



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

Volume 136

(9 February 2021 to 14 March 2021)

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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)
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Bradley, Maurice (East Londonderry)
Bradley, Ms Paula (North Belfast)
Bradley, Ms Sinéad (South Down)
Bradshaw, Ms Paula (South Belfast)
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Buchanan, Keith (Mid Ulster)
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)
Buckley, Jonathan (Upper Bann)
Bunting, Ms Joanne (East Belfast)
Butler, Robbie (Lagan Valley)

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

D

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Dillon, Ms Linda (Mid Ulster)
Dodds, Mrs Diane (Upper Bann)
Dolan, Ms Jemma (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Dunne, Gordon (North Down)
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)

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

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Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)

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

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

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Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)

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

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Long, Mrs Naomi (East Belfast)
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Lyttle, Chris (East Belfast)

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McGuigan, Philip (North Antrim)
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Maskey, Alex (Speaker)
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Muir, Andrew (North Down)
Mullan, Ms Karen (Foyle)
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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, Ms Emma (Mid Ulster)
Stalford, Christopher (South Belfast)
Stewart, John (East Antrim)
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
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Minister for Infrastructure.....	Ms Nichola Mallon
Minister for the Economy.....	Mrs Diane Dodds
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Official Report (Hansard)

Assembly Sitings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 16 February 2021

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Members, before we commence, I remind you that, once again, this week's business has been amalgamated into a single sitting. Three Ministers will respond to questions for oral answer. To avoid a long suspension during the sitting, the Business Committee has agreed to schedule a motion to suspend the Standing Order that requires Question Time to commence at 2.00 pm. Subject to that motion being agreed, Question Time will commence as soon as all other business concludes. That will probably be between 10.40 am and 11.10 am. Question Time will commence with the Minister for Communities, followed 45 minutes later by the Minister for the Economy and, 45 minutes after that, by the Minister of Education.

The Business Committee will meet at 1.00 pm or after the sitting adjourns. A lunchtime suspension has not been scheduled.

Public Petition: Adoption of Ravensbrae Waste Water Treatment Plant, Garrison

Mr Speaker: Ms Jemma Dolan has sought leave to present a public petition, in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak.

Ms Dolan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you for the opportunity to present this public petition with regard to the adoption of the waste water treatment works in Ravensbrae, Garrison, County Fermanagh.

The waste water treatment works serving Garrison has been at capacity now for two decades. Therefore, for the Ravensbrae development to get planning permission, the developer had to build his own waste water treatment plant. Through bad planning policy, he was allowed to build a treatment plant that was not up to a standard that NI Water could adopt. This has left the Garrison community and the natural environment around the village with a ticking health and ecological time bomb on its doorstep.

My first preference would have been to go door to door with this petition, but, as we all know, current health regulations prevent that. Therefore, I thank the 258 people who have taken the time to sign the online petition. The 258 signatures may not seem like a lot, but, bearing in mind that Garrison has a population in the region of 350 people, those signatures represent a large majority of the residents and their concerns.

We have a number of unadopted housing estates in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, but Ravensbrae is of particular concern due to the potential of raw sewage leaking into the world-famous Lough Melvin, which is internationally renowned for its unique range of plants, animals and fish.

Lough Melvin is the only location in the world where the gillaroo trout can be found.

In response to a question for written answer to the Minister for Infrastructure last year, I was told that it could be at least six years before the sewerage infrastructure in Garrison would be updated. Quite frankly, the people of Garrison cannot and should not be expected to wait for six years. Every month, the electricity supplier threatens to cut the power to the waste water treatment plant because the developer who built it refuses to pay the bill. The result of that will be similar to what the residents of Galliagh Shore experienced: raw sewage running down the street and children not being able to play outside, not to mention the smell.

I know that updating the sewerage infrastructure cannot happen overnight, so I ask the Minister to instruct NI Water to upgrade the waste water treatment plant in Ravensbrae to its standards and to adopt it. If, for whatever reason, that is impossible, the least that the ratepayers of Ravensbrae and Garrison expect is that the Department for Infrastructure, through NI Water, should take over the management of the plant until the mains sewerage system is updated and extended in Garrison.

The planners and the developer have let down the residents. This petition calls on the Minister for Infrastructure not to let down the residents. In 2021, sewage treatment should not be a luxury; it is an essential utility.

Mr Speaker: The Member will know that, normally, I would invite her to bring the petition to the Table and present it here. However, in light of social distancing, I ask her to remain in her place and make arrangements to submit the petition to my office. I thank her for bringing the petition to the Assembly's attention. Once it is received, I will forward it to the Minister for Infrastructure and send a copy to the Committee for Infrastructure.

Public Petition: Sanctions for Cyberbullying

Mr Speaker: Ms Joanne Bunting has sought leave to present a petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak.

Ms Bunting: I am grateful for the opportunity to present this petition, which calls for sanctions for cyberbullying, to the House today. I have been requested to do so by a grieving family from my constituency of East Belfast, and this is a serious subject that will have touched many families across Northern Ireland.

The Gregg family lost a precious son, a beloved brother and a father to suicide as a result of relentless targeting for six months on social media. Mobile technology is freely available and necessary in today's society, so bullying and targeting not only are distressing for their subject but can be relentless and feel as if there is no escape. No one is immune from cyberbullying; we are all potential targets. It affects people of any age and from any walk of life, but it can be overwhelming and devastating. Sometimes, the hope that it will stop simply runs out, leaving nothing but despair — and then what?

The petition was originally started for mental health week, and some 10,630 people have signalled their support online for the family's campaign. I have another 1,246 physical signatures in my possession. The signatories call for sanctions on those who, often with unremitting viciousness and for fun, drive someone to take their own life or to attempt to do so. We seem to have become a society that is generous in our charitable giving but unkind with our words. Social media has become a place where it appears acceptable, often behind a veil of anonymity or a persona, to say anything, regardless of and with little thought for the impact that the words or the message may have on the recipient.

There are many who advocate loudly for tolerance but show none when they are behind a keyboard. There must be more stringent regulation of platforms or a stricter interpretation of the rules, or both, for those who breach and misuse them to bully, resulting in a desperate person coming to physical harm at their own hand. It is important that legislation keeps pace with an ever-changing world, and, therefore, I believe that it is right and necessary that consideration be given to legislation that deals specifically with cyberbullying that leads to suicide or a suicide attempt. Those 10,000 people in Northern Ireland call on the Justice Minister and the Assembly to say, "Enough", and to introduce a sanction. I support their call.

Mr Speaker: Again, in light of social distancing, I ask the Member to remain in her place and make arrangements to submit the petition to my office. I thank her for bringing the petition to the Assembly's attention. Once the petition is received, I will forward it to the Minister of Justice and send a copy to the Committee for Justice.

Standing Order 20(1): Suspension

Mr Speaker: This item of business will be treated as a business motion, and there will be no debate.

Mr O'Dowd: I beg to move

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 16 February 2021.

Mr Speaker: 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 20(1) be suspended for 16 February 2021.

Private Members' Business

Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill: First Stage

Mr Givan: I beg to introduce the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill, which is a Bill to amend the Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations 2020 to remove the ground for an abortion in cases of severe fetal impairment.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Ms Bradshaw: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This morning's situation is unusual because the proposer of the Bill decided to provide us with information on it at 10.16 am. With reference to Standing Order 30, parts 5 and 6, and Standing Order 34, I am sure that the proposer will have no objection, given that he has stated that his Bill is fundamentally about human rights, that I ask for assurance that we will have written evidence from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission on its content before we proceed to scrutiny.

Mr Speaker: First, there is nothing unusual about the procedure this morning. In fact, the procedure is very much in keeping with past practice, including very recent practice. We have had motions tabled, including by Executive Ministers, at short notice and so on and so forth. It is at the discretion of the Member, as sponsor of the Bill, to have its First Stage scheduled. Of course, every other stage of the legislative process will go through the Business Committee and so on. The Bill will go through the House according to the normal procedure. I put it on the record that there is nothing unusual with the procedure by which Mr Givan has introduced the Bill this morning.

Ms Bradshaw: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You have not addressed the issue of our receipt of the Human Rights Commission's advice before we move to scrutiny.

Mr Speaker: We engage with the Human Rights Commission. The commission's response will be a matter for it. The commission will also have the opportunity to present its evidence throughout this process. The Bill's First Stage has been introduced this morning. The Bill will be printed, and, through the Business Committee, it will go through the normal, ongoing process by which legislation always proceeds. In my role as Speaker, I will ensure that the legislation will be governed, processed and managed properly.

Members, please take your ease for a moment.

Oral Answers to Questions

Communities

Shankill Gateway Public Realm Scheme

1. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Shankill gateway public realm scheme, including the current position on the allocation of funding. (AQO 1553/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I thank the Member for his question. The Shankill gateway public realm scheme received full planning permission in July 2020. However, Belfast City Council has since raised a number of considerations about the omission of a redesign of the Peter's Hill/North Street junction from the planning approval. My Department has engaged with the Department for Infrastructure and Belfast City Council through a joint junctions working group to review the Peter's Hill/North Street junction and develop designs to improve that connection to the city centre. When the final designs are agreed and a revised planning approval obtained, if necessary, my Department will consider the budget position against other priorities.

10.45 am

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for her answer. Can the Minister expedite those conversations with the Department for Infrastructure and Belfast City Council to ensure that the development, which has been talked about for some time, is put in place as soon as possible?

Can the Minister give an update on the development of the junction between Lanark Way and Shankill Road that includes St Matthew's church, the shops, Glenwood Primary School and West Belfast Orange Hall? It was due to start some months ago but has not. It was then due to start this week but does not appear to have.

Ms Hargey: The conversations with the Department for Infrastructure and Belfast City Council are ongoing and are moving as quickly as possible. Belfast City Council has developed its 'Bolder Vision' for Belfast, and part of that vision is overcoming severance from surrounding communities. The Member will know that Belfast city centre is surrounded by inner-city working-class communities. There is other ongoing work on the shatter zone that runs along Peter's Hill from Carrick Hill to New Lodge to the bottom of Divis Street. Therefore, the council is taking an overarching view of the essential road work that needs to be done, and measures by the Department for Infrastructure will be a key part of that. We are trying to move at pace, and I will update Members as soon as that work has been completed. There is a commitment that there should be no undue delay with the programme. It will move forward with other key strategic sites along the shatter zone, as we try to move those sites forward for development as soon as possible.

I do not have information about the other scheme that the Member mentioned to hand. I can follow up with a written response about when the scheme is to start.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Minister mentioned that the Peter's Hill/North Street junction was originally included in the scheme. Can she talk or write to her colleagues in

Infrastructure and Belfast City Council about where that fits in with the shatter zone that she referred to and, indeed, the strategic site assessment that Belfast City Council and her Department are involved in?

Ms Hargey: All those strands of work are important parts of Belfast City Council's 'Bolder Vision' for Belfast. In working with the Department for Infrastructure and Belfast City Council, I commit to taking a strategic, longer-term view of the entire space of the shatter zone, the undeveloped sites that sit there and the roadway and public realm works that need to be done.

I know that Belfast City Council's vision is to overcome severance from surrounding communities, which has been a long-standing issue; indeed, when those communities were consulted, one of the key issues raised was feeling locked out of the city centre. I commit to removing that severance and restitching those communities into the city centre and its streetscape. Public realm road infrastructure is a key part of that. I commit to taking that work forward once the conversations with the council and DFI are concluded. I will update Members accordingly.

Mr Allen: Minister, it is evident in the draft Budget that your Department's wider budget is under severe pressure. With that in mind, are there any proposed schemes in the forthcoming financial year that may be under threat?

Ms Hargey: The draft Budget is that at the moment — a draft. Concerns have been highlighted through the equality impact assessment (EQIA) that are more to do with the revenue side of the Budget than the capital side. I am assessing those and taking into account the consultation on the draft Budget. I will then come forward with my budget and priorities for the time ahead. I will update Members on the particulars of the capital and revenue sides once we get to that point.

Statutory Sick Pay

2. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Communities whether she will consider making changes to statutory sick pay (SSP), to provide adequate support for people who have to self-isolate or shield because of COVID-19. (AQO 1554/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I thank the Member for his question. Statutory sick pay is an important tool in helping people to adhere to the current advice to stay at home if they have symptoms of COVID-19 or have been advised to self-isolate. However, as, I am sure, the Member will appreciate, those guidelines are easier to comply with if you know that your income is enough to support your family.

I recognise that anyone moving from a salary to the current rate of statutory sick pay faces a substantial drop in income and financial uncertainty. Increasing the rate of statutory sick pay could go some way to encouraging people to comply fully with the requirement to remain at home and protect the health service.

Last March, I wrote to Thérèse Coffey, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, to request that urgent consideration be given to increasing the rate of statutory sick pay and to ensuring that individuals are properly financially supported during the pandemic. That would ensure that those who are self-isolating do not continue working, thereby potentially endangering their health and the health of others and further spreading the virus.

Unfortunately, I have only recently received a reply from Justin Tomlinson MP, the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work. I plan to meet him in the coming weeks to request that urgent consideration be given to increasing statutory sick pay.

I should also highlight the fact that I responded quickly to provide financial support to those who have to self-isolate by including additional support through the discretionary support COVID-19 self-isolation grant. That payment is designed to assist with short-term living expenses, where a person or a member of a person's immediate family has been infected by COVID-19 or has been advised to self-isolate in accordance with the latest guidance from the Public Health Agency (PHA).

Once I have met Justin Tomlinson, I will update Members as soon as possible.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, for a comprehensive and detailed answer. What actions, if any, are you taking with the Minister for the Economy to advance statutory sick payments in Northern Ireland not only during COVID but beyond COVID, when we are coming out of the pandemic. How can we improve statutory sick pay for everybody in Northern Ireland who find themselves in such circumstances?

Ms Hargey: Discussions are ongoing, and I have a meeting due soon. I have a request in with the Minister for the Economy to look at this and other issues on which both Departments need to work together. We need to look at statutory sick pay but also at, for example, labour market interventions. I will update Members when we progress those discussions.

The issue of statutory sick pay needs to be looked at. The pandemic has really highlighted the fundamentals and the faults in the system. We need to find ways of addressing those to ensure that people are not having to choose going to work over their health because they do not have the finances to sustain themselves.

As I said, I have introduced new measures, within the existing legislative constraints, around discretionary support. I am keeping all of that under review to see how we can improve those systems. I will update the Member in due course.

Ms Mullan: Minister, since the start of the pandemic, you, along with Carál Ní Chuilín, have been determined to do whatever it takes to support those most impacted on by COVID. In addition to statutory sick pay, which you touched on, what changes have you made to ensure that support is delivered to those who need it?

Ms Hargey: Overall, the Department and its staff have really stepped up at the height of the pandemic. I take the opportunity to commend the staff of the Department for Communities. They really want to get support out the door and on to the ground as soon as possible. Over the past year, we have invested over £304 million in support right into the heart of communities and neighbourhoods. We have increased the income threshold for discretionary support. That was one of the first measures introduced last year. We also introduced the self-isolation payment, broadening it to make it a grant, and we increased people's awareness of how to draw it down. We introduced food supports in the immediate aftermath of the onset of the COVID pandemic, when people were being instructed to

stay at home. There have been other supports, such as funding support to councils to assist them with services and loss of income, and, as you will have seen, over £42 million has been invested in making additional COVID heating payments to over 220,000 individuals in groups that were seen as being at high risk.

I continue to review all the measures that we are trying to implement, including discretionary support, which is unique to the North, to see how we can make all the schemes more flexible and to ensure that they reach as many people as possible.

Mr McGlone: I am sure that the Minister will more than appreciate that, for people who are trying to get by on statutory sick pay of £95.85 per week in difficult circumstances, both health-wise and family-wise, the discretionary support mechanism is elongated, lengthy and difficult to get through. In order to obviate all that, has she given any consideration to a particular SSP top-up scheme tailored specially to needs in Northern Ireland? She will appreciate that, in the circumstances, people who are off work because they have tested positive are least able to go through an elongated computerised or telephone application mechanism for discretionary support.

Ms Hargey: I thank the Member for his question. Again, as I said, in the midst of the pandemic, a lot of issues opened up with regard to how the system functioned and the changes that needed to be made. Changes were made quickly to discretionary support to make it more flexible for people. The application form was shortened. We put it online to ensure that people could also access it that way. It continues to be improved.

Obviously, I will conduct a review of discretionary support, which is bounded by legislation. That may mean legislative change in the time ahead. However, I am keen to ensure that existing mechanisms are made more flexible to ensure that people who need support can get it as quickly as possible. I am obviously keen; that is why I have written to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) about statutory sick pay overall. Changes need to be made. Any uplift to statutory sick pay will have financial implications. I believe that it has to be forthcoming from the Department for Work and Pensions, because there will be a knock-on effect for employers' contributions. Again, we have to look at all that in the round.

The important thing for me is to get support to people who need it as quickly as possible. I will put that strongly to DWP in the meeting that is due to take place in the next couple of weeks. I am also committed to reassessing measures that I already have in place in the Department to ensure that we make it as easy as possible for people in a time of crisis to access that support as quickly as possible. Part of the review will be talking directly to people who have been through the process to see whether we can make changes to the application itself, as the Member mentioned, whether it can be more streamlined and whether there are quicker ways or extra supports that we can build in to ensure that we get all the information that we need and that people get the support that they need as soon as possible. As I work through that review and meet DWP, I will update Members on the conclusions of those.

Mr Carroll: Given the fact that only 2% of people who have received the discretionary self-isolation grant have been able to get the figure of £500 or more, will the Minister

look, as part of the review, at implementing an automatic payment of at least £500, so that people, especially low-earners, can self-isolate safely?

Ms Hargey: One of the big issues is that, when we compare the payment with what is happening in England, we see that it is not a straight scheme in how it is implemented across the water, as, I am sure, the Member will appreciate, in that it can be taxed. I want to build as much flexibility into discretionary support as I can to make sure that people get the assistance that they need. Whilst it is not a one-off £500 payment, discretionary support here is a grant, not a loan. You can apply more than once. That is what is important: someone can apply multiple times if they or a member of their household is self-isolating as a result of COVID.

Part of the review of discretionary support will be to see whether I can build other flexibilities into the scheme. It is not about stopping people trying to access help. I want to make sure that I open up the help that I can give to people in as quick a manner as possible and make the process as easy as possible to go through. That is why it is important, as part of the review, that I engage with professionals who have expertise in this and that I engage with those who have been through the system and may have had a negative experience of discretionary support. We can learn from that experience how we can improve customer service and streamline the service to ensure that it meets the need. We will look at all that. As I said, I have increased the income threshold. That was about trying to get as many low-income families into it as possible. All that will be part of the review, going forward.

11.00 am

COVID-19 Mitigation Schemes

3. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for Communities for the total number of unsuccessful applications to the COVID mitigation schemes administered by her Department. (AQO 1555/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department acted swiftly to put in place a range of programmes and schemes to support individuals and organisations who have been impacted by the COVID pandemic. In order to support individuals, a fund of £3 million was made available through the discretionary support self-isolation grant, and, as of 31 December 2020, 19,975 claims have been processed, of which 3,883 were unsuccessful.

For sporting organisations, a fund of £27 million was made available through three schemes. For two schemes, a total of 2,808 applications were received, of which 526 were unsuccessful. The third scheme is still being processed, so we do not have those figures yet.

For charitable organisations, funding of £20.5 million was made available through the charitable grants scheme. In phase 1, 1,646 applications were received and 129 were unsuccessful. Social enterprise support was also provided through funding of £9.25 million. There were 394 applications to that scheme, and 79 were unsuccessful. Information is not yet available for the other schemes that my Department put in place, such as the community, voluntary and social enterprise sector PPE scheme and the culture resilience scheme, as they are still being processed and applications are being given out at the

moment. Again, I am happy to share that information once it is available.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for that detail. If you are designing a COVID mitigation scheme that is based on qualifying criteria, it is probably inevitable that individuals and groups will fall through the cracks. Will the Minister agree that it would make sense to form a subcommittee of the Executive as a sort of appeals body that is populated by her and maybe the Minister of Finance and the Minister for the Economy? That would represent a better safety net for those who miss out.

Ms Hargey: Over 80% of applications for the discretionary support scheme have been successful. We still need to do work on the 20%. I am keen to engage with the Executive where I can in order to look at additional support and to learn from things that have not worked in the past. That is why I have instructed that there be a review of discretionary support. I want that to be independent in some ways, and I am involving people from outside the system in that review in order to ensure that there is independence, scrutiny and accountability. Importantly, in keeping with a co-design policy, which I gave a commitment to, and in embedding a rights-based approach, I want to involve those on the ground who have been impacted by the supports in either a positive or a negative way in order to ensure that we meet their needs going forward. That is why I am doing the review.

I have not looked at your suggestion for an overarching group. I have ongoing engagements with Ministers on certain schemes across the Executive. We are looking at the pathway not just to an economic recovery but to a social recovery. We will continue having those cross-departmental discussions across the Executive in order to learn from the impact that the pandemic has had on poverty and how it has exacerbated the problems that are already there. We need to work in a more collaborative, joined-up way on the solutions, and that is something that I am committed to doing in the time ahead.

Ms P Bradley: My question comes with a caveat, which is that, in our constituency offices, we hear more about the negative than the positive, but I want to talk about the COVID-19 discretionary support grant. Minister, what would you say to those people who have been turned down and who were told to literally count the number of tins they had in their cupboards and what they had in their fridge? We know that people's needs are not black and white, so, when you look at the review, will you give your word that you will use a common-sense approach, because not everybody's situation is the same?

Ms Hargey: As I pointed out, the majority of those who applied to the scheme — there have been over 15,000 applications — have been successful. That said, I need to look at the plight of those who have not been successful and, through no fault of their own, find themselves in such a situation.

As part of the review, it is important that we reach out to those individuals and talk not just to those who have had a good experience of the system but to those who have had a negative experience. I think that there is an issue. We have a team of dedicated staff who live in the communities and who provide that service. I have seen them really stretching themselves, particularly throughout the pandemic, to go above and beyond. We changed stuff

immediately at the outbreak of the pandemic to make it more flexible: we increased the income threshold, we set up the online form and we shortened the form to try to make it as easy as possible.

With that said, there are still things that can be done. There are systems that can be improved and customer services that can always be improved. There is a commitment with regard to this review, not just from me as the Minister but from the Department and officials. They see the value in this review being conducted. They see the value in an independent review from outside sectors and, importantly, in hearing from those who have come through the system with negative experiences to work out whether there is a common thread and issue that needs to be dealt with. I am open to ensuring that this is an open and transparent review and to making things better for those people. The big thing is around instilling dignity and a rights-based approach into the system. If we are serious about that, we need to listen to people who have had a negative experience and to reshape the system to respond to their needs. I am committed to doing that, and I know that the staff in the Department are committed to doing that. Indeed, I will update Members as we start to work through the review of discretionary support.

Ms Sheerin: Minister, thank you for your answers so far. You have reiterated, today, your commitment to getting help and support to people who are in need. In the light of that, can you outline what you are doing to increase the uptake of the discretionary support?

Ms Hargey: Yes, there has been a lot of work. One of the common problems is that people do not know where to get access to help. There is a plethora of different systems for help. The first thing that we did was to work with the Public Health Agency, and we included a link on nidirect's 'Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Benefits' web page, detailing financial support and practical help. I have also successfully worked, through the Department, with the Department of Health to include information on the grant as part of the StopCOVID app. The Department has a good working relationship with the advice and independent advice sectors, and information on the grant is also available through those organisations. Indeed, information is available through our jobs and benefits offices, and Members can get information and updates through the Department.

Discretionary support is going to be a fundamental part of the review around how people knew about the service, how they could access the service, and whether there were blockages in terms of getting information and whether it was clear. When I read some websites, I can get confused when trying to find stuff, so I want to make it as easy as possible for people to find the support. These are people who are in a distressed state, as they have lost income and they are wondering how they are going to have food on the table or heat their homes. We need to make support as easy to get and accessible as possible. Therefore, as part of this review, I make a commitment to look at that issue. We need to shout about these supports and try to find others to do that. We have a good network of community and voluntary organisations that has really stood up throughout the pandemic, to get critical support and food out to communities. So, we need to find new ways of reaching out and engaging with people, and my Department is open to looking at any suggestions or ways

in which it can increase awareness around the supports that are there.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. She will be aware that many have fallen through the net for support from many of the schemes that were issued by the Executive, not least the sports and social clubs that have a hospitality element. They are being pointed to the sports sustainability fund, which is administered by your Department, but it closed on 20 January. Therefore, is the Minister minded to reopen that fund and to look at the eligibility criteria with the Minister of Finance?

Ms Hargey: First, those applications are being processed at the moment, and that fund closed on 19 January. Within that process, it was clear that assistance could be given to the sports organisations that have been impacted. For example, if they operate a bar facility and there is a reduction in income from that, which is impacting on their sports side, then they can apply through that fund. From the assessments, I know that a lot of clubs have applied through the sports fund regarding lost income through their enterprises. Those costs will, in some ways, be met through that grant. So, there are ongoing discussions.

I have not had much lobbying from organisations. Up until now, a lot of the sports organisations have applied for the grant. We are, obviously, going to be making announcements on that fund shortly because assessments are concluding. If they can show that the costs for which they have applied have a direct impact on the sport that they do, that will be looked at as part of this fund. The fund has been maxed out of current money. If we see that there is an additional need or that a new need emerges, that has to be taken into consideration in new COVID support in the next financial year.

I am keen to engage with the sporting codes, individual sporting bodies, the Sports Forum and Sport NI to see whether there are any gaps in the existing fund and what we can do to provide new or additional supports. All that depends on budget. However, I am committed to seeing what I can do to close any potential existing gaps, but we have not been made aware of any. We have not had a demand, but that may come as the funding applications and notifications are released in the coming week or so.

Casement Park

4. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on her Department's engagement with the GAA in relation to the development of Casement Park. (AQO 1556/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I thank the Member for his question. Advancement of the plans to complete the regional stadia programme, including Casement Park, is a commitment in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. I am fully committed to delivering on this priority area. I welcome the announcement from my colleague the Minister for Infrastructure in October 2020 of her intention to approve the Casement Park planning application. I recently wrote asking for an update on that.

There continues to be significant engagement with the GAA in relation to the development of the Casement Park project. The regional stadia programme board, chaired by the senior responsible officer (SRO), meets monthly. Representatives from the Ulster Council GAA

(UCGAA) attend in respect of the Casement Park project. Members of the stadia team attend the regular meetings of the GAA project board. My departmental officials meet the UCGAA weekly to ensure that the project is being delivered at pace. This is in addition to the many project-related meetings that both teams attend, with relevant project consultants and advisers in attendance. I also have regular meetings with the GAA Casement Park team and members of its project board to assess progress and discuss issues pertaining to the project.

Mr Chambers: I thank the Minister for her update. Can she confirm that there is a funding stand-off, to a degree, between her Department and the GAA on the delivery of this project? Will those funding difficulties put the project in danger in any way?

Ms Hargey: I do not see a stand-off at the moment; I am not sure whether that is what the Member means. There have been good discussions and engagements with the GAA on the development. There is a commitment from me and from the GAA that we need to see the final regional stadium developed. Kingspan and Windsor are up and running, notwithstanding the COVID restrictions, and we have seen the benefits of those two stadia. It is right that we complete the third and final stadium for Gaelic games and young Gaels who are coming up and for the wider impact that it will have on the community.

We await the outcome of the planning process. We need the green certificate to finalise the full business case. There then has to be a discussion and a negotiation around the cost. In Committee last week — Minister Ní Chuilín, who took my place when I was off, has commented publicly — I said that an increase in cost has to be shared out. The Executive and the GAA have to make additional contributions. All that will be finalised in the full business case once the planning certificate has been given. Those negotiations will step up and be at a greater pace over the coming months once we have that certificate in place, which should be in the coming weeks.

Mr Lyttle: When will the Minister release the subregional stadia funding? I seek her assurance that this long overdue and desperately needed funding will be allocated to clubs such as Glentoran in my constituency of East Belfast before the end of this mandate.

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much for the question. In Committee last week, I spoke about regional and subregional stadia. Those are both commitments in New Decade, New Approach. I am committed to having this programme up and running before the end of this mandate and the elections next year.

I thought it prudent to have a reassessment to look at the commitments and the need for subregional stadia, because the initial plan is over 10 years old and is outdated. There was another consultation in 2016, and a lot has changed since then, including the impact of COVID. There has been a wide range of engagement with football clubs and associations, including the IFA and others. We are in the middle of concluding that engagement and having recommendations come to me, as Minister, and I will then outline my plans for how the subregional stadia will be rolled out.

11.15 am

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

HSC Staff Recognition Payment

T1. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for Communities what steps she has taken to ensure that those healthcare workers who have received the £500 acknowledgement and those healthcare students who have received the £2,000 acknowledgement from the Health Minister will not see that money have an adverse effect on any social security or income support benefit that they may already be in receipt of. (AQT 981/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much for your question. It is an important one. Our healthcare workers right across the board have done a tremendous amount of work throughout the pandemic, and will do so after the pandemic, in delivering a healthcare service. I am committed to doing all that I can on the £500 payment. I think that there is a way of doing it so that it will not be impacted on by tax or a loss of benefits. I am waiting for a formal request from the Minister of Health to look at this, but my Department and officials have given a commitment that we will be ready once that request has been received. Wording may need to be written into the legislation that the Minister is bringing forward, and, indeed, my officials are engaging with officials in Health on that wording to ensure that the £500 can be paid and will have no detrimental impact on those receiving it. The discussions are ongoing. We await the formal request, but officials are on standby to do all that they can to ensure that the payment can be made as soon as possible.

Mr Chambers: I thank the Minister for that. Minister, in the absence of some mitigation coming forward, do you agree that a number of recipients of those acknowledgements might be forced to refuse the payment and that that would be a shame?

Ms Hargey: The sooner that we can get Health and my officials engaging, the better. We have asked the Department of Health to be forthcoming with its official request to my Department. I have officials ready and waiting to deal with this, and they need to amend that piece of the legislation under the coronavirus regulations that they are bringing through to ensure that the payments can be made as quickly as possible. There is a commitment from me, and I am sure that there is a commitment from Robin as well, to do that as quickly as possible.

Empty Site: Sunningdale, Ballysillan Road

T2. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister for Communities, given that she will be aware that he has written to her about a site on the Ballysillan Road at Sunningdale, which has lain empty since the maisonettes were demolished, and over which there seems to be an impasse between her Department and the Housing Executive, whether she will intervene to ensure that the site is developed for the benefit of the community and does not become an environmental blight. (AQT 982/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am aware of the correspondence from you, William. I am looking at this. Discussions are ongoing with the Housing Executive about that site and others. I will

come back to you in writing with an update on where that is going as soon as possible.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for that response. Minister, may I raise the issue of Casement Park? You said that you have had significant engagement with the GAA and that your Department continues to engage. Community consultation on these issues is hugely important. What consultation have you, as Minister, had with residents, particularly the Mooreland and Owenvarragh Residents Association?

Ms Hargey: Yes, community engagement and consultation are key, and I know that the GAA is in the middle of developing and laying out the community engagement plan. I have had no direct engagement yet with residents in and around the facility. We await the outcome of the planning decision and are still waiting for the green certificate to be issued so that we can look at the terms of that planning. That will apply to the development of the site and the management of the site going forward. In community engagement, there may be considerations that are not dissimilar to how such facilities are run, for example, in Croke Park and in Cork.

I am keen to engage. I come from a community like Andersonstown. I have a community development background, and I see the critical importance of engaging with residents — those who are concerned about the stadium but also those who see the positive impact that a stadium can bring to the community. We are looking at the community engagement plan. We want to pick up the pace on that, once the planning permission certificate has been issued, and move to the full business case. I will lay out my plans on that engagement, along with what the GAA needs to do on grassroots community engagement.

Welfare Reform Mitigations

T3. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for Communities how many people are benefiting from welfare reform mitigations such as the so-called bedroom tax and the benefits cap. (AQT 983/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I do not have the exact number of those who are benefiting. The mitigations are ongoing; they have been running from last year. The mitigations are still being paid, and there is a commitment that they will continue.

I have draft legislation and regulations to close the loopholes to ensure that families — just over 220 of them, I think — do not fall through them. I will soon bring those forward for Executive approval, to be introduced in the new financial year. The budget has been committed for those mitigations. I can write to the Member with the specific number of people in the bedroom tax and cap sections and how many households are being impacted. I will update Members once the legislation and regulations are due to come through. An SR1 form, detailing the regulations, will go to the Committee.

Mr Nesbitt: Given that we are about six weeks from the end of the financial year, is the Minister concerned about what will happen to those people if she does not introduce legislation on time to extend the mitigations?

Ms Hargey: I am committed to going through with the mitigations, as are the Executive, through New Decade, New Approach. The money will not be stopped at the end of the financial year. The money will continue to run; it is

in the budget for the next financial year. There will be no break in payments. I am committed to making sure that they continue.

The issue that we need to fix as soon as possible is the loophole in the existing mitigations that families fall through, and I am committed to doing that in the regulations. I am confident that whilst the legislation will move through, the regulations, which will require a shorter period of engagement with the Committee, can pick up on those issues to ensure that we give protections to those families as soon as possible.

Racism: Zero Tolerance

T4. **Ms Brogan** asked the Minister for Communities, given the recent attack on the Belfast Multicultural Association building and the ongoing issues of exclusion, inequality and racism faced by the BAME community, whether she agrees that political leaders have a responsibility to show zero tolerance for racism in our society. (AQT 984/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Yes, 100% they do. Where racism, or sectarianism for that matter, raises its head, it needs to be challenged. There needs to be a united community approach to condemning it.

I met the Belfast Multicultural Association just after the fire. I was on the scene. I reported that at the last Question Time. On the Monday after, I met them, the North West Migrants Forum and other groups. The big issue that they had was that a tweet condemning those actions was not enough; we needed to stand side by side. I know that that is difficult, given the COVID regulations, but we need to stand beside those communities to show our support.

I gave a commitment to do that. Since then, I have written to the First Ministers and the Justice Minister on the specifics of the fire, but also looking at anti-racism working strategies more broadly. I agree that we need to face racism down where it raises its ugly head and stand with those who are victims of racist crimes.

Ms Brogan: Will the Minister join me in condemning the disgraceful and racist comments of DUP MP Gregory Campbell? All political representatives should understand that their words carry weight and can have real-life consequences for those who face racist abuse and attacks. Unfortunately, that was not Mr Campbell's first outburst, but his party should ensure that it is his last.

Ms Hargey: I condemn any words or actions that can lead to an increase in feelings of hostility or to a hate crime. When I engaged with members of ethnic minority communities after the fire, one of the key things that they said to me was, "Words are words, but words can hurt and have consequences".

It is important for elected representatives to think about things before we tweet them or put them up on social media. People have fallen foul of tweets that they have made in the past. There is a need for education on and awareness of anti-racism and anti-sectarianism. We all need to learn continually and to engage continually with the relevant groups and organisations. I know that, after the fire, there is a genuine fear in those communities. People who put their head above the parapet to raise concerns after the fire feared that they would then become a target of hate crime. As elected Members, we have a responsibility to stand with those communities and to

de-escalate tensions. If there are genuine fears, and there are, we need to overcome them and challenge racism and sectarianism wherever they appear.

Heritage Recovery Fund

T5. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister for Communities, after thanking her for her continued work and that of her officials and her predecessor to assist the North Antrim Village Forum in his constituency, whether she can confirm that the Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust, based in the village of Armoy, will receive funding through the Heritage Recovery Fund, following the announcement yesterday of the 50 heritage organisations that will receive funding. (AQT 985/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much. My predecessor, Carál Ní Chuilín, announced towards the end of last year that that money would be allocated. We are working with the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The funding will support organisations that carry out heritage work and individuals such as tour guides to ensure that they are sustained throughout the pandemic and that our heritage is protected in the time ahead.

An arm's-length body handles the applications, so I do not have to hand the specifics of who has been successful, but, after Question Time, I can send you a breakdown of the allocated funding, Mervyn. It is critical funding. I saw from some of the announcements yesterday on Twitter that it is a lifeline for individuals and organisations, and it will ensure that we protect our heritage and built environment. The funding is also important for local community education and for tourism, given the people who will come to visit here, in order to showcase our exceptional heritage. We have committed to working with those individuals and organisations in the time ahead, along with the culture and arts sector and the creative industries more broadly. They make a contribution, and they will be vital to the social and economic recovery piece that we will be taking forward as an Executive.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for her answer. There has been public comment made about to where some of that money will be allocated. Some of it will be allocated to very large projects and to organisations such as the National Trust. It is vital, however, that smaller organisations and rural organisations that make an invaluable contribution to the sector and to our communities, such as the Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust, not be excluded. Will the Minister ensure that that is the case?

Ms Hargey: That is important across all the schemes that we are supporting, be they for heritage, culture, the arts or sports. It should not be just the larger organisations or representative bodies that receive funding. We should also ensure that the organisations that work at the grassroots level, often at the coalface, receive support and that there be that balance. It is also important that individuals receive support, and the scheme picked up those individuals who are involved in the broader tourism and heritage piece. I have committed to doing that.

With the programmes that my Department is doing, I want to look at doing more work in rural communities, not just on heritage but across the board, to ensure that we are rural proofing in a real way. I want to continue engagement with the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs on that.

11.30 am

We, along with DAERA and the Department for Infrastructure, have brought forward additional funds this year to support rural communities, and we have worked collaboratively to do that. In the last week, I have written to those two Ministers to request that we start to do that in a more structured way and to ensure that the funding is targeted properly. I recently met the Rural Residents' Forum, and I picked up on a variety of issues around not just heritage but housing, community development and others. I want to continue to engage on those issues as part of my conversation with the other two Ministers. I can update the Member or the House as we move through that.

Mr Speaker: I call Pat Sheehan. You will not have time for a supplementary question.

Casement Park

T7. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for Communities when she anticipates approval of the business case for Casement Park and to state the next steps in the process, given that, as a great advocate for the new Casement Park, she will be aware that the building of the new facility is greatly anticipated in west Belfast and among the GAA and sporting fraternity. (AQT 987/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much. Casement Park is a key project that is to be delivered along with the other two regional stadia. I played in Casement as a young camogie, and I want that same experience and opportunity afforded to other young Gaels who are coming up across Belfast and, indeed, Ulster. I want to see the project developed as soon as possible, in line with the subregional stadia, and I have given a commitment on that. Everything that I can do in my Department is up to date. I am waiting on the Department for Infrastructure to issue the green certificate. I have written to the Minister to ask for a timeline of when that will be completed. I know that discussions are ongoing, and I am hopeful that it will be completed soon. After that has been received, I will be able to pick up the pace to get the full business case, and the negotiations around it, finalised. Once we have that and a timetable in place, I will update Members as soon as possible. I am keen to get that done as quickly as possible and to get the project moving over the next couple of weeks and months, as soon as I get the green certificate from planning.

Mr Speaker: Time is up. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair)

Economy

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I advise Members that question 5 has been withdrawn.

Mobile Data Allowances

1. **Ms Brogan** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline how the £1.7 million for increased mobile data allowances will be distributed to support further and higher education students living in rural communities. (AQO 1567/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): My Department is working closely with further education

(FE) colleges on the provision and distribution of that funding to full-time enrolled learners throughout Northern Ireland. Full-time further education students who have been marked present at least once on an e-register during January 2021 will receive a one-off cash payment of £60 into their bank account in order to offset data costs incurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Within that allocation, 500 iPads or similar devices have also been put on order and will be loaned to further education students who require online access.

Ms Brogan: Students in rural areas such as my constituency of West Tyrone have struggled to complete learning and remote learning due to poor broadband connection. Under the digital hardship scheme, will additional mobile data allowances be given to students who need them in order to complete their studies and their online exams?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. As I indicated in my previous answer, part of the £1.7 million allocation will be used to help young students to buy access to further data. That, alongside the additional iPads or computers that are required for young people, should help with digital poverty. In addition, throughout the pandemic an additional £4.8 million of funding was provided to colleges earlier in the financial year to buy IT equipment. Some colleges have obtained data SIM cards for students to access broadband, and, to date, 1,197 of those cards have been made available to further education students.

I hope that that alleviates the Member's concern, because I understand that this has been a very difficult time for young students, who have missed out on the college experience and have had to rely on online teaching. No matter how good that is, the loneliness and remoteness of that has been difficult for young people.

Mr Durkan: Has the Minister engaged with network providers on mobile data, and does she know how many more masts are required and where across the North those masts must go for full mobile connectivity?

Mrs Dodds: The telecommunications part of my Department is continuously in contact with mobile providers, particularly as we move to the roll-out of 5G, which is very important for connectivity across Northern Ireland. I do not have to hand the detail on masts, but I will, of course, be happy to write to the Member.

Project Stratum

2. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the roll-out of Project Stratum. (AQO 1568/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. Project Stratum will utilise public funding that was gained through the DUP confidence and supply agreement, together with investment from Fibrus Networks, to deliver gigabit-capable broadband infrastructure to more than 76,000 primarily rural premises across Northern Ireland, including 4,236 premises in the Member's constituency. It is the biggest infrastructure project ever undertaken in Northern Ireland, and, for the Member's further information, work is already under way in Killyleagh to provide that important connectivity.

Following contract award in November 2020, the deployment of infrastructure commenced immediately. Work is under way in the first five deployment areas: Coalisland; Killyleagh; Ballycastle; Kilkeel; and Castlewellan. Fibrus Networks has planted in excess of 374 poles, installed 8.2 kilometres of duct and completed 63 kilometres of fibre cable.

The fact that those build activities have already commenced, at this stage of the project, is a significant achievement, given that network providers typically use the first six to nine months for planning. Therefore, while we had anticipated that that period would be required for network design, it is now expected that the first premises will be live in the first quarter of 2021 and that over 19,000 of the 76,000 will have been passed by the end of this year.

Fibrus Networks has advised my Department that the COVID-19 restrictions have caused some delay due to additional paperwork and the challenges that it presented. This is a good news story for Northern Ireland and building the connectivity of the future for the economy.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for that response. If we were to do a SWOT analysis — strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats — what current threats could the Minister identify to Project Stratum?

Mrs Dodds: Project Stratum continues to be rolled out. We will be looking at the premises, for example, that are not within the scope of Project Stratum, but, currently, there are no threats to its roll out.

Mr McAleer: I share the Minister's sentiment that this is a good news story; it is a very good news story. The Minister will be aware that, in the assessment for broadband, it was initially stated that about 100,000 premises in the North did not have access to decent broadband. However, the figure quoted for Project Stratum is 76,000. That is a gap of over 20,000. Has the Minister had any engagement with the Project Stratum team and DCMS in Westminster to look at a means to try to reach premises that are not currently in the Project Stratum intervention area?

Mrs Dodds: It is a good news story for Northern Ireland. As we have seen during the pandemic, connectivity is key for all communities, particularly rural communities. It is key to the objectives of growing the economy in Northern Ireland — the regionally balanced economy that we all seek. Currently, about 3% of premises that should have been within the targeted intervention area are out of the scope of Project Stratum. We have had discussions with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and Fibrus Networks, and we are working to identify the solutions and costs to bringing those premises into the intervention area. I will update the House as soon as I have further information on that.

Mr Dickson: I welcome the connectivity that Project Stratum will give, but, as well as that, BT recently estimated that Northern Ireland is one of the most digitally connected regions in the United Kingdom. What actions is the Minister taking, along with Invest Northern Ireland and InterTradelreland, to promote Northern Ireland as a digitally engaged community, to enhance business, particularly given our unique position in relation to the GB and EU markets?

Mrs Dodds: The Member makes a very important point — one that we use many times when we are talking to investors who are thinking about coming to Northern Ireland. It is an absolute delight to be able to say that the tech and digital companies that are already in Northern Ireland find Northern Ireland to be innovative, hard-working and solution driven, and that many of them, while completely operating for the past year at home, have been winning contracts for their larger home markets in North America, and productivity has increased. The workforce is a credit to Northern Ireland.

This is one of the spaces where we think we can grow the economy further. For Belfast and the greater Belfast region to be recognised as one of the most exciting digital hubs in the United Kingdom is extremely important. However, I advise the Member that, even though all of these things are hugely important and are connected with the service economy, which, of course, is not subject to the rigours of the protocol, we must fix the impact of the protocol on Northern Ireland. To be disconnected from our biggest market is a huge disadvantage to Northern Ireland.

Those who continue to support the protocol blindly will be turning their eyes away from the impact on businesses, families, jobs and the potential for the economy in Northern Ireland to grow.

11.45 am

Mr T Buchanan: I come from a rural area, and I know the difficulties faced by rural communities with poor broadband connectivity. I hope that Project Stratum will address those issues when it is finally rolled out. Given that rural areas and communities are really affected, why are the areas of greatest need not prioritised in this programme? What impact will that have right across Northern Ireland?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question; he makes a very important point. I point out to him, and for the information for the House, that, in West Tyrone alone, 9,591 premises will be impacted by Project Stratum and will have the superfast broadband that they need if we are to build the regionally balanced economy that we all seek.

When tenders and contracts were done, it was made clear that we had to roll out Project Stratum in a way that made the best use of the moneys to include as many houses as we could. Hence, the construct of the programme so far. I look forward to the first 19,000 houses being connected by the end of this year, and, in the spring, the first live connection. That will be quite a moment for the largest-ever infrastructure project for Northern Ireland.

North/South Meetings: Refusal to Engage

3. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister for the Economy to list all areas within her Department's remit where she will not engage in North/South ministerial meetings until there is a satisfactory solution to the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland to allow unfettered access for trade, goods and travel from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. (AQO 1569/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. I have made clear that, at all times, I will act in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland and our local economy, in accordance with my ministerial responsibilities, the code and the statement of 2 February by our party leader, which

I know the honourable Member fully supports, as do I. We have indicated to our Government that they need to act, but we also need to send a message to the Government of the Irish Republic that North/South relationships are impacted on by the implementation of a protocol for which they are cheerleaders and which does real damage to the agreements that they purport to uphold, along with the real damage that it does to our businesses, consumers and communities in Northern Ireland.

We cannot and will not continue to act as though relationships have not been impacted on by their actions. We will consider each matter on its merits, not doing anything that negatively impacts on Northern Ireland. However, it cannot be business as usual for North/South relations because of the issues that flow from the protocol.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her very clear answer. Does she agree that the protocol is causing significant economic and societal harm in Northern Ireland and that it cannot be business as usual in respect of North/South relationships, given the horrific and unhealthy attitude of the Republic of Ireland's Government towards Northern Ireland during the EU-UK negotiations and the actions of the NIO in changing the Belfast Agreement regarding consent? Will she assure the House that she will partake in North/South activity only when there is a clear advantage for Northern Ireland, its businesses and its people?

Mrs Dodds: I assure the House that that will be my position. In no way do I want to negatively impact on Northern Ireland, the stability of its people, its political process or, importantly for me in my role, its economy. However, on many occasions, I have explained and gone through the difficulties that the protocol represents for Northern Ireland and the rupture to the UK's internal market that it has brought about. I find it somewhat disconcerting that nationalist politicians and cheerleaders from the Republic of Ireland simply refuse to acknowledge the folly of the protocol for North/South relations, east-west trade and communities, individuals and families.

Let me tell you about some of the issues that I have been dealing with over the last number of weeks. These very real issues are impacting on families across Northern Ireland. The e-commerce market in the United Kingdom is broken, with parcels not arriving. It is easy to make snide remarks on Twitter about parcels, but the real impact is on families and businesses across Northern Ireland. My Department has been following the e-commerce issue very closely and tracking what has happened to over 100 businesses that previously sent parcels to Northern Ireland. Six weeks into the operation of the protocol, only 143 of those businesses have made any changes.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Minister's time is up.

Mrs Dodds: We are very clear that there are significant challenges and difficulties.

Dr Archibald: It is quite clear that Brexiteers argued for Brexit on the basis of fantasies and mistruths and ignored the concerns and fears, which have now been realised, that Brexit would bring only disruption and difficulties. A report last week by Manufacturing NI —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): May we have a question, please?

Dr Archibald: — highlighted that the majority of businesses here want practical solutions to make the protocol work. Does the Minister not agree that her time would be better spent engaging with those businesses and promoting our valuable access to the European market, rather than engaging in silly political stunts?

Mrs Dodds: I remind the Member that I, in my former role as a Member of the European Parliament and as a Minister, have consistently warned of the dangers of the protocol. All parties in this House that want the rigorous implementation of the protocol want it at the expense of families and businesses in Northern Ireland.

I am not in the business of carrying out stunts. If I were, I need only look at the party opposite and its breaking of walls at an imaginary border and all the other stunts that have happened. If there are stunts in this House, that party has the monopoly on them.

Mr O'Toole: One important way in which we could ease the east-west disruption caused by Brexit would be through the signing of an EU-UK agreement on sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) goods, specifically a veterinary standards agreement. Switzerland has one, as does Norway, and they are both outside the European Union. If the Minister is serious about wanting to ease east-west disruption, will she commit, here and now, to calling on the UK Government to sign a veterinary agreement on much closer alignment between the UK and the EU on veterinary standards? That is a practical way in which we can ease disruption. Is she willing to make that call, here and now, on the UK Government?

Mrs Dodds: The Member is well aware that the Swiss-type arrangement that he talks about requires the whole of the UK slavishly to follow EU rules in every respect. In the European Parliament, I used to hear it said that, if the Swiss wanted to turn right, they had to ask for permission from Brussels.

As someone who voted for Brexit and believes in the sovereignty of the United Kingdom, I will always want the United Kingdom to act as one. I regret that our Prime Minister imposed the protocol, cheered on by many in this House, to the detriment of Northern Ireland. It is now up to the Prime Minister to fix the problem that he created, to take up his duty to United Kingdom citizens in Northern Ireland and remove barriers to trade, particularly for SPS agreements.

The Member should also reflect, when he cheerleads for the protocol, what the SDLP wants from it. They cheerlead for the protocol, yet the SDLP leader wrote to me, in my Department, asking whether I am going to design a scheme to provide financial assistance to businesses that are experiencing additional costs as a result of the protocol.

Dr Aiken: The Minister may not be aware, but, this morning, Maroš Šefčovič said that he will meet Northern Ireland businesses and civil society on Thursday of this week. Does the Minister think it discourteous, to say the least, that he is not listening to political unionism, in our steadfast opposition to this very unequal Northern Ireland protocol?

Mrs Dodds: The European commissioner reflects a denial that many in this House have, and that our own Government have in changing the consent mechanism

to the protocol. That is the position that the European Union has long taken. It is disingenuous — that is the politest and mildest way that I can put it — to call for the full implementation of the Belfast Agreement in all its parts and then change the rules of the agreement on consent, because the European Union's pet project might not gain consent in this House.

It is time that nationalist politicians here, in Dublin, London and the European Union listened to the fact that the delicate balances created by the Belfast Agreement have been completely thrown out the window and that political unionism is united in opposing the impact of the protocol in Northern Ireland.

EU Structural Funds

4. **Mr Muir** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the actions she is taking to mitigate the impact on her Department arising from the termination of EU structural funds. (AQO 1570/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. I continue to work with the Finance Minister on the replacement of EU structural funds. The Department for the Economy has a clear interest in EU replacement funding, given that the European social fund (ESF) and the European regional development fund (ERDF) have historically funded substantial activity in our policy remit, such as economic development, energy, skills and apprenticeships.

A successful bid in the January monitoring round provided my Department with domestic funding for existing ESF projects in the current financial year. That effectively enables my Department to defer spending European Commission funds of about £26 million until 2022-23, when otherwise that funding would have run out. The mechanism for extending this ESF activity is being explored, and I hope to make a formal announcement in the coming weeks.

This welcome outcome provides my Department with additional time to develop appropriate succession programmes and secure the necessary funding for these valuable interventions.

Mr Muir: Northern Ireland is in a very different place now, and we need to plan for the future. Will the Minister clarify her attitude towards the future? Will her party work with the protocol to find solutions with the rest of us, or will it turn its back on reality, North/South cooperation and economic success?

Mrs Dodds: I assure the Member that my face is firmly turned towards the future. I am working on future interventions for the Northern Ireland economy, because I want a successful, stable, prosperous Northern Ireland, where all its citizens can live and feel valued. That is an important point of principle for me. However, I understand the pro-protocol parties making a song and dance about this. They have moved away from "rigorous implementation" to "a few teething problems" etc, and I understand the Member's point.

12.00 noon

Let me be absolutely clear: our biggest market is GB, and we sell more into the Great Britain market than we do to the Republic of Ireland, the rest of the EU and the rest

of the world put together. It is absolutely imperative that we fix the fissure that has now developed in the United Kingdom's internal market so that we can help Northern Ireland to progress. This is an important point: many firms will not know what their future holds, because they may rely on supply chains that bring goods from the EU that then have to come to Northern Ireland as part of the manufacturing or retail process. Those goods, because they traverse GB, may be hit by tariffs if they are at risk of falling into the single market. We need to have clarity for our businesses, and, before we can move on, that interruption to the UK's internal market needs to be fixed.

Mr Stalford: Does my friend agree that it is bizarre to be in a situation in which political parties in the House will defend arrangements that will impose additional costs on families and firms? Does she also agree that what we are dealing with here is a group of Belfast masochists defending Brussels sadists? *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Dodds: That is quite the description. What we have here is an attitude of burying your head in the sand. Of course, that is common in Brussels, because that is where the political project comes above everything else. We have seen that with vaccines. When it comes to the vaccine supply, the political project trumps people's lives. It trumps everything in relation to Northern Ireland. I do not believe that Brussels really cares about Northern Ireland. It has used it shamelessly as a bargaining chip for years.

Ms Sheerin: It is clear that our departure from the EU has led to the loss of quite a lot of structural funds. I know that your Department has apparently lost £70 million from the European regional development fund and the European social fund. Things between your party and the British Government may not be great at the moment and you are on somewhat of a break, but can you give us an assurance that you have sought clarification from the British Government that they will replace that funding? Have you received confirmation that they will?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. She takes us into the territory of the replacement programmes for European funding and how that will work in future. It is important that we address the issues around apprenticeships. No matter what the political persuasion, I do not think that anyone in the House would deny that I have absolutely championed young people and apprentices in Northern Ireland at every opportunity. It is important that we look at the young people who are in our training networks so that they can have a good start in life. I will continue to work to identify that programme.

Our Government need to give us greater clarity on the successor programmes, including the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF), and on how we can work within the parameters not just to get additional funding for training needs and apprenticeships but to obtain real investment in Northern Ireland that recognises the needs and priorities of the Northern Ireland Executive.

Mr Allister: Last weekend, former First Minister Peter Robinson perceptively said:

"you cannot try to ditch the protocol and administer it at the same time."

Which choice does our Economy Minister prefer?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is clearly not related to the question. It is up to the Minister whether she wishes to respond.

Mrs Dodds: I will of course respond to that, because it is an important point. Perhaps the tone of Mr Allister's question reflects his position all along that he does not want Stormont to succeed or to have the institutions here.

In my first answer to the question, I said clearly that I would act at all times in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland and according to my ministerial responsibilities. I take those seriously and will do that, but I will continue to oppose the protocol that has brought such damage to the economy in Northern Ireland. For the first six weeks of this year, most of our time has been focused on the issue of the movement of goods. Firms across Northern Ireland are about to put in what are called "supplementary declarations". Those supplementary declarations will deal with the issue of tariffs. I expect to see significant disruption at that level as well.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That ends the period for listed questions. We move to topical questions.

Students: COVID Disruption Payment

T1. **Ms Brogan** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will address the inequalities in the allocation of the COVID disruption payment to ensure that it be made available to all students, given that, although the £500 payment was welcomed by many higher education students, full-time students at further education colleges, part-time students, international students, students from the North who are studying in the Twenty-six Counties and students from the North who are studying in Britain have been excluded. *(AQT 991/17-22)*

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. She has raised an important and, dare I say, topical question. I was delighted to announce a package of almost £38 million of support for students in Northern Ireland. As the Member rightly said, that support will deal with the £500 individual payments to all students. It will increase the hardship funds that are available to our institutions by another £8.5 million, including a focus on the mental health of young students and the issues around digital poverty that many young students face. I recognise that, and that is why I asked for and gained a support package that is probably the most generous in our United Kingdom.

About 15,000 students from Northern Ireland study in institutions throughout the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. My Department holds no database for those students, and I have no legal remit to ask universities or institutions in Great Britain to authorise payments to those students. It is not within my legal purview at this time. However, those students are not without help. Just as EU, Scottish or Welsh students can gain help through the schemes in Northern Ireland, students studying in Great Britain will gain similar help through the schemes that are there. Just recently, Scotland announced an additional £30 million for hardship, Wales £40 million and England £50 million. I encourage students to use the schemes in the institutions that they belong to.

Ms Brogan: Minister, in November, you told the Assembly that your Department would review the level of support

for postgraduate students. Those students do not receive maintenance grants or loans, and it is a major barrier for those on a low income. Will you provide a date for when the consultation on postgraduate funding will be launched?

Mrs Dodds: I cannot provide the exact date. However, this afternoon, I will discuss the issue with the senior team in my Department, and we hope to launch the consultation in the very near future.

Reopening the Economy: Plans

T2. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister for the Economy what plans she is putting in place for the reopening of the economy. (AQT 992/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. All of us in the House must be rightly proud of the way that our health service has responded to the most difficult period in our history and to the vaccination roll-out. I am hopeful because we have been managing to get significant numbers of people vaccinated. That is a credit to Patricia Donnelly and her team, who are organising the programme. We should all acknowledge that fact. However, as we progress, we need to make sure that we open our economy safely and for the long term and break the cycle that we have been in of opening and shutting it, which is destroying so many businesses.

On Friday, I met my local chamber in Banbridge, and it was disturbing to hear how so many businesses are literally hanging on by their fingertips at this time. No amount of schemes or help are substitutes for an open economy that is trading freely. In the coming weeks, I will work with the TEO task force, but I will also bring forward my plans for economic recovery and, most importantly, plans that, I hope, the Executive will respond to for a skills budget for Northern Ireland that will not just open the economy but help it to trade successfully with appropriate skills.

Mr Stalford: Thank you, and, speaking as someone who has been in hospital three times in the last year, I absolutely associate myself with your comments on the National Health Service.

I urge the Minister to be bold in pushing for the fullest possible opening-up of our economy. It is utterly soul-destroying for people who are trying to run businesses that, every time there appears to be light at the end of the tunnel, up pops some public figure demanding that we build more tunnel.

Mrs Dodds: I absolutely agree with the Member's last comment that messaging is important and can have a significant impact on businesses. I had a meeting with some business organisations and was disturbed to hear that, because of the issues and the problems and the longevity of the pandemic, many people had had mental health problems and some had contemplated suicide. That is no way to run our society. It is difficult, and messaging is key in all that.

Yes, we want to open up our economy safely and as swiftly as the transmission of the disease allows. I will, of course, work with colleagues in order to bring that about. However, the House could support us, and there are things that our national Government could do, such as extending furlough. There are areas such as aerospace, tourism and hospitality where the tail of recovery will be long and troublesome, so the extension of furlough is key. For

tourism and hospitality, extending the cut in the VAT rate is also key. I know that my party colleagues at Westminster are taking up all those issues, but it is crucial that we send a united voice on that important issue.

Protocol: Disruption

T3. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she agrees that parties that enthusiastically called for the full implementation of the protocol should bear some responsibility for the disruption caused to businesses and consumers, with many of us having been contacted by constituents who are angry because they can no longer receive parcels from GB, and, if so, has she raised the issue with the UK Government. (AQT 993/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. I have raised the e-commerce market in the United Kingdom on a number of occasions with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), which is my reporting Department, and, indeed, with Michael Gove, who is undertaking work on most of the protocol issues. It is vital that we have a UK e-commerce market that thrives and that every business and individual in Northern Ireland can be part of in an equal way across the United Kingdom. That is not happening, and we have significant disruption with firms that simply will not commit to trading with Northern Ireland. That may be because they do not know the changed circumstances, it may be because the information came too late or it may be because the so-called grace period that Michael Gove announced runs out on 31 May. Those are the problems of the protocol. It is for those who sit on the opposite Benches and deny those problems to explain that to families, individuals and businesses across Northern Ireland.

12.15 pm

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her response. I am sure that she is aware that many hauliers are facing very difficult and challenging times. Yesterday, one haulier, with 20 trailers sitting in England, was unable to get loads back because businesses would not supply. This is a big issue for hauliers, many of whom have been making a loss over the four or five weeks since the protocol commenced.

Mrs Dodds: Yes, the issue of hauliers is hugely problematic for Northern Ireland. Indeed, I was talking to one haulage company in my constituency that admitted that it had no alternative but to raise prices. Those prices will, in turn, be passed on to consumers and businesses in Northern Ireland. The protocol inevitably brings less choice and higher prices. That is an inevitable outworking of the protocol.

I was also talking to Hospitality Ulster. It said that if we consider that export health certificates are due to run out in a few weeks, as is the grace period on chilled foods, and the fact that the food service industry is operating at around one-third of its normal level because of the shutdown, the protocol's problems will become more intense and deeper as time goes on.

North/South Ministerial Meetings: Duty

T4. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister for the Economy, after thanking the Member from West Tyrone for asking questions about students, whether she accepts that, on signing the Pledge of Office, it is her duty and not her

choice to participate in North/South ministerial meetings, given that, in answer to question 3, she said that she would consider each matter on its merits. (AQT 994/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I think that the Member does not remember the first part of my answer to that question, in which I said that I would, at all times, act within my ministerial responsibilities and the code of office.

Ms S Bradley: Thank you, Minister, for that clarification, because there is a duty on you, as there is on all Ministers, to represent all the people of Northern Ireland.

In that vein, what plans does the Minister have to ensure that equality is offered to the people of South Down, who, for a very long time, have been at the latter end of any work done through Invest NI to secure inward investment and jobs. What plans does she have to rectify that situation?

Mrs Dodds: I will write to the Member about the issue in South Down. I crave equality for the citizens of Northern Ireland: equality in the UK's internal market and equality in the UK's e-commerce market so that all citizens in Northern Ireland are treated on the same basis as citizens right across the United Kingdom. The protocol interrupts that and causes a huge fissure. Equality is high on my agenda.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Pam Cameron. The Member may not have time for a supplementary.

Click and Collect

T5. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she agrees that introducing click and collect for all retail stores would go some way towards helping businesses that have been losing trade because they have been forced to close while larger retail outlets have been allowed to remain open. (AQT 995/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This issue is a source of great frustration to me. I have now brought two papers on click and collect to the Executive. So far, we have had one discussion and no decision.

If we want to reduce the inequality in how small independent retailers are treated vis-à-vis the big multinationals, we have to move to allow them to trade in some respect or another. Inevitably, that will include click and collect. I will again put forward my paper on the matter for discussion on Thursday. I hope that it can be resolved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of our period of questions to the Minister for the Economy. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments, and I ask anyone who is leaving the Chamber to respect social distancing.

Education

Education: Minor Capital Works

1. **Mr Stewart** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of his Department's current minor capital works. (AQO 1582/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I thank the Member for his question. The minor works capital programme remains under pressure. However, the Department has

successfully bid for an additional £15 million of capital for minor works in the January 2021 monitoring round. Although investing all that additional capital before the end of March 2021 will be challenging, the additional capital is an extremely welcome boost in relieving the ongoing pressures.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for his response. At the outset, I declare an interest as a member of the boards of governors of a number of schools. Setting aside the frustrations and concerns about COVID and the lack of information, sometimes, that principals receive, the single biggest issue and complaint that is raised with me by principals and teachers is about delays with minor schemes and capital works. Almost every school in my constituency has raised concerns, having been on waiting lists for years. One school has had 20 repairs to its roof in the past two years, even though it has been on the waiting list for a new roof for 10 years.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member come to his question?

Mr Stewart: It sounds penny wise and pound foolish. How do we get to a position where those repairs can be carried out in a timely manner?

Mr Weir: The issue is across the sector. The level of investment that is needed is well in excess of what is directly available. At the last call that was made, around 6,000 applications for minor works were received in October 2017, which then had to be ranked. There has been an intervening period since October 2017, and various works have been put in place. Over 1,300 of those schemes have been completed or are being progressed. In addition to that, around 625 emergency and unavoidable schemes have been progressed in the past financial year. I anticipate that a similar number will be done in this financial year. As with anything, the level of capital budget is always a mix between what we have in minor works, what is in the school enhancement programme (SEP) and what is in new school builds. It is about trying to get a mix between those. As with anything, although COVID has constrained what can be done from a practical point of view, it is always the case, notwithstanding that, if the capital budget were twice the size, I am sure that, ultimately, twice the money could be spent. It is about operating within that.

I understand entirely the frustrations of individual schools that will see issues around that. Sometimes, the answer will be minor works. Sometimes, as the Member mentioned, the danger is that simply doing minor works to a school is throwing a certain amount of good money after bad. That is why we have capital programmes for major works and SEPs. However, that will not cover every situation. If the Member has any direct concerns about individual schools in East Antrim, I will be happy to receive correspondence from him, and we can chase down the details on those cases.

Mr Catney: Will the Minister provide an update on how the additional £18.1 million that was announced in January will be spent and whether any of that funding will be carried over in the next financial year?

Mr Weir: Again, that capital funding was received through the monitoring round. Of that, £15 million has been directed towards minor works. A lot that can be used can be brought forward. An issue has been raised about some

minor works schemes and fire risk assessments, quite a few of which were planned for 2021-22. The additional money that has been received means that we can front-load those, so around 35 minor works schemes that are mainly focused on those recommendations can be brought forward. Those works will be initiated immediately and as much work as possible completed in the financial year.

We will always try to bid for as much as possible in monitoring rounds. However, it is challenging when there is a restriction that, if you bid for something in a January monitoring round, any money not spent directly on that front by the end of March has to be surrendered. However, the aim is to press the Education Authority (EA) to try to make sure that as much as possible is done between now and 31 March.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, Minister, and congratulations on getting that extra money for minor capital investment. You said that spending it by the end of March might be a problem, but we need increased space in classrooms to allow safe social distancing. Can any of that minor capital investment now be used for those schools to ensure that we can get our children safely back to school?

Mr Weir: It would probably be very difficult to implement work on safe social distancing between now and the end of March, so we have to try to be as creative as possible. Anything that can be spent and can be diverted in that direction will be. To be honest, from a practical point of view, given that it is monitoring round money, even procurement issues mean that it will be difficult to divert much of that between now and 31 March. The delivery mechanism for minor works is through the Education Authority. We are trying to ensure that as much pressure as possible is kept on the EA to make sure that there is the highest possible level of spend.

Irish-medium Education: Resources

2. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Education whether he has provided any additional resource to Irish-medium education to address the specific immersion needs of children, including those with no access to Irish education at home. (AQO 1583/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. At the beginning of the pandemic, I set up the continuity of learning programme with a focus on supporting pupil learning. Recognising the specific needs of the Irish-medium sector, I included a separate work stream for Irish-medium education. That brought together representatives from across a range of educational bodies and support service organisations.

Specific resources have been provided for Irish-medium schools and pupils through the work stream. Guidance and support for parents have been translated or developed. Work stream representatives have facilitated links with the BBC, with a view to increasing its Bitesize Irish-medium programming. The Education Authority has developed a website to provide a single point of access for information, especially during a time of remote or blended learning. The website includes a distinct area for Irish-medium schools to access resources, guidance and support through one portal.

My Department works closely with its arm's-length bodies on providing resources, support and solutions for our practitioners on the ground. That includes providing specific funding to the Education Authority and the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to provide Irish-medium support.

Furthermore, Altram, which is funded by my Department to provide support to the Irish-medium preschool sector, has developed a range of resources, including phonetic resources for parents' language development and audiovisual language resources to assist parents with remote learning. All that work was informed by the valuable advocacy of Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) as the representative body for the Irish-medium education sector. That partnership approach will continue and be built upon for the benefit of all pupils in the Irish-medium sector.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. Will he clarify whether the support that he has outlined is additional resource and support, financial or otherwise, that is being provided to the schools?

Mr Weir: These are additional resources. For instance, resources have been produced by CCEA as part of the programme. I will give you an indication of the range of interactive resources that are available: an early years phonetics scheme is being developed to extend to years 3 and 4; a dictionary of mathematics terminology; an Irish language talking clock; electronic versions of translated text books; and the development of a series of talking books for post-primary children to provide auditory exposure to the language.

From a practical point of view, part of the complication that has been faced is the extent to which off-the-shelf resources are available outside of Northern Ireland. The Irish-medium sector has been disadvantaged because, largely speaking, the English-medium sector can draw down resources from the United States, Canada and various other places.

To a certain extent, a lot of the work that has been developed, for instance by CCEA, has started from a base position of what can be done internally in Northern Ireland, while looking to the Republic of Ireland to see whether any additional assistance can be provided there. However, that has had a level of constraint, which has meant that the off-the-shelf resources have been less readily available.

12.30 pm

Moreover, while we have tried to give greater flexibility to Irish-medium schools, one of the disadvantages that they face has been the number of substitute teachers that they can draw on, and that is because it requires a level of specialism. Other sectors have faced not dissimilar problems, although I do not want to draw direct comparisons. However, the pool of people who can be drawn from to provide, during the COVID response, the full range of supports has been narrow, and that, too, has created constraint.

Ms Flynn: We know that, particularly during the first wave, there were significant gaps in the Irish-medium sector and also for organisations that represent newcomer families. In his first answer, the Minister mentioned the work streams that were set up. Will he outline what direct engagement he has had throughout the process with the Irish-medium

sector and the organisations that work with newcomer families?

Mr Weir: We have tried to work with all the various sectors and groups. To that extent, with regard to resources, the EA has, as much as possible, tried to provide translations. We recognise that there is a wide range of newcomer families in Northern Ireland from very diverse parts of the world, which makes it challenging to meet all their needs.

The Member highlighted particular problems in the spring of last year. To be fair, that was something that, in different ways, affected all sectors. None of us in the Chamber could have anticipated the disruption that would happen last spring. That has undoubtedly been the case through a range of sectors. Generally, feedback, particularly from parents, has been that the remote learning and assistance during this lockdown — I think that all of us accept that face-to-face teaching provides the best possible solution — has been much better than it was in the first lockdown when, to a large extent, people were caught unawares.

Part of the support has also been through information to parents and translation. One of the issues, particularly for Irish-medium education, and, indeed, for the education of newcomer children, has been that although a lot of work has been done by way of remote learning and lessons directly from schools, the intermediaries are often the parents who are on the front line. They will not have the same teaching experience, and some will also face linguistic issues. For example, the parents of many children in the Irish-medium sector may not have had the opportunities that their children have, and their knowledge of Irish may not be as great as their children's. That is a barrier, but resources are being put into it.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his answer on a sector of our children who perhaps need additional resources. I am sure that the Minister will agree with me that looked-after children often require additional help, whether that is pre-COVID or through COVID. What additional measures have been put in place for those young people to ensure that they are not further disadvantaged?

Mr Weir: As part of the wider picture for vulnerable children, there have been interactions for looked-after children with the Department of Health to provide support and to work on an inter-agency basis, and that is to be welcomed. Looked-after children will also count as part of the wider pool of vulnerable children. We have seen a much greater degree of opportunity. One of the things that was made clear during this lockdown was an encouragement of vulnerable and looked-after children to be directly in schools, and uptake has been much greater this time than previously.

Of great concern in the first lockdown was the number of vulnerable children not directly interacting with schools or not in school when they had the opportunity to be. From discussions with ministerial colleagues in different jurisdictions, I know that that problem was not unique to Northern Ireland; it was common in a number of jurisdictions. There is considerably more uptake and support directly happening by way of supported and supervised learning in schools, particularly for our looked-after children. It remains ongoing work. The work on looked-after children is done not just by my Department but through working closely with the Health Department. His colleague the Minister of Health has done good

work on the subject. We try to work closely on that. It is very difficult to do it for all young people, but the most vulnerable in our society need that level of support.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I urge Members who are asking a supplementary question to connect it to the listed question.

Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030

3. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister of Education, following the recent publication of the Executive's children and young people's strategy 2020-2030, for a timescale for the development and publication of the associated three-year children and young people's strategy delivery plan. (AQO 1584/17-22)

9. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Education what steps he is taking to ensure that, despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the children and young people's strategy 2020-2030 is taken forward urgently. (AQO 1590/17-22)

Mr Weir: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 9 together.

I am committed to ensuring that the Executive's children and young people's strategy is taken forward as a matter of urgency, despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, if anything, it is even more vital in the current context that we work together in a coordinated way to improve the lives of children and young people and to address the issues that they face. In many cases, those issues and the problems that many children face have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

The children and young people's strategy provides the vehicle for coordinated action. It has been developed with extensive input from a wide range of stakeholders, including, crucially, young people themselves. It reflects what is important to them. Its aims are ambitious and will be achieved only if we cooperate with a renewed commitment to address the many challenges identified.

My officials are developing, in partnership with other Departments, a cross-departmental delivery plan that will set out the actions to be taken over the next three years. Those actions, which are part of the plan, will focus on the 40 areas of greatest focus. Those were identified by stakeholders and are listed in the strategy. The delivery plan will identify where cooperation will be required to address specific issues and who will be involved. We are also compiling a suite of population indicators, which will be used to track progress on outcomes and help us gauge what real difference is being made to the lives of children and young people. I intend to bring the delivery plan to the Executive for approval by May, before it issues for public consultation.

Mr Harvey: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. Can the Minister indicate how implementation will be monitored?

Mr Weir: The delivery plan will touch on all Departments, probably on some a bit more than others. All Departments, in collaboration with their delivery partners — there are also third-sector bodies and arm's-length bodies involved — will be responsible for the implementation of the actions that they have identified in the plan. Some will be cross-cutting, while some will fall to an individual Department.

My Department, on behalf of the Executive, has lead responsibility for publishing, monitoring and reporting to the Assembly on the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. Monitoring of the delivery plan is the key element of that process.

To support that, the Department will be putting in place monitoring and reporting structures that will oversee the delivery of the strategy, provide accountability and aid cooperation. Importantly, a wide range of stakeholders, will have a voice in the monitoring process, not just on where we have got to now. Stakeholders will be, amongst others, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), the statutory children's authorities, children's service providers, academic and practice-based researchers, and, most importantly, children, young people and parents themselves.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Minister for his response, I welcome the fact that his report will be brought forward in May, but surely he will agree with me that our most vulnerable children and young people, particularly those in special education, should be our priority, especially given the situation that we are in. I understand his position on vaccination, particularly for the entire staff of special schools, but may I use this opportunity to ask him to talk to his colleague in Health to ensure that all teaching staff and all other members of the school community —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): This is an opportunity for questions.

Ms Ní Chuilín: — are vaccinated? Will the Minister bring that issue back to his Executive colleague on Thursday, please?

Mr Weir: I will be having discussions fairly constantly. The Executive took a view that they wanted, first, to get consensus. Obviously, the Health Minister and the Health Department will be critical to that. Although I have highlighted the education sector, other Departments will take a view that specific groups within their remit should also be prioritised for vaccination. It is fairly clear that that will operate on the basis of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) position.

I share the Member's view, and I have made it clear on a number of occasions that I want to see prioritisation for the wider education sector. The strongest need is in the special schools sector, and that is because of the vulnerability of the children and the level of interaction. There has been some progress on that, but I want to see early vaccination of all education staff, because that will be of benefit to children, parents and those staff in enabling them to provide continuity. That will be part of wider Executive discussions, and I suspect that, given the desire to ensure that the roll-out is on the basis of an agreed prioritisation list, the role of the Executive will be to lobby and give a Northern Ireland voice to that larger, wider discussion.

Given the overall success of the vaccination process, through which a number of key groups of clear clinical vulnerability are being reached, a clear debate is opening up more and more across a range of jurisdictions on what the next steps are, and I think that prioritising key worker groups has to form part of the overall thinking. To some extent, that will include education staff, but it will have to go slightly beyond that as well.

Mr Lyttle: I agree with the Member for North Belfast.

The key aim of the children and young people's strategy is healthy children, so I will ask the Education Minister to be clearer. In order to promote safe and healthy special schools during the pandemic, which special school staff will be vaccinated and when?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. As I indicated, my position is that there is still a good argument to say that all special schools should be included. Work has been ongoing involving the Department, the EA strategic leadership group for special schools, the Public Health Agency and the Chief Medical Officer (CMO). The Department of Health has indicated that it would prioritise vaccination around a range of children with particular clinical vulnerabilities. There is a list — it is not exclusive to that — of, I think, 16 interventions around that, and staff will interact with that.

We are at the stage where it is effectively a two-stage process. There is identification of the children whom staff will be interacting with, and then, in terms of delivery on the ground, there is a role for the schools to identify those staff. I appreciate that that sometimes puts the schools in a difficult position, but Health is indicating that it can only justify, from a clinical point of view, interventions for those staff who are directly involved. I understand that that work is nearing completion and that the list of children is more or less there. The principals indicated that they did not want to do it over the half-term period, but there will be identification and that will lead to a reasonable cohort. It will not go as far as I ideally want, but part of that is to try to reach consensus in the Executive, particularly with Health. The Department of Health can speak for itself, but it will want, above all else, to ensure that the integrity of the JCVI programme is not in any way breached, and that is an understandable position, but, again, there is benefit in ensuring that everybody in special schools is vaccinated as soon as possible.

Mr McNulty: The Minister will know that I have been like a broken record on the need for a more comprehensive programme than that being delivered under the restart programme. We need a recharged programme that helps kids to recover and to catch up physically, academically, socially, emotionally and mentally. A major focus of the children and young people's strategy is on mental health and well-being. Given that we are now facing a crisis in mental health amongst our young people, what immediate commitments can the Minister give to provide additional funding or resources to help to tackle that?

Mr Weir: Part of the emotional health and well-being strategy allies with the children and young people's strategy. In 2021, we were able to mainstream an additional £5 million directly from Education, with additional support of £1.5 million from Health, so £6.5 million of this year's Budget has been baselined.

Despite the fact that we are moving to a scenario in which there will be flatlined cash next year, we are ensuring that that will be baselined on an ongoing basis. As part of that, £5 million was made directly available for COVID recovery in 2021. One of the slight frustrations that we have seen with some COVID issues is that COVID has created the need for particular interventions and sometimes creates barriers to those interventions going as far as they can, so there is restriction on the ground.

12.45 pm

As I said to the Member, on the previous occasion when I brought a paper to the Executive, it indicated that, on balance, we needed to extend remote learning to 5 March. One of the key aspects of that paper was seeking the commitment of the Executive to a new Engage programme. The Member may call it "Recharge"; we will call it "Engage". We will not disagree over the language.

In looking towards the recovery position — a broader paper will be brought to the Executive on that — there is an overall ask that will involve not only the educational catch-up but the mental health and well-being side of that. One of the lessons is to see whether there is greater flexibility —.

Mr McNulty: The physical as well.

Mr Weir: The physical as well. I know that the Member opposite will be putting all the children of Northern Ireland through their paces on that side of it as well.

While the lead in those responsibilities lies principally with the Department of Education, there is an important role where the Department of Health and the Department for Communities, in particular, and others can step up. There is also good work to be done in partnership with third-party organisations, particularly on mental and physical well-being.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Minister's time is up.

Transfer Tests 2021

4. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister of Education what provision is being made for transfer tests in autumn 2021. (AQO 1585/17-22)

Mr Weir: The post-primary transfer tests are organised and operated by private providers. I understand that, to date, only the Association for Quality Education Ltd (AQE) has indicated its intention to initiate preparations for proceeding with tests in the next academic year. I will engage with AQE Ltd on those arrangements. However, it is vital that AQE Ltd also engages with pupils, parents and other stakeholders sooner rather than later on how the tests will be conducted, including its approach to the safety of children. When the Post Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC) outlines its proposals, similar engagement will be taken forward at that point with PPTC for the GL test as well.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for his answer. I declare an interest, as one of my daughters will be going through the transfer test procedure, if it goes ahead, later this year.

Minister, we have been pushing hard for transfer tests to take place in the primary school setting. Are you having any engagement directly to see whether that can take place?

Mr Weir: The aim would be to proceed with engagement. The problem tends to be twofold. As they are privately set tests, AQE and PPTC would ultimately need to buy in to that. Having said that, I suspect that that is not the barrier.

The problem, I suppose, is that, back in 2016 — I do not how much it was a bar — a memo, at least, was sent out saying that primary schools were not to be used as hosts. I lifted that in 2016, so there is no barrier to the test being

held in a primary school. The opportunity to hold the test in primary schools will require the buy-in of those schools. Largely speaking, it will require the buy-in of boards of governors. I will be happy to convene people around a table to discuss that. One of the problems is that, if we are to get buy-in, we need it across the board. If we ended up with a scenario where some pupils were able to sit a test in their own primary school and many others were not, you would create a sort of a home-and-away advantage.

I agree with the Member that the best place for pupils to sit transfer tests is in the environment of their own primary school.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of our period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions.

Remote Learning: Pupil Engagement

T1. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Education, after declaring an interest as a parent of two teenagers who are grappling with the new means of education, for his assessment of the level of engagement with remote learning amongst pupils in this lockdown compared with the lockdown last year. (AQT 1001/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am sure that the Member opposite will be a good example for the promotion of remote learning to them.

We are monitoring the situation with remote learning. Directly speaking, in schools, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) is looking at the broader element of remote learning, and each school has a link officer; indeed, while, of course, none of us, in September, would have anticipated where we would be in February of the following year, there was an acceptance that there was likely to be levels of disruption, so all schools were told to have a remote learning plan in place at the beginning of the school year. The sense of things that I get is that, while, to be fair, there was an element of schools being somewhat taken by surprise last spring, the level and, indeed, standard of remote learning has considerably improved.

The problems with remote learning are not simply about what happens for individuals with devices or lesson plans. One of the disadvantages of remote learning compared with face-to-face teaching is that it takes pupils out of what can be a strong learning environment, where they are in front of a teacher with their fellow pupils. While tremendous work has been done during the lockdown, particularly by parents, it can never be quite as good as direct interventions in schools.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. The disruption of face-to-face learning is compounded by many other factors, including broadband speeds, which I and my colleague Nicola Brogan raised with his colleague the Economy Minister. That disruption will have an inevitable impact on the curriculum and, indeed, on qualifications. What preparations has the Department made to ameliorate the challenges caused by the disruption to the curriculum and qualifications?

Mr Weir: The Member is right: there is a level of disruption to the curriculum. While we accept that remote learning is not and cannot be of the same quality as face-to-face teaching, we should not fall into the trap of believing that

it necessarily means that there will be a loss of leaning across the board. What needs to happen is a sort of catch-up programme, and that is why I will put further detailed proposals to the Executive. If Mr McNulty is nice to me, I might even call it a “Recharge” programme. That will impact not just on mental health and physical well-being but, in particular, on academic catch-up. It will have those different strands to it. It is about what will be done during the remainder of this academic year, what additional interventions can be made, particularly on a voluntary basis — some were made during the summer last year — and what additional support can be provided during 2021-22.

The Member will be aware that, certainly for 2021, a different model of assessment is being put in place that moves away from examinations because it would be unfair to subject pupils to those. Clearly, there will be a knock-on effect on how we look at qualifications in 2022. Unfortunately, as with a lot of things in society, echoes of the problems that we are having with COVID will resonate for years to come. It is about trying to ameliorate those as much as possible, rather than being in a position to remove all the problems.

Education: Legislative Plans

T2. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans to bring legislation to the House. (AQT 1002/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. During the time remaining in the mandate, my priority is to introduce legislation that addresses the flexibility of the school starting age. I have instructed officials to begin scoping out the work for a potential Bill during this mandate. I fully support the concept that parents, especially parents of premature children who are born late in the academic year, should have some flexibility on that. That is why I have instructed officials to make the Bill my Department’s key legislative priority. Given the close proximity to the end of the current mandate, there will be significant pressure on the Executive’s legislative programme. Any legislation that I introduce will therefore depend on the Executive agreeing to proposals from all Ministers as well as Members.

On a personal note, I have been made aware of cases such as those of Freddy and Isaak, two premature boys whose parents would love to have some flexibility around the school starting age. Let me assure the House that I will do all that I can to address those concerns on behalf of boys such as Freddy and Isaak and many more like them whose parents have campaigned on the issue.

Mr Givan: Minister, I welcome the announcement that flexibility will be given in respect of those with June birthdays and, indeed, of premature children. Many families and the charities that have campaigned on the issue will welcome that announcement. Can you assure the House that, given the time that is left in the mandate, the Bill will complete its stages and receive Royal Assent before the next election?

Mr Weir: As I said, we are just over a year away from the end of the current mandate and the legislative programme will be busy, so I have asked my officials to prioritise the policy development work and the consultation that will be needed before the Bill’s introduction to the House. The school system across the board largely works well, but it does not work for everybody, which is why flexibility is

needed. In taking the Bill forward, officials will need to assess its implications across a broad range of policy areas, including preschool provision, special education, the age at which a person commences post-primary education, school leaving age, the curriculum at Key Stages and area planning. Many of those policy areas are also set out in primary legislation. I will need to assess the impact on our educational partners, including the Education Authority, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), CCEA, the Controlled Schools’ Support Council (CSSC), and rightly conduct extensive public consultation. That will take a number of months, but it should provide a sound policy basis for taking forward future legislation that meets the needs of the young people who will benefit most from it. I know that the Education Committee, while we may clash over the odd issue, will be constructive and positive when the Bill eventually comes before it. In the meantime, it is important that parents make informed choices about what they want to do, including speaking to the school to which they are applying to discuss how their child will transition into year 1.

Academic Selection

T3. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Education, in reference to Dr Aiken’s question and in light of the fact that, in recent years, even pre-COVID, several grammar schools have decided to move away from academic selection, whether he is content with that trend or does he intend to put pressure on those schools to revert to his preferred system. (AQT 1003/17-22)

Mr Weir: There is a right to academic selection in law. The legal position is that it is the responsibility of boards of governors. I believe in the right of schools to use academic selection, so I will not pressurise them to abandon it. Through no fault of anybody in the system, because the situation has been overtaken by COVID, we are seeing a range of difficulties that will probably be magnified in June when pupils and their families find out the location of their post-primary school. In a system without any alternative and without a transfer test, that creates a lot of problems in itself. The issue is that, while we will recommend in guidance the criteria that we believe to be better than others, almost inevitably, any form of criteria will advantage some over others.

I will work with the sector. Those schools — I cannot speak for all of them — that felt that they were unable to use academic selection this year because of the lack of a transfer test are largely heavily and strongly committed to using academic selection. The choice remains, and boards of governors can choose whether to use it. I know that, in the past, some schools have taken a bilateral approach and used it for particular streams, which is also legally permissible.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for his answer. I appreciate that these are difficult times and that perhaps this is not the best time to have this discussion. Given that a number of schools — in fact, all the grammar schools this year — have chosen their input without the benefit of academic testing, would the Minister consider studying those schools, particularly the ones that had already decided not to go with selection tests, to see what effect, if any, it has had on their performance?

Mr Weir: If we are looking at the intake in a particular year and its academic record, it would take a number of years to determine performance.

For instance, for those entering year 8 in September, it will simply shift the balance a little in where they show up in GCSE statistics. I believe that we have a system that, across the board, has high levels of success. We have seen that, at primary level and at post-primary level, when we have had comparators, in many cases with other jurisdictions across the world, we have had considerable success, including in reducing underachievement.

1.00 pm

Lost Learning: Contingencies

T4. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Education, given that he will be aware of recent commentary about how best to recover lost learning time, with the idea of whether to pause or repeat this academic year being suggested, albeit that although it may be of benefit to some children or young people, such a blanket proposal may not be a solution, what contingencies are in place for parents who feel that it is in their child's best interests to repeat the year. (AQT 1004/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am at one with the Member on her overall assessment. I appreciate that people will be looking at examples of blue-sky thinking, and that is perfectly natural. The repetition of a year across the board, leaving aside everything else, would, as mentioned earlier, create enormous practical difficulties with accommodation in schools. Would children operate on the basis of having 15 years at school or skip a year at a later stage? The educational information suggests that, in general, the repetition of a year is not an advantage and, in some cases, it is a disadvantage. For specific individuals, there is provision for boards of governors to accept a child's repeating a year or being a year late. In the current system, that is done in a relatively small number of cases.

Of the 333,000 children in the school system, a little over 5,000 are overage for their year. Most of those, however, have particular circumstances of special educational need or, understandably, they will be newcomer children, particularly those with language difficulties, and more than 2,000 of the overage children are in that category. It will be for boards of governors to consider that and, I suppose, for parents to make a representation on their individual case. However, parents need to be careful about the implications of what they do for their child. They will be in the best position to judge the individual interests, but it is not an easy solution for people, and I do not think that people should go into that blindly.

Ms Dolan: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. As part of this conversation on pausing and repeating the academic school year, the issue of applying flexibility to the school starting age has been highlighted again, and I welcome the fact that you intend to introduce legislation to provide the level of flexibility that many parents and children need. What can parents who want flexible school starting ages now, particularly in light of COVID, do?

Mr Weir: Directly speaking, it is about engaging with the school. With the best will in the world, the aim will be to introduce legislation this autumn. That will not directly impact on the 2020-21 cohort, and we can do

nothing retrospectively. I mentioned rigidity, and part of the problem is that school starting age is set in primary legislation. Therefore, no clever manoeuvre by any of us can get round that. I encourage parents to engage directly with their child's school.

I want to be clear that there is a lot of work to be done on flexibility. This is not something where people simply have a broad ideological belief that it is just too early to be starting at that age. It has to be under very specific circumstances because we need something that can work for the system. Broadly speaking, the system works well in relation to school participation and academic progress. However, the lack of any flexibility means that some families are left in an impossible position, and trying to deal with those exceptions, rather than the rule, will be critical as we move ahead on school-age flexibility.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Our time is running out. I call Pat Catney for a quick question.

Children in Care

T5. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister of Education, given that he will be aware of the huge increase in the number of children and young people who have had to be placed in care, with my Education Committee colleague Justin McNulty confirming the number at 178 children, what plans he will put in place to support young people and their families now and within his COVID recovery plan. (AQT 1005/17-22)

Mr Weir: The COVID recovery plan has to be comprehensive across a range of issues. As I said, it will probably look not simply at academic matters but at mental health and physical well-being. The interaction of groups involved will require cross-departmental work with Health, because the resolution of some of the issues for individuals will be tailored to the needs of the individual. That is where the focus needs to be for those children.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That ends our period for questions to the Minister of Education. The next item in the Order Paper is the Adjournment.

Adjourned at 1.05 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 22 February 2021

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Members, before we commence business today, I want to address two matters. First, over recent months, we have seen a very worrying trend of a variety of threats, attacks, vandalism and abuse, including of a sexually violent nature, on social media against a range of people, including Ministers, Members on all sides of the House, journalists and other figures, cultural organisations and ordinary families. Indeed, they are becoming so commonplace that one of my difficulties in the Chair, particularly when considering Matters of the Day, is that, recently, we could have had a discussion condemning specific threats at the start of our business every week.

I acknowledge that Members, including Linda Dillon, Mike Nesbitt, Matthew O'Toole and Michelle O'Neill, have all wanted to raise those issues recently, as have other Members. It is important in my role as Speaker that I record that the Assembly is built on the principle of this being a democratic society in which we uphold freedom of expression and the right of people to have different views and the ability to ask questions. Parties may wish to come together to explore how a substantive discussion on those issues could be added to the Order Paper in the time ahead. For today, however, I know that I speak for Members on every side of the House when I say, on behalf of the Assembly, that we absolutely condemn those who are behind all those threats, attacks and abuse, and we stand in solidarity with those who are on the receiving end of it.

I will move on to the second subject. I remind Members that today will be the first plenary sitting during which they may join the sitting remotely. I wrote to all Members on Friday 19 February to make provision for hybrid Assembly plenary proceedings in accordance with Standing Order 110, and I ask Members to familiarise themselves with that guidance. I thank all those Assembly staff who have worked hard over the past three weeks to put in place the practical and procedural measures to allow this change, bearing in mind that the Assembly gave its approval only on 1 February.

I want to highlight a number of key points.

First, Members participating remotely should act in accordance with the same standards of decorum and behaviour as expected in the Chamber. Secondly, Members wishing to speak should ensure that their name is added to the speaking list in good time to be called. Thirdly, attending remotely does not impact on the quorum required in the Chamber under Standing Orders. Finally, when speaking remotely, Members will not see the clock.

So, for timed contributions, we will advise Members from the Chair when their time is coming to an end.

Inevitably, when incorporating the greater use of technology, we are likely to have our fair share of technical problems. Hopefully, they will be minor, and, indeed, we might even have the odd comedy moment. However, we should keep in mind the reasons for undertaking this change. With the patience, support and good humour of all Members, I am sure that this new method will quickly become embedded in our business.

Mr Buckley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last Tuesday, Ms Paula Bradshaw, Member for South Belfast, challenged the validity of the introduction of the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill. Rightly, you ruled that the Bill's introduction had been properly carried out and that it was within the legislative competence of the Northern Ireland Assembly. At the Health Committee last Thursday, the Member continued to challenge your ruling, saying that the Bill's introduction should not have been allowed and requesting to see your legal advice. Is it in order for the Member for South Belfast to continue to challenge your authority? What action will be taken to deal with the Member and reassure the House that you will resist her efforts?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. I do not want to rehearse my response to Paula Bradshaw last week. Suffice to say, the procedures embraced by Paul Givan were totally consistent with Standing Orders and procedures and were totally correct. I have no doubt that, during the process of that legislation, there will be a lot of debate and scrutiny, as should be the case. I have no doubt that people, including human rights organisations, will ensure that their voice is heard as part of that scrutiny. The content of discussions at Committees is not for me to comment on, but the Member has put his point of view on the record and drawn the attention of the House to the remarks of Paula Bradshaw. I have not heard the recording or seen the Hansard report of the meeting; this has been raised only by you in the Chamber. I take note of it, and, suffice to say, anyone asking for the legal advice to the Speaker will simply be advised that that advice is, as always, privileged and will not be shared. The Member has put his concern on the record.

Public Petition: Extend the COVID Disruption Payment

Mr Speaker: Mr John O'Dowd has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes in which to speak.

Mr O'Dowd: I wish to present this petition on behalf of the National Union of Students-Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI), the student advocacy movement that speaks on behalf of our students who live locally. I will read out the wording of the petition:

"On 4 February the Economy Minister announced that all full-time higher education students in ... universities and colleges would receive a £500 Covid Disruption Grant. But further education, part-time and non-EU international students have been denied this support. All students have experienced severe disruption throughout this pandemic and no one deserves to be left out. We want the Economy Minister to extend this payment scheme to include further education, part-time and non-EU international students. The Minister should also work with other Ministers in UK and Ireland to make sure that support is also available for students from [here] who study elsewhere."

The petition has 3,313 signatures.

In conclusion, there is cross-party support for the petition and the work of the NUS-USI. It is particularly unfortunate that full-time students studying in further education colleges, who are most likely to come from a lower-income background, have not been afforded this grant. Mr Speaker, I support the student movement in its work and in its continued call for this payment to be made to others. I will present the petition to you in due course.

Mr Speaker: As the Member knows, I would normally invite him to bring his petition to the Table. However, in light of social distancing, I ask the Member to remain in his place and make arrangements to submit the petition to my office later. I thank the Member for bringing the petition to the attention of the Assembly. Once the petition is received, I will forward it to the Minister for the Economy and send a copy to the Committee.

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: The next item of business in the Order Paper is a motion on Committee membership. As with similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

*That Ms Paula Bradley replace Mr Gary Middleton as a member of the Committee on Procedures. —
[Mr K Buchanan.]*

Executive Committee Business

The draft Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Mr Speaker: The next item of business is two motions to approve two draft statutory rules (SRs) that relate to direct payments to farmers. There will be a single debate on both motions. I will ask the Clerk to read the first motion, and I will then call the Minister to move it. The Minister will then commence the debate on both motions as listed in the Order Paper. 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 on that motion will then be put. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mr Lyons (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I beg to move

That the draft Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That the draft Direct Payments to Farmers (Simplifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs).]

Mr Speaker: 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 motions.

Mr Lyons: The current direct agricultural support schemes, which include the basic payment scheme, are worth over £293 million annually to farmers in Northern Ireland. The purpose of the regulations that I am bringing forward today is to ensure that the current schemes continue to operate effectively and to implement improvements and simplifications wherever possible.

Leaving the EU has provided Northern Ireland with an unprecedented level of regional discretion and flexibility with regard to future agricultural support in Northern Ireland. As Minister Poots has said in the House, this is one of the most significant changes in policy affecting the agriculture sector in over 40 years. We now have the opportunity to develop an agricultural support framework better suited to local needs: one of the benefits of leaving the EU and one that will provide for and secure long-term sustainability in our industry. The regulations that I am bringing forward today are the first step in that transition.

I move to the first regulation. The legislative amendments introduced in the draft Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 will maintain the status quo as far as possible and are largely technical. No substantive policy changes are being made, and farmers will see no change on the ground as a result of the regulation.

EU regulation No 1307/2013 — the direct payments regulation — contains financial ceilings that are used to calculate direct payments to farmers across the UK. However, it includes financial ceilings only up to and including the 2020 claim year. The SR specifies the manner by which DAERA will determine the annual

financial ceiling to calculate payments beyond 2020 in Northern Ireland. The ceiling for each future year must be equivalent to Northern Ireland's share of the UK national ceiling specified in the direct payments regulation for 2020.

The ceiling will no longer be specified in legislation but will be determined administratively. Setting the ceiling in legislation is no longer necessary, given that the context of allocating funds to EU member states is not applicable. The change will not alter the amount of money being paid to farmers, and the Department will remain constrained by the Treasury allocation.

The SR makes other minor amendments to ensure that the schemes can continue to operate effectively beyond 2020. That includes replacing some dates that were specific to the 2020 scheme year with equivalent dates that are not year-specific. It also removes from retained EU law provisions that are not applicable in Northern Ireland.

Similarly, it removes some provisions that are no longer operating in Northern Ireland, such as the requirement for beneficiaries to meet negative list rules and the ability to make payments in euro. Other amendments remove provisions that are not relevant beyond the 2020 scheme. For example, the SR removes rules concerning the transfer of funds from the 2020 direct payments budget to be used for rural development measures.

12.15 pm

I will move on to the second regulations, which are the Direct Payments to Farmers (Simplifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021. The regulations give legal effect to the simplifications and improvements that my predecessor, Edwin Poots, announced in the Assembly on 17 November 2020. The simplifications are intended to make the direct agricultural support schemes simpler both for applicants and those administering them.

Part 2 removes the greening payment, with the money being incorporated into the basic payment scheme. The requirement not to plough environmentally sensitive green land is retained, as set out in article 32A of EU regulation 1307/2013. Greening requirements for crop rotation, ecological focus areas and retention of permanent grassland had a negligible impact in Northern Ireland, where over 90% of land is permanent grassland and there is an abundance of landscape features, such as hedges and sheughs, to meet ecological focus area requirements. Consequently, meeting greening requirements was largely an administrative exercise for farmers. Indeed, the greening requirements were counterproductive in Northern Ireland, where our cereal area continues to decline, which raises biodiversity concerns as grass becomes ever more dominant.

Part 3 limits the number of entitlements that can be allocated from, or increased in value from, the regional reserve to 90 for a young farmer/new entrant. That brings it into line with the 90 hectares limit for the young farmers' payment. It also removes a farm business's eligibility for the young farmers' payment after three unsuccessful applications from the 2022 scheme year onwards.

Part 4 makes a change to the over-declaration penalties so that they cannot exceed the amount of payment due prior to the penalty being applied. Part 5 removes the concept of a cross-border holding within the UK. Farms with land in

more than one UK region will make separate applications to each paying agency and then be paid separately.

Part 6 changes the amount at which payments are capped from €150,000 to £190,000. That is a technical change to reflect the fact that capping did not apply to the greening payment and that the amounts are now incorporated into the basic payment. The aim is, as far as is possible, to have a neutral impact on capping.

Part 7 sets the minimum control rate for inspections at 1% for scheme applications, but the Department can increase it, should the error rate increase. Part 8 makes some technical changes to the provisions on coupled payments, which allows me to introduce a protein crop payment in 2021 and 2022.

Part 9 makes some consequential changes to the direct payments regulation. It also removes the 3% limit on the increase in the basic payment ceiling, giving the Department more flexibility to maximise expenditure of Treasury allocations for direct payments.

Together, the regulations will ensure that direct payments to farmers can continue smoothly in 2021, as well as making some significant improvements and, importantly, simplifications. I commend them to the Assembly.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I welcome the opportunity to speak as Chairperson and to outline the views of the Committee. Leaving the EU has brought about significant change from the common agricultural policy, and that will have an impact on our agri-food sector.

Policies will no longer have to follow CAP pillars 1 and 2, and that has required the Department to develop new approaches and support systems that will address the needs of agriculture and rural communities as well as the environment. Members are aware that direct payments are currently worth over £293 million annually, and are of significant importance to sustaining agriculture and supporting viable trading options. The Department continues to consider how future payments can support farming and rural communities while maintaining the sustainability and profitability of farming and the environment. That, of course, will take time, but, while that work is being explored and developed, it is important that payments continue under the existing schemes.

In his ministerial statement of 17 November 2020, Minister Poots spoke about his long-term vision for agriculture support. He referred to a number of simplifications and improvements that he intended to make regarding the rules that govern the direct payment scheme in the 2021 scheme year. The Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee heard from departmental officials at its meeting on 4 February 2021 that the SR for the Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations 2021 would maintain the status quo and that its provisions were largely technical in nature. Members were reassured that there would be no substantive policy changes and, importantly, that farmers would see no change on the ground as a result of the regulations. The Department will receive its financial allocation from Treasury, and farmers will continue to be paid.

The Committee heard that the SR makes a few minor amendments to ensure that the schemes can operate effectively beyond 2020, including the replacement of

some dates from the 2020 scheme year with equivalent dates that are not year-specific. Regulations will remove from the EU-retained law those provisions that are no longer applicable here, as well as the provisions that will no longer operate, such as the requirement for beneficiaries to meet negative list rules for the active farmer and the ability to make payments in euros. Other amendments will remove provisions that are not relevant beyond 2020.

The second SR that the Committee considered — the Direct Payment to Farmers (Simplifications) Regulations 2021 — will give legal effect to the simplifications that Minister Poots announced in his ministerial statement. The Committee heard that they are intended to make direct agriculture support schemes, such as the basic payment scheme, easier for applicants and those who administer the schemes. The SR includes setting the minimum control rate for inspections at 1% for scheme applications, but gives the Department the flexibility to increase it should the error rate rise.

It was on that issue that the Committee received representation from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), as it had concerns about the reduction of inspections outlined in Part 7 of the regulations. The Committee received oral evidence from the RSPB and heard that the RSPB was of the view that more frequent and effective inspection would prevent environmental decline, such as decline in water quality. The RSPB stated that it was uncomfortable with the prospect of the bare minimum of inspection rates. We are glad that the RSPB raised the concerns because it allowed clarification from the Department. That meant that the RSPB and the Committee were content that the reductions referred to in the regulations will apply only to land eligibility.

Members also raised with the Department concerns about the unit entitlements for new entrants limited to 90 hectares. We were concerned that there was a danger that those changes could negatively impact on young farmers who are attempting to enter the agri-food business. The Department clarified that the reason behind the reduction in unit-size entitlement was to bring it into line with the area that can be applied for under the young farmers' payment. It aligns the two to make them more workable and easier to administer, thereby making the process simpler. At its meeting on 4 February, the Committee agreed with the merits of the policies, and, at its meeting of 18 February, agreed that there would be no objection to that rule.

I will make some points in my capacity as Sinn Féin's spokesperson on agriculture and rural affairs. Sinn Féin welcomes the certainty that the regulation brings for this year, at least, especially with the impact of COVID on the sector and the negative implications of the hard Brexit imposed on them by the DUP and their Tory bedfellows. Sinn Féin welcomes the simplifications, such as the incorporation of the greening payment into the overall basic payment scheme and the reduction of inspections to 1%. Those simplifications make sense.

Anybody who represents a rural area will know that inspections have been the bane of the life of many farmers. They can result in the delay of the single farm payment being issued, particularly during the worst months of the year — the winter — when stock is in and there are additional costs, and, of course, Christmas. The decisions that have been made prove that the Department can be

decisive when it wants to be. Sadly, however, that has not been the case for the Glenelly farmers, who have been waiting four years, and there is the same lack of progress from the Department on the TB strategy, the ammonia action plan, climate change legislation, a new rural policy and a new agriculture policy. I am sure that there are many other areas in which there has been a lack of progress and a lack of will to make progress.

I must also say that it is regrettable that the Minister has declined to meet the Committee. I read in the farming press that the Minister has been meeting stakeholders, assuring them that he will make decisions, yet, when the Committee requested to meet him to discuss his priorities, that request was turned down. It is good that he is here today, because it is an opportunity to see him face to face, an opportunity that we do not get in Committee.

In the shadow of Brexit and COVID, which are the two big threats to our farming and agri-food industry and rural communities, now is the time for maximal leadership and the pursuance of the maximal funding possible to support our hard-pressed rural communities, so it was really frustrating that, when the Finance Minister announced a number of weeks ago that £251.1 million of funding was available for allocation and specifically implored the AERA Minister to come forward with proposals, he did not. All we got were excuses that their need could not be identified and a fear that, had they got additional funding, they could not spend it by the end of the financial year. That, to me, was a lame excuse, particularly when all of the other Departments were bidding for funding and were in the same position as DAERA.

In that regard, I feel really strongly that the agricultural and rural communities have been let down by the Department on many of these issues, particularly that last one that I mentioned. I hope that the Minister and, indeed, his party reflect on that in the time ahead.

Mr Irwin: I declare an interest in the matter as a partner in a business that receives direct payments. This is an important motion, and the two pieces of Executive Committee business before the House today are important and necessary to ensure that we have a functional payment system to enable payments to be made in the coming year and to shape the future of direct payments going forward. The matter was discussed at some length in Committee a few weeks ago, when there was broad agreement that the matter should progress to the next stage, and I welcome the next step in the process today.

On the wider issue of payments in the future, there is an opportunity for meaningful change that can be taken with the very best interests of our agriculture industry and natural environment fully and firmly in mind. As I have said previously, farming and the environment very much go hand in hand, and one cannot realistically survive without the other. That is why support for farming and the environment is so vital. As we know, direct payments are worth around £293 million a year to the industry. That is of significant assistance, and, understandably, there has been much debate and insistence on the need for such payments to continue. Our agri-food industry is one of the most prized assets in Northern Ireland, securing many thousands of jobs across a great number of sectors. It is, of course, important that the industry is fully supported going forward to ensure the stability and full recovery of our economy post pandemic. The motion seeks to provide

continuity for the industry in payments and processing, and farmers will see little difference in the procedure. No substantial policy changes are contained therein. For that reason, I support the motion.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for introducing the direct payment statutory rules today. The SDLP is content to accept both statutory rules on direct payments to farmers but with some qualifications and reservations.

The statutory rules are necessary as a direct consequence of Brexit, and, without the rules, the legislation would not be in place to allow the operation of the existing direct payment scheme for farmers beyond the end of the 2020 scheme. However, to contextualise it, particularly with regard to the rural development funds, which have an impact on the wider rural community, as a result of Brexit, £34 million has been lost from previous available funding for rural development over the next three years. Simultaneously, we have the situation where £15.3 million over the next three years has been lost from the funding to support the bovine TB programme, which is crucial and underpins the functionality of rural communities, particularly farming communities and their ability move on.

The payments that we are talking about today are worth £293 million, as others have said, and have been the main income support schemes for farmers for many years. If they were to end suddenly, it would be a significant shock to the farming industry.

The fixed ceiling on payments, however, represents a decrease in income in real terms on a yearly basis due to inflation. This is a point for the Minister: we hear the Minister of Finance repeatedly request that Departments put forward bids. Is there any potential in the regulations for the Minister to add a supplementary bid for the funding that may be available? It might be helpful if the Minister would clarify that, as it could assist our rural communities.

12.30 pm

In Committee, I raised the issue of three unsuccessful applications to the young farmers' scheme. It might be helpful if the Minister looked at that. I ask for some clarity on it. Granted, it is understandable if there are three unsuccessful attempts and circumstances have not changed, but circumstances can and do change: the business may have additional farm acquisitions or whatever. What provision is there to allow for a change-of-circumstances application from the same individual or business party? It is important to clarify that. I am not talking about multiple repetitive applications to the same scheme with the same circumstances. It is, obviously, allowing for cases where circumstances do and can change.

The current level of funding has some guarantee attached, but, beyond the term of the current UK Parliament, there is no certainty over what will follow for the funding available for direct payments. Farmers, like most businesses, ask for certainty, and, rolling forward, we must make sure that there is a degree of certainty for the finance and funding that underpins the viability of their businesses. That is important for the food-producing and agri-food sector.

Farmers are also concerned that statutory rules are going through in the absence of a broader strategic framework for future agriculture support specifically for Northern Ireland. I have touched on some of them already. There

is a need for a clear and explicit purpose for future agriculture funding that contributes to the delivery of wider strategic objectives for sustainable farming and land use within a sustainable environmental approach. When or if that will be forthcoming is not clear.

Even before circumstances dictated that the current Minister would be in place today, there had been significant slippage in the target dates for legislation and improved environmental strategies that should have been before the Assembly. I hope that we will see movement on those soon. The opportunity is there to use new and existing mechanisms of funding and regulation to combat the global crisis of climate change and ever-decreasing biodiversity. What is needed is imagination and the political will to do that. I hope that the Minister, while he is here, will demonstrate both those qualities in the time ahead, and, for the best of good reasons, I hope that that will be for a short time.

Mrs Barton: Thank you for the opportunity to speak on the amendments to the regulations. The regulations are the consequence of the UK's withdrawal from the EU and the common agricultural policy. That is one of the most significant changes to agriculture policy for nearly 50 years. Policies will no longer have to comply with the common agricultural policy, which means that, eventually, Northern Ireland will be free to develop new approaches and support systems and build on the agri-food industry, which is already recognised as a world-class producer of food.

With that new approach, consideration will have to be given to environmental sustainability and improved resilience that address agriculture, the environment and rural needs. While the amendments to make the direct payments can be described as technical, if they are not in place, it will affect DAERA's ability to make direct payments to farmers and prevent its effective function. Those payments are worth approximately £290 million per year to the industry. However, because the Department is constrained by the Treasury, the allocation will not change because the same method to calculate direct payments is used across the United Kingdom. While it will take time to develop policy for future payments, it is important that there is no impediment to payments that prevents simultaneous work towards a review to simplify the payments, which would be most welcome.

Some of the minor amendments to help with the direct payments include the removal of having to make the payments through the euro and the removal of non-specific dates, together with the intended simplification, for applicants and administrators, of the direct agricultural support schemes. There is also the removal of the greening payment and the money included in the basic farm payment. There is also a new minimum 1% inspection rate for scheme applications, but that can be increased, where necessary, by the Department. Finally, provision has been made to introduce a coupled payment in 2021 for protein crop payments.

I support the motion.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for his opening remarks. I also thank you, Mr Speaker, your office, the Assembly secretariat and all officials for making possible remote access to Assembly debate following requests from me, my party colleague Kellie Armstrong and other Members.

We are grateful for the work of officials in the interests of Members, staff and, of course, public health.

As a Member of the AERA Committee, I feel that it is imperative to stress from the outset the importance of the agri-food sector to the Northern Ireland economy. It represents around 10% of activity, which is considerably higher than the overall average of the rest of the UK. Furthermore, the profile of the agriculture sector and the associated industries in Northern Ireland varies considerably from those across the UK. The Northern Ireland industry, as colleagues will know, is built around quality rather than scale necessarily. Standards are fundamental and are a matter of pride to all stakeholders throughout the industry.

The United Kingdom's leaving the EU and the common agricultural policy is the most significant change in policy affecting the agri-food sector and agriculture in over 40 years. Environmental, food safety, animal welfare and labour issues are all now critical considerations when developing new approaches and support systems that need to better address the needs of Northern Ireland agriculture, the environment and rural communities. There is also, as was mentioned, a broad range of farming and environmental stakeholders who deserve the opportunity to engage more fully in the development of future policy relating to the sector. In Northern Ireland, direct payments, as was pointed out, are worth over £293 million annually. Future payments need to support farming and rural communities while benefiting the sustainability and profitability of farming and, more crucially, the environment. It is my hope and that of many others that the natural environment and global challenges will feature more heavily and appropriately in future policy shaping. Maybe the Minister will reflect on that when he responds today. I further hope that the Minister will take an opportunity to address the Committee on that range of matters.

On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support what is before us to secure the continued passage of the regulations that are the subject of both motions.

Mr Harvey: We are used to having one John Blair; having eight today is certainly more interesting.

The direct payments to farmers regulations represent the much-needed continuation of the lifeline of support for the agriculture industry. I welcome the work done by the Department in bringing the regulations before the House today. The regulations will ensure that the relevant legislation is updated to ensure that farmers continue to receive support, thereby maintaining the status quo. The agriculture industry has experienced a turbulent year, like many other sectors, due to the impacts of COVID-19. The knock-on effects of the closure of hospitality and the difficulties being experienced because of the Northern Ireland protocol, to name but a few issues, have significantly impacted on the sector. It is therefore vital that farmers can be guaranteed the assistance given through the direct payments scheme. The regulations give that much-needed certainty and provide the necessary framework for the next scheme year.

The common agricultural policy accounted for 79% of the income of the industry in Northern Ireland between 2013 and 2019. Leaving the CAP allows us to chart a new course towards a support system that is tailored to the

needs of the local industry and environment, unique to this jurisdiction and adaptable for the future. Last year, payments provided almost £300 million worth of support to the local agricultural sector, a lifeline for many. As I stated, unlike CAP, the new scheme affords the opportunity for a flexible and bespoke approach to farming support. It is vital that the Department remember that for the future, that the scope and framework of the scheme are regularly reviewed and that the industry is allowed to play a direct part in this. We must use our new-found adaptability to our advantage.

The Minister recently set out his vision for the future. I welcome the direction of travel that he has outlined. A basic area-based payment that provides a safety net but still encourages productivity, the funding of coupled payments to directly target areas such as suckler cow and new breeder cow producers and the new agri-environment programme will all work together to incentivise growth and ensure that sustainability is at the heart of agriculture for the years ahead. I welcome the removal of the 3% limit on the increase of the basic payment scheme, which will also provide greater flexibility within the budget allocation. I am also glad to see the retention of the ban on the ploughing or conversion of environmentally sensitive permanent grassland and the increased penalties for breaches of those prohibitions. That sends out a clear message about the importance that the Department places on environmental protections.

Leaving the CAP allows us to remove many of the constraints placed on our environmental programmes. I look forward to the progression of further changes in this area. The changes provided for will give legal effect to a range of simplifications and improvements announced for the 2021 scheme year by the Minister in September. I support both motions.

Ms Sheerin: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations and the Direct Payments to Farmers (Simplifications) Regulations. I support them, as they remove a barrier to continued direct payments beyond 2020. At the outset, we must acknowledge that the SRs offer nothing more than short-term breathing space. They allow the single farm payment to continue but offer absolutely no assurance to our local farmers about what they can expect to earn going forward, given that we have now been dragged out of the EU against the expressed wishes of the majority of the population in the North.

As already outlined, EU-funded direct payments are currently worth over £293 million to our agricultural producers in the North. Every year, EU payments constitute 87% of our farmers' income. When those in our farming community told us loudly and clearly that Brexit would be bad for agriculture, they were not exaggerating. The Tories have promised that direct payments will continue until the end of the current mandate, but you will forgive our local farmers for not relaxing on the basis of the word of the British Government alone. The British Government's inability to keep their word is something that, I know, my colleagues across the Benches are acutely aware of.

Uncertainty and confusion are the common themes amongst our rural populations. Remember that this affects not just the people lambing sheep or planting potatoes but those in our farming community who support the

machinery dealers, the scanning, clipping and fencing contractors, the vets, the family businesses that put up sheds and concrete yards and the small agri-shops that sell lime, fertiliser, diesel and feed.

When we are on the subject of single farm payment, it would be remiss of us not to acknowledge the double blow that was dealt to our mountain farmers in the wake of the Brexit decision. Minister, this time last year, your Department failed in its obligation to rural communities when your predecessor refused to acknowledge the will of the House and overturn your party colleague's decision to stop areas of natural constraint (ANC) funding to hill farmers.

Not only did you overturn the decision made by my colleague Michelle O'Neill to recognise the additional challenges faced by hill farmers and to compensate them accordingly but you put an end to the transition towards a flat rate, which she had implemented in a bid to create equality between all farmers, ensuring that hill farmers were no longer punished for poor soil quality. Unlike those who might avail themselves of the protein crop payment that you have referred to, mountain farmers do not have a range of choices for their land. What you and successive DUP Ministers have failed to understand is that hill farming without the ANC element and without an increased entitlement value is not viable. That is driving livestock off, instead of encouraging it on to, our hills.

12.45 pm

We need to get money into the pockets of our hard-pressed farmers. Encouraging closed stocks and allowing our farmers to rear lambs and calves from birth ensure traceability and reduce the risk of disease. To act as though the old model was production-based ignores the vital contribution that hill farmers make towards our local food chain. As someone who has grown up in a farming family and has seen at first hand the energy and effort that a farm consumes, I call this nothing short of an insult. Farming is a labour of love, without which none would survive.

At a time when we are turning towards an all-Ireland economy and when the sensible option for producer and consumer alike is to trade within the country — to go up or down the road instead of crossing the water — it makes absolutely no sense that farmers in the North will now be at a disadvantage because their counterparts in the Twenty-six Counties can still avail themselves of common agricultural policy funding but they cannot. My uncles in Donegal can get it, but my dad in Tyrone cannot.

Another group who are losing out as a result of Brexit and who have been failed by your Department, Minister, are the Lough Neagh fishing community. Despite repeated promises from as far back as last September, when your predecessor, Edwin Poots, in written format and in the Chamber, told me that they would receive the COVID-19 compensation package that they were promised and that other producers received, the fishing operators in Lough Neagh are still without that support. We are a year into the pandemic, Minister, and that is not acceptable. I welcome the regulations, and I hope for a change in attitude from the Agriculture Department so that we see money going back into rural communities.

Mr McGuigan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate today on the SRs, the first of which is on direct payments to farmers. As a result of Brexit, the North is, obviously, now out of the common agricultural policy. The Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations will ensure the delivery of direct agricultural payments to farmers in 2021. I sit on the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, and that SR was considered on 4 February. As others have said, the Committee was more or less content with the policy. The SR maintains the status quo, and the amendments introduced are merely technical in nature. It outlines how DAERA will continue to determine the annual financial ceiling and calculate payments beyond 2021. It will not be set in legislation, which means that we will have to align with Treasury's allocation. There are no policy changes in the SR, and farmers should not see any changes as a result.

The second SR on the simplifications was considered by the Committee, again on 4 February. It makes simplifications, changes and improvements to direct agricultural payment schemes for the incoming year in a number of ways. It removes greening requirements and maintains the ban on ploughing or conversion of environmentally sensitive permanent grassland. The basic payment scheme land eligibility inspection rate is now set at 1%. The development of future schemes, among other things, will be the responsibility of DAERA and not DEFRA.

As has been outlined, concerns were raised about the reduction in inspections to 1%. DAERA officials addressed those concerns and stated that the proposed reduction will apply only to land eligibility and not to cross-compliance measures. It was explained that, due to COVID, inspection rates had to be reduced to 1% for basic payment schemes and 3% for greening payments, and that, due to greening requirements being removed, only 1% of inspections for the basic payment scheme will be carried forward for the incoming year. Officials told us that that provides adequate control after conducting assessments.

Sinn Féin will support both SRs. However, we note that that cover is for the incoming year only. We will have an annual budget, not the seven-year multi-annual budget framework that we previously had under pillars 1 and 2 of the common agricultural policy. Whilst there is a commitment in the Tory Government manifesto to retain the direct agricultural payment until the end of the British Parliament, there are no guarantees after that date. As has been pointed out by others, given that the British Government will repeal the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, we do not know what the situation will be beyond 2022. Our farmers and rural communities will undoubtedly face major uncertainty.

Our neighbours in the South remain in the common agricultural policy. As has been said, that could lead to an uneven playing field on this island and pose problems for farmers in the North's ability to compete with farmers across the island. Although I support the SRs, our farmers have hanging over them major issues and concerns, which we will no doubt be raising in the Chamber in the future.

Ms Bailey: We have been repeatedly assured that the SRs are mainly technical amendments to how direct payments were previously administered. For that reason, we will be supporting them today. The Green Party broadly welcomes the simplifications, because we welcome the ability for

payments to continue into 2021, thus providing that limited certainty for farmers.

It is important that minor simplifications do not become characteristic of the change that we make to our system of agriculture payments as we leave the EU's common agricultural policy. Instead, they must form part of a transition period of continuing towards delivering better outcomes for nature and land use and for the wider farming sector through nature-friendly farming models. As it stands, England is working on its new system of direct payments. It is using public money for a public-goods model that does not automatically extend to Northern Ireland. Scotland and Wales are working on their own bespoke primary legislation for 2024. At EU level, the CAP is being reformed. Is Northern Ireland therefore being left behind? As we know, despite clear support from the AERA Committee at the time for such a provision, no sunset clause for Northern Ireland was included in the UK Agriculture Act 2020. Without the legal obligation to introduce a bespoke agriculture Bill for Northern Ireland, change will be slow in coming. We are in a situation in which no such legislation seems to be forthcoming, and there has been no indication that it will ever come. For all we know, the simplification regime will simply continue indefinitely. What we need is for the simplification payments to be part of a time-limited transition period until we can get our own legislation in place for farmers. It is essential to provide that certainty for farmers and the agri-food sector at large.

I therefore call on the Minister to make the creation of Northern Ireland's own agriculture Act a priority. There can be no doubt that the future of agriculture policy is at a crossroads. Our system is at breaking point. On the one hand, we see an industry that has become increasingly hostile to those at its heart. Rural poverty is at an all-time high, and one in four farming families lives in poverty. On the other hand, we see our natural ecosystems in a state of collapse and government policies of agricultural intensification that have led to 98% of our special areas of conservation (SACs) exceeding their critical thresholds for ammonia pollution. We have no air pollution strategy either. Some 95% of our lakes fail water framework directive quality standards. At the same time, our agriculture sector is the sector that is the biggest contributor to our total greenhouse gas emissions. As was already mentioned, I do not think that our track record on environmental sustainability is really there.

As tricky as it is, the issue of climate change is one that must be addressed. We need to work out a transition plan for rural communities, as well as for the rest of us. The writing has been on the wall about climate change for all of this time, and it cannot be ignored. Business as usual is not an option. We keep hearing about plans from the Minister and the Department for the new green growth strategy, which is a strategy that is based on more productivity. We have not had sight of it to date, however, so we have not seen the detail. We must move forward with a Northern Ireland agriculture Act, using the public-money-for-public-good model that puts nature and farmers at its heart.

Any future system must address farm poverty, support small farmers, and improve the status of farmers in the value chain, while mitigating the effects of climate change, improving water and air quality, and protecting and

enhancing biodiversity. The Green Party does not believe that to be ridiculous or impossible. We will do all we can to make what some may believe to be impossible very possible.

We will support the SRs.

Mr Lyons: I thank all Members who contributed. Together, these are important statutory rules that will ensure the continued smooth delivery of direct agricultural support to farmers. I welcome the support of the Committee, and, it appears, of the Chamber, for the regulations. That, as was noted, is essential. I thank the Chairman of the Committee for acknowledging that, for rehearsing the view of the Committee and for putting it on the record.

We did, though, get to his own party-political contribution — a very party-political contribution. I want to speak to a few of the issues that he raised. He mentioned a number of strategies and frameworks that he is looking for clarification on. We had talk of climate change, ammonia, rural frameworks and TB. Those are all progressing. I hope to have more information with the Committee soon in relation to what the Department is doing.

He mentioned the lack of action so far on TB. That is something that I am pushing in my short time in office. It is my expectation that something will happen and that we will see interventions this year. I hope that that will be welcomed, although I remind the Member that, from 2007 to 2016, it was his party that held the post that I am currently in. Where was the progress during that time? Where was the progress during the three years when there was no Assembly, when it was his party that kept the Assembly down, preventing us from taking action —

Mr McAleer: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyons: — in a second — not only on TB but on issues across many Departments? I do not want to test the patience of the Speaker too much on this, but I am happy to give way to the Member.

Mr McAleer: On the topic of TB, does the Member accept that it was the wide-ranging test and vaccinate or remove study implemented by the former DARD Minister Michelle O'Neill that will, in fact, underpin whatever interventions he, finally, puts in place to tackle this issue?

Mr Lyons: Of course, we will be looking at all those options, and I hope, as I said, that an intervention will take place this year. There has not been the movement that we would have liked on this over the past number of years, and I am glad that because of work that my predecessor did, and the work that I am doing, on this issue, that it can be moved on.

I thank Members for their comments. Mr Irwin outlined why we need to have the regulations in place and their importance. I thank him, and Mrs Barton, for welcoming the fact that we now have opportunities, as a result of leaving the EU, to tailor support and no longer have to find our way into the one-size-fits-all model from the EU. We can now tailor support to our own needs here in Northern Ireland.

Mr McGlone raised concerns about unsuccessful applications and the limit of three application attempts. It is the case that they will be able to make a number of applications. If circumstances change, they can apply again and still have three attempts. However, if difficulties

are identified through the implementation of this revised approach, we can look at that again in the coming years.

The evidence that we have is that it will affect a relatively small number of people, if any. It is important that we have the ability to make changes if necessary, but it is good that the changes and rules are put in place.

1.00 pm

Mr McGlone also mentioned certainty for the future and the supposed certainty that, he felt, he had in the European Union. Of course, that certainty did not exist. There were limits to the support and the time frame. Nothing was guaranteed beyond 2023. Now, we have the power to support farmers in the way in which we want and desire. That should be welcomed.

Mr Blair raised questions about what future support might look like: again, that is now in our hands. As Minister Poots outlined in his statement to the Assembly in November, we want to progress, taking into consideration a number of issues. We want to increase productivity, see improved resilience, see a more integrated supply chain and be environmentally sustainable. Those are the issues on which we will build our future support and policy as we move forward in the coming months and years.

Ms Sheerin raised concerns about areas of natural constraint. I confirm to the Member that I have no plans to reintroduce an ANC measure. It is an old CAP measure that has little to offer in moving the industry forward. We need to look to the future rather than try to recreate the past. That is my position and that of my predecessor.

Ms Sheerin: Will the Minister take an intervention?

Mr Lyons: I am happy to give way in a second. That is our position moving forward. I hope that it is understood that we need to change how we provide that support in the future to put it where it is needed and to make it available to all farmers. I will give way.

Ms Sheerin: The Minister said that it was not wanted by a majority, but a majority in the House supported a motion on the ANC payment just last year, during this mandate. It might be the DUP's view that the ANC payment does not work, but that view is at odds with the view of the rest of the Assembly.

Mr Lyons: I am not surprised that we are on different sides on the issue; I do not think that that will change today. I note the Member's comments, but, certainly, in my engagement with farmers and stakeholders, that is not what, I am told, is the way forward. It is not what people want to see being progressed. Instead, we should focus our efforts on devising schemes and support measures that are for the good of all farmers.

I think that those were all the comments that related directly to the regulations that are in front of us. Given the importance of the issue, as I have set out, I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

Direct Payments to Farmers (Simplifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Mr Speaker: The motion has already been debated.

Resolved:

*That the draft Direct Payments to Farmers
(Simplifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021
be approved. — [Mr Lyons (The Minister of Agriculture,
Environment and Rural Affairs).]*

Mr Speaker: Members may take their ease for a moment or two.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair)

Assembly Business

Mr Butler: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. You will know that the right to vote is a democratic right that is cherished and protected across the world and here in Northern Ireland. That right to vote is protected in legislation, as are the mechanisms to facilitate it and the absolute need to ensure that the register of voters is as up to date and accurate as possible.

Last week, Sinn Féin, a party in the Assembly that is led by the deputy First Minister, produced what I can describe only as a package of misinformation and fake news on the updating of the register that the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland will soon embark on. Surely, it is incumbent on each of us, as elected representatives of the Assembly, and our parties to uphold the democratic process, accuracy, openness and transparency, and I ask the Speaker's Office to investigate and rule on the matter.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member should be aware that that is not a point of order, but he has put his points on the record.

Mr O'Dowd: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, will the Speaker's Office look at how Members use points of order? Some Members use them to issue press releases and snapshots for the evening's news.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Your comments are on the record and are valid. They should be investigated, and I am sure that that will be drawn to the Speaker's attention.

Private Members' Business

Recovery and Investment Strategy

Ms McLaughlin: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the deep and lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on people, communities and businesses across Northern Ireland; further recognises the severe impact that restrictions have had on our society and economy and the devastating impact that the conclusion of the furlough scheme will have on jobs; regrets that the Minister for the Economy and Minister of Finance have failed to produce a comprehensive COVID-19 recovery plan prioritising employment and efforts to build back better; expresses concern that the Minister for the Economy has failed to outline a strategy for maximising the potential for job creation and growth as a result of dual market access guaranteed under the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland; and calls on both Ministers to work with their Executive colleagues to establish a comprehensive recovery and investment strategy that will transform public services, create more jobs and help build back better from the crisis.

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 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.

Ms McLaughlin: The Assembly has a choice: we can moan about the situation that we face, or we can get on with it and fix it. The SDLP has always focused on solutions. We are proud of that, and, my, does Northern Ireland need solutions today? This is not just about COVID. We have other major challenges. We have Brexit, and we have climate change. We can spend our time arguing about whose fault it is, or we can devise solutions. In doing so, we have the opportunity to begin to solve the deep-seated problems in our society.

Perhaps the biggest problem of all is inequality. That inequality has been manifest throughout the pandemic. COVID-19 has not hit people equally. Those who are poor, those who live in overcrowded accommodation, those who do not have access to private healthcare, those who work in the National Health Service and the caring professions, those who work in low-paid service jobs and those whose neighbourhoods have air quality that is blighted by traffic and solid-fuel burning are, along with the old, the most likely to become seriously ill with COVID-19 and to die. The crisis of COVID-19 is also a crisis of inequality, and, of course, the SDLP was founded to address inequality in our society.

As we look to build back better, it is essential that we correct the deep-seated inequalities in Northern Ireland. If we just let market forces do the work, we will not achieve a better and fairer society. About one in five workers who have been on furlough for the past six months or more are expected to lose their jobs. Last year, 11,000 intended redundancies were notified by employers. The situation is likely to worsen this year and will affect, in particular, our young adults, the lowest paid, those on zero-hours contracts and others who have the weakest positions in the labour market. That is particularly true for those

without the strong skills that are valued most by employers. For generations, our labour market has struggled with insufficient skills and has delivered productivity levels that are the worst in the UK. If we are to have an effective recovery from COVID, it is essential that we raise skill levels across our working-age population.

The solution must start in our schools, and we must address inefficiencies and inadequate provisions in our further and higher education colleges. The COVID recovery plan must involve all our Departments and break down the silo system of government that prevails in the Executive.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Ms McLaughlin: Sorry. No time.

It would be wrong to try to just recreate the structure of the economy that we had before the pandemic. When we talk about building back better, we need to take that literally and not just metaphorically. Prior to the pandemic, we had a crisis in our high streets, towns and city centres. Our retail centres must be centres of leisure activity, and we need to invest more in our streetscapes and green spaces and make city and town centres easy places to walk around, with less crowded pavements, and allow cafes and restaurants to expand and spill outside. They need to be recaptured as places for people and not be dominated by cars.

Central to the Economy Minister's approach is the circulated paper, 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy', which includes a section on a more regionally balanced economy. It talks about how to bring rural areas up to the level of urban areas, yet the biggest challenge of all is how we bring the weakest urban areas up to the level of the strongest urban areas. If you look at the map of deprivation and joblessness across the North, you will see clearly where the biggest problems of regional imbalance are. They are in Derry and Strabane and in west and north Belfast. The apparent failure of the Economy and Finance Ministers to recognise that reality shows a real lack of perspective behind the decision-making process when considering how to build back better.

Talking about a lack of perspective brings me to the protocol. No one dislikes or opposes Brexit more than me, but even I can see that the Brexit protocol provides the North with new opportunities that we must grasp [Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order.

Ms McLaughlin: I recognise that, sadly, some are so blinded by their narrow ideology that they would prefer to suffer than use the opportunities that they have. That is not the attitude of the SDLP. My colleague Matthew O'Toole and I have written to the Economy Minister to urge her to fully exploit the advantages that we have as a result of the protocol while, of course, working pragmatically to reduce [Interruption] —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order, Members.

Ms McLaughlin: — the difficulties caused by Brexit to east-west trade.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. Please take your seat.

Ms McLaughlin: OK.

1.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, we are at the start of the debate. You will all have the opportunity to give your point of view. If you wish to intervene, you may ask to do so. If the Member agrees, your intervention will be permitted. Other than that, wait until it is your turn. There is too much noise from Members in a sedentary position. I call the Member who spoke last.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. My colleague Matthew O'Toole and I have written to the Economy Minister to urge her to exploit fully the advantages that we now have as a result of the protocol, while, of course, working pragmatically to reduce the difficulties in east-west trade that Brexit has caused. We also wrote to InterTradeIreland, the Industrial Development Authority, Invest NI and the Department for International Trade to urge them to exploit the opportunities presented by the protocol. I pay tribute to Invest NI — not something that I will say very often. I have criticised that organisation on many occasions because of its lack of regional balance, but I have no criticism of it with regard to the protocol. I would like to quote from Invest NI. I realise that this will be difficult for some to hear, but this is what it said:

"This dual market access position means that Northern Ireland can become a gateway for the sale of goods to two of the world's largest markets and the only place where businesses can operate free from customs declarations, rules of origin certificates and non-tariff barriers on the sale of goods to both GB and the EU.

This is a unique proposition for manufacturers based in Northern Ireland as well as those seeking a pivotal location from which to service GB and EU markets, recalibrate supply chains, or design, develop and sell products across key industries such as life & health sciences, aerospace, electronics & machinery, chemicals, consumer and agri-food goods."

I totally concur. However, I would have added renewable energies to help the producers who are reliant on it.

That brings us to the other problem that has been inflicted upon us: climate change and the necessity to decarbonise our economy. Imagine a place with lots of hills on which wind turbines can generate massive amounts of electricity. Imagine a place with lots of coastline that provides the opportunity for tidal strength to be converted into electricity. Imagine a place that is internationally recognised as having substantial levels of geothermal heat that can be used to heat buildings. That place, Members, is Northern Ireland. However, imagine a place where four of 10 homes are occupied by people in fuel poverty and where hundreds of thousands of homes are leaking heat because the properties are in serious need of major improvements to their energy efficiency. This represents a massive challenge to our ability to move to 100% net zero by 2050. These facts make the case for a green new deal, which is a core part of my party's policies.

Let us put the pieces together: improving our city and town centres, giving them new purpose with more urban living, leisure facilities and green spaces; creating a substantial number of jobs in the construction industry; reskilling our workforce to equip those out of work and those not yet in work for the next generation of jobs; investing in infrastructure, including public transport, water supplies

and sewerage; accelerating broadband roll-out; exploiting the Brexit protocol to attract inward investment and support local businesses to make good in the best of both worlds; helping local producers to supply to local retailers; tackling the regional imbalance, which requires Invest NI to promote jobs across the North, particularly in areas with the highest unemployment rates, such as Derry; delivering more and spreading more fairly; higher education places and skills training —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Ms McLaughlin: — decarbonising the economy; supporting the roll-out of heat pumps; promoting hydrogen; implementing a green new deal; and creating a more equal society. Once you put these elements together —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

Ms McLaughlin: — you genuinely have a comprehensive recovery and investment strategy —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

Ms McLaughlin: — unlike the weak proposals put forward by the Minister for the Economy [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order, the Member's time is up.

Dr Archibald: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "will have on jobs;" and insert:

"agrees that all Executive Ministers must contribute towards delivering a comprehensive economic recovery strategy; and calls on the Executive to develop a comprehensive recovery and investment strategy that will transform public services, create more jobs and help build back better from the crisis."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): You will have 10 minutes to move the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. I invite you to formally introduce your amendment.

Dr Archibald: I am glad to have the opportunity to contribute to today's debate and to move our amendment, which was tabled in the spirit of recognising the need for a collective approach from the Executive to the recovery from COVID-19.

We face many challenges in the weeks and months ahead as — hopefully, in the not-too-distant future, if we continue on the right track — restrictions begin to ease and society begins to reopen. It has been a devastating year, and everyone here will recognise that, first and foremost, it has had a devastating human cost, with many people losing loved ones and others suffering serious and long-lasting health impacts. It has also had a huge negative impact on our way of life and on livelihoods. Businesses have had to close and some people's jobs have disappeared overnight, while tens of thousands of people remain on furlough and uncertain about their future.

Certainly, the interventions from the British Government and the Executive have been vital in mitigating the worst impacts and in helping businesses to survive and protect jobs. However, despite all the interventions, there remain those who have been excluded from support schemes

to date, which needs to be addressed. There remains £250 million of funding, which can be allocated to support businesses and protect jobs, but there has been a frustrating lack of any new schemes coming forward. I ask the Economy Minister to look at that again, including for those self-employed people who fall between the self-employment income support scheme and the newly self-employed scheme, for travel agents who have been very badly impacted and need particular supports and for the events sector, which has not had any specific support either. While there is money available, it should be utilised to help as many businesses and workers as possible.

The Finance Minister —.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: Very quickly.

Mr Stalford: I will be very brief. In the previous debate on the economy, the lady from Foyle thought it very funny for me to point out the massive debt that the Government are running up. The Minister has revealed that every week of lockdown is costing the Northern Ireland economy £100 million. Would the Member like to talk to that?

Dr Archibald: I am not sure if you are referring to me; I am not from Foyle.

Mr Stalford: No, I am not. *[Laughter.]* No, I am not.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order.

Dr Archibald: We have seen massive state intervention from Governments around the world, which shows the strength and importance of doing something like that. That is something that we need to look at. What we want to see is continued economic and fiscal stimulus to support businesses and to get our recovery, particularly our economy recovery, on track.

All of us recognise the importance of the furlough scheme and the need for it to be extended further to continue to support businesses, particularly those most impacted and those that will not return to anything like normal operations for some time. Another possible cliff edge and lastminute.com announcement will not be helpful to any business that is trying to plan and to support its workers. The ongoing cost to businesses that have not been able to open for the past year is something that the British Treasury needs to look at again in respect of the furlough scheme.

The pandemic has lasted longer than many of us originally thought that it would, which has resulted in longer restrictions, and there has been a need for mitigations rather than stimuli for recovery. It is clear that that will continue for some time, but there is a need to plan for the way forward to ensure that we are ready to boost our recovery once we are through the worst of this and do not simply return to what we were doing before, because, let us face it, it was not working too well anyway; we have a very poor economic scorecard, and that needs to change.

We also need to respond to the new trading reality that has resulted from Brexit. Our businesses and our communities need to be supported to deal with the challenges posed by Brexit and to build on the protections afforded by the protocol and the continuing access to the EU's single market. We need to see collective leadership to find solutions within the arrangements of the protocol and to support businesses that, because of Brexit, have greater

challenges. That includes support to reorientate supply chains and markets across the island of Ireland.

Recovery from COVID-19, even the economic recovery, will not fall to one Department to deliver. There will need to be an Executive strategy with buy-in from all Ministers. We need to work to tackle deprivation and break down barriers to education and employment. We need to ensure that our recovery from COVID-19 seriously addresses the threats from the climate and biodiversity crises. We need to have a holistic approach that cuts across all Departments in order to deliver a jobs-led recovery. We need skills and employability programmes and entrepreneur supports that build on the new ways of working that we have had to adopt and that we accept being accelerated throughout the pandemic. We need to create a more regionally balanced economy, in which our towns, villages and cities are more suited to contemporary working, living and socialising, with infrastructure to support modern living, which is increasingly digital and online. We need a transport network that meets the needs of our rural and urban communities and that delivers on our decarbonisation targets. None of those things will be done in isolation. That is why our amendment calls on the Executive to develop a comprehensive recovery and investment strategy.

The pandemic has shone a bright light on many inequalities and structural problems, and particularly on the importance of our public services, which have been decimated by a decade of Tory austerity. It has also highlighted the real essential workers, and we need to remember that as we plan the way forward. Sinn Féin published its economic recovery strategy back in June last year. It is based on four key principles: supporting workers and their families, including through ensuring that we deliver on the protections for workers committed to in New Decade, New Approach; supporting businesses to create and sustain jobs through skills programmes, start-up supports and the infrastructure to support local recovery across the North; delivering on a just transition to a net zero-carbon society, because, as we move away from a reliance on fossil fuels, we need to ensure that those who can afford it least are not left to foot the bill; and, finally, giving the Executive the financial tools to deliver on recovery, because being at the whim of a Tory Chancellor who delivers funding for COVID supports in dribs and drabs and who failed to live up to the commitment to have multi-annual Budgets is not the way in which to plan for economic recovery.

There needs to be a real conversation about the financial and borrowing tools that the Executive need to be able to deliver on economic recovery. Those four principles are the basis of a strategy that should be delivered across the Executive: a strategy that aligns our Programme for Government with all Ministers and all Departments working to deliver on their important roles within it. That is the approach that is envisaged through the outcomes-based Programme for Government, which is focused on indicators that do not fall neatly into departmental boxes. It is about adopting an approach that breaks down departmental silos and ensures better outcomes for all our citizens.

All the Executive parties need to pull their weight. They need to show that they are serious about collective leadership and responsibility by contributing to the development of the recovery strategy and then driving it

forward. "Building back better" cannot be just an aspiration or a slogan. It needs to be delivered on, and that means having a strategy that is not just a document on a shelf but the active work of the Programme of Government for all Ministers and all Departments.

Mr Stalford: We will not be supporting the motion, but we will support the amendment. Everyone recognises the serious impact that lockdown measures have had, not only at an economic level but at a societal level. As I said earlier in my intervention to the Chair of the Economy Committee, the pandemic is costing the Northern Ireland economy £100 million a week. We have seen projections that show that up to 100,000 jobs are likely to be lost in Northern Ireland.

In that context, it is well and good to table motions demanding recovery plans and greater action from one or two Ministers, but you cannot at the same time, day in and day out, week in and week out, appear in the media to demand that lockdown continue. You cannot have it both ways. You cannot lambast the Education Minister every time that he is in the Chamber for daring to suggest the reopening of schools. You cannot appear in the media and in the press opposing even a hint of the slightest easement of lockdown and then bring such motions such to the Assembly.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: I am happy to, if I get an extra minute. Do I get an extra minute if I give way, Mr Deputy Speaker?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): If there is an intervention, yes.

Mr Stalford: Knock yourself out. *[Laughter.]*

Mr O'Toole: I will leave that to you. The Member's argument seems to be that there is this binary between locking down and magically opening up the economy. Every independent economic forecaster or serious analyst around the world does not accept that binary. We cannot simply open up the economy when the virus is still rampant. That would do more economic damage. The real thing that we should be doing is vaccinating as many people as possible in order to drive the infection down, because that is the way to economic recovery.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

1.30 pm

Mr Stalford: I gave way, but I will not take the entire minute. I am not suggesting that for a second but I am pointing out that Northern Ireland is one of the most locked-down places in the world with regard to controlling access to education, closing off huge swathes of our economy and all the resultant trouble that will come from that.

It is important that we do everything in our power to get the economy opened up as quickly as possible within the public health constraints. I have noticed that, when that is hinted at or suggested, certain parties run to the TV studios to rubbish the suggestion. The same ones demanding almost eternal lockdown will be the ones tabling motions like this and singling out the Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Finance. People see that as quite cynical behaviour; they see straight through it. The

economy is everything because it pays for all of the public sector; it pays for all of the services that we want to provide for our constituents. It is only through having a strong and thriving economy that we can pay for roads, hospitals and schools. Therefore, we must be cognisant of that fact. Yes, of course, health is important, but the economy is equally important.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: Yes, go ahead.

Mr Storey: Does the Member accept that the parties opposite want a continual drip-feeding from the Chancellor without any recognition of where real money comes from?

Mr Stalford: That is the point. These debts will have to be paid back. It is not real money; it is borrowed money. We need to be cognisant of that.

As for the benefits of the protocol mentioned in the motion, they are as illusory as the concept of European Union flexibility. There are no benefits to the protocol. It adds costs to customers and businesses and makes it harder to operate a business in this part of the world. Among those who argued for it, I noticed that the tone has now changed. Gone is the "rigorous implementation of the protocol", as the consequence of what they campaigned for has become increasingly obvious to businesses and consumers. "Rigorous implementation" has been changed to "teething problems". They are not teething problems. It is what the protocol was designed to do. It was designed to punish the people of Northern Ireland as they tried to purchase goods or operate a business.

Indeed, I recall that, in a previous debate, my colleague Mr O'Toole thanked the EU for giving us the protocol. Thank you for making it harder for my constituents to purchase goods. Thank you for making it more expensive to run a business. Thank you for your benign attitude towards us. The vaccine debacle demonstrated to all of us just how benign and decent the view of the European Union is towards Northern Ireland. We are nothing more than a plaything for it to use to get back at the rest of the United Kingdom for voting to leave. The proposer of the motion said that the solution must begin in schools. I agree.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Stalford: I will. That is why schools should not remain closed for ever. As quickly as we can get schools and institutions of learning open, the better for everyone.

Mr Stewart: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was not expecting to get in so soon. I want to thank the proposer of the motion and the proposer of the amendment. There was a similar motion in October. Unfortunately, things have not moved on much since. We are still in lockdown, businesses are still under pressure, and the economy is suffering as a result. I share the frustration that, to date, there has been a lack of a clear economic pathway and I also share the need for an ambitious, innovative and cross-cutting economic strategy. I recognise the need for the entire Executive to play a role in that. We should all be concerned about the impact of furlough ending. No one should be under any illusions about the impact of ending it too soon, even in a targeted way.

That said, it is important to recognise the huge levels of government intervention, from Her Majesty's Treasury and the Executive, that have helped to shore up businesses and provided a safety net for workers. We can only imagine the true and horrific impact without that. Thankfully, there is light at the end of the tunnel. An excellent vaccination programme is being rolled out, as we have been discussing, and, hopefully, we will come out of lockdown and start to see economic recovery very soon.

The Department for the Economy is working through the 'Rebuilding a Strong Economy' document, which was published in June 2020. The Minister will know that I was somewhat critical of that because, in the medium-term recovery strategy that it intends to address, there were the same three cornerstones that every economic strategy has ever had, which are: creating highly paid jobs; developing a highly skilled and agile workforce; and rebalancing the regional economy. I do not think that anybody could be against any of those things, and I think that was aspirational, but I could never understand how that could fit into a 12- to 18-month strategy. It was almost unachievable that we would ever have got to that stage.

We eagerly await the publication of the Northern Ireland economic recovery plan, and we understand from last week that there is a bid of £160 million for that, but I hope that it includes recognition of our microbusiness and small business sectors, which make up over 90% of our economy. I also hope that it recognises the need to grow our social economy through social enterprise acts, potentially looking at a Northern Ireland-first public procurement process, a focus on skills and jobs and an ambitious attempt to promote and grow our fintech and green energy sectors and to regenerate town centres, which have been under major pressure since well before the pandemic broke out.

We often say that Governments do not create jobs but businesses do when given the right conditions. The Job Start scheme was launched here briefly, which was a reincarnation of the Kickstart scheme that was launched by Westminster. I find it almost impossible to believe that, just three months after it was launched and tinkered with by the Department for Communities, it has now been binned. Young people who have returned from studying in GB or the Republic of Ireland and want to get into an apprenticeship or a paid internship are now being told that that scheme is no longer available. How can we say that we want to invest in our most important asset — our people — and throw them a lifeline and then take it away just when the opportunity is about to begin?

Businesses and dozens of young people who were meant to start that scheme have been in touch with me to say that they are completely disgusted that it has been removed for the sake of £16 million. I am sending a message to the Minister for Communities and the Minister of Finance to refund that scheme and get it back up and running. We talk about our young people being our most important asset, and I cannot, for the life of me, understand why that scheme has been withdrawn for the sake of £16 million. The opportunities that it would create, specifically in the sectors in which it was meant to work, would be absolutely massive. We talk about the brain drain here and the impacts of that, and many young people are leaving, but that scheme was there to target exactly that. I would love to see that as a cross-cutting strategy in the Executive.

Finally, the motion refers to the benefits of the protocol. I want to see the Department focusing on the impacts right now of the protocol rather than aspirational job creation, if that is something that others think might happen. Right now, businesses in my constituency are massively under the cosh. They cannot get goods in, they are struggling with their logistics, and they are paying more than double in tariffs. So, I encourage the Minister to set up a designated point in her Department to catalogue the hundreds of issues that businesses here are raising to try to work towards solutions —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Stewart: — because those are the businesses that are operating right now, and they need solutions as quickly as possible.

Mr Dickson: As Members will be very much aware, for nearly a year now, I have been pressing the Economy Minister to deal with many of the issues in today's debate. It is very clear that our world economy has been severely battered by COVID-19. Lives have changed immeasurably and businesses have been severely restricted and, indeed, closed as we try to tackle infections and save lives.

It is very clear that the impact of the pandemic will be with us for many years to come. The past few months have been amongst the toughest of the pandemic, but with the mass roll-out of vaccines, which others have referred to, there is more reason for optimism and, hopefully, a glimmer of light on the horizon.

As we move, we hope, out of the pandemic, we clearly will need an Executive-wide recovery strategy. Some say, "Build back better", but I say, "We need to build forward better." Going back to the old ways is not the solution. We need to tackle structural weaknesses and to build on our strengths. Unfortunately, that does not always seem to be recognised by the Departments that are supposed to take a lead on economic development. Indeed, one of the weaknesses of our Government is the stubborn silo mentality of Departments and Ministers. They are reluctant to work together, and there is a lack of communication. If we cannot have cross-departmental plans to navigate our recovery, truthfully, we are wasting valuable time and money and squandering our opportunities and those of future people by simply drifting and reacting to events in real time.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: No, I want to get through. Thank you.

For example, the Minister for the Economy has rolled out numerous and very welcome programmes for skills and apprenticeship recovery and made additional funding available for higher and further education. We have had our differences, but I place on record that the Minister has done a job of work to tackle those issues. However, that work does not relate strategically to the work that is being carried out by the Department for Communities on supporting people in employment. In reality, the two are not on the same page; indeed, one wonders sometimes whether they are even reading the same book.

The Department for Communities also demonstrates a lack of urgency to cooperate with the Department for the Economy, particularly on the launch of the Job Start scheme, which reference has been made to. Its

equivalent in GB launched on 2 September. Where is it? We have to have an answer to that. I understand that this is an emergency the like of which we have never seen before, but if we continue to simply react without a plan or planning, we will miss the opportunity to maximise the impact of spending and cross-departmental working.

The drift needs to stop. As noted in the motion, the job retention scheme will eventually end. We know that it will end, in theory, in April, but many of us hope that it will continue as the vaccine programme starts to build back resilience in the community. Thousands of people may not return to roles that they had in March 2020, so we need to have a comprehensive plan in place for job creation, upskilling and attracting the jobs of the future. We need to adjust to the new economic realities of the pandemic and face the situation post Brexit. That means selling Northern Ireland's strong and unique advantages.

The motion notes that one of those will come about as a result of the protocol. The protocol is not the outcome that I or the Alliance Party wanted. We wanted minimum friction in all directions; indeed, the backstop would have delivered that in a much better way. However, our national Government sought the hardest Brexit, leaving us, by necessity, with the protocol. Unless the UK Government sign agreements that make the protocol unnecessary, we must make the most of what we have by streamlining operations and pressing our Government to reach lasting solutions with the EU, as they promised to do.

Nonetheless, this should be a game changer for our economy not only in the UK market but in the EU single market for goods. Instead of being a peripheral region of Europe, Northern Ireland should be the pivot point and a centre for trade east-west, North/South and between Europe and the UK. In recent days, we have heard that Invest Northern Ireland has increased its interests from foreign investors, with the result that Northern Ireland's new trading —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Dickson: I will. We are in uncharted territory, so we need a plan for the future — a plan that delivers. Unfortunately, up to now, we have been drifting.

Mr Buckley: I will speak against the motion and support the amendment.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has had a terrible impact on every element of our society, whether it be business, leisure, faith, community, sport or family life. There has not been a person who has not been impacted by the restrictions and by COVID's effect on their business or livelihood. We take it very seriously. While I support 100% what has been said about a recovery plan, we must also look towards that as a collective effort. It is not the fault of an individual Minister or Department or of who got what Department before COVID came along. COVID has impacted upon them all, and we need a collective effort and strategy, as outlined in the amendment, which I will support.

COVID-19 has had an impact.

My colleague Mr Stalford mentioned £100 million a week in costs and thousands of jobs. We are at the tip of the iceberg with regard to the long-lasting impact that some of the restrictions will have. However, the SDLP motion is full

of doublespeak. On the one hand, in relation to COVID, it says that —

1.45 pm

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to my friend for giving way, not least as it gives him an extra minute. The Member will agree, I am sure, that a recalibration of the economy is under way. Does he agree that, as we roll out the vaccine and more people get the protection that they need, a recalibration of the way in which the Government have functioned over the past 12 months, with one Department dominating all others, is also needed?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Buckley: Absolutely. That will come.

I was talking about the doublespeak. On the one hand, in the motion, the SDLP talks about the damaging impact of the restrictions, and, on the other hand, in public commentary, it is so lustful as to desire the restrictions that are in place. You cannot have it both ways. It also talks about the benefits of the protocol, the rigorous implementation of which is, inevitably, damaging to businesses across this country. The motion is filled with doublespeak.

It is notable that the motion is a deliberate, styled attack on the Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Finance. If the SDLP wants to talk about records throughout COVID-19 and the schemes, I am happy to do it, because, while the SDLP was dragged to the table to put support in place for our lorry drivers and taxi drivers —

Mr Storey: And bus drivers.

Mr Buckley: — yes, absolutely — we watched as the list of those who were willing and wanted to get their driving test lingered and could not engage in the workplace because they had no transportation. Let us compare that with the record of the Economy Minister, who has put nearly half a billion pounds' worth of schemes towards supporting businesses and individuals throughout this difficult time. Could she do more? Absolutely. She would want to do more. Let us not forget that those in glasshouses should not throw stones. I can see how this may come from an opposition party, but a member of the Executive knows full well the financial responsibilities that are placed on every Department.

Nearly half a billion pounds — 30 schemes — have come from the Department for the Economy. There has been the £10,000 small business grant scheme; £25,000 for the retail, hospitality, tourism and leisure sectors; the microbusiness hardship fund; the newly self-employed support scheme (NSESS); the limited company directors support scheme (LCDSS); and the COVID restrictions business support scheme (CRBSS), parts A and B. Do I have to go on? I think I will. There has also been the wet pubs business support scheme (WPBSS) and the large tourism and hospitality business support scheme (LTHBSS). The list goes on. It is incredible. I have a document outlining over 30 schemes. What has the SDLP brought forward? What has it done in support of those struggling throughout COVID-19? Only advocate for the very restrictions that have put those people into isolation in their homes with no jobs and no ability to get back into the workplace. Reality must dawn, and the reality is that there

must be a collective response. That is why I am so sad at the tone of the motion.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buckley: I will before I end, but I want to get on to the second doublespeak in the motion: support for the protocol.

What doublespeak if ever I have heard it. Again, we see the useful pawns of the Europeans sitting on the Benches opposite, advocating a protocol that places limits and restrictions and denies opportunity to Northern Ireland business, be that unionist, nationalist or other. It is very much a case of chasing fool's gold at the end of the rainbow or riding the unicorn about which they talked throughout the Brexit process. They have been useful pawns in the game. Rather than putting the needs of Northern Ireland first, they have put on record their rhetoric on Brexit and hampered the opportunities in it for our business.

In the short term, prosperity in homes across Northern Ireland during the recovery will be protected only by ensuring that businesses already doing trade with what is by far Northern Ireland's largest and most valuable market — Great Britain — are able to continue to do so in the new and costly way provided by the protocol, the rigorous implementation of which the Members opposite called for. It is useful to note how Members opposite have drawn back their language.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Buckley: The reality has dawned that the protocol damages Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland businesses. It is high time that Members realised that.

Mr McGuigan: Brexit has been imposed on us by the DUP and the Tories. I just had to mention that.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Can you clarify the accuracy of the comments made? Leaving the European Union was the result of a democratic vote held in the United Kingdom, and the Member opposite has a UK National Insurance number.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has put his point on the record.

Mr McGuigan: I thank my constituency colleague for allowing me the opportunity to clarify: a hard Brexit has been imposed on us by the Tories and the DUP.

Nobody could have predicted the current worldwide COVID pandemic or its impact. Whilst the first priority of the Executive and the Assembly has to be protecting public health and the lives of our citizens, there is no doubt that COVID has brought harsh economic conditions. This is a worrying time for many businesses and workers concerned about their current financial conditions and their financial conditions on the other side of the pandemic. Add a disastrous Tory/DUP-imposed hard Brexit and the threat of climate change into the mix, and it is clear that we need a comprehensive economic recovery strategy. Whilst the Economy Minister is clearly responsible for economic policy, any recovery strategy must have buy-in, input and contributions from all Executive Ministers. As our amendment states, any recovery strategy must:

“transform public services, create more jobs and help build back better from the current crisis.”

Mr Stewart: I thank the Member for giving way. I totally agree that any strategy must be aimed at providing new jobs and retraining people. Does he agree that the cancellation of the Job Start scheme after it was evolved to try to make it Northern Ireland-specific is deeply lamentable, given the impact that this will have on people who now want to get into paid apprenticeships and on sectors that want to encourage young people to join them?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr McGuigan: We need to encourage, through as many avenues as possible, people into businesses and people into employment. I certainly am optimistic that any Executive recovery strategy will do precisely that. That is what is needed. It must be based on supporting workers and their families, and it must support businesses here, including SMEs. As other Members have said, it must, of course, tackle regional imbalances.

As Sinn Féin's environment and climate spokesperson, I think that it should go without saying that we need to build back better and greener. Our recovery must be built on working towards a zero-carbon future. If any positive can be taken from COVID, it is that it has shone a light on how work practices, transport and infrastructure can be redesigned to deal with a pandemic, as has been done. When we are rebuilding and building for the future, some of the lessons that have been learned must be implemented and used to tackle climate change and build an economic future that creates better cities with less traffic, cleaner air and better air quality for all citizens who live in them. When I look at the infrastructure developments and active travel policies that have been introduced in other European cities throughout the past year, I cannot help thinking that, moving forward, we need to be much more ambitious in the North.

An Executive recovery strategy must not only deliver a green new deal but do so by delivering a just transition. The strategy must allow businesses and workers to buy into that and participate in a better way of doing things. A green economy will create additional, well-paid employment, harness our abundant renewable energy resources, lower costs for families and businesses, create warm homes for those in fuel poverty and provide public transport for all, including those living in isolated areas.

Five minutes is nowhere near enough to outline all that needs to be outlined in such an important debate on the economic future for citizens. Tory austerity over 10 years has had a severe negative impact on public services in the North and on our economic prospects. We need further devolution of fiscal powers to the Executive and to see those powers used wisely in the interests of those who live here.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, Question Time is due to begin at 2.00 pm. I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member scheduled to speak is Mervyn Storey.

The debate stood suspended.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland

1. **Dr Aiken** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their engagement with the European Commission on the impact of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. (AQO 1597/17-22)

2. **Mr O'Toole** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps they are taking to maximise the benefits from Northern Ireland's unique dual-market access under the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. (AQO 1598/17-22)

3. **Dr Archibald** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the recent joint statement by the European Commission and the British Government on the implementation of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. (AQO 1599/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I will take questions 1, 2 and 3 together.

Following the EU's triggering of article 16 on 29 January, the First Minister and I requested a meeting with the European Commission vice president Maroš Šefčovič. The meeting took place on 3 February, and we apprised him of the current situation regarding the implementation of the protocol and its impact here. The meeting was constructive and led to an agreement to work together to address the remaining protocol issues. Following the meeting, the European Commission and the British Government released a joint statement confirming their commitment to the Good Friday Agreement and their agreement to use the Joint Committee structures to work intensively to find solutions to outstanding issues. That commitment to finding solutions is very welcome. I am pleased that it was reiterated in the joint statement from the European Commission and the British Government following a further meeting on 11 February. The First Minister and I continue to attend meetings of the Joint Committee. We will use its structures to ensure that our position is understood and to seek the best outcome for our citizens and businesses. Concurrent with those ongoing discussions, we continue to work to identify, assess and seek to resolve immediate operational issues associated with the end of the transition period.

The Department for the Economy, alongside Invest NI (INI) and InterTradelreland (ITI), is continuing to engage with many sectors to clarify the terms of access to the different markets and to encourage and enable export growth that could help drive our economic recovery.

Dr Aiken: I thank the deputy First Minister for her comments so far. Did Maroš Šefčovič give any indication that he was listening to the very legitimate concerns of the people of Northern Ireland, particularly those of the unionist community, about the very invidious and divisive

nature of the Irish Sea border and the fact that the protocol is part of the problem, not part of the solution?

Mrs O'Neill: I can confirm to the Member that the vice president of the Commission listened intently to what was said in the meeting. Further to that, as you will know, he held a series of meetings towards the end of last week with business leaders and civic society leaders here to listen to people's concerns. I welcome the fact that the EU side and the British Government have recognised the need to implement the protocol, iron out all the issues that have been identified and find solutions. Everybody's efforts right now should be on trying to find solutions to give businesses the clarity, stability and certainty that they crave for the months ahead about what future trading patterns will look like for them. What we are dealing with now is the outworking of Brexit. There were always going to be major ramifications from Brexit. Thankfully, we have a protocol that offers a solution to what is a huge problem.

Mr O'Toole: First Ministers, just a few days ago, Invest NI said:

"Northern Ireland can become a gateway for the sale of goods to two of the world's largest markets".

Our unique position means that we are at the hinge point of the British market and the EU single market of half a billion people. First Ministers, what are we doing to maximise the benefits from the dual market access to create jobs and prosperity for people here? We are in a unique position that is envied not just by other parts of the United Kingdom but across this continent.

Mrs O'Neill: I agree with the Member about the opportunity that we have. We have access to both markets, which is a strength in our ability to trade that is the envy of many others. We need to work on our access to 450 million people in the EU market. I said in my original answer that work is under way with the Department for the Economy, Invest NI and InterTradelreland. It is important that they work together, and with all sectors, to identify the markets and work on the opportunities. We need to see more of that. We need to use our unique position to attract jobs and investment. There is a huge opportunity for us. We need to see the dedicated economic strategy from the Department for the Economy. I know that the House will discuss economic strategy today and tomorrow, and I look forward to that. It is important that we maximise the benefits that we have and that we work with the business community, traders, retailers and everybody else. We must try to get certainty on the issues that require certainty and then look for the opportunities.

Dr Archibald: Does the First Minister agree with me that the Executive should develop an overarching economic strategy to maximise the benefits from our continued access to the European single market and its 450 million consumers?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her question. It is an opportunity for us to work to develop an overarching economic strategy. That will take all of the Executive working together across every Department. It will come as no surprise to the Member to hear me say that the disruption and difficulties that we are experiencing are a direct consequence of Brexit — a Brexit that was rejected by the majority of people across this community and the majority of Members of the House. That is my view. Our

collective focus, as an Executive and across the Assembly, must now be to protect jobs and livelihoods. We need to have the Joint Committee providing solutions on issues. Let us all work together to provide solutions. Those are the opportunities before us.

Mr Allister: Does the deputy First Minister accept that commerce between Great Britain and Northern Ireland has been impeded by the protocol, the rigorous implementation of which she demands? Why does she want to punish the economy of Northern Ireland? Is the simple truth that dislocation between Northern Ireland and GB is a political gain that she prioritises above the damage to our economy?

Mrs O'Neill: What we are experiencing is a direct consequence of the Brexit that the Member championed and helped to bring about. What we need to do now is find solutions to the outstanding issues. I want to see free trade right across: North/South and east-west. I do not want to see any disruption to trade. It is to our economic benefit that trade flows freely. Instead of playing silly games, our focus needs to be on what provides certainty to businesses, traders and retailers and what gives stability and simplification. Let us use the avenues open to us in the withdrawal agreement, namely through the Joint Committee. I welcome the fact that it will meet, I believe, before Wednesday. I hope that the joint First Minister and I will be in that meeting so that we have an opportunity to put across the need for stability, certainty and simplification.

Mr Buckley: These issues are caused not by Brexit but, rather, a denial of Brexit by the protocol parties opposite. Some nine weeks into the Northern Ireland protocol, can the deputy First Minister point to any evidence, either anecdotal or substantial, that the protocol has any advantages for Northern Ireland businesses, or is it the case that they simply do not exist? If so, would she join me and others in calling out the protocol for what it is, and ensuring that it is destined for the dustbin where it belongs?

Mrs O'Neill: My personal view is this: thank goodness for the protocol. What we are experiencing right now is a result of the fact that the British Government did not prepare. They did not work with businesses to ensure that they were ready for a post-Brexit world. They ran the clock down to 31 December, so there was no opportunity to transition into a new trading arrangement. We are dealing with a new trading reality as a direct result of Brexit. What the Executive and the Assembly need to focus on is ironing out the difficulties that have arisen as a direct result of Brexit and working with the British Government and the EU side to make sure that we get solutions to those things. Let us look towards the opportunities for the future, and let us ensure that we grab all those opportunities and that we help to create jobs and employment here and help our local industry. There are new trading realities and patterns, so there are opportunities now for smaller businesses here that traditionally could not supply, for example, some of the big supermarkets. How can we support them to make sure that they can do that? That is where our efforts need to be focused. It is around stability and certainty. It is not around playing games with the protocol that was agreed over the course of four years.

Ms Armstrong: What confidence can our business community have in an Executive that are failing to work

together? How will the negotiations go if that relationship falls apart, given the self-harm that Brexit has created in this place?

Mrs O'Neill: We are dealing with a post-Brexit world. The Executive have no option other than to work together. Everybody needs to be focused in the same direction, and that is to iron out the issues that need to be resolved. There are issues that are a direct result of the new trading reality. There are issues that are a direct result of the fact that, as I said, the deal was not struck until it came right down to the wire, so people have not had time to adjust. Of course, there will be issues, and they are genuine issues, particularly from a business point of view, so let us get a resolution to those. I look forward to the Joint Committee on Wednesday. That will give us an opportunity to try to, hopefully, get some outcomes. A number of issues have been resolved. Some clarity was given on the issue of steel, for example. We continually raise a whole list of issues to try to get clarity on them. I welcome the fact that there has been progress, but there is definitely more to be done. Our job should be to continue to find the solutions.

Mr Stalford: The triggering of article 16 by the European side was, I am sure that the deputy First Minister would agree, a hateful, spiteful act by an incompetent, bungling European bureaucracy to disguise the fact that it had singularly failed to deliver a proper vaccine roll-out for the people of continental Europe. Given that article 16 has now been triggered, does she agree with me that, in future, UK Governments should not be reticent about using it to defend our interests in the way that the European side did theirs?

Mrs O'Neill: First, I disassociate myself completely from your language. Secondly, what happened on the EU side, when they indicated that they were going to trigger article 16, was wrong. I have said that publicly. It was wrong, but you do not fight fire with fire. You do not fight back and say, "Well, you know, they threw their dummy out of the pram, so let's do it too". Let us find solutions. Let us find solutions to the Brexit that has been foisted upon us by the Tories and that your party supported.

Hate Crime

4. **Ms Brogan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on how the racial equality strategy 2015-2025 is addressing racism and eradicating hate crime. (AQO 1600/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, junior Minister Kearney will respond to that question.

Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): We want this to be a truly shared, equal and safe society for all our people, regardless of race or ethnicity. Unfortunately, racism and hatred remain an unwelcome presence in our society. Earlier this month, the First Minister and I attended a meeting with the racial equality subgroup, which reinforced the huge impact that racism has on people's lives and how important it is that we continue in our efforts to tackle hatred and prejudice. We are doing that through the implementation of our racial equality strategy.

Tackling racism and hate crime is the central aim of that strategy, and we remain fully committed to the delivery of all its key actions. Progress has been made on a number of those. We have completed a review of the minority

ethnic diversity fund to ensure that it best supports local groups to promote good relations between people of different ethnic backgrounds. We have reviewed the Race Relations Order and are now preparing options for enhancing the legislation. We will shortly consult on a draft refugee integration strategy.

We are also considering the recommendations from Judge Marrinan's report on hate crime legislation, and we very much look forward to seeing them implemented.

2.15 pm

Tackling hatred is the responsibility of all of us in government and wider society. We will continue to drive forward this critical work. Let me say this once again: there is no place for hate or discrimination in our communities, and we will not tolerate racism in any form. We are committed to tackling the challenges, and it will take us all working together to deliver the positive change that is needed.

Ms Brogan: We recently witnessed appalling racist remarks from a DUP MP who then refused to withdraw or apologise for the offensive comments. Will the Minister agree that comments like that not only run contrary to the objectives set out in the racial equality strategy but go against the Executive and Assembly's opposition to any form of racism?

Mr Kearney: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht an cheist a chur. Just last week, the First Minister, junior Minister Middleton and I met the racial equality subgroup. That group, as I indicated, has a specific responsibility to advise on the implementation of the racial equality strategy for 2015-2025. Speakers at that meeting recalled their experiences of everyday racism. They also reflected on their experiences of institutional racism and, critically, intergenerational poverty, as it interconnects with the reality of racism. They also discussed the effects of precarious employment and zero-hours contracts, which have a disproportionate effect on our ethnic minority population. It was a sobering meeting. In some respects, we might want to describe it as something of a "reset" moment, if you like, because contributors set out the task ahead if we are to build a future that values racial equality and racial justice.

As for the 'Songs of Praise' remarks by a senior DUP politician that you referenced, it is clear to me that, when senior politicians feel that that type of public commentary is acceptable, we still have a way to go. The remarks were insulting and offensive, and I acknowledged that during our meeting with the racial equality subgroup. Those remarks contrast starkly with the future that we should all seek to build together. Just as they run contrary to the vision of the racial equality strategy, which is owned by the Executive, they speak to the need for robust political leadership across the Chamber to confront all forms of racism and to give leadership to build a community that is defined by inclusivity, celebrates our diversity and is known, crucially, for its zero tolerance of racism so that this place becomes renowned as a welcoming place for everyone who has chosen to make it their home. Mar sin, a Cheann Comhairle, ní mór do gach aon cheannaire sa saol, sa tsochaí agus sa pholaitíocht an fód a sheasamh in éadan an chiníochais, an tseicteachais agus gach saghas idirdhealaithe.

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time is up.

Mr McGrath: A key component of the racial equality strategy that has yet to be delivered is a refugee integration strategy. Given that I was today sent a social media ad for a vacant house in Northern Ireland that included the line, "Foreign nationals need not apply", where are we with that much-needed integration strategy?

Mr Kearney: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht an cheist a chur. The Member raises an important issue about the progress of the refugee integration strategy. Allow me to set it into this context: work has progressed on the matter. Just bear with me, colleagues, so that I can get you the specifics.

We have, in fact, advanced it. It is one of our 11 themes in the racial equality strategy. It falls within the context of how we deal with refugees and asylum seekers. We are engaged directly with the British Home Office on bringing forward its recommendations and views on the matter. We have made it clear that we are acutely concerned about the potential implications that that would have for how we ensure that our racial and ethnic minorities and those who have come to this place as asylum seekers and refugees are properly regarded, included and not in any way economically disadvantaged as a result of coming here to make this place their home.

Mr Beattie: It is incumbent on us all to make the racial equality strategy work to help with diversity in this part of the United Kingdom. Many from the BME community, especially the newcomer communities, cannot avail themselves of the rules around the common travel area. What are we doing to rectify that?

Mr Kearney: I thank the Member for his question. Again, that relates to how we advance the work that we have taken forward on our minority ethnic development fund. We have the racial equality strategy overview, but we also need to deal specifically with asylum seekers and refugees. In that respect, we are engaged, as I said, with the British Home Office to ensure that travel does not become an impediment to ensuring that people who need to come to live in this place for fear of famine, war and other forms of injustice are brought here, are included in this society, are fully integrated and enjoy the same benefits of living in this place as any other member of society in the context of our racial equality strategy and all the programmes, elements and priorities that that reflects.

Mr Durkan: There is a lasting concern that organisations run by people from our traditional communities who work with BME people are favoured over organisations led by BME people, whose groups are often told that they lack the capacity to administer government funding or to run programmes. However, one of the stated aims of the racial equality strategy is to build capacity for ethnic minority people. How is the distribution of resources between race relations and community relations decided?

Mr Kearney: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht an cheist a chur. We have in place a racial equality subgroup. As I explained, the First Minister and I met it just last week. We think that it is very representative of the constituencies and communities that it represents. We can always do better. We had a good engagement about the importance of the work that it is carrying forward. We need to listen to what it says. It would be a huge anomaly and completely counter-intuitive if we had a situation in which

those of us who are from here would purport to know best the needs of those who are members of our racial and ethnic minority population. The fix for that is to stay closely engaged with our racial equality subgroup, which is an integral part of our racial equality strategy, listening to what it has to say, and then, when we have access to resources, to build capacity and inclusion to ensure that the rights of those minorities are protected and that that is done in a way that is absolutely in consultation with those citizens on the ground, articulating their needs and ensuring that they are properly represented and reflected through the racial equality subgroup.

Victims' Payment Schemes: Funding

5. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on discussions with the Secretary of State on funding for the Troubles-related-incident victims' payment scheme. (AQO 1601/17-22)

6. **Mr Beggs** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme. (AQO 1602/17-22)

10. **Ms Dolan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Troubles-related-incident victims' payment scheme. (AQO 1606/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission again, a Cheann Comhairle, I will answer questions 5, 6 and 10 together.

On 9 February 2021, the Court of Appeal ruled that the Executive Office is under a legal duty to fund victims' payments and lump sums under the Victims' Payments Regulations 2020. The ruling gave the Executive and the NIO four weeks to find an agreed solution. The First Minister and I remain entirely committed to delivering the scheme, and the Executive Office acknowledges that it needs to be funded to operate properly. Along with the Justice and Finance Ministers, the First Minister and I are engaged in correspondence with the Secretary of State in relation to funding. Following our request for an urgent meeting with him to address the matter, the Secretary of State has now agreed to that meeting, which will take place tomorrow, 23 February. It remains our firm view that the scheme should be funded by the Westminster Government as an addition to the block grant. Without that additional funding, the Executive will face significant funding pressures. We will continue to make that case directly.

Such discussions will not prevent TEO, in the meantime, from making the necessary requests for funding from the Department of Finance as it falls due. The £2.5 million advance from the Executive has enabled the establishment of a dedicated project team in the Department of Justice to progress the development of delivery structures for the scheme. A substantial programme of work is under way. Progress to date includes the ongoing development of an online system to receive applications, the appointment of an interim Victims' Payments Board, the appointment by the DOJ of an assessment service provider and the securing of accommodation for staff who will deliver the scheme. Mr Justice McAlinden has been appointed as interim president of the Victims' Payments Board. The proposed allocation of funding in the draft Budget would provide £6.7 million in 2021-22 for the administrative costs of the scheme, which demonstrates the Executive's commitment to delivery. Part of that funding will enable the

victims and survivors sector to recruit additional staff to support applicants.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. The clock is, clearly, running down on this. There are two weeks left. Is the deputy First Minister telling me that there is a plan B, so to speak, to get everything in place? Will the Executive have any money to pay victims at the end of March or May? The campaign was led by those who were severely physically injured, and, subsequently, those who suffered psychological damage were added. If funding were to become available, would the Executive be in a position to get money out quickly to those who have suffered the most hurt physically?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her question. It is our intention to get the scheme up and running and the payments out the door as quickly as possible. Those people have waited far too long to get to this point. As the Member will know, the court ruling made it clear that we had to fund the scheme, but we believe that the scheme is so different from what was agreed in the Stormont House Agreement. Under the British Government's own funding policy, they must fund what they have legislated for. We hope that we will make some progress in the meeting with the Secretary of State tomorrow.

Mr Beggs: Earlier this year, the Finance Minister reported a significant underspend and said that money returned to him might be returned unspent to Treasury. Has the Executive Office been in touch with the Treasury to ask whether, at the very least, that funding could be used to pay the first year of the disability scheme for Troubles victims to ensure that those victims are not disappointed once again?

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the Member that our focus and attention are on getting the scheme up and running, the applications in and the payments made. That is why we need to have the engagement with the Secretary of State tomorrow. It will involve a group of Ministers including us from the Executive Office and the Finance and Justice Ministers. It is important that we have that meeting, because we have been waiting for it for five months. It is really important that we have that discussion. Alongside that, the Finance Minister will, of course, on behalf of the Executive, continue to engage with the Treasury on the funding of the scheme.

Ms Dolan: Can you clarify whether it is the case that the British Government developed the scheme and, according to their own Treasury rules, must fund it?

Mrs O'Neill: I am always conscious, when I speak about this matter, that victims who need the pension are listening to the debate. Let me speak directly to them: the Executive are absolutely committed to delivering on the scheme. However, how the scheme is resourced is a political question, and it is one that needs urgent focus from the British Government and, in particular, Brandon Lewis. It requires an immediate political solution because, as I said, victims have had to wait for far too long. I appreciate that the needs of victims who are waiting for the pension are immediate and need to be addressed without further delay.

As I said in a previous answer, we have been asking for this meeting with Brandon Lewis since, I think, last October, and we will have that meeting tomorrow, but it is really important that there is an outcome and that we have

a chance to have a real conversation about the funding of the scheme.

2.30 pm

The victims' payment scheme was designed in Westminster, and policy decisions on the scheme were taken there. The British Government have significantly increased the costs, so, consistent with their statement of funding policy, they also ought to have made provision for the finances that are required. The cost of the scheme when it was initially pitched and the costs today are vastly different. We have now received a report from the Government Actuary's Department, which has used assumptions about numbers provided by TEO for a range of cost estimates, ranging from £600 million at one end of the spectrum to £1.2 billion at the other end, with a central estimate of about £848 million. That shows the level of challenge that the Executive will face in trying to fund the scheme, which is why we need the British Government to fund a scheme that they brought forward policy for and took policy decisions on.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Electoral Register: False Information

T1. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that the deputy First Minister will be aware that a census is due to be carried out in the coming months to provide us with an up-to-date, accurate record of all who will be eligible to vote at the next elections, whether the deputy First Minister will take this opportunity to correct the false and factually incorrect information that she and her party put out across the media that this was solely an exercise to purge eligible voters from the register in Northern Ireland. (AQT 1011/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: First, the Member will know that I am speaking here as joint head of Government and joint First Minister, so if you want to address the matter politically with the party, that is fair enough. However, let me say that the Electoral Office's role should be to facilitate people to register to vote and to make it easy for people to exercise their franchise and to take part in the democratic process. Given that, right now, normal procedures cannot be followed because of the pandemic, if you wipe the register now, how will people be able to go door to door, for example? There are pragmatic issues that need to be addressed, and I hope that the Electoral Office takes that on board.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her response, but she did not take the opportunity to withdraw the remarks that the party made and to apologise to the people for the misinformation that the party put out, which seems to be a constant drip from that party.

Mrs O'Neill: That is not a question, a Cheann Comhairle, but let me say that, given the history of this place and the fact that so many people were denied access to voting, we here in the North know how important our vote is, so it is incumbent on all of us in political office to ensure that it is made as easy as possible for people to participate in the democratic process.

Abortion Services

T2. **Ms Sheerin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the legal and human rights imperative to provide modern, accessible and compassionate abortion services here, whether the deputy First Minister agrees that it is the sole responsibility of the Health Minister to implement those services. (AQT 1012/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: In simple terms, the answer is yes. That is my view. Since the framework came into effect, there has been a legal responsibility on the Health Minister to ensure that he provides modern, compassionate healthcare and abortion services and that they are provided via the health trusts here. I believe that his failure to do so is failing not only women, who have a legal and human right to compassionate healthcare services, but his health trusts, which have a right to expect leadership from the Minister. Women should, under no circumstances, be compelled to travel to access vital healthcare services at any time, let alone during a global pandemic, so the Minister should end the delays and fulfil his legal responsibilities to make those services available to women. His failure to do so to date is totally unacceptable.

Ms Sheerin: Go raibh maith agat, Minister. As you have outlined, the new legal framework for abortion services came into effect in March last year. Do you agree that it is now long overdue that the Health Minister acted on this legal imperative and that he should stop delaying and provide the services to which women are entitled immediately and without further delay?

Mrs O'Neill: The framework and the legislation are crystal clear. It is the legal responsibility of the Minister of Health to ensure that the services are provided, and the longer the delays go on, the longer he is denying women access to compassionate, modern and vital healthcare services. That needs to end, and the Minister must act.

COVID-19: Vaccination Roll-out

T4. **Miss McIlveen** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the positive news today from Scotland in relation to data, which demonstrates that the roll-out of the vaccination programme has led to a significant reduction in the number of people who are being hospitalised, whether the deputy First Minister can confirm that that type of data will be included in future modelling here to inform decisions to move Northern Ireland out of the current restrictions more quickly. (AQT 1014/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: My thanks to the Member. I have not seen the data, so I cannot comment on that per se. What I can say, however, is that we have always held the view that the Health Department should put all that information into the public domain. A fair amount of information is shared on the Department of Health website, but when it comes to us making those decisions and bringing the public along with us, the more information that we can put into the public domain, the better. That will help people understand the pathway of the virus, the trends and the patterns, and how those inform our decision-making. My general answer is therefore that we should put everything that we can into the public domain.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. We are all aware that work is ongoing to produce a

pathway out of lockdown. The deputy First Minister should know that people are mindful of the need to protect lives and the health service, but they are also weary. Will she give a commitment that that pathway will be meaningful, detailed and unambiguous and will have clear targets?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, it is really important that we set out the pathway. As the Member is hopefully aware, the First Minister and I intend to present it to the House next week, hopefully on Monday. We very much want to give the public a route map and show how we will reverse out of the current restrictive measures that we have in place. Everybody is looking for some hope and towards the future, and we want to spell that out for people. It will need to be a step-by-step process, however. There is no doubt in my mind that it will need to be gradual and that the lifting of restrictions will be slow and steady. The roll-out of the vaccine and the fact that it is working so well — we commend all those who are involved in delivering the vaccine — combined with keeping the virus suppressed for as long as possible mean that we need to chart what the future will look like for people. As I said, we hope to do that next week.

Victims' Payment Scheme: Delays

T5. **Mr Allister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the deputy First Minister would like to take this opportunity to apologise to innocent victims for the added hurt and trauma that all the delays, at her insistence, to the victims' payment scheme have caused them, given that the High Court has had to call out the Executive Office, not once but twice, on failures in respect of the victims' payment scheme and, very pointedly in the first case, made criticisms that were personal to the deputy First Minister. (AQT 1015/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: This is a very sensitive issue, and we should be very mindful of the fact that, in normal political discourse, we can goad each another. Obviously, you and I will never see eye to eye on many, if not all, given issues, but, when it comes to the victims' pension, Members need to be very sensitive. Those people have waited for far too long to get their pension.

I am committed to doing all that I can to make sure that they get that payment as quickly as possible, but the political reality is that Westminster took policy decisions that were far advanced from what, politically, we had agreed previously. It is therefore incumbent on Westminster also to resource it. I have talked about the challenge with the costs and about the fact that we could be looking at a central estimate of £848 million. That is a lot of financial resource that the Executive would have to bear the brunt of providing if the British Government are not forthcoming with finance. It would put the Executive and the Assembly in a very difficult position, and we would have to take the money from health, education and all the other public services. I am very focused on getting a solution, trying to find the money and making sure that those people do not have to wait a moment longer.

Mr Allister: For all those words, the Minister is unable to say sorry to them, and not for the first time. Are we now in a position in which who gets the pension has been abandoned as a stalling tactic? Has the deputy First Minister come to the realisation that that point is settled and will not be used as a stalling tactic any further?

Mrs O'Neill: The victims' pension should be paid to all those people — every single last person — who have been directly impacted on by the conflict. Anybody who has received an injury should be eligible for the scheme. There is a cohort of people who have been left out of the scheme, and I know that they will fight this case in the courts. I support them in doing so because they are equally entitled to a pension. I previously said that my focus and priority are to make sure that we get the pension paid, that the payment is no longer delayed, and that the British Government must step up and resource something that they took policy decisions on.

COVID-19: Republic of Ireland Vaccination Roll-out

T6. **Mr Givan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, after asking the deputy First Minister to join him in commending the roll-out of the vaccination programme in Northern Ireland, with the number of people who have now received the vaccine heading towards a third of the population, which is replicated across the United Kingdom, how concerned the deputy First Minister is that only around 5% to 6% of the population of the Republic of Ireland has been vaccinated and to state how much of a threat that is to the people of Northern Ireland. (AQT 1016/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: I look forward to the day when all the people who live on this island, across these islands and globally receive the vaccine. There is no room for any nonsense about "vaccine nationalism", as I have heard it described. We are in a global pandemic; if there was ever a time for us to work in a global effort, this is it. I look forward to the day when we are all vaccinated, when we can get back to some sense of normality, and that people are allowed to be with their family and friends and go about their daily business without the fear that comes with living in a pandemic.

Mr Givan: On the reopening of our economy, as you said this morning, you want to have a pathway to recovery to protect families, workers and businesses. I wholeheartedly agree with that. Let us have these restrictions removed as soon as possible and as is practicably safe to do so in line with the health guidance. However, the Republic of Ireland has put in place enforcement against the people of Northern Ireland travelling in the Republic of Ireland, and yet we are a much safer country now due to our vaccine progress. Is any reciprocal enforcement planned by the Executive to protect our return to normality because of the Republic of Ireland's failure to vaccinate its people?

Mrs O'Neill: The message across the board, across both these islands, is to stay at home. That remains the case, even as measures are announced on what a pathway to recovery and what opening things up again could look like. We are still dealing with the pandemic, and the message, for now, is to stay at home. People should not be travelling anywhere, whether from Clonoe — where I live — to Belfast or from Dublin to Cork. People should stay at home. That remains the message.

We are still in the middle of the pandemic, dealing with a challenging situation. Whilst things are going in the right direction and are looking good, if we do not keep the virus suppressed, we will keep yo-yoing in and out of lockdown. That is not where we want to be. We need to

see steady progress. We want to publish the pathway next week, as that is really important to giving the public an understanding of what the future looks like.

Mr Speaker: I call Maolíosa McHugh. I advise the Member that he will only have time for his main question.

Casement Park

T7. **Mr McHugh** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the importance of resolving the delay to the Casement Park development, which is an Executive flagship project. (AQT 1017/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. He is absolutely right: Casement is a crucial project, not just for Gaels but for the Executive, because it has been a flagship project for some time. Therefore, there needs to be an end to the delay as soon as possible. I am glad to say that the Finance Minister has included £20 million in the Budget for that development.

It is disappointing that the planning application still has not been completed. I expect that the Infrastructure Minister will now work to ensure that there are no further delays. It has been more than 10 years since the Casement project was announced. It is time to return Casement Park to its place as a shining beacon for Gaels in Antrim, and for the wider economic benefits that it will bring to Belfast and Ulster.

Mr Speaker: Our time is up. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

2.45 pm

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McGlone] in the Chair)

Finance

Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme

1. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on his Department's engagement with the Executive Office on the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme. (AQO 1611/17-22)

9. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Finance what provisions are being put in place to ensure payments from the Troubles-related-incident victims' payment scheme can be made without further delay. (AQO 1619/17-22)

14. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister of Finance whether he has requested a meeting with the Secretary of State to discuss funding for the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme. (AQO 1624/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): A LeasCheann Comhairle, with your permission, I will group questions 1, 9 and 14.

I, along with my Executive colleagues, am committed to ensuring the delivery of the victims' payment scheme. With that in mind, as part of the draft Budget, the Executive have allocated some £6.7 million towards the preparation costs for the introduction of a scheme. The wider payments issue requires urgent attention.

While TEO identified estimated costs in respect of scheme payments, the Executive were agreed on the need to further the matter of funding with the Secretary of State, whose predecessor's actions led to a significant increase in the potential cost of the scheme. I, along with the First and deputy First Ministers and the Minister of Justice, have been trying to meet with the Secretary of State for some time. He has now agreed to a meeting, which is due to take place tomorrow.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he outline the likely funding levels and any estimates that he has made for the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme and what bids, if any, TEO or the Justice Ministry have made to his Department?

Mr Murphy: The most recent report that we got from the Government Actuary's Department estimated that the cost could be anything between £600 million and £1.2 billion, which is an increase on the high-level estimate that the Department of Justice had placed on it.

As the Member will know, the additional bits of the scheme that were added by a previous Secretary of State, such as psychological injury, including to people based outside the jurisdiction, and injuries, including psychological injuries, for armed forces personnel, have substantially increased the potential cost. While it is a demand-led scheme, it is very hard to give an accurate estimation, but those costs make it hugely challenging, if not unaffordable, for the Executive to carry the burden alone, not to mention the fact that it is contrary to the British Government's own policy, having set the policy and legislated for it.

The Department of Justice received money for the administration of the scheme, and the Executive were very clear that, on the payments for the victims, which we are committed to and want to see happening, we need that discussion urgently. That is why we have been pressing since last year for a discussion with the Secretary of State to try to apportion the costs of the scheme.

Mr T Buchanan: Given the wider cost of the scheme, which the Minister talked about running from £600 million upwards, what action is he taking in order to ensure that, whenever applications are made by the innocent victims, the money will be there to make the payment to them and that there will be no further delays in the scheme?

Mr Murphy: Of course, that is a matter for the Executive to decide. If the Executive decide that they are going to carry the burden of the entirety of the cost, the upward figure, as I said, is estimated by the Government Actuary's Department to be £1.2 billion. That will have serious knock-on implications for other public services that we provide over the lifetime of the scheme. Many more upfront costs may well be attached to that than were previously estimated, given that people may opt for a lump sum rather than a pension over many years.

All those issues create huge levels of uncertainty, and that is why we need that discussion with the British Government. The Secretary of State has decided to take the lead on the matter, and we have been pressing for a discussion with him. We wanted to include the payment levels in the draft Budget paper that we have produced, and we certainly want to include the levels for payment in the final Budget paper, which we will come to in the next couple of weeks.

Ms Dillon: It is disgraceful that the British Secretary of State has taken five months to respond to a request for a meeting with Ministers from the Executive on the issue, which is on a policy and legislation that he brought forward. Having said that, I am glad that he is now prepared to meet you, Minister. What will the potential impact be on other Departments? I absolutely support the payments to victims, who should not have to wait any longer, but what is the likely impact if the British Government do not step up to the plate on funding the scheme?

Mr Murphy: As I said, the cost will be anything between £600 million and £1.2 billion, depending on whether people seek payments up front, which could change the profile of payments year-on-year. However, if we take it at the upper level and do a rough allocation across Departments, we are talking about a cost of about £615 million to the Department of Health and £227 million to the Department of Education and so on, right down the level of spending for all Departments. You can see that it will have a very significant impact on our public services.

That is not to play off what victims deserve and need against public services, because that would be a very cruel thing for the Government to try to do to us, as we want not only to provide the best possible public services but to meet the very real requirements of victims. We need that urgent discussion with the Secretary of State in order to get the issue resolved.

Mr Allister: Is that not exactly what the Minister is doing: trying to play off victims against public services in order to up the ante with the Secretary of State? Is there an acceptance that, when one listens to the Court of Appeal, at the end of the day there is no choice other than to find the money wherever it is found? Does it help to exaggerate the demands by saying, for example, that £600 million will come off the Department of Health as if that was in one year, when it is over the entire lifetime of the scheme, which might be 30 years?

Mr Murphy: The Member says that the money should be found "wherever it is found", but he clearly does not indicate where it should be found, so he has not come off the fence. Perhaps he could say whether he thinks that the Executive should pay for the scheme in its entirety and that the British Government should not make any contribution. If he feels that the British Government should make a contribution, we in the Executive are right to pursue them for that. He is sitting on the fence because he will not declare his hand. He is just saying, "Somebody should sort this. It should not go on much longer". Of course, from his position in opposition, he does not have to come up with the answers for any of it.

We are trying to sort it. We recognise that the costs over the 30 years — those are the costs that the Government Actuary's Department came up with, not us — have to be paid, and if we have to pay them, that will have a huge impact. I have no desire to play off public services against the needs of victims. We want to see the issue resolved, but the British Government added the substantial costs to the policy; therefore, they have a duty to meet those costs.

Fiscal Council

2. **Ms Ennis** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the establishment of the fiscal council. (AQO 1612/17-22)

12. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitment on the establishment of an independent fiscal council. (AQO 1622/17-22)

Mr Murphy: With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I wish to group questions 2 and 12 together.

I have put forward proposals to the Executive for establishing a fiscal council and a fiscal commission. Those include terms of reference for and membership of both bodies. Once the Executive have considered those proposals, I hope that we will be able to put the council and the commission in place very quickly so that they can begin their important work.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Minister for his response. I understand that the fiscal council will focus on the Executive's spending plans but not on their revenue plans. Does he agree that the work of the fiscal council will be more meaningful if the Executive assume greater control over local taxation and revenue-raising opportunities as a result of the important work that the fiscal commission will take forward?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for her question. The intention is that the fiscal commission will look at the broad range of economic, policy and revenue-raising levers available to the Executive and make recommendations, as has been done in Scotland and Wales on a number of occasions. It is envisaged that the fiscal commission will engage over the rest of this calendar year and produce a report for the Executive. Given the time frame in this mandate, it is more than likely that it will become a point of action for an incoming Executive. When its work has been done, any decisions taken by the Executive will then become a matter of immediate interest to a fiscal council. I see the work of both bodies being interlinked.

Mr O'Toole: I welcome the fact and am glad that these bodies are being instituted, which I have called for repeatedly. Will the fiscal council or the fiscal commission be set up in statute to give the grounding that the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) in London and the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council have? Also, will they have independent economic forecasting powers to give real bite and insight to their recommendations and underline their independence?

Mr Murphy: For the fiscal council, I have brought initial propositions in order to set it up. The experience in other jurisdictions, as the Member said, is that, once a body was set up, it moved onto a legislative footing. We and the Finance Committee, on which the Member sits, will have an interest in that. We have asked the personnel involved in the fiscal council and the fiscal commission to engage early with stakeholders, including the Finance Committee. Clearly, we want to see that. We want independence to be firmly established. As it begins its work, whatever resource and support is needed will be provided by the Department. Senior officials in the Department will support the council, the commission and the secretariat. Should they require any other resources or support, we are very happy to

look at that. The initial proposition is to get these bodies established and to allow them to develop from there.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): My apologies, I should have called Chris Lyttle first. Mr Lyttle, you have the Floor now.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you, Deputy Speaker. The fiscal council was a commitment in the New Decade, New Approach agreement in January 2020. Minister, when will the fiscal council be operational, how will it be funded and what will its relationship be with the Department of Finance?

Mr Murphy: The fiscal council will be operational as soon as the Executive approve it, which, I hope, will be in a matter of days. The council's relationship with the Department of Finance is that the costs will be met by the Department, and we have already budgeted for that. We will provide a secretariat and support from a senior departmental official. Clearly, the intent is that the commission, like similar commissions, will move onto a more solid footing with legislative underpinning. If they have specific requirements, we will be happy to work with them. We have encouraged them to engage with all stakeholders as soon as they are up and running.

Dr Aiken: We want the fiscal council to be put in a legislative framework as quickly as possible so that it is in statute in order to guarantee its independence. Will the Minister outline how he sees the relationship developing, particularly around the Procurement Board that he chairs, the independent board on infrastructure and other independent oversight boards that are being looked at?

Mr Murphy: I agree with the Member about moving quickly to that position; we have spoken about the issue in recent days. I see a role for the Committee, of course, in that. The fiscal council will have responsibility to look over the Executive's finances to make sure that we are on a sustainable footing. Interaction with the Procurement Board, which provides policy for spending £3 billion, will be an important function. Any agencies or bodies that have an impact or give advice on spending will be of interest to the council. We fully expect the council, when it is up and working, to have wide engagement not only with bodies outside government that have an interest but with this institution, Departments and arm's-length bodies.

3.00 pm

COVID-19: Aviation Industry

3. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Finance whether he will work with Executive colleagues to prepare a comprehensive package of measures to assist businesses that service the aviation industry and that have been badly impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. (AQO 1613/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The responsibility for airports rests with the Infrastructure Minister. Although the responsibility for air connectivity and, indeed, wider economic support, including the COVID restrictions business support scheme to support businesses in the supply chains of affected businesses, rests with the Economy Minister, my Department is in the process of implementing a £10 million package of support for the Belfast airports under emergency powers granted by the First and deputy First Ministers. The Infrastructure Minister is providing £1.2 million of similar Executive support to the City of Derry

Airport. Keeping the airports open is the first step in supporting the businesses that work with them.

This support follows on from a series of Executive-agreed announcements last year specifically to help to sustain the aviation sector during the pandemic, including over £3.1 million in direct business rate support to our airports and other businesses within the airport sites. My Department is also holding £150 million aside for consideration of additional business rate relief in the next financial year, and regional airports will be considered as part of that. That, in turn, is in addition to a broader range of schemes that have been put in place by the Executive and Treasury to provide significant support to businesses more generally.

If respective Ministers believe that there are gaps in the provision of support for the industries that they have responsibility for, I will fully consider any proposals that they develop.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his answer. The huge drop in revenue as a result of fewer flights has caused devastating losses to other people and industries, such as engineers, travel agents, airport car parks and taxi operators. What are the Minister and his Department doing to assist other Ministers to prepare a package of measures to support those businesses specifically?

Mr Murphy: We have been sounding like a broken record for the last number of weeks in encouraging Ministers to bring forward bids for any area of responsibility or any sector that falls under the broad ambit of their Department, in recognition that some of the sectors that she mentioned have, thus far, received little or no support. The support that we provided to airports covered businesses in the airport and gave rate relief and other support to them. As I said, in the first instance, keeping the airports open and enabling them to pick up again when we emerge from this pandemic will be crucial.

In some cases, bids have been brought forward for other sectors, including the taxi industry. I have been told that support may well be sought for travel agents, which I very much welcome, but it is for the Departments that have responsibility for those sectors to bring bids forward.

Premiere People: NICS Contract

4. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Finance for a breakdown of the £425 million contract with Premiere People for the provision of temporary agency workers for the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS), agencies and non-departmental public bodies. (AQO 1614/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Construction and procurement delivery, in conjunction with Civil Service human resources, has completed procurement to provide agency workers for a wide variety of posts in the Civil Service, agencies and non-departmental public bodies. Within that procurement, a total of eight contracts were awarded, the estimated total value of all contracts being £425 million. As the use of the contract is demand-driven, the figures provided are estimates, rather than a guaranteed level of business.

Like many organisations, the Civil Service uses agency workers to carry out work that, for a variety of reasons, cannot be completed by substantive Civil Service staff. Those reasons include covering periods of staff absence, supporting time-limited projects or contractual work or,

where necessary, to cover permanent vacancies pending substantive appointments.

Approximately 50% of agency workers in the Civil Service are assigned to the Department for Communities to discharge benefit processing services on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) under the terms of service-level agreements. The salary costs of all those staff are funded by DWP via the Department for Communities. Of the eight contracts, six were awarded to Premiere Employment Group Limited. The total estimated value of the Premiere contracts is £394 million.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware that there has been a big overspend on previous contracts with agency firms. I appreciate that he mentioned estimates, but I hope that he can outline measures that have been put in place to avoid future overspends. The Comptroller and Auditor General has expressed concern that there is an over-reliance on agency staff and:

“Strong evidence therefore exists that temporary solutions are being used to plug permanent gaps”.

It appears that the Minister’s decision is at odds with that position. How can he commit to addressing the over-reliance on agency workers by announcing another lucrative contract for the further use of agency workers?

Mr Murphy: There will be oversight and monitoring of the contracts to make sure that they are properly operated and that the payments reflect the service provided.

Recruitment, as you know, is not an overnight process. It is ongoing to fill vacant posts permanently. The majority of agency workers are at administrative officer (AO) level, and, as of 15 February, there were 1,749 agency workers at that grade in the Civil Service. A recent AO external competition, which allowed current agency workers within the Civil Service to apply, has resulted in over 560 letters of offer being issued to date. There is an attempt to reduce reliance on agency workers and to increase the numbers of permanent staff. As I said, 50% of the agency workers are employed directly through the DWP contract, which is a service level agreement that it has with the Department for Communities. However, I agree with the Member, and, this year, we have enhanced the terms and conditions of agency workers. The best solution, where it can be found, is to have permanent workers with proper terms, conditions and career prospects.

Ms Dolan: Minister, I welcome the fact that you have required parity of treatment between agency and permanent workers in pay, annual leave and paid time off for medical appointments. In addition to those improvements in conditions, has your Department included any social clauses in the contract?

Mr Murphy: As the Member said, we have changed the terms and conditions to allow parity with those that apply to Civil Service workers. In consultation with the Strategic Investment Board (SIB), the Department has used the Buy Social initiative to include a number of social clauses in the new contracts. The contractor will deliver paid work placements for Buy Social agency workers and business and education initiatives to a school or organisation in the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector to support people’s career development and employability. That support may include vocational talks, curriculum

support, career guidance, workplace visits or mentoring. The contractor is also required to develop and maintain a human rights policy in relation to work carried out on that contract.

Mr Durkan: A few months ago, the Minister assured me, in the Chamber, that the necessary resources were in place to support the recruitment of the announced 900 Northern Ireland Civil Service posts in universal credit over the next few years, given the 126% increase in the number of claims; a number that, sadly and inevitably, will increase even further. It is my understanding that 350 of those posts were advertised, yet, to date, not one of them has been filled. The DFC draft budget indicates no additional money for recruitment next year. Does the Minister agree that that investment is vital, not only to minimise the hardship faced by claimants but to reduce the massive stress on current staff?

Mr Murphy: I agree with the latter points that the Member made, but I disagree that I gave a guarantee. Any Finance Minister who guarantees what money will be in next year’s Budget is someone to whom you should listen very carefully. I could not give any such guarantee last year, because we did not know what was going to be in next year’s Budget. We have been delivered from the Treasury, very late and at short notice, what is, essentially, a flat Budget for next year. For Departments, such as Communities, to have the same cash available as they had last year is, effectively, a cut. I have had a number of meetings with the Minister for Communities, and she has correctly identified the pressures that the Member refers to. She is clearly exercised to ensure that she can employ the requisite number of staff to deal with, unfortunately, a very high level of increase in the number of people presenting to claim universal credit. We will work closely with her, and we hope to have an improved position by the time that we get to the final Budget stage.

Mr Muir: Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, we have all been greatly indebted to our civil servants and officials for their work in challenging circumstances, particularly staff in the Department for the Economy for the assistance that they have given. It was recently reported that there is a 25% vacancy rate in the Department for the Economy. Will the Minister give us an assurance that everything is being done to fill those vacancies, so that we can relieve the pressure on staff in that Department?

Mr Murphy: We will do all that we can to support Departments when they identify pressures. Pressures of £1.7 billion were identified ahead of the Budget. The Budget did not deliver any additional cash, so that is a very significant level of pressure to try to meet from within existing resources, but we will continue to work with all Departments to try to assist them in managing the pressures that they face, including recruitment pressures.

COVID-19: Budget Implications

5. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the medium- to long-term Budget implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. (AQO 1615/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Member will know that we are in the middle of a pandemic. Any future economic assessments will depend on the course and nature of the pandemic, the vaccination response and the potential for virus mutation. At this stage, it is not possible to predict

accurately the medium- to long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. How the pandemic will impact on the Executive's Budget will depend on a number of factors, the primary one being the approach that the British Government take to public spending in the medium to long term. We will know more once work commences on a further spending review, which will set out the medium-term Budget envelope.

Mr Robinson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he foresee there being an impact on the Executive's capital spend as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic that could have a detrimental impact on Departments such as Economy and Health?

Mr Murphy: It very much depends. This year's Budget, including the capital and resource allocations, is very disappointing, because, in effect, we have got the same amount as last year, given that costs rise and salary costs rise. The budgets of most of the larger Departments have, in effect, been cut. As I said, that is very disappointing. It will therefore depend on what policy approach the British Government take. If they revert to the approach that they took to the 2008 crash, for instance, when they decided to cut public spending to introduce austerity policies, we are into a real difficulty, because I do not think that we ever fully recovered from the austerity policies and cuts that were imposed on Budgets over a number of years. Last year's Budget was the first Budget to give all Departments an uplift, but, with this year's Budget, we are back to flat cash. It will therefore depend on what happens going forward. As the Member correctly identifies, if there is a reduction in capital, that will have an ongoing impact on how some of the bigger Departments can spend their money.

Mr McGuigan: The disappointing stand-still Budget provided to the Executive for next year seems to indicate that the British Government intend to use COVID to justify a return to austerity, just as they did with the financial crisis of 2008. Does the Minister agree that austerity is a self-defeating, right-wing ideology that will hamper economic recovery from the health pandemic?

Mr Murphy: Austerity is the wrong approach. If ever we saw a lesson for the short-sightedness of cutting public services, it was the advent of the pandemic, when a range of public services, particularly the health service, which had been underfunded for years, became crucial. The direct knock-on effect of that is that the restrictions that we found ourselves with and that have had an impact on the economic activity are a consequence of trying to protect public services and making sure that the health service is not overwhelmed. There is therefore a linkage between the two. Austerity is a short-sighted policy, because it impacts on longer-term economic planning and spend. I hope that it is not a direction that the British Government revert to. I hope that they will have learnt the lesson that their previous dalliance with austerity policies did not serve the public well generally, and I hope that it is not a course that they follow in future.

Mr Chambers: Can the Minister make a commitment to ensuring that the sacrifices of our health service are recognised and that health transformation remains the priority in future funding?

Mr Murphy: I know that that is a key ask of the Health Department. The Member will know from my previous

answers that we recognise that the health service was left under enormous pressure. When the Executive returned last January, they collectively set themselves the priority of trying to support the health service and the transformation programme. That remains Executive policy. The Member will know that, even though we have limited resources, Health gets the lion's share and tends to get the first call on any additional resources that we receive. That is as needed, because we have seen over the course of the pandemic, if we needed an example, how crucial and vital the health service is to protecting our population. I wish that we had a much better budget to offer it for next year, but we will certainly try to protect the transformation programme as best we can in the time ahead.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): We will be able to get in a quick question and answer.

January Monitoring Round: Departmental Bids

6. **Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on departmental bids for unspent COVID-19 funds made since the start of 2021. (AQO 1616/17-22)

8. **Ms Brogan** asked the Minister of Finance whether he has received any bids in the January monitoring round from the Department for Infrastructure to maintain and improve roads in rural areas. (AQO 1618/17-22)

11. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister of Finance whether there have been any bids from the Minister of Education in the January monitoring round to provide laptops to enhance the provision of online learning. (AQO 1621/17-22)

3.15 pm

Mr Murphy: I would like to group questions 6, 8 and 11, but I doubt that we will get to supplementary questions for questions 8 and 11.

During the January monitoring round, Minister Weir submitted a bid of £3 million for children's portable devices for the Education Authority. The bid was agreed by the Executive on 21 January 2021. The Department for Infrastructure did not submit a bid in the January monitoring round to maintain and improve rural roads. In answer to the Member's question, having provided further additional resources on 2 February and 10 February subsequent to the January monitoring round, I have now asked Executive Ministers to provide final bids for funding in 2020-21. Those are under consideration. I will update the Assembly in due course.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I will take a brief supplementary question.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, I am mindful of the concerns of those waiting in limbo for cancer surgeries across the North, and I am sure that you share my concern. Therefore, has your Department made any further funding available for private healthcare providers to enable more cancer surgeries to take place?

Mr Murphy: This is a conversation that was had a number of weeks ago at the Executive, and we were advised by the Health Department that it could not purchase surgery in this year to be spent out in the next financial year. So, the allocation of some unspent COVID money would not

have worked in that regard. I understand and appreciate the points that the Member makes, although purchasing surgery abroad might be problematic in a pandemic with the restrictions on travel. It was discussed that surgery purchased now could not be spent out in the next financial year, so it was not possible to allocate money to that. No bid came in for that in that regard either.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Members, that ends the period for listed questions. We move on to topical questions.

Unspent Funding

T1. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Finance to inform the House of the quantum of funds at risk of being unspent and therefore lost to the Treasury. (AQT 1021/17-22)

Mr Murphy: We are still receiving information from Departments, so I cannot. Suffice to say that we intend to bring an updated paper to the Executive this Thursday, which I hope will capture all that we have received to date. We have left a little bit of leeway should anyone have something in the pipeline that they want to bring to our attention. My priority is to make sure that all the sectors that have missed out get an opportunity to have a case made for them. We also put in place contingency plans, which we will bring to the Executive, to spend out any remaining money to ensure that its full value goes back into the local economy or into local services.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister. Has he received a bid from the Minister of Justice on behalf of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, bearing in mind the Chief Constable's warning that he may have to lose several hundred officers, which would amount to a net loss of 800 officers compared with the commitment in New Decade, New Approach?

Mr Murphy: I think that there is a difference in what the Member is talking about in making a bid. The bids that I have been speaking about are bids for unspent COVID money, which was the framework for his original question. The first question dealt with unspent money or underspend of money. That, of course, is to be spent in this financial year. If he is moving onto the Budget for next year, of course, as I said in response to previous questions, we did not receive any increase for any Department, so any bids or pressures identified by the Department of Justice or, indeed, by any other Department, have to be set against the reality that we had no additional money for any Department and we had no time to do a re-prioritisation exercise, which may have taken money off one Department to put it into a priority in another. That left us in a very difficult position in trying to match for the year ahead. Of course, pressures in relation to policing personnel come in under that as well.

Fiscal Management

T2. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Finance, given that he will be aware of the code of practice and established rules of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which are embedded in the Treasury's 'Improving Spending Control' guidance, whether he agrees that where it states in that guidance that "devolved administrations, and their Arms Length Bodies will be expected to monitor and manage information about

spending effectively, including improving the skills needed, in order to help them deliver their spending plans" that is a good foundation for fiscal management. (AQT 1022/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Yes, I think that it is, and that is why we included reference to best practice in the OECD in setting up the terms of reference of the fiscal council, the proposition on which I have put to the Executive.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his answer, short though it is. Minister, the DCAL subregional stadia programme for soccer was agreed as a priority by the Executive and allocated £36 million back in 2011. Consultation started in November 2015 and closed in February 2016, and, for some reason, the Minister went out to a second consultation. We are now in February 2021, and no money has been allocated to the football clubs. Will the Minister agree with me that that does not meet the OECD established rules of good practice?

Mr Murphy: The Member has neglected to mention that we had a three-year hiatus, when the Assembly was down, in the middle of all of that. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has been replaced by the Department for Communities, which has responsibility for that programme. The Communities Minister can answer on — perhaps, not what happened under her predecessors — what is intended to happen to that programme in the near future. I agree with the Member that we want to see things work as efficiently as they can. I also share his view that investment in sports is a very good long-term investment for society as a whole.

IT Provision

T3. **Ms Hunter** asked the Minister of Finance whether he will allocate extra resources to schools by extending for another year the Engage programme and the provision of expanded IT support for schools and IT equipment for children who do not have adequate IT at home for schooling. (AQT 1023/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I entirely agree with the Member that the Department of Education has run two very important programmes, and my Department recently increased the money for the Engage programme. As I said in a previous answer, the Department has given £3 million to support additional IT requirements for kids who are homeschooling.

COVID money will be available next year. It will not be on the same level as this year, where we have had over £3.3 billion. We have been promised about £0.5 billion for next year. Some of that is earmarked for Education. I know that the Education Minister is very complimentary about the value of the Engage scheme in particular, and I imagine that he will bid for support on those grounds. I will be very happy to support those bids.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that East Derry is a very rural constituency, I often hear about the difficulties with broadband and digital poverty. What further steps is your Department taking to remedy that?

Mr Murphy: I recognise the problems; I represent South Armagh, which has very similar issues with broadband connectivity, rural poverty and deprivation. My Department has been involved in a pilot scheme on IT support for vulnerable people in areas that struggle with broadband connectivity. The pilot scheme has been substantially

oversubscribed, and we intend to look again at what resources can be applied to that pilot scheme. Of course, I encourage the Department of Education to look at rural areas where there are difficulties. Homeschooling is difficult enough for parents who have full access to broadband, but where it is patchy or non-existent, it is virtually impossible for people.

Winter Fuel Allowance

T4. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister of Finance, in light of what should have been the automatic payment of winter fuel allowance in November and December having been quite problematic in a number of areas, what steps is his Department taking to resolve the issues to avoid a repeat of the problems next year. (AQT 1024/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I seem to be answering topical questions on the business of a lot of other Departments today, and that is clearly a Department for Communities issue. We provide the resources if we can, and if the Executive approve that, the Department has to carry it forward. I am not certain what the hold-ups or difficulties have been. The Minister for Communities might be able to provide you with an answer on that issue.

Mrs Barton: Minister, I was going to follow up by asking whether you had any idea of how many people were affected and how much finance was involved.

Mr Murphy: Unfortunately, I do not have that information with me at the moment. I can undertake to ask the Department for Communities to provide the Member with a written answer.

Gender Identity

T5. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Finance whether he agrees with the transgender community here in its call for a change in the law to allow people to declare their own gender identity rather than enduring a medical process to receive a medical declaration, which is the current process. (AQT 1025/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Yes, I do. I met TransgenderNI last year to talk through the issue and how best to bring about change here. Unfortunately, there is not sufficient time left in this mandate to bring through such legislation. However, I have commissioned research to inform legislation in the next mandate. The research went out to tender in November last year. Unfortunately, no proposals were submitted. Therefore, it has been retendered, with a closing date of 26 February this year. I very much encourage bids for that important work.

Ms Sheerin: Thanks, Minister, for that answer. Will the research that your Department is conducting refer to the 2015 Bill and the current law in the Twenty-six Counties?

Mr Murphy: Yes. I am conscious that there is a shift internationally towards self-declaration models of gender identity. The research will examine the legislation south of the border as well. The fact that other jurisdictions have moved first means that we can learn lessons from them. It is also important that transgender people here are not left behind, so we need to make progress on the matter in the next mandate.

Job Start

T6. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Finance how much money came here by way of Barnett consequential for the youth labour market intervention that is known as Kickstart in Britain, was proposed as Job Start here but is now known as "false start", given that it, too, has been shelved by the Minister for Communities after months of preparation by businesses and promises to young people. (AQT 1026/17-22)

Mr Murphy: It is up to the Executive as a whole to decide what to do with any money that comes as a Barnett consequential. It is not for an individual Department. The money comes unencumbered, as he will know from his time as a Minister. He will also know that the programme has not been shelved but has run into the same difficulties as those that he identified with employing people to deal with universal credit and that the Department is very concerned about that and desires to press ahead with those employment support programmes. That is a discussion that we are having with the Minister for Communities, and it is an issue that we hope to address between now and the final Budget paper.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am sure that he will agree — I think that he already has — about the importance of upskilling our young people for employment and reskilling people of all ages, particularly given the employment abyss into which we are staring. Does he share my concerns about the impact that any failure to proceed with Job Start might have, combined with the impact on many employment and skills programmes, which has been caused by the loss of European structural funds?

Mr Murphy: Yes, I absolutely agree with him. He mentioned in a previous question the figures for universal credit, the need to get people upskilled and reskilled and the need to give some hope of employment to young people. Those programmes are hugely important. That is why I am exercised about trying to find support for the Minister for Communities and why we have pursued lost European funding, which has a real impact on similar skills programmes in the Department for the Economy. Those will all be vital because we are going to face a significant economic downturn. We are already facing a significant increase in unemployment. If we want to provide support for people to try to get them back into full employment, we need to assist them with skills and re-education opportunities.

Hospices: Financial Support

T7. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Finance, in light of the fact that the pandemic has had a devastating impact on the fundraising activities of hospices, and given the crucial role that those organisations play in caring for people with terminal illnesses, with the fact that there remains money to allocate in this financial year, whether he will consider an injection of financial support, further to the more than £15 million that he provided previously, to help hospices through this difficult period. (AQT 1027/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for his question. Yes. As he said, we have, with the agreement of the Department of Health, provided support for the hospices over this year.

We are looking at a further package for hospices from the unspent COVID money to assist them. As he and, I am sure, all Members of the House do, I value the services that hospices provide. I am glad that we were able to offer them some much-needed support. We are working with hospices to secure a further package for them.

3.30 pm

Mr Gildernew: You touched on the issue in a previous answer, Minister, but will you expand on it? As a representative of a rural community, I am aware that this is a time of year financially when spare cash is often directed towards improving roads. I am sure that we all continue to see roads in poor condition, as I have today. Would you be open to a further bid for road maintenance, Minister?

Mr Murphy: I would. I know from my experience of having responsibility for roads that time is moving on. Generally speaking, Roads Service, as it was then, would have been ready to go in January, February and March. We are now approaching the end of February. We had no bids in January monitoring for road maintenance or road improvements generally. However, if such a bid should come in, I would be happy to consider it. I suspect that time is against that now, but I would be happy to consider such a bid if one comes in.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That ends today's topical questions. Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. Thank you, Minister.

I ask Members to take their ease before we move back to continue the Private Members' Business.

Private Members' Business

Recovery and Investment Strategy

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly recognises the deep and lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on people, communities and businesses across Northern Ireland; further recognises the severe impact that restrictions have had on our society and economy and the devastating impact that the conclusion of the furlough scheme will have on jobs; agrees that all Executive Ministers must contribute towards delivering a comprehensive economic recovery strategy; and calls on the Executive to develop a comprehensive recovery and investment strategy that will transform public services, create more jobs and help build back better from the crisis. — [Ms McLaughlin.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "will have on jobs;" and insert:

"agrees that all Executive Ministers must contribute towards delivering a comprehensive economic recovery strategy; and calls on the Executive to develop a comprehensive recovery and investment strategy that will transform public services, create more jobs and help build back better from the crisis." — [Dr Archibald.]

Mr Storey: I am sure that not all the nation is waiting with bated breath after Question Time to hear my contribution. It is more likely that they will want to hear what the Prime Minister has to say about moving out of lockdown.

Forgive me for being the cynic in the House, but, when you read the motion and listen to the proposer and some other contributions, you would nearly think that we are in the first shot of the 2022 Assembly elections. The motion reads and sounds like a party manifesto. Maybe it is time for the SDLP and others to consider seriously whether they are part of the forced mandatory coalition that we have in these arrangements. Instead of trying to have the best of both worlds, maybe it is time for the SDLP to tell its electorate where it stands on working together in an Executive.

The SDLP is not alone in acting in that manner. The Member for East Antrim was right to raise the issue of the Job Start scheme earlier. The Minister responsible for that scheme has not really told us why it has been set aside. Did the Minister want it to be rebranded? Did the Minister want it to be redesigned? Was the Minister nervous about being part of a UK-wide scheme? Those are all legitimate questions that need to be answered, because they all have an impact on the economic recovery and well-being of Northern Ireland.

We also need to ask a question of the Alliance Party, which likes to present itself as benign, being neither unionist nor nationalist and living in this world of, "We really don't know what we are, but we are up for whatever is out there". Be assured that the Alliance Party will raise its hand for whatever is populist. What did its representative say about the Executive? He said that, when it comes to Ministers, they are still in their silos. Maybe the reason that they are in their silos is that the construct of this place has resulted in silos. They are not a Government the same as the Governments in any other part of these islands. This is a

forced mandatory coalition, and it is therefore no wonder that we have the outcomes that we sometimes have.

Of course, Sinn Féin never ceases to amaze me in how it comes up with the schemes and plans that it gets involved in. Philip McGuigan, my North Antrim colleague, wants us to have more fiscal powers. Let us ignore the £13 billion from the Treasury and the £4 billion that has come to Northern Ireland as a result of being part of the United Kingdom despite the protocol. Now, he wants us to have more power and more fiscal responsibility. Will the Members opposite tell us whether they want to bring in water charges? Will the parties come clean and tell us what economic stimuli they will introduce that will tax the people of Northern Ireland?

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. He speaks passionately on the subject. Does he agree that, to date, solutions, recommendations or, indeed, ideas have not been brought forward by the parties opposite, because, in reality, what is provided to us by the block grant and other means is what keeps our place in the United Kingdom secure, as it is today?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his intervention. He makes a valid point about the fiscal package. It is vital, but it is not the only reason that we want to remain part of the United Kingdom.

When we come to the motion, let us pull away all the rhetoric and let the party that proposed it be honest with its electorate. Huge problems have been created as a result of lockdown. Yet, when the Economy Minister brought forward proposals to help local businesses — click and collect is one example — what did the other parties in the Executive decide to do? They said, “You cannot do that. That is a bridge too far”. The ink on the press release was not even dry when they went out saying, “It’s terrible. We need to support local businesses. The traders are crying out for help” — and they are.

We need to have a dose of reality in the House. Let us remember that Google — not that I always take it to be the source of my information, but it is the source of most of our information today — says that 87% of retail and recreation establishments had a loss in footfall in the five weeks prior to January.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Storey: It is time for the party that proposed the motion to come up with real ideas and not try to be part of an Executive when, in reality, it would prefer to be outside the door.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I advise the Member that she has four minutes before we have to pass over to the Minister.

Ms Dolan: The COVID-19 pandemic has given the world a different perspective on the way that we live our lives. It has exposed flaws in the traditional models and approaches to public services, but, likewise, it has progressed thinking and practice around new and different ways of working. An example of that is the regional hubs announced by the Finance Minister last week. It was probably not a direct result of the pandemic, but the pandemic was possibly a catalyst in making us realise that remote working is feasible and productive. Enabling people to work closer to home promotes regional economic

balance, reduces carbon emissions and, perhaps most importantly, promotes the work-life balance and health and well-being of employees. Investment in rural broadband through Project Stratum must mean that those in rural areas are not impeded from working remotely.

A strong, regionally balanced and inclusive economy is essential if we are to tackle the social and economic challenges facing us. Any economic recovery cannot repeat the mistakes of the past and must provide decent and secure work. Sinn Féin is committed to strengthening collective bargaining rules to empower workers, such as the need to remove the 20-employee threshold for statutory trade union recognition. There has been significant spin from the Executive on business survival; however, trying to keep the pre-pandemic economy alive will not bring about an economic recovery. We have already seen an adverse impact on our high street with a number of retail outlets moving exclusively online.

To achieve the kind of economy that we want and need to see, key structural weaknesses in our economy need to be addressed, such as too few higher-paying jobs, the skills gap and our regional imbalance. We know that higher pay and greater stability brings benefits to people’s well-being. Working to increase the number of people in higher-paying jobs and to decrease the number of lower-paying jobs will bring a range of economic and social benefits. While the Economy Minister recognises the need to end low-paid jobs, her strategy looks only at improving productivity in order to do that. She has given no commitments or recognition to the need to end the scourge that is precarious work that results in low pay.

Developing the skills base of our young people and workforce should remain central to our economic success going forward. There are too many sections of our society where low skill levels and low educational achievement are prevalent. I have real concerns that, in a post-COVID-19 world with significant competition for jobs, that section of society could face even greater challenges in securing employment. At the end of December 2020, 94,800 employees in the North were still on the furlough scheme. Therefore, the potential for unemployment to increase significantly over the next few months means that there will need to be a particular focus on adult education and the opportunities to reskill and upskill.

While the economic recovery must be led by the Department for the Economy, there is a responsibility on the Executive as a whole to contribute. Transport and physical infrastructure are the responsibility of the Infrastructure Minister, and, as infrastructure development is central to closing regional imbalances in the economic recovery, it is important that the SDLP recognises that responsibility. I am from Fermanagh, a county without a single mile of dual carriageway, never mind a motorway. I could give you all a lesson on regional imbalances, but I will leave that for another day.

Mr Carroll: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. We are obviously having an important discussion, but we are reaching the point at which we will have had debate for about an hour and a half and not had a contribution from a Member who is from a party that is not in the Executive. I ask that your office considers that for future debates to ensure that the parties that are not in the Executive are not excluded.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Yes, I will reflect that back to the Business Committee. I understand the point that you make, but, within the time constraints of an hour and a half, the Minister must be called half an hour before the conclusion of the debate. I will reflect that back. Thank you.

I call the Minister to respond to the points made during the debate.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): First of all, I thank Members for their contributions.

COVID-19 has not just been about the economy. As a public health crisis, it has created havoc with our children and young people's ways of life, especially through the unprecedented disruption to our education systems. It has split family units in a way that none of us could have imagined. It has put pressure on our heroic health service, and, most tragically of all, it has taken the lives of more than 2,000 people in Northern Ireland. The decisions to impose such restrictions have been aligned with the respective health protection regulations brought forward by the Minister of Health and supported by the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA).

3.45 pm

There is no one in the Chamber more acutely aware than I am of the economic damage done by these restrictions. As Mr Stalford pointed out, although others have called for longer and more extreme lockdowns, I have repeatedly highlighted the devastating effect that restrictions have on employment, our town and city centres, our high streets and the wider economy. No level of grants can compensate for the loss of trade incurred over the past year. The best way in which to support local businesses beyond this restrictions period is to have a safe and sustainable reopening of the economy.

Ms McLaughlin began the debate by outlining the choice that we face between constantly complaining and moaning or finding solutions. She set the bar of expectation high. I will leave it for others to judge for which of the two options she opted. She then spent some considerable time espousing the virtues of the protocol. Her party is a cheerleader for the protocol, so we should perhaps not be surprised by that. Ms McLaughlin cannot, however, hide her head in the sand and ignore the damage being done to businesses and consumers in Northern Ireland as a direct result of the protocol. Indeed, her own party —

Dr Aiken: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Dodds: Give me one second. Indeed, her party leader wrote to me asking for assistance to be given to businesses suffering as a direct result of the protocol. I will give way now.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister very much for giving way. Does the Minister agree that the protocol is the problem, not in any way the solution?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his intervention. Yes, the protocol is indeed the problem. We did not have to be here. There are those in the House who just today told us that we should be thankful for the protocol. I do not know many businesses that are thanking anyone for the bureaucracy, the hindrances to trade and the disruption of the UK's internal market.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for giving way. She mentioned an interesting document that she received from the leader of the SDLP, Colum Eastwood MP. Does she find that in some way to be in conflict with the actions of his party in this House, where it calls for the rigorous implementation of the protocol?

Mrs Dodds: Yes. Sometimes we have to ask the real SDLP to stand up, but in this case I will defend Mr Eastwood, because I think that he is genuinely reflecting the concerns of his constituents and writing to me asking for some help with the problems that the protocol is bringing for businesses.

A Member: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Dodds: I do have to keep going. Mr Stewart raised some of the problems being faced by businesses because of the protocol. I can assure him that my Department has been cataloguing the issues and engaging directly with our Government on them. Mr Buckley called those supporting the protocol the pawns of the EU. If this were a game of chess, those people would already have knocked over their king and accepted defeat.

Northern Ireland is a great place in which to live, work and invest. I want to see us reach our full potential and grow our economy, but, to do so, we must recognise the frictions and damage created by the protocol. Unless we have full and unfettered access to our most important market in GB, we simply cannot maximise our opportunity for economic success.

I listened with some interest to the contribution from the Chair of the Economy Committee. Although I may not be a cheerleader for everything that the Conservative Party has done of late, we absolutely must recognise the unprecedented level of financial support given to Northern Ireland by our national Government, as well as the immense success of the national vaccine roll-out across the United Kingdom, which has meant that over 30% of our citizens in Northern Ireland have had at least one dose of the vaccine. As my colleague Mr Storey noted, being part of the United Kingdom matters.

Since last April, my Department has stepped up to the challenge of providing financial support for businesses, employers and individuals impacted on by COVID. It has provided in the region of half a billion pounds to tens of thousands of businesses and individuals. I will not outline the details of every scheme delivered by my Department, not least because my colleague Mr Buckley started to do that for me, but I will write to all Members to provide an overview. I am sure that Members, including the Chair of the Committee for the Economy, will agree that it compares very favourably to that of other Departments. My officials have sought to meet the challenge head-on, working tirelessly to turn around schemes that would ordinarily have taken weeks. We owe them our thanks for the work that they have done. Along with the UK Government initiatives, such as the self-employment income support scheme and the furlough scheme, collectively, we have provided financial assistance to all sectors and occupations throughout Northern Ireland.

I note and concur with the concerns raised in the motion with regard to the furlough scheme and the potential impact of its ending on 30 April. I have requested that the Chancellor reconsider that date, given that significant job losses would inevitably occur were it not to be extended.

The economy needs more time for sustained recovery before that financial support for employers and individuals is removed. I will continue to work to that end. In parallel, I will work with Executive colleagues to consider how best to support those who most require ongoing financial assistance within the designated budget available, as well as working on the pathway to recovery and resilience beyond the COVID nightmare.

In June 2020, I published our framework document, 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy'. Guided by that document, my Department is preparing to publish its economic recovery action plan. The plan will set out the interventions required to assist people and businesses to adjust to and recover from the changing economic fundamentals caused by COVID-19 and EU exit.

Four themes for recovery have been identified in the action plan: stimulating research and development and innovation; supporting a highly skilled and agile workforce; promoting investment, trade and exports; and building a greener economy. Within each of the four themes, a suite of actions has been developed to promote sustainable economic recovery. Needless to say, Members will understand that, as with the virus itself, the global economic consequences of COVID-19 are still unfolding. Therefore, it will be important that the action plan is agile and can evolve and adapt to meet the needs of the economy as we move through the crisis to recovery and back to economic prosperity.

Looking ahead to that more stable and prosperous future, my Department has also been working on the development of an economic vision for Northern Ireland. That separate and more strategic piece aims to communicate a plan for the next decade, which will guide our longer-term economic ambitions and direction. That economic vision will also identify the core sectors and technologies where Northern Ireland can demonstrate global leadership and the opportunities that exist for us to take advantage of our strengths in those areas. The next decade for the Northern Ireland economy must be one of innovation. I am confident that, through an innovation-driven recovery, we will deliver long-term, positive outcomes for all people.

I also want to see funding that will allow me to deliver a comprehensive skills package. I need support from the Committee for the Economy, the Chamber and, indeed, wider society in helping me to gain the budget that I require to invest in skills. Without that investment in skills, economic growth and recovery potential will be stunted. Whilst my Department has led, and will continue to lead, on all aspects of that work, economic development is a shared responsibility for those across the entirety of government at both devolved and national level. I note that the Member from Fermanagh talked about the importance of infrastructure. Of course, my Department is delivering the largest infrastructure project ever delivered in Northern Ireland, Project Stratum, which is being delivered through DUP confidence-and-supply funding for Northern Ireland.

In relation to the motion, of course, I will work with my fellow Ministers on our immediate recovery plan and implementation and will continue to instigate the conversation and thinking to influence our longer-term aims of a globally competitive, regionally balanced and carbon-neutral economy, as per our joint commitments in the Programme for Government.

I, again, thank Members for their contributions to today's debate. While I do not underestimate the challenge ahead of us as we continue to respond to COVID-19 and its economic and societal impacts, now is not the time for petty point-scoring. Now is the time for real and genuine collaboration that puts our people and their economy first. I am confident that if we work together, not just in the Executive and Assembly but right across all spectrums of society, we will thrive as a nation.

Mr O'Dowd: I will speak in support of the amendment. The proposer of the original motion, Sinead McLaughlin, spoke about solutions and tackling inequality. I would not dream of arguing against either of those things, but if we are to find solutions to the economic devastation that is possibly facing us as a result of a number of elements, it is crucial that the Executive work as one and that all Executive Ministers play their part in producing an economic recovery plan that creates well-paid jobs, leads to an end to inequality and gives our society and our people hope for the future.

The consequences that we face are the result of, almost, the perfect storm. Facing Brexit on its own would have been bad enough for any devolved Assembly with limited fiscal powers, but to face COVID-19 and Brexit and, possibly, an accompanying world recession will be a huge challenge for all the political parties involved in the Executive, and those that are not involved in the Executive as well. We need a united front, and that is why I think the amendment is important.

Members on the opposite Benches have said — to a degree, they are right — that the economy has been ruined as a result of the lockdown. Yes, that is true to a certain degree, but it is COVID-19 that has ruined the economy. Nobody set out to close down the economy. Nobody's ambition was to close down the economy. I heard Members say that it has cost x amount of pounds to keep the economy closed, so I checked the latest figures for deaths across these islands. Across these islands, in the last year, 125,000 people have died as a result of COVID-19. Imagine if we had not closed the economy down. Imagine if we had not, in response to the third wave, which has been devastating, closed the economy down.

Mr Buckley: I appreciate the Member giving way, and I understand the point that he has made. Inevitably, yes, the actions by the Executive have helped save lives. Equally, in that spirit, will the Member acknowledge that some of the restrictions put in place by the Department of Health on wider health services and, indeed, on the economy have had a knock-on impact on mental well-being, jobs, family life etc? Does he recognise that?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I remind the Member that he has five minutes.

Mr O'Dowd: They have, but I remind you again that 125,000 people have died. They cannot be replaced. Jobs can be replaced. Businesses can be replaced. Mental health can be treated. I accept that it is a huge challenge for our society and has to be part of our recovery. However, when you look at the scale of what we faced, it was the right decision to close down. We now have to decide what we have to do to create a new economy. Our economy was in trouble before COVID-19. It was in trouble as a result of the pending Brexit and in trouble even before Brexit was mentioned.

As a society, we have the lowest-paid jobs on these islands. We have the lowest economic output on these islands. We have the lowest standard of living on these islands. That was before Brexit, before COVID-19 and before anybody had heard of the protocol, so we have a long, long way to go to try to create a fair economic recovery for all.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Very, very quickly.

Mr Storey: Will the Member also accept that we can sometimes create a situation of doom and gloom in here?

There was a 5.7% increase in new businesses registered in Northern Ireland in 2020. We also need to give confidence to the community.

4.00 pm

Mr O'Dowd: We do. You need to reflect on that yourself, Mr Storey. Is your campaign against the protocol giving confidence to the business community or is it causing difficulties in that community? At the early stages of the campaign on the protocol, your leader quite rightly pointed out that there are huge economic opportunities for businesses as a result of the protocol. Invest NI now has enquiries coming in from across the globe about how businesses could set up here in order to create jobs and prosperity for our people. When those businesses are looking at scenes such as those that we saw at Larne or Belfast, or they hear —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close, please.

Mr O'Dowd: — our political leaders say that we are facing a crisis, it does not give confidence.

Let us use the opportunities that are in front of us. I accept that there are problems for some businesses with the protocol, but there are also huge opportunities as a result of it.

Mr O'Toole: Mr Deputy Speaker, can I just check? Do I have 10 minutes to make my winding-up speech?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): You have 10 minutes.

Mr O'Toole: I will try not to use all my 10 minutes; I will try to be uncharacteristically concise. First, let me start by thanking everyone who contributed to the debate. It is clearly vital that we discuss the issues. They are critical and fundamental to why we are all here, whether we agree on individual economic issues.

As we debate the motion, we all hope that we are nearing the end of this most acute phase of a pandemic that has changed the life of virtually everyone on the planet. We heard from John O'Dowd, the previous Member to speak, that 125,000 people in these islands have died. I am glad that he drew our attention to that, because it is the most fundamental and critical thing that we should all bear in mind when we are responding to the consequences of the pandemic, including its economic consequences.

In this part of the world, we are sometimes liable to dwell on how unique and distinct we are — and we are — but in the face of a once in a lifetime public health crisis, the Assembly and jurisdiction faces many of the same dilemmas that are being faced around the world. How do we keep as many people as possible healthy? How do we

minimise deaths? How do we avoid our health services collapsing? How do we vaccinate our people quickly? How also do we ensure that we have a fairer and greener economy when we finally emerge from what we all agree is a hateful hibernation? That is what the motion is all about. According to my party, it is about emerging from our hateful hibernation in a fairer and greener way while not only addressing the very many long-standing structural issues that have affected our economy but taking advantage of the unique and distinct place that we find ourselves in as a result of the protocol but not exclusively because of it.

Before I come on to some of the main arguments in my summing-up, I want to touch briefly on some of the arguments that were made by colleagues from across the House throughout the debate. Caoimhe Archibald moved the amendment, which we do not agree with, although, in a sense, I understand its point. We think that it is important that we are specific in holding Ministers to account for the delivery of an economic strategy, and I am glad that the Minister is here to respond to the debate. Among the things that Caoimhe Archibald said was that we need to deliver on a just transition. We absolutely agree with that. That is why we talked about it today.

My constituency colleague Christopher Stalford, who is no longer in the Chamber, talked about the importance of opening up the economy as quickly as possible. As I said when I intervened on him earlier, unfortunately, that opens up the false dichotomy that far too many people in the debate and, frankly, on the opposite side of the House have been prone to when talking about the economic challenges of COVID. That is the idea that somehow there is a public health response and then there is the economy, and if you would just open everything up — that means the shops, the restaurants and the pubs — we could all get back to normal. I am afraid that that is just a fantasy. Sadly, that is not the case, and I am afraid that, even in her response, the Minister slightly indulged the notion that somehow the two are in opposition to one another. There is no economic response without a comprehensive and effective public health response. There is no way of recovering our economy unless, when we lift the restrictions, we do so in a durable and sustainable way.

I am afraid that the lesson that all of us had to learn before Christmas was that, if you precipitously ease restrictions in an unplanned way in order to narrowly prioritise short-term economic interests, there are negative public health consequences. I do not want to dwell on that point, but it is important.

There are noises off from the Member for North Antrim from a sedentary position. He talked about the effects of lockdown, working together in the Executive and how he thought that fiscal powers were a bad idea. What are his bright ideas for overhauling economic policy in this place? I will happily give way to him. I see him moving towards the mic.

Mr Storey: I remind the Member that I was not that person; it was the party opposite that raised the issue of fiscal powers. John O'Dowd has raised it again. Let us hear from the party opposite and from the SDLP about your plans. If they are anything like previous plans, City of Derry Airport will probably be back up for sale again.

Mr O'Toole: I will say two things. I could keep the honourable Member here all day telling him about my plans and my party's plans for greater fiscal powers, which would

be matched to a proper long-term economic strategy. I will tell you what they would not be. They would not be the kind of use of fiscal powers that Sammy Wilson demonstrated 10 years ago when he actively sought a new fiscal power from the Treasury in London, only to use it to subsidise non-existent transatlantic flights, which cost us £2.5 million every year. I want more fiscal powers for this place, but I want to use them better than Sammy Wilson did in giving away 2.5 million quid out of the block grant every year. Every time a Member opposite lectures me about fiscal responsibility, I will lecture you back about the Sammy tax.

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I am happy to give way to Jonny Buckley.

Mr Buckley: Getting back to the motion, I agree with the initial sentiment about recovery and an investment strategy. However, does the amendment not remove the politics from the motion in calling for a collective strategy? If that is the case, why can the Member's party not support it?

Mr O'Toole: Our motion is about an Executive approach, but it is also about holding people accountable. In the nicest possible way, I am glad that the Minister is here today and that we are holding her accountable.

I will address points made by Members before I move to my own points. John Stewart was exactly right when he talked about the many issues that face our economy because of COVID. He talked about Job Start and apprenticeships, and we agree with him on those. He moved on to talk about issues that have arisen as a result of the protocol, which in itself is a consequence of Brexit. The Member who has just intervened dismissed the idea that the east-west disruption on goods moving from Britain to Northern Ireland was a consequence of Brexit. My God, what cognitive dissonance. There would not be a protocol if not for Brexit. There would certainly not be a protocol if we had not had a series of opportunities for a softer all-UK Brexit, one that would have avoided disruption in the Irish Sea.

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I will not give way. I have been generous so far.

That was spurned by the party opposite.

Let me come on to the protocol and a key issue that we are discussing. We face one of the biggest economic crises that any of us have lived through. It may even dwarf the financial crisis of 2008. We do not know when we will fully emerge from this. We hope that we will see sustainable global economic growth, but we do not know what the path of that recovery will be or how well the rest of the globe will do on vaccination efforts. There is huge uncertainty. I recognise that, and it does not make the Minister's job any easier. However, at the beginning of my remarks, I talked about this place being unique and distinctive, which we focus on too much sometimes. However, the truth is that our unique and distinctive nature means that, because of the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves post Brexit, we have a unique selling point. I did not want Brexit. I did not want Brexit so much that I left a career over it. The only reason that I am here is because of Brexit. I found the consequences for Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland too unacceptable, and that is why I got involved in politics. However, the protocol means that we, not only unlike any other part of these islands but unlike any other part of this continent, have unique, untrammelled and unfettered access from Northern Ireland not only into

the British market, which — I agree with the Members opposite who keep saying it — is critical to our economy but into the European single market of 450 million people. That is unique on this continent.

We know that food producers are facing issues. For example, in Britain, the people who catch Scottish langoustines, those who produce Somerset cheddar and Welsh lamb farmers cannot get their produce to supermarket shelves or, when they reopen, restaurants on the continent quickly enough. We have replacements for all those products: for every Scottish langoustine, there is a Portavogie prawn; for Somerset cheddar, there is Coleraine cheddar; for Welsh lamb, there is lamb from the Mourne and the Sperrins. The Members opposite may shake their heads, but it is true. That is why Invest NI, which works for the Minister, is looking at those opportunities.

In the area of life sciences and highly regulated manufacturing, we have some great pharmaceutical companies in Northern Ireland. We have Almac, which is in Mr Buckley's constituency, and Norbrook, which is beside the border in Newry. We have an established life sciences sector. I am sure that the Minister knows this because Invest NI will have told her: that is exactly the kind of sector that can benefit from the protocol and having access to trade in both markets. Why not?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr O'Toole: Why, when we are talking about a just transition, do we not focus on our access to the European green deal and the green industrial revolution that Boris Johnson keeps talking about? Let us maximise the opportunities that we have and our unique place on this continent. Let us stop talking down the Northern Ireland economy. People on this side of the Chamber are often accused of that; now, however, people on the other side of the Chamber are the ones who are talking us down.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: Let us maximise the opportunities. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the deep and lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on people, communities and businesses across Northern Ireland; further recognises the severe impact that restrictions have had on our society and economy and the devastating impact that the conclusion of the furlough scheme will have on jobs; agrees that all Executive Ministers must contribute towards delivering a comprehensive economic recovery strategy; and calls on the Executive to develop a comprehensive recovery and investment strategy that will transform public services, create more jobs and help build back better from the crisis.

Adjourned at 4.12 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 23 February 2021

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Inland Waterways

Mr 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 light of social distancing being observed by the parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear the statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members who are participating remotely must make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. Members who are present in the Chamber must also do that, but they may do so by rising in their place as well as notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly.

I remind Members to be concise in asking their question. I also remind Members that, in accordance with long-established procedure, points of order are not normally taken during a statement or the question period after it.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): With your permission, Mr Speaker, in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) inland waterways meeting that was held in the North/South Ministerial Council joint secretariat headquarters in Armagh and by videoconference on 3 February 2021. The Executive were represented by me, as Minister for Infrastructure, and Gary Middleton, the Executive Office's junior Minister. The Irish Government were represented by Darragh O'Brien TD, Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and Minister Malcolm Noonan TD, Minister of State for Heritage and Electoral Reform. This statement has been agreed with junior Minister Middleton, and I am making it on behalf of us both.

I chaired the meeting, which had only one item on the agenda. We appointed Mr John McDonagh as chief executive officer of Waterways Ireland for a term of four years, with effect from 1 March 2021. We agreed to hold our next NSMC inland waterways meeting in May 2021.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her statement. Minister, I know that this was not raised, but can you give us an update on the greenway, especially phase 2 from Middletown to Monaghan? Furthermore, what are the implications for the role of the chief executive of Waterways Ireland, now that the transition period has ended?

Ms Mallon: I am happy to give the Member an update on the Ulster canal greenway. Waterways Ireland, in collaboration with Monaghan County Council, Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, and East Border Region Ltd took the lead in submitting an application for INTERREG funding for the project. The application was successful, and just under €5 million was allocated towards the cost of the greenway. The Ulster canal greenway strategy, devised by Waterways Ireland in collaboration with local authority partners along the Ulster canal corridor, identified 12 potential greenway routes, totalling almost 200 kilometres in length. This project comprises two of them: Smithborough to Monaghan and, as the Member highlighted, Monaghan to Middletown. The annual socio-economic value of improved health outcomes from local population access to 200 kilometres of greenway for walking and cycling is estimated at €14.4 million. That is an agenda that we are committed to advancing.

I can advise that, as a result of preparations carried out by Waterways Ireland, there were no issues on day one of having left the European Union, and it has been business as usual. Of course, as we proceed, there may be some divergence in directives, but Waterways Ireland continues to work hard to keep the situation closely monitored.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her statement. As Mr Boylan indicated, Brexit will have a far-reaching impact on communities. Minister, have you had an opportunity to make any assessment of the impact of Brexit on inland waterways?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. She raises an important issue, given how Brexit has impacted on our lives right across this island. As I indicated in my response to Mr Boylan, there were no day-one issues in Waterways Ireland, and the organisation continued on a business-as-usual basis. Going forward, EU directives will no longer apply, which could lead to an incremental divergence in legislation and in compliance with procurement directives that will not apply. That may see rules change. In the short term, however, rules are likely to remain the same. Any additional procurement regime will bring added administration, but Waterways Ireland has considered the implication of the need to migrate to a new tender advertising portal platform. Sadly, EU funding will no longer be available in the North, with the exception of PEACE PLUS, which the EU has committed to continuing to allocate.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her statement and for participating in her ministerial duty to cooperate with North/South bodies. Will she outline what the implications

will be if some other Ministers follow through on their public commitment not to participate in North/South cooperation, which is their duty?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. We hear a lot of discussion about the Good Friday Agreement, and there is a lot of focus on it. That is absolutely correct, but, as the Member will know, there are three strands to the agreement. It is the responsibility and obligation of all of us to ensure that we live up to our responsibilities and duties under all the strands. Be it COVID, Brexit or the climate emergency, we face all those challenges. They know no borders, so the solutions should not be restricted to borders. I urge all MLAs and all Ministers to continue to work in partnership so that we can collectively and collaboratively address the challenges that face all our citizens across these islands.

Ms Anderson: Minister, this appointment will have the new chief executive oversee a range of capital projects, including the Ulster canal restoration. PEACE PLUS is coming through — hopefully in full — but, as we have been dragged out of the EU, it will potentially be the last funding of its sort that we get in the North. Is the chief executive considering any other projects to try to access Peace IV funding? You and other Ministers know that a lot of projects will be trying to get money from that fund.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. I would like to put on record my support for the Member regarding the disgusting abuse that she has had to put up with. It is an issue that is affecting an increasing number of women right across political and public life, and we should not countenance it or give it solace in any way.

In respect of funding, as the Member points out, there will be challenges. The new chief executive is very much focused on the 10-year strategy for Waterways Ireland. Part of that work will ensure scoping and maximising the funding opportunities available. There is funding provided by my Department and the corresponding Department in the South. We will continue to ensure that we maximise all efforts, but, given the significant input and impact that European Union funding has had in the North, that will be a challenge. However, we will continue in all our roles to seek to maximise funding opportunities wherever they occur.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her statement. I noticed that the website for Waterways Ireland only possesses annual reports and corporate plans from a few years ago. Will the appointment announced this morning come with more up-to-date published plans and enhanced transparency?

Furthermore, we all recognise the importance of our waterways, and many in my constituency want to ensure that they have continued access to Newry canal, and we have talked about a lifting bridge designed for the southern relief road and Narrow Water. Will the Minister comment on that?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. Waterways Ireland is accountable to the Department for Infrastructure, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and the North/South Ministerial Council. Ministers discharge their oversight responsibilities in respect of Waterways Ireland through the NSMC. That includes consideration and agreement of the budget and corporate and business plans and progress towards agreed business targets and project milestones.

I assure the Member that quarterly monitoring meetings are also held, chaired by senior civil servants from both Departments. Moreover, the chief executive officer and appropriate directors attend to account for business performance and corporate governance.

Waterways Ireland's audit committee also meets quarterly. The committee has an independent chair and two external members and has unrestricted access to the internal and external auditors. The committee has access to the work of internal audit, and it approves the internal audit work plan and receives reports on various aspects of internal control.

The Member will be aware of my commitment on the Newry southern relief road. We continue to engage with stakeholders, and there is a very clear view emerging locally that the preference is for a lifting bridge, so we are factoring that into the options.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for her statement and for her continued great work and strong leadership. I am assured of your commitment to North/South relationships and also your ambitions for our island. Can more be done by the North/South Ministerial Council and other bodies, such as the British-Irish Council, to help us to rebuild after COVID and Brexit and to tackle our shared ambitions of addressing the climate crisis?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his very pertinent question. I share his ambitions for more collaborative working across this island and, indeed, across all these islands. It is a fact that, in Ireland, in Northern Ireland and in Britain the challenges of COVID, the disruption of Brexit and the crisis of the climate emergency are shared areas that Governments and communities need to address. It is my view that the bodies of the Good Friday Agreement that were to increase cooperation and collaboration are as important as ever. It is vital that all of us in this place seek a way to work through our challenges for our citizens, working in partnership, given that, as I said in my response to Mr Muir, challenges know no borders and neither should their solutions. I believe that it is time for all of us to get back to that shared agenda, particularly as we seek to build our shared home place.

I am also very mindful of the importance of democratic accountability and scrutiny, and when Ministers make statements to the House, it is important that all Members have the opportunity to hold them to account.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Minister for her statement. Waterways Ireland has stated that there has been an increase of over 3,000 boat registrations since 2016. That probably shows how important it is to keep our waterways accessible and in good condition. People have been waiting for the delivery of Narrow Water bridge for far too long.

That project needs to be delivered as soon as possible. I concur with the comments made by my colleague Liz Kimmins. Do Waterways Ireland and the chief executive officer have an input into the options being considered for Narrow Water bridge? How could that impact on local waterways? Will the Minister give us a general update on the Narrow Water bridge project?

10.45 am

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. Given that the meeting had a one-item agenda, that issue was not discussed. The Member will be aware of my

commitment to the Narrow Water bridge project and the fact that it is a New Decade, New Approach commitment. I share her frustrations. I am firmly of the view that had we had a functioning Assembly and Executive, the project would be much further advanced.

Of course, as we continue to engage with all stakeholders, we will take the views of everyone who has a clear interest in the project. We want to be sure that we get the right outcome and that we can deliver it at the earliest opportunity.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for her statement. I understand that the chief executive officer of Waterways Ireland has been in the role on an interim basis since 2019. What does this appointment mean for the timeline of the delivery of the Ulster canal, which is a highly anticipated project with huge benefits to the local area and the local economy from tourism?

Ms Mallon: As the Member points out, Mr John McDonagh was in the role on an interim basis and, through an open recruitment competition, he was selected to fill the post of chief executive on a four-year contract. Mr McDonagh was involved in the development of the corporate plan and has been leading on the 10-year strategy that will encompass many of the issues that are in focus. I have been in correspondence with Mr McDonagh since he took up the post, and I am firmly convinced of his commitment to ensure that we maximise our natural assets to the benefit of all our citizens.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister explain why it was a one-item agenda? Was that the only business that she sought to have on the agenda, or was that the product of what is presented as a form of political protest? Is the Minister so politically tone-deaf that she does not realise that if east-west relationships are to be trashed as they have been, North/South relationships, given the equilibrium that is supposed to exist, cannot continue as they are?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He utilises language and terminologies that I would choose not to. However, if I may use his own word to answer, Brexit has “trashed” things. That is why none of us wanted it. *[Interruption.]* Mr Allister may always look for conspiracies and misgivings. I can assure him that he can look for conspiracies all that he wants but he will find none.

There was a single-item agenda because the post had been filled on an interim basis since April 2019, and it was imperative that the NSMC appointed, without delay, the candidate who had been selected through an open recruitment competition. The previous sectoral meeting was held in November 2020, so it would have been inappropriate to hold a full sectoral meeting so soon. It would also have been inappropriate to wait and make the appointment at the next sectoral meeting, scheduled for May 2021. The only other option was to have a sectoral meeting with a single-item agenda to appoint the successful candidate to the post of chief executive officer.

Mr Allister: There was no other business to do.

Mr Speaker: Order. That concludes questions on the statement. Members may take their ease for a moment or two.

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

Executive Committee Business

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next item of business is the motions to approve three statutory rules, all of which relate to the health protection regulations. There will be a single debate on all three motions. I will ask the Clerk to read the first motion, and I will then call the Minister to move it. The Minister will commence the debate on all the motions listed on the Order Paper. 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 shall call the Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on that motion. That process will be repeated for the remaining statutory rule. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I beg to move

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

The following motions stood in the Order Paper:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved. — [Mr Swann (The Minister of Health).]

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved. — [Mr Swann (The Minister of Health).]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I call on the Minister to open the debate on the motions.

Mr Swann: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Today, I am bringing forward for debate the latest three amendments made to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations 2021. They are SR 2021/18, SR 2021/27 and SR 2021/29, which are amendment Nos 2, 3 and 4 of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations 2021. With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will set the context and briefly summarise the statutory rule.

Members will recall that the restrictions that were introduced on 26 December were originally planned to be in place until 6 February. However, evidence was emerging during January that the huge pressures on the healthcare system that had been experienced would not have eased sufficiently by 6 February to allow any relaxation of restriction measures. The Executive formally reviewed the restriction regulations on 21 January having examined the evidence on the ongoing transmission of the virus, the high number of hospitalised COVID patients and ICU capacity. The Executive agreed that the existing post-Christmas restrictions should remain in place until midnight on 5 March, with a review to take place on or before 18 February.

We saw the COVID-19 infections rise significantly after Christmas, with the R value for new positive tests between 1.5 and 1.9 on Monday 5 January. That sharp rise was a consequence of the relaxation in restrictions prior to Christmas. Families were mixing with their grandparents and grandchildren or relatives who had come home for the Christmas period and who they may not have met since the start of the pandemic. It was very important for families to meet up, but, unfortunately, we know that the virus transmits easily in enclosed spaces where people are in close proximity, as is the case in our homes. By the review of 31 January, there was extreme pressure on the health and social care system, and the third wave was at its peak. We saw a rapid rise in hospital inpatient numbers and ICU bed occupancy, with 800 COVID-positive inpatients across the system, and, by Monday 18 January, we had seen a 48% increase in 14 days.

There were 65 confirmed COVID-positive inpatients in ICU, an increase of 67% in the previous 14 days. Members should note that that was in comparison with previous highs of 51 COVID patients in ICU in April 2020 and 52 in November 2020 during the first and second waves of the pandemic. That left us with little choice but to request that the restrictions should continue, and the Executive supported that view.

The three amendment regulations that we are debating today gave effect to a number of essential changes agreed by the Executive that I will now outline to Members. SR 18, amendment No. 2 of 2021, was made on 2 February. The regulation came into operation on 3 February and remains in place today. That regulation amends the date on which my Department must review the need for restrictions and requirements imposed by regulation 3 of the principal regulations to be on or before 18 February. Regulation 3 also amends the expiry date of the principal regulations to midnight on 5 March 2021.

SR 27, amendment No. 3 of 2021, was made on 5 February. It came into operation on 6 February and remains in place today. That regulation permits a customer to collect a Motability vehicle from a car dealership following an online application. The amendment was made to resolve an anomaly with the Motability scheme that had been brought to the attention of my Department. Members will be aware that the Motability scheme enables individuals to exchange part or all of their disability benefits as a payment towards the lease of a new vehicle. The scheme requires Motability customers to collect their vehicle, which means that car retailers are unable to deliver new vehicles to their Motability scheme customers. Furthermore, current restrictions on movement and on non-essential retail prohibited customers from collecting vehicles from car dealerships at that time. In effect, the restriction on movement prevented new Motability scheme users from obtaining a Motability car as they could not visit a car dealership to collect their vehicle, and that was an unnecessary disadvantage to people with disabilities. I assure Members that it was never the policy intent of the restrictions to disadvantage any Motability scheme customers who require a vehicle for essential travel. The Chief Medical Officer (CMO) advised that it was a low-risk activity and appropriate mitigations were in place. This is why I amended the regulations.

Finally, Members, I come to the third of the three statutory rules: SR 29, amendment No. 4 of 2021. The regulation

was made on 9 February, came into operation on 10 February and remains in place today. The regulation permits an exemption to allow the provision of driving instruction by or on behalf of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) or the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Board for the purpose of testing the competence of employees to drive a vehicle as part of their job.

Members may ask why we needed the change. They will recognise, as I do, that we expect our emergency services to be there when we need them. They have continued to provide their services to the public throughout the pandemic. I put on record my thanks to them for their dedication. However, to keep those services running, they require a sustainable supply of suitably skilled drivers to allow them to continue to deliver our vital public services. Members will be aware that, under the existing regulations, driving lessons were considered to be close-contact services and were not permitted other than for motorcycles. There was no exemption for emergency services to continue to provide this training.

The anomaly was drawn to my Department's attention by the Fire and Rescue Service, and my Department recognised that that was also likely to be the case with driving instruction provided by the PSNI and the Ambulance Service. Following receipt and consideration of the proposed mitigations for the Fire and Rescue Service, the PSNI and the Ambulance Service, the amendment was made to permit driver training to continue for emergency services.

I believe that the restrictions were a measured and proportionate response to the information that was available at the time. The trajectory of the epidemic since their introduction has demonstrated that they are having an effect, but we are not yet where we need to be. I believe that the restrictions continue to be necessary today. Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I hope that that provides you with a summary of the context in which the regulations were made and an outline of their content.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Swann: I recommend the regulations to the Assembly. I will give way.

Mr Allister: Much obliged. The Minister told us at the beginning of his remarks what the R rate was in January, but can he update the House on what the R rate is today?

The Minister probably has not noticed because of the position of the seating in the House, but will he join me in welcoming back to the House one of his predecessors, Mr Poots? It is good to see him back to health.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I welcome Edwin back to the House. His presence is very welcome, and I am glad to have him on my back *[Laughter.]*

11.00 am

The R number should not be the sole number that we focus on or concentrate on. Today, we reckon that the R number could be between 0.7 and 0.9. Whether R is taken to be the rate of increase or the rate of decrease, it is always proportionate to where we started from. We started with 1,000 inpatients in January, after the wave coming up to Christmas, and it is that rate of decrease that we see now. If you are driving a car at 100 mph and put the brakes

on, it takes longer to slow down and come to a stop than if you had you been driving at 30 mph. That is what R is about: R is also the measure of decrease in the rate of cases.

The Member will be fully aware that R is not the only measure that we rely on. When the Department publishes its weekly paper on the R rate, that paper also contains the number of people who are in hospital, the number of people in ICU and the number of people aged over 60 who are testing positive in any one period. R is the cumulative number that people have concentrated on, and it has been a useful measure of the rate of decrease, but Members also have to take into consideration where we started from and where we want to get to.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister. I note that there are fewer people on my list than are in the Chamber. I will read who is on my list — I am afraid that I have to — and, if you are not on the list and wish to ask a question, please rise in your place. First on my list is Mr Gildernew, the Chair of the Committee. Then, I have Mrs Cameron; Ms Hunter; Ms Bradshaw, via StarLeaf; Mr Paul Givan; Ms Carál Ní Chuilín; Mr Edwin Poots; Mr Justin McNulty, Mr Jonathan Buckley and Mr Jim Allister. If your name is not on that list, please rise in your place, and I will add your name to it.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): First, I place on record the thanks of the Health Committee to all those health and social care workers out there who continue to work in such difficult and trying circumstances, and whose dedication to helping those most in need and the vulnerable over the past year has been inspirational.

I, too, welcome Mr Poots back to health and back to the Chamber. He reminds us that many people out there are struggling with many other conditions and that the health service is trying to cope with those along with COVID and all the problems that predated it. Minister, we also appreciate everything that you are doing to get us through this very difficult time.

The regulations in front of us today are about some very practical purposes, such as allowing driving instruction on behalf of the emergency services and allowing customers to collect Motability vehicles. However, even now, some of these regulations are out of date following Executive announcements last week on the extension of the lockdown period and changes to click-and-collect rules, and we know that we will get additional amendment rules to scrutinise in the coming weeks.

This serves to highlight the difficulty in scrutinising and debating regulations that we know will be out of date. The Committee has raised issues about the speed at which regulations are being made, and it has requested further information on the analysis of the expected impact that regulations will have to ensure that there is sound evidence for extending or easing restrictions.

The Committee was briefed by the Department on these rules at its meeting on 18 February. I note that members were disappointed by the lack of detail provided by the Department, especially on the discussions on changes to the click-and-collect rules. The Committee raised issues with the Department on click-and-collect rules in relation to regulations considered by the Assembly on 8 February.

The Committee did not receive any further clarity on that issue from the Department at its meeting last week.

At the briefing, the Committee also raised the issue of what guiding principles are in place to consider the lifting of restrictions over the coming weeks and months. The Department advised that the sequence for lifting the restrictions is being refreshed. It would be good to hear from the Minister on the progress of this review. We seek assurances that lessons have been learned over the past year. The Committee understands the need for the restrictions to be in place but is acutely aware of their effect on the mental health of our population. The Committee has received correspondence from individuals and organisations on outdoor exercise, especially for children and young people.

The Committee has written to the Department outlining those concerns. I note that there has been some indication in other jurisdictions of allowing limited outdoor gatherings and the return of organised adult and children's sport. I would be grateful if the Minister could outline the Executive's thinking on the issue and say whether any assessment has been made of the impact of easing restrictions in that area.

If I may, I will now make a few remarks in my role as Sinn Féin spokesperson on health. First, I acknowledge the tremendous work being done around the vaccine programme and the fact that further cohorts of people are being brought into it. That is a credit to everyone involved: the Minister, Patricia Donnelly and all the front-line staff who are working on that. However, I have concerns about the fact that the virus continues to mutate. We have seen that on these islands and across the world. The vaccine in itself will not be the entire solution. While it presents much cause for hope, we are not out of the woods as far as the virus goes.

The Minister will note that I am wearing a public health safety message badge about social distancing: I support that campaign. People should maintain the basic measures. We know that they are effective in suppressing the virus. I appeal to people not to gather in large numbers at local beauty spots, beaches and places such as that, which we saw happening over the weekend. We have all seen better weather, and the fact is that the numbers are travelling in the right direction in the suppression of the virus. That is very welcome, and we all look forward to brighter and sunnier days, such as those that we experienced over the past weekend. However, today's inclement weather reminds us that we will continue to face significant headwinds and that the virus will continue to present problems in the time ahead. In light of that, we continue to be concerned about the lack of progress on find, test, trace —.

Mr Buckley: I appreciate the Chair's giving way. Does he agree that one of the Committee's most pertinent concerns when studying the regulations was the scant detail brought to it in relation to a road map or plan for lifting restrictions, particularly for issues surrounding click and collect? I do not think that the Committee received any information on that from the representative from the Department of Health.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Member for his intervention. That has been an issue of concern. We do not see the

granular detail to support our consideration and scrutiny of restrictions being brought in or, indeed, eased.

It is important — imperative — that we build on and sustain the progress that we have made over the past weeks by moving out of the restrictions very carefully and gradually and on the basis of evidence and data that we have here in the North and on the island. We should work together to ensure that we maximise and extend the benefits that have been so hard fought for and won. In light of that, the Committee would like to see further information around find, test, trace, isolate and support, which will still be necessary to meet the existing virus and potential future mutations or variants of it. We are keen to see that system continuing to be built so that we do not put undue pressure on the health service as a result of surges such as those that we have seen.

I regret that there has been a lack of engagement on maximum suppression and how we can do significantly better with a really aggressive and robust find, test and trace system. The Committee wrote to the Minister about that at the end of July but has not received a response. That is an area of concern for us.

The restrictions are feeding into the pressure that is on the health service. We know that we have pushed our health service and hospitals beyond what, in some instances, they have been able to bear. We owe it to them to do everything that we can individually and collectively as a Department and an Assembly to ensure that that does not happen. We do not want to squander the steady progress that we have seen over recent weeks. We must be guided carefully forward. We cannot waste the gains by moving too quickly at this time.

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member's giving way. He makes a very important point about being guided by the science, and we have often said that. Has the Chair of the Committee any view to give on what Professor Whitty, the Chief Medical Officer in England, has said about how science is guiding the announcements by the Prime Minister, and how that compares with the Chief Medical Officer's role here in Northern Ireland?

Mr Gildernew: I watched the statement last night. We should be doing what suits our circumstances here, based on the trajectory of the virus and the capacity of our health service. We should be looking to build on the gains made from the restrictions and, importantly, to provide certainty and confidence. In this period, it has been notable that people have understood what it is that is being asked of them. They have understood the purpose of the restrictions and broadly understood the plans for moving forward. We should be guided by our own Chief Medical Officer, how he sees the issue and how that feeds into the overall system and circumstances that apply in the North.

Mrs Cameron: I join others in welcoming my colleague Edwin Poots back to the Chamber. It is good to see him.

A Member: Hear, hear.

Mrs Cameron: He is an incredibly robust man, so I am really not that surprised to see him back so quickly, but he is very welcome. It is good to have him back.

I broadly support the amendment (No. 2) regulations, the amendment (No. 3) regulations and the amendment (No. 4) regulations. I regard them as being sensible, certainly in the case of the discretion around Motability vehicles

in the amendment (No. 3) regulations. That is a very welcome step that will allow those with a disability to avail themselves of that excellent scheme, unimpeded by the pandemic. They can complete much of the process online or by telephone and are permitted to collect the vehicle directly from the dealer.

Going further with such flexibilities will have to be addressed. Although the Executive have resumed some click-and-collect services — in many ways, that is a progression from this legislation — we need to see a broadening of the definition of “essential” and some common-sense application tailored to certain industries. I give as an example the fact that you can collect a child's pair of shoes but cannot have the child's feet measured in the shop. Those of us who are parents know the importance of having properly fitted shoes for their children. My children are long grown up, thankfully, but I can distinctly remember the times when I took them to get their shoes. I was often surprised by how many jumps in size they had taken since the previous time. It was often more than one. Such an important service should be allowed for toddlers and children on health grounds. I encourage the Minister to consider that actively.

Mr Buckley: I appreciate the Member's giving way. She will recognise that the conversation at the Committee went much further than just the services for toddlers that she outlines. Hopefully the Minister can look at this, but we also considered services pertaining to the provision of school uniforms and young children's clothing. Sadly, those retailers have also had to close, thereby denying people the ability to access those services.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for his contribution and wholly agree with the sentiment.

It is very clear that some services that were deemed non-essential back in December are now essential. An example is retailers that sell nursery equipment, cots, prams etc. Such items are not always easy to fit to a person when purchased online. We owe it to our local retailers to try to support them in what has been a financially crippling time. There are businesses that could benefit from operating under an appointments system to ensure that maximised safety is achieved.

SR 2021/29 — the amendment (No. 4) regulations — allows a person to provide driving instruction when that service is provided by, or on behalf of, the PSNI, the NI Ambulance Service Trust or the NI Fire and Rescue Service Board for the purpose of testing competence to drive a vehicle. That is another sensible move and a rightful prioritisation of those who provide us with emergency services. We need those services all of the time, not least during a pandemic. We must ensure that all such vital services can be operational. Many in those front-line services are the real heroes of this pandemic, and all that we can do to support them should be done.

11.15 am

We look forward to the regulations evolving further to encourage the reopening of our economy and the staged return to normal life. Many people struggle not just with the severity but with the duration of the restrictions. We are all aware that untold damage is being done. Whilst lives have been saved and all the restrictions have been in place for the right reasons and with every good intention

of protecting health, let us be ever mindful that the mental health of the young and old has suffered badly in doing what was unthinkable a year ago. Trying to raise children and school them at home, working from home, caring for relatives and trying to keep ourselves physically and mentally healthy in the pandemic have been challenging, to say the least. That brings up the importance of getting all our children back into school as soon as possible. The importance of that cannot be overestimated.

It has been a worrying and stressful time for those with friends and family resident in homes and so vulnerable to COVID-19. It has also been stressful for those working in the homes.

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for giving way. On her point about children returning to school and what they have lost over the lockdowns, does she agree that a successful return to school will need the cooperation of the Health Minister and, indeed, the Communities Minister, probably taking a lead from the Education Minister, and that a programme of activities involving academic work, health education, mental health education and community work extending, hopefully, into the summer period, will be necessary?

Mrs Cameron: I thank my colleague for that intervention and agree wholeheartedly. There is much work to be done to catch up and to alleviate the damage that has been done in the past year.

We should not underestimate the stress and mental health pressure that so many have been under, not least those who work in the care home sector, on COVID wards and in ICU. I do not know how we can ever repay all those who have selflessly given to others over the past year; that is what they have done.

It should also be remembered that this has had a huge impact on the mental health of those who have been shielding. Let us not beat about the bush: whilst shielding is not a requirement in law, many people have shielded for the entirety of the past year. There is still a huge fear for them, so I welcome the roll-out of the vaccine. Hopefully, the majority of those who are clinically extremely vulnerable or vulnerable have been or, in the very future, will be vaccinated, and that is very welcome. It will have a lasting impact on people who have suffered as a result of being housebound in the past year and on their friends and family.

We cannot forget that there is much fear, even amongst us politicians, about what is coming down the line. There is a fear that there will be a huge wave of undiagnosed conditions, including cancers. We cannot forget or dismiss that.

We need to ensure that, as restrictions are eased in the coming weeks and months, there is timely presentation of the regulations to the House to allow debate and scrutiny at the right time. Having the answers to what, when and why is vital for public confidence as we embark on a road map to recovery. I would appreciate it if the Minister could update the House on his discussions with the Speaker and the Executive Office to ensure that that happens.

The Chair of the Health Committee appealed for people not to gather at beauty spots etc. That has been happening for an awfully long time. That highlights the importance of reintroducing sport and outside activities that are much

safer in order to spread out the people who are gathering in various areas. That is because those are the only areas that they can go to. They do not have any gyms or sport to go to. People need to do something, and they need to be able to get out, look after their head and get some exercise. It is really important that we make a move towards allowing that type of activity again.

Again, I mention that the vaccine roll-out is incredible, and I thank the entire team under the Health Department, including Patricia Donnelly, who is doing a great job in organising that roll-out. I know that there will be hiccups and awkward moments in that roll-out, but that is unavoidable. I very much welcome the fact that the carer roll-out has been much greater this week and that it will apply to all adult carers. We know the great service that carers provide in our society and community, but we know that they are not on a list. We know that they do not have evidence to prove what they do. I understand that the Minister will expect people to act in good faith and to put themselves forward for that vaccine because they are the main carer of someone who is vulnerable or elderly or has an underlying health condition. I welcome that roll-out, and, with that, I end my comments.

Ms Hunter: I join other Members in welcoming Edwin back to the Chamber.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the regulations. Of course, since these amendments to the health protection regulations were tabled for debate in the Assembly this morning, as of last Thursday we have known that the restrictions are to be extended. My party colleagues and I continue to support the Executive in their decisions on the continuation of lockdown until 1 April. They are not easy decisions, especially as time goes on. However, we know that they are not taken lightly and are made on the best medical and scientific advice and in the interests of public health. I have expressed similar sentiments before, but I sincerely hope that the next six weeks will be the last ones with such strict restrictions in place and that the rates and spread of infection will allow a greater loosening of restrictions in early April.

As I have also done in my previous remarks in these debates, I continue to urge the public to continue to adhere to the guidance. We acknowledge the great toll that the last year has taken on everyone's mental health and well-being. I hope that the difficult sacrifices that everyone has made since the beginning of the pandemic are recognised. I especially note, as has been mentioned by colleagues, the impact of the lack of team sports and regular gym use on the overall well-being of people of all ages. I sincerely hope that, in the months ahead, we prioritise living with COVID-19 in a safe way and that things can safely and slowly return to normal, as opposed to continued lockdowns.

With regard to amendment No. 2, the 18 February date has passed, and we have seen the Executive's announcement last Thursday. However, I welcome the requirement on the Department of Health to review the need for restrictions. I note and welcome the fact that the current restrictions will again be reviewed on 18 March and that the Executive's pathway to recovery blueprint will shortly be published, on 1 March.

On amendment No. 4, I also welcome the provision in the regulations for driving instruction for services provided by or on behalf of the police, the Northern Ireland Ambulance

Service Health and Social Care Trust or the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Board. That seems to be a wise and sensible measure, particularly at a time when we have extra need for and pressure on our emergency services; indeed, we recognise the great value of their work.

I will focus my remarks mainly on amendment No. 3, as well as the resumption of the click-and-collect services from 8 March for some retailers, which was announced last week. We are all too aware of the huge impact that the pandemic has had on local businesses across all of our constituencies. Whether it be shops, pubs, restaurants, gyms or hairdressers, no small business has gone unaffected. I am sure that it has come as some relief and welcome news to some businesses, such as those that sell clothing, footwear and electrical goods, that they will now be able to offer click-and-collect services. Being able to offer some kind of custom and service will, we hope, not just be of financial benefit but will give some hope to small business owners for the prospects of the sustainability of their business for the remainder of the restrictions. We have seen how larger companies such as Asda and Tesco have benefited while small businesses continue to struggle. I am happy that that has been somewhat rectified.

Whilst I am glad to see the Executive move on click and collect, we all recognise that many small business owners will not be in a position to do that or have the means to establish or offer click-and-collect services. Likewise, small independent shops will not be in the business of clothing and electrical goods. What has angered many small business owners in my constituency is that the burden of closure and restriction seems to fall heavily on their shoulders as opposed to the bigger chain stores that I mentioned, which may, as a result of stocking such a wide variety of goods, have exceptions much more easily than, for example, a small local business like a boutique or gift shop. As we begin to emerge from the pandemic, business rates need to be looked at. The whole retail landscape has changed drastically in recent years, and perhaps the pandemic will, sadly, cause that to continue even more. It is not fair that small businesses in our towns and villages incur such large fees in rates. I really hope that that is something that we can take from this experience and change.

I echo Mr Gildernew's point, and I would like to see a review of the impact that the regulations and restrictions have had. That would be really beneficial for the Committee to see.

As always, I and my party, the SDLP, offer our support to the Minister and the Executive on the regulations as we continue to work together to beat the virus. I hope that, when we next discuss regulations, we will see that they have improved the situation and that we have today recognised the need to come together politically at this time.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We are now about to embark on a new course for me. It will be a bit like the Eurovision Song Contest: this is the verdict of the South Belfast jury coming in on-screen. Can we bring Ms Paula Bradshaw in via StarLeaf? There you are. Hello, Paula.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I welcome back Mr Poots as well. It is great to see him in the Chamber.

I place on record my continued appreciation of the Health and Social Care workforce for its sterling efforts in battling this devastating virus. I also pass on my condolences to the families that have been bereaved since the last time I was in the Chamber. I sincerely hope that they will have an opportunity in the near future to come together with their loved ones to mark their passing in a more accustomed tradition.

We again find ourselves discussing regulations long after they apply; indeed, amendment No. 2 has been superseded by another amendment to move the date of the review further on. In this instance, we are looking at a reversion to something that is fundamentally closer to the regulations when they initially came into force last March. The main headline in the regulations is that a "Stay at home" order now clearly applies and may be enforced.

I continue to commend the vast majority of people who are staying at home except for essential journeys. This is an exceptionally grim time of year in which we are asking them to do that. I hope sincerely that the advances made by the vaccine programme, which are now evident in reducing infection and not just hospitalisations, are keeping people's spirits up, but we appreciate that this is a difficult task. I put on record my thanks to the Health Minister, Patricia Donnelly and the rest of the team for the vaccine programme. Apart from a few hiccups, it is going really well, and they are all to be commended for their hard work.

Despite that, we still need to ask ourselves why we are getting hundreds of cases every day, given that the numbers now being reported represent a period after the regulations came fully into force. That was the question that I asked the Health Minister when we last debated the regulations, and the wider public, who continue to make this significant sacrifice, have a right to that information.

We also need to ask ourselves how we assess the reality that, if fewer shops are open but people are still determined to go out and about, we inevitably end up with crowded shops and, as it seemed at the weekend, crowded parks and public tourist destinations. I am not the only one who, while out grocery shopping, has found myself in what I term "COVID central". Ultimately, the question becomes whether we are serious about the enforceability of the "Stay at home" order or have the potential to limit those crowds. We missed the opportunity at Valentine's weekend to introduce the click-and-collect provision. That is possibly why all the supermarkets were crowded, as I said at the Health Committee.

I welcome the announcement last week that click-and-collect arrangements are to be extended for some retailers. As the Deputy Chair of the Health Committee rightly pointed out, that is vital for retailers in areas such as children's footwear. However, I believe that we have left some retailers scratching their heads wondering why they have not been included.

11.30 am

If I may, I want to address quickly yesterday's headlines about apparent crowds on the north coast and public parks on Sunday, as the Committee Chairperson and the MLA for East Derry raised earlier. There is a distinct lack of clarity about what we are asking of people. The regulations suggest that we may meet more than one person and,

imminently, another household for exercise. There will now be further confusion because the Prime Minister has talked about allowing that for recreation but not exercise. People do not just walk past people whom they know when they are in a park. I have been out walking on nearby walkways. One does not just walk past people. People are interacting even when they do not intend to meet others. Should we revert to the basic message of avoiding the three Cs: crowded spaces, contact and crowds? That may give greater clarity on what is required. However, we also need to remember the slogan that I used in the Health Committee: "You are not caught in traffic; you are traffic".

Contrary to amendment No 2, the next review is now on 18 March. We also now have an ad hoc debate about whether we should follow England more closely, particularly with regard to school reopenings. I urge the Executive to follow the evidence that is provided to them and to do it strategically rather than on an ad hoc basis. Other facilities beyond schools impact on the key balance between mental and physical well-being on the one hand and eliminating serious illness arising from the virus on the other. Essentially, leisure centres, gyms, golf courses and libraries are good for supporting people's mental well-being. In the next review round, serious consideration could be given to reopening some of them, given the social-distancing and hygiene control measures that they had put in place before the current lockdown.

I want to raise another issue, which the Health Minister does not handle but which the Executive need to consider. It emerges from amendment No 4, which allows driving training for the emergency services, aligning the exemption here with that for motorcycles. We need to be fully prepared for the recovery with regard to driving tests. We heard from the Infrastructure Minister in response to a question that tens of thousands of young people — that age group in particular — are waiting for their tests. Is there any opportunity for rapid testing to be introduced at test centres before the people who are taking their tests enter the car? That would protect test centre staff and give greater comfort to the wider public. The sooner that that backlog is cleared, the better. Among those will be people who are graduating from health and social care degree courses, for example, who will be vital members of the workforce as we emerge from the pandemic.

It is imperative that I raise an issue that is local to South Belfast, which is the ongoing and seemingly increasing issue of parties in the Holylands area. The message seems to have been completely lost. There seems to be great disturbance to local residents. Low-level criminal damage has occurred. There are all-night parties. It is very worrying that, as we come up to St Patrick's Day and, as others mentioned, with the arrival of nice weather, we could see greater community transmission in that area, which will lead out into the regions if a "steel wall" is not put in place and the Executive, through the task force, do not get a grip on the problems that are occurring nightly and throughout the night in the Holylands.

I want to raise with the Health Minister the need to update the shielding advice on nidirect. At the minute, it is based on the previous restrictions. Can that be updated urgently for many of our constituents, particularly those who work or send clinically vulnerable children to school?

Lastly, given the relative absence of information that my colleagues on the Health Committee highlighted, I want

to mention, with great reluctance, that there are ongoing difficulties with our scrutinising the regulations and amendments. We ask departmental officials to be more forthcoming with that information, which, potentially, is being provided to the Executive. We have a lot of work ahead of us, but there are brighter days ahead.

Mr Poots: I thank everyone who has wished me well. Indeed, I have had direct contact from Sinn Féin, the SDLP, my party and Ulster Unionist members over the past number of weeks, and I thank them all for that. Many others have wished me well on social media, and I thank them for that, too. Most of all, I thank almighty God for being with me throughout this, and I thank the superb doctors, nurses and all the staff — the cleaners, the people who provide the food and so on — in the hospital service who support people who need that care. They have been fantastic throughout. Their skill, knowledge and expertise and the care, compassion and attention that they give are second to none, and we should be totally proud of our health service. I have great pride in it. My direct family has given almost 50 years' service to the health service, and we care passionately that it is maintained and supported. I might talk about some of the issues with it later, but I wish our Health Minister well in everything that he does, because we need our Health Minister to be successful in the health service. I wish him every success.

In April last year, we were in a very difficult place. COVID was clearly on the rise, and we did not have many ways forward other than a straightforward lockdown, so that is what was done. Thankfully, we are now in a different place. The vaccine is a game changer. Late last year, I asked the Chief Medical Officer whether the vaccine would be a game changer, and he indicated that it would be. Eighty per cent of hospitalisations are of people over the age of 50 or people who have clinical vulnerabilities. Ninety-nine per cent of the deaths that occur in hospitals are of people over the age of 50 or people who are clinically vulnerable. The vaccination process will cover those people by the end of April. Consequently, the issues and pressures that hospitals have had to bear over the last number of months in particular will not be the same problems as we move forward.

There has been a lot of criticism of our national Government and Prime Minister over a series of issues. I commend them most highly on their acquisition of vaccines. They have been ahead of the game throughout Europe, as demonstrated by the number of people who have been vaccinated. I believe that somewhere in the region of 500,000 people have now been vaccinated in Northern Ireland. We could not have vaccinated them if we did not have the vaccine available. I give a huge commendation to our Government for ploughing ahead, taking the risks and buying the vaccines and a huge commendation to our healthcare staff for getting them out so efficiently. We should, rightly, be proud of that.

Vaccination puts us in a different place from where we were in spring, autumn and winter last year, so we need to look at that context, and our response must be commensurate. We must look at low-hanging fruit, and we need to open up, as quickly as possible, areas that cause little risk. We talked about car showrooms, for example, and about allowing the collection of Motability vehicles. I believe that car showrooms should be opened fully, because they are large spaces with very low footfall that

provide an important and valuable service to people right across the country. We should look at garden centres, because this is the time of the year when people want to get out to their garden to do a bit of planting, and that is good for their mental health. Again, a lot of garden centres are outdoors, there is a low footfall, and it is entirely reasonable for them to reopen.

In car washes, there is no exchange between people other than handing over the fiver. There is no actual exchange. People sit in their car, and somebody outside washes it. That sort of thing should be done quickly.

Hairdressers have a 0.05% impact on the R number, yet we have people with small businesses who are unable to engage in them. As we look around, we can see that we could all do with the hairdressers being open again.

Those things are low-hanging fruit. They will have little impact on the spread of COVID, and, particularly in view of the fact that the vaccination programme is being rolled out, areas like that can be looked at.

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Poots: Yes, in a moment. Pam Cameron rightly mentioned shoes. I remember going with my mother to get shoes, and it is most important that children have good shoes that fit appropriately throughout their lifetime. Opening shoe shops is critical, and I encourage that that be looked at.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way, and, indeed, I welcome him back to the House. It is great to see him in good health and good spirit. He has quite rightly outlined the great hope that there is in our community about vaccinations and the promising signs of their impact on levels of hospitalisations and, indeed, cases. Therefore, does he agree that commentary on extended lockdowns and restrictions into, for example, 2022, as reported by some media outlets, runs counter to that positive sense of hope that vaccinations can bring? The Member will well know from his experience, even with his latest health issues, that people out there are fighting severe issues with mental health and anxiety given their conditions, whether they are health-related, job-related or otherwise.

Mr Poots: I entirely agree with the Member. Not only does it run counter; it is counterproductive. People talk about health versus the economy. We should just nail that. Health and the economy are not enemies. COVID is the enemy of the economy, education and health. It is not health versus the economy. The economy supports health. It provides a taxable income that keeps the health service going. The economy is the friend of health, and we should look at how we can ensure that our economy comes back to be strong and vibrant and provides that tax intake. Let us be very frank: the last that I heard, the UK had borrowed some £390 billion to cover COVID. No country can keep on borrowing and borrowing. We need to raise money from taxation. Taxation comes from a successful economy, and, therefore, our economy needs to grow. We need to have sensible relaxation — not rampant relaxation — on the economy.

Children's education has been disrupted inordinately. If we are to talk about science, let us look at the science. The Public Health Agency has said that the spread from COVID in schools is small-scale. Consequently, we need to look at how we can get our schools opened quickly. I

just cannot work out the logic of bringing P1 to P3 pupils back to school for two weeks and then taking them out again to allow senior-school children in years 11 to 14 in different schools to go back to school. I know that that is not what the Education Minister wanted or desired, but other Executive Ministers would not allow him to open up schools more meaningfully and productively. I urge that that is looked at again, because the public health message is not that children are the big spreaders of COVID. Again, the concern was that children would bring COVID home from school and spread it to their vulnerable grandparents and so forth. With the roll-out of the vaccination programme taking place so successfully, we really need to look at how we can support our children and young people.

Children have suffered inordinately. Their education has been impacted last year and this year. If you talk to schoolteachers, they will tell you that. For example, I talked to a schoolteacher who was marking the ordinary exams in December, and she told me that the standard had dropped so much from the previous year.

Children are getting their schooling online, and we see circumstances in which they are coming on to a Zoom call but not using their camera, are joining it in their pyjamas or are not interacting. We cannot provide, and no one should try to pretend that we can, the standard of education through homeschooling that we can from children being in the classroom. It is therefore incumbent on us to support our young people and to get our children back into education.

11.45 am

Socialisation in school is critically important. Children benefit from participating in sport, which, when played outdoors, limits the spread of anything. Our children need to be got back to school. Children who engage in arts, drama and music have been disproportionately affected. Our young people cannot socialise. They cannot do their driving test. Their university life is impacted on. Young people, who are not impacted on directly as a consequence of COVID-19, because it has a very limited impact on young people's health, are being disproportionately impacted on by the COVID-19 regulations.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Poots: Yes, I will.

Mr Gildernew: Does the Member recognise the issue of long COVID, particularly its impact on children? We cannot take lightly the fact that it has limited impact. Long COVID is still having a significant impact, and that needs to be considered.

Mr Poots: Of course it does, but it also has to be weighed up against everything else. Life is about balances. The impact on children's mental health and well-being is much greater than the impact of long COVID. Over 100 children have been added to the at-risk register over the past year. The impact on children who are at risk through being at home all of the time with parents who have a disposition towards violence or who have alcohol or drug dependencies is much greater. The impact on their education is devastating. When we weigh up the issue that you rightly raised against all the other issues, I am sorry, but it is infinitesimal in comparison. Yes, there will be an impact, and it will be hurtful. I know people who have

been impacted by long COVID, and it is something that is a problem, and will be going forward, but it is not a reason not to be bringing children back to school and allowing them to move on with the opportunities that exist there.

Finally, I want to talk about COVID versus health, because the health service is perhaps the organisation that has suffered most as a consequence of COVID. Our health service staff have been under extraordinary pressure as a result, and key services provided by specialists have been undermined throughout.

One of the most successful stories in our health service is that of renal transplantation. We are way ahead of most places in the world on live transplantation. Transplants, however, have not been allowed to take place since late autumn of last year. That has a major consequence, because more people are going on to dialysis, and those who require kidney transplants are not getting them. As a consequence, their health is deteriorating day by day. I watched an uncle of mine, 40 years ago, deteriorate as he waited on a kidney transplant. Forty years later — he is now in his 80s — he is still alive as a result of that transplant. Dialysis does “a” job, but it does not do “the” job. I understand the difficulties involved in live transplantation, but it needs to start again as soon as possible.

As we start to move forward, with vaccinations increasing and infection numbers coming down, we need to normalise our health service as quickly as possible.

People refer to the 2,000 people on the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) register who have had COVID linked to their death, but, in 2019, 850 people died from mental health issues. Being locked away in your home and having the ability to buy large quantities of alcohol, which we know contributes to poor mental health outcomes, is causing greater mental health issues. There has been a significant rise in mental health issues, and there will be a further significant rise as a consequence of COVID-19.

Looking at other services such as cardiac services, our senior cardiologists have indicated that, as a consequence of what we are doing, their service has been diminished and their outcomes are worse. So, more people will be dying of heart attacks and having life-changing events as a consequence of their heart condition because the service is not there.

Then, of course, there is cancer. In the late summer, the Chief Medical Officer indicated that there were 900 fewer diagnosed cases of cancer compared with the previous year. By the autumn, that figure was 1,200, and by the latter part of last year it was up to 1,500. Those are people whose cancers were not detected. The consequences are frightening, because an early diagnosis of cancer is critical. Looking back at my time as Health Minister, one of the things that we did was to extend the bowel screening programme, which has led to many more people having their bowel cancer identified early. That is critically important because bowel cancer can very quickly spread to the liver and other organs, but if you get it in time it can be very successfully dealt with.

However, many people have not had their cancer identified. One of the issues is GPs not seeing people directly. GP services are critically important, and many have been doing a tremendous service, including as part

of the vaccination roll-out, but the importance of a general practitioner being able to put their hands on someone physically — examining their neck, examining their abdomen and identifying early conditions — is that it will bring cancer diagnoses forward more quickly.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. He raises an important point. Does he agree that, unfortunately, we are seeing a great disparity across Northern Ireland? Some GPs have gone above and beyond the call of duty during the COVID-19 pandemic and seen patients face to face as the need has arisen. Unfortunately, that has not been mirrored across the system and there has been a disparity, which could be down to a number of reasons.

We had a presentation at the Health Committee from trusts’ representatives. They talked about their great worry being late presentations at A&E because people had failed to have their condition picked up by their GP due to fear or not knowing that the practice was open to them. They also said that some people, when they arrived at A&E, said that they had been afraid to go there because of the message to stay at home.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before you respond to that, Mr Poots, I am mindful that previous discussions on health protection restrictions have veered beyond the content of those restrictions. Ministers have been as guilty of doing that as Back-Bench Members. If people want to have a wider discussion, I will not stand in their way. However, I ask Members to try as much as possible to relate their remarks directly to the content of the restrictions.

Mr Buckley: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. My reading of the regulations, particularly the first one, is that it is a review of a date about reviewing restrictions. Therefore, my reading of that regulation is that it applies to all restrictions in all different sectors, as has been outlined by Members from across the House.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As I said, all Members have, at times, veered beyond the content of the restrictions, and I am not seeking in any way to inhibit the debate or restrict Members’ contributions. However, if Members could, as far as possible, direct their remarks to the content of the restrictions, it would be helpful. I would not want you to think, Mr Buckley, that I was correcting you, because I was not, so do not take the hump. *[Laughter.]* I was simply taking the opportunity to put that on the record; it was not personal and it was not directed at you. Absolutely not.

Mr Poots: I thank the Principal Deputy Speaker for his latitude and for his gentle rebuke, which has been noted.

People being afraid to have that interaction relates to the “Stay at home” message. Dr McBride rightly pointed out that a lot more people have come through EDs and had their cancer identified in that way because the GP services are not as available as they were. The consequence of that is later diagnosis, which leads to poorer outcomes. Key services and surgeries have had to be cancelled.

I will finish by saying that, as the vaccination programme is rolled out and the pressures on hospitals ease in other areas, it is incumbent on us to get back to providing those key services. I want health leaders to be able to look cancer sufferers in the eye and say that they are doing

everything possible to ensure that those patients have the opportunity to live.

Last year, approximately 200 people died with COVID-related conditions. In the previous year, 4,500 people died of cancer. I expect that the figure for last year will be similar and that the figure for next year will be greater as a consequence of our response to COVID-19. In everything that we do, we need to reflect on what we have done thus far and on what has been achieved. The vaccination programme gives us the opportunity to make a clear and substantial difference in terms of the impact on the economy, education and health and to properly take on the battle against COVID without merely restricting people all of the time.

Ms Bradshaw talked about people being outdoors. Avoiding crowds is a good thing, but getting outdoors is also a good thing. Taking a walk outdoors is good for people's mental health and well-being and their physical fitness. I do not believe that restrictions that discourage people from going outdoors are well measured. When we look at the restrictions again on 18 March, we need to encourage people to do that as well as to get out to their gardens. If they cannot get the plants, there is no great encouragement to go out to the garden. We need not get into the problems of importing products for keen gardeners, but if the garden centres are not open and we cannot import products, how are people supposed to get out to their gardens? It is good for their mental well-being and their physical health, and it does not have an impact on COVID.

Let us move forward in a very realistic way. Let us ensure that we can take the appropriate steps to continue the battle against COVID but also to open up the economy again, reopen schools and unleash our healthcare specialists to ensure that they can tackle heart disease, mental ill-health, cancer, kidney transplantation and all of the other superb services that are carried out by our health service but which have been hamstrung as a consequence of COVID for over a year now.

Ms Ní Chuilín: You are getting soft, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. *[Laughter.]* I am just saying that I would have put him out, easy; he was veering close to challenging the Chair.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: He would not have got away with it in the City Hall.

Ms Ní Chuilín: He would not have got away with it in the City Hall, Christopher; that is all I am saying.

I am absolutely delighted to see Edwin back, and I am surprised that he is back so soon. I am pleased for his family. He was described as robust, but I would describe him as stubborn and thran.

Mr Poots: Yes, I am.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, absolutely; all day long. Nonetheless, I am glad to see him back.

Minister, here we are again, debating amendments to health regulations that have already been made. In essence, we have all accepted the process, but it is fair to say that, in doing that and in supporting the Minister and the Department as best we can, there is an uneasiness in the Health Committee. The fact that we are not getting a level of detail prevents us from scrutinising the regulations

as much as possible, and some of the detail that we are getting is very scant. The amendments are being made in order to address anomalies, which is fair enough when you look at issues concerning dealerships, emergency vehicles and things like that. Perhaps, in his response, the Minister will confirm that, when we are talking about ambulances, that includes rapid response vehicles, motorbikes, movement of blood and movement of people from one hospital site to another, because those services have increased.

12.00 noon

I also put on record my thanks to and deep appreciation of all health and social care workers. Just last night, I learned that a neighbour, who is only 42 and has four sons, passed as a result of COVID. It is really sad, and they did everything they should have. There is still transmission out there, and we need to get to the bottom of what is happening. I know that women like her and parents and families right across the board are doing everything they possibly can to keep not only themselves but their families safe. The last place that they want to be is the hospital.

I said at the previous debate on the regulations that our health and social care staff continue to amaze and inspire a lot of us. This is now described as the third wave. It has been a long year. They have provided not just physical, clinical and medical support but counselling and emotional support. I particularly want to mention those staff who have to make the awful calls to families when it is quite obvious that their loved ones are about to pass or are seriously ill. They have to do that day after day, and it takes a special sort of person to do it. They are special, and we need to look after them.

We are looking at anomalies in what is being presented to us now, and we accept that the regulations will be reviewed. There have been examples from colleagues across the Chamber. My colleague Gerry Kelly and I continue to meet groups virtually on Zoom. There is an understanding of the health regulations that talk about being able to go out and exercise with one other person, but community services, particularly those that are involved in counselling and emotional support, and youth providers are really worried about people. It has also been raised by a faith-based group that going beyond the one person that their people are allowed to meet is not always practical.

Edwin talked about drugs and alcohol. To give an example, I received a phone call from a family member with two children. The regulations meant that if I had gone into the house, there would have been four of us. In an emergency, I had to stand in someone's garden, which is a rare thing in the New Lodge, let me say *[Laughter]* — I am not joking, because I am going to come back to that — with a window open, trying to talk to a distressed parent with two really distressed children in the house. They did not need me to talk; they needed me to go in and comfort them. To be quite honest, I was halfway into the living room, because I could not see them in distress.

Youth providers are seeing a growing number of children and young people out in the street involved in reckless behaviour. Not all of it is antisocial, but they are gathering. Those providers want to go out and make sure that the kids do not fall foul of COVID regulations. They are working with the local police who know them and trust

that they are not breaking regulations, but what if the local police do not know them? They may see a youth provider, who might not be identified as a youth provider, talking to kids about potentially harmful behaviour.

Not everyone has the ability to go out for a walk with someone from another household, so someone could just check in on them. More often than not, if people are under the influence of drugs, alcohol or both, they are not fit to walk. When we are looking at anomalies, we are asking a lot from people who have, to be fair, adhered to the regulations and guidance, but we also need to give them a bit of trust and leeway. They are afraid to do that in case they break the regulations, because it could affect their employment. Everything that we are doing goes against their natural instinct and training.

I urge the Minister, as I have before, to look at that when he considers anomalies or unintended consequences. We are not talking about large numbers. We are talking about people who are first responders, as we have recognised in the House. They have stepped in and stepped up time after time to help people and prevent them ending up in A&E. That is what we are trying to do. Our youth providers in North Belfast — I dare say that it is the same across the board — are stepping in and stepping up to prevent kids from going in front of the criminal justice system, so we need to support them in that.

With regard to the trajectory of the virus and the R rate, to be honest with you, like a lot of people, I look at it on the news and read about it in texts, but then I look to see how many people are infected, how many people have died and how many people are ventilated. I look at the latter rather than the former. Too many people are still being infected, and, despite all the regulations, we still have not got to the bottom of where infections occur, and that is extremely worrying. We need to go back and look at our find, test, trace, isolate and support arrangements.

We have all heard the pleas from health and social care staff, families, parents and colleagues who work in the community sector, and we are not asking that policy is made on the hoof. We understand that that cannot happen, but I think that further interrogation is needed of anomalies to ensure that people do not end up in our A&Es. We also need to make sure that people do not end up in our criminal justice system. We need to talk to youth providers and to the community and voluntary sector about developing protocols around safe social distancing. They have already spoken to Gerry and me about what that may look like, so it is not as if they are sitting waiting for someone to drop it on their laps. They are the experts, so let us trust them to bring those issues forward.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. She is on record in Committee as saying that youth providers are facing difficulties. Equally, she has put on record in the Health Committee and in other places the need for youth sport if it could be provided in a safe, socially distanced way, which, to be fair, many sports are, and the knock-on effect of denying young people the opportunity to engage in sport. That would perhaps deal with the unintended consequence of young people engaging in activities such as drugs and alcohol misuse. We want those people to avoid getting involved in the criminal justice system.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I completely agree. The Member is right up to a point. The guidelines are preventing those activities

happening. I was about to come to the unintended consequences. I was at a local park on Sunday, and it was really busy, but it was safe. Even though there were narrow paths, people were stopping for others. It was almost as if they were using their own traffic management system, and it was great to see. People are on record as saying that a return to training for outdoor sport in particular and physical activity is critical. A lot of people who are involved in sport do not care about the weather. They are not fair-weather sportspeople. As far as my kids are concerned, the muckier and rainier it is, the better.

I heard from the Sports Forum yesterday and saw it on the news, and I have also spoken to a lot of people and sporting groups in the community, as have many colleagues, and they are trying to bring forward protocols. I appreciate that it is not for these regulations in particular, but, when we are looking at anomalies and unintended consequences, we need to feed that in.

I will finish by saying that the vaccination programme is a big chink of hope for people. As someone who is well into her 50s, I am looking forward to getting my vaccine in Belfast, like a lot of people. As someone who has family members who work in the health and social care system and in education, I want to ensure that the school community and all staff are vaccinated as well. There are lots of children of key workers in schools, and the classrooms are quite big —.

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for giving way. She raised the issue of schools. If we are to get schools back, it is important that teachers receive their vaccination. There was a bit of an issue about special schools. For me, everybody in special schools should be getting vaccinated. Our learning disabled community should be a key target for vaccination because they are a key vulnerable group, and I encourage that to happen.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I completely agree. I have raised that before. A school is an entire community, particularly when it comes to special education schools. Every person employed or volunteering in a special school has a really positive but integral role to play. It is important that all people serving food, transporting children back and forth, teaching or looking after the close and intimate care of children and young people should be vaccinated. This is equally true for other schools. We do not want education policy to be made on the hoof. However, to make it easier for people to buy into and understand, we need it to run alongside a vaccination programme.

I also want to raise the issue of a COVID recovery plan. We all talk about issues, and rightly so, because that is what this place is for. Edwin, in fairness, spoke in-depth about the issues relating to health and undiagnosed conditions, and he talked passionately and compassionately about mental health. The mental health issue has always been bad, even before COVID. Now, it is really worrying. I have seen people distressed whom I have never seen distressed before. These are robust, strong people who are leaders in their family and community. I hear examples of, "So-and-so is not doing too well". It is quite shocking. They are the ones who keep their families together.

The other issue is that we need to look at the way in which people access mental health services at the point of need throughout the period of COVID and these regulations.

We need something like a Nightingale hospital for mental health services, somewhere for people to go to so that they can be treated, cared for and monitored, regardless of whether they have taken drugs or alcohol. We just have not got round to that, despite the goodwill of the professionals and their wish to do so. Mental health has got worse because of COVID. Families are deciding not to bring relatives to A&E. Then, it comes to the point of calling for an ambulance to bring them straight there. That is the level of issue that we are dealing with.

I am delighted that we are seeing some progress. I am delighted that we are looking at anomalies and trying to fix them as fast as we can. However, I am still not convinced that we are getting as much information as we could. I am not saying that it is being deliberately withheld; I just think that the information given is too scant. I appeal to the Minister to provide a little more detail. I do not sit on the Health Committee and accuse him of withholding the information; I am just saying that he needs to give us more to scrutinise.

There is an issue of unintended consequences and anomalies. I would like to see, and be a part of, that recovery plan. I am happy to share any good practice or experience that I have. The people whom Gerry and I work with in North Belfast, like the people of many constituencies, have definitely earned their keep, and then some. Before COVID, they were working in the worst of conditions. Earlier, I joked about gardens, but I remind Members that few people in North Belfast have gardens. People have nowhere to go. I live in a terraced house, with a yard that I can just about get a wheelie bin in and out of. I have plant pots on my roof, and that keeps me sane sometimes. Overcrowding has a shocking impact on mental health. Often, three generations are under one roof: grandparents, parents and children all living in a tiny house.

When we look at ways in which safe social distancing can happen in sport and exercise, let us consider the frail and elderly who cannot go for a walk. Let us look at the possibility of allowing them to have more than just a carer to accompany them, to give them someone to talk to. Often, that is the difference between keeping people alive and allowing them to live.

Mr Givan: I, too, join in welcoming Edwin Poots back to the Chamber. I am delighted to see him back so quickly.

I can recall our first conversation just after he had had the operation to remove the appendix, and he had just been told about the other issue that needed to be dealt with. From that first conversation, throughout the entire process, he has remained unshakeable and has been encouraging and advising colleagues on government policies, what we should be doing and so on. I wanted to say, "Just take a break", but such was his desire to assist others and to serve people. I am delighted to see him back. I trust that that will have been his first and last speech from the Back Benches in this mandate. His contribution showed exactly why he needs to be back round the Executive table as soon as possible to bring his experience to assist the Executive in the decisions that lie ahead.

12.15 pm

I, too, commend the NHS. I have not spoken in the past year at great length on the regs as they have come through

from the Department of Health, but, given the general application of the first motion, and as we approach a year in, I feel that today is an appropriate time to make a more significant contribution in that respect. I, too, have seen how those who work in the health service have stepped up and carried out phenomenal work. My wife works in the health service. I know the stresses and difficulties that there have been in managing staff, redeploying people, people doing jobs that they have never had to do before, were never trained to do and have had to be trained to do, and all the dynamics, stresses and strains that the health service has been put under. That has applied not only to those on the front line but to the secretarial staff who provide administrative support. They have been under a huge amount of pressure, as have others across the public sector, but the NHS in particular.

COVID has been devastating to the families who have lost loved ones. People who would not have lost their life had it not been for the COVID virus have lost their life. Families have not been able to have funerals and wakes in the way in which we are so accustomed. They have not been able to grieve with other people or to be with their loved one as they passed away in a hospital. That will be with people for the rest of their life, and some will never get over it. That has been one of the consequences of the way in which the COVID virus has been an enemy to all of us.

When the restrictions were first brought in, like my colleague Mr Poots, I could see a justification for them, as we did not know what was coming. Tsunami-like scenes were coming from Europe, and fear struck everybody. There was a need to take significant legislative powers in order to restrict people's activities. I can understand why that happened, almost a year ago. However, we have had the experience, and we have been able to learn from that. We have also seen the consequences that Members have spoken about. Carál Ní Chuilín spoke at length about the impact on families and their mental health. All of us are dealing with the same issues in our constituencies. We can now weigh up all the consequences of the restrictions and look at them and their proportionality vis-à-vis COVID-19. We know the predictions that were made of the number of people who would die. We had predictions of 15,000 people. A morgue was provided for, not too far away from here, through the MOD, because there was a concern that we would not be able to cope appropriately with the management of people who had lost their life. That was being prepared for. I am thankful that we did not reach that level, but things have been devastating for the 2,000 people who lost their life and for their families. Now, we can look at the proportionality of what we are doing.

Today's motion extends, in a general application, what applied from February to 5 March. The Executive met last week to carry out their review and have announced a further continuation of the restrictions, with very marginal changes. I will get to that in due course. The basis on which the restrictions have been extended until 5 March is predicated on transmission rates and on not wanting to overwhelm the NHS, and it is vital that we do not overwhelm it with hospitalisations. A fundamental change has now occurred, however, and it is the roll-out of the vaccination programme, which has given us the ability to suppress transmission. The R rate has been below one for a significant period now, and we can see that from the drop-off in transmission rates. We are seeing a reduction in hospital admissions. They were somewhere in the

region of 700-plus at the peak of this most recent situation and are now below 400. I trust that the admissions rate will continue to fall.

With the vaccination programme having targeted and taken place for the over-75s, then the over-70s and the clinically vulnerable groups, we should continue to see a reduction in hospitalisations. We may not necessarily see a reduction in transmission, but, hopefully, for those who do have it, it will be managed in their home environment, and they will not need to be hospitalised. Part of the primary objective of all the restrictions was not to overwhelm our hospitals, so, if we are able to manage COVID much better in the community instead of in the hospitals, different criteria need to be applied when testing the restrictions. If we are not overwhelming the NHS, we need to look at other decisions taken around the restrictions. Based on what Professor Whitty, England's Chief Medical Officer, said yesterday, that starts to change the dynamic around how much of a priority should be given to the R rate when considering it against hospital admissions. It changes the way in which we need to look at that.

I want to say to the Health Minister that it is very important that we know what the grounds and the criteria are for the restrictions. I know that many in our community will feel that the goalposts have moved. As they move, people who have made sacrifices ask what those sacrifices were about, because we have achieved the goal that we were asked to achieve, yet now a different test is being applied. When that happens, it starts to have an impact on people's behaviour and on their willingness to do what we have asked them to do.

It is in that context that the headlines came out of an interview that our Chief Medical Officer, Dr McBride, gave a number of weeks ago. It was an interview that quenched people's hope, because they had felt that we were moving in the right way, only for Dr McBride to talk about restrictions going into next year and having to bring them all back in again come the wintertime if they are lifted in a very limited way. That sent out a message to the public about the price that they are paying. Where they had seen light at the end of the tunnel, that hope was removed by his comments. I know that, 24 hours later, Minister, you sought to change some of the narrative and the impact that the interview had had, but it did have an impact on the people to whom I spoke. It impacted on the way in which they were viewing what they were being asked to do, because the goalposts were being moved and that hope was being taken away. We know the phrase:

"Where there is no vision, the people perish".

That is what is needed, and the negativity that I have heard at times from some leading health professionals can be counterproductive. That therefore needs to be weighed up as we go forward.

We look at the impact of the restrictions, and I commend to colleagues the report that was published yesterday by Her Majesty's Government, 'COVID-19 Response — Spring 2021'. It runs to some 70 pages, provides a huge amount of detail and analysis, and outlines the rationale behind the four steps that the Prime Minister announced. I am not going to advocate, strictly speaking, for the Prime Minister's policies to be our policies, as I would not say that we should adopt the policies of Scotland, Wales or, indeed, the Republic of Ireland. I agree with Mr Gildernew that we

need to do what is right for the people of Northern Ireland. However, the document published yesterday is very helpful for Members as we consider the best way of doing that.

If we consider the impact of the pandemic, one of the analysis pieces is on the impact on the economy and society. Paragraph 20 says:

"The pain has not been felt equally."

We have said that we are all in this together, but the pain has not been felt equally. It goes on to say:

"Staff in the hardest-hit sectors, such as hospitality, are more likely to be young, female, from an ethnic minority, and lower paid."

They have borne the brunt of the restrictions more than any other group.

The Government have provided significant business support of some £280 million. We talk about protecting lives and livelihoods, and the impact on businesses has been severe. Again, there has been inconsistency, because people and businesses have not been all in it together. Big business has been able to find ways around the restrictions, while small businesses have been closed down and unable to do that. I am thinking about the clothing and retail sectors: small businesses are unable to open, whereas if you go into the multinational supermarkets, their clothing sections are all open.

Now, I am not advocating that those clothing sections should be closed, but we have been talking about levelling up. I believe that, with the vaccination programme, we need to reopen our businesses. However, that takes us into the issue of whether it is better to have controlled or uncontrolled environments. We have seen the virus spread in uncontrolled environments, with an increase in people meeting indoors in their domestic dwellings. That is where all the evidence has shown that there is the biggest potential for the virus to spread. However, we have restricted the controlled environments that take their responsibilities very seriously. Therefore, there has been an inconsistency in the application of the restrictions to small businesses and big businesses. One of the very marginal changes brought forward by the Executive to take us into April was click and collect for essential items only. I know from speaking to people that that really limits their ability to do click and collect at all. Our small independent retailers need to get more than click and collect for essential items only.

We have heard about the impact on people's mental health, and that is a significant issue. Mr Poots talked about the statistics, and 850 died last year as a result of mental health issues. The paper published yesterday states:

"Mental health and wellbeing have also suffered during lockdowns, according to the UCL COVID-19 Social Study. Anxiety and depression levels are now consistently higher than pre-pandemic averages. This coincides with restrictions to school attendance which have severely damaged children's education."

Mental health is much worse than in the pre-pandemic environment, and we need to take that into account. Carál Ní Chuilín and others rightly highlighted all those downsides. In my view, that can only lead us to the

question: "What caused that? What do we need to do to change that?". Now that we have the vaccination programme, we need to recognise that COVID is no longer the single issue and lens by which we have to view these problems, and measures need to be taken from a much broader position.

One of the ways to help people's mental health is outdoor activity. Again, Carál Ní Chuilín mentioned that North Belfast is an exclusively urban area. In South Belfast, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I think that you have two constituents whose homes are regarded as rural.

12.30 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín: Nine.

Mr Givan: North Belfast has nine. When I think about the urban population in the city of Belfast, it is no wonder to me that people want to climb Divis. We saw the footage of that. I will not be critical in any shape or form of people who went to an outdoor open space. I trust that they were able to manage that; as the Member for North Belfast indicated, it was a full park, but they were able to manage all of that themselves. The outdoor/indoor argument is one that needs to be addressed by our Executive.

The report contains an analysis that states:

"Opening outdoor sports settings will help to reduce the adverse physical and mental health effects experienced by large parts of the population, in particular children and those living alone. Exercise and outdoor sports are well documented to reduce individuals' risk of major illnesses, such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and cancer by up to 50% and lower risk of early death by up to 30%. Physical activity is also known to help with improving mental health through better sleep, happier moods, and managing stress, anxiety or intrusive and 'racing' thoughts."

We know that the risk of the virus in outdoor settings is not even comparable with the risk indoors. Why would we want to continue to say to people, "Stay indoors", where we know that the risk of the spread of the virus is much greater, when we have outdoor settings? We have only a small amount of parks and beaches that people, rightly and understandably, want to go to. The report states that, in England, on 29 March, all under-18 outdoor sports will resume, with no limit on the numbers that can participate, other than the limits in the sporting bodies' governing rules. Rather than having a small number of parks being heavily congested, let us move to where all outdoor sporting activities can be resumed. People will then spread out because they will take their children to their hockey, rugby, football, Gaelic and all of those sorts of activities. We know that the risks outdoor are nothing in comparison to those indoor, so we need to see that.

People will say, "Follow the science". The report states:

"Airborne transmission is a significant route by which COVID-19 passes between people. Particles of the virus can build up and circulate in the air in the form of aerosols in enclosed spaces ... especially where air exchange is poor. This makes indoor settings more risky than outdoors, where the fresh air quickly disperses the virus to safe levels. This is confirmed by observational studies tracing people infected with

COVID-19 which shows the majority of transmission occurs in indoor settings and that 'super spreader' events ... are more likely indoors than outdoors."

The science says, "Get people outdoors". That will minimise what they do indoors. I would like to see those restrictions being lifted soon.

I will touch on our schools. I am on the board of governors of two primary schools and a secondary school, the populations of which are almost 2,000 children. The impact on learning has been devastating. That, again, is borne out by evidence that has been published in respect of the impact on education. I know, from my own experience, that there is a disparity in the level of engagement that people have with online learning. That transcends academic ability; it ranges from those who are highly academic to those who struggle. There is definitely a disparity in that regard; there is a digital divide, which perpetuates a class divide when it comes to education. I know that that has also had an impact on people's ability to work. The report that was published last night talks about how women in particular have had to reduce the hours that they work because they need to manage homeschooling. So, again, this is impacting on women.

We have to consider some of the logic in the announcement that P1 to P3 children will go back for two weeks and will then be off again before Easter in order to facilitate Years 12 to 14 in a different school setting. I had to read that statement on multiple occasions just to figure out whether that is really what has been decided. I have spoken to Peter Weir, the Education Minister, about that, and I know that that is not what he wanted. It is not what he wanted. He told me that it was through the engagement of the Department of Health that we got the result that we got. I am sure that the Health Minister can elaborate on that in due course. I know that my colleague Peter Weir does not want to see P1s to P3s coming in for two weeks and then being put back out again in order to facilitate Years 12 to 14. In Scotland and Wales, P1 to P3 children are back already. We are not bringing P1 to P3 children back until 8 March. Scotland and Wales have already started that process.

We had the announcement from the CMO in England yesterday. I hope that the Health Minister will be able to address this point. Professor Whitty said that the data is "unambiguous". He said that the data to justify all children in all school settings going back is "unambiguous". The risks are negligible. Our own Public Health Agency in Northern Ireland has said that. The balance is much more in favour of having all children brought back in for all the reasons that others said about children at risk, children's mental health and the impact on their educational attainment and life chances.

Professor Whitty talked about Chief Medical Officers. The inference was clear that it was not just him saying that but the Chief Medical Officers in the devolved regions. I would like to know if that is the case. If the advice and the scientific and medical evidence all justify all children in all schools coming back on 8 March, why are we having P1 to P3 children in for only two weeks from 8 March and then their being put back out of school for nine days? I am really struggling to understand that, and I know that our constituents are all struggling to understand it. If it is based on the science, why is our science in Northern Ireland so

different to England's given that we are dealing with the very similar dynamics of the virus?

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. He makes a crucial point. The CMO for England, Chris Whitty, actually went further than that. He talked about a document from all four CMOs that said that they agreed that every child is disadvantaged by being out of the school and that the risk of getting COVID from going back to school is incredibly low. Do we have access to that document? We in the Health Committee have seen no evidence of it, but it would be useful to know what the facts and science in that document say; maybe the Minister can address that in his contribution. The Member is quite right. Parents are quite rightly asking whether our priority is getting children back to school as quickly as possible in line with the scientific evidence provided.

Mr Givan: The Member makes the point very well. Mr McNulty, a Member for Newry and Armagh, is in the Chamber. I have been in the Chamber when other Members said that our schoolchildren need to be back as soon as possible. I agreed wholeheartedly when Mr McNulty said that in the Chamber a number of weeks ago. I have heard other Members in other parties say that children need to be back as soon as possible. Given the scientific and medical advice that Professor Whitty articulated last night, why are they not coming back in Northern Ireland? What is the medical and scientific advice for their not coming back?

It concerns me when I hear some say that bringing children back to school has an impact on the wider behavioural approaches of our society. It cannot be that the denial of our children's education is being used to influence wider society's behaviour. That cannot be allowed to continue if it is indeed the case that it is being used to justify a different approach here in Northern Ireland.

There are big questions, particularly for the Chief Medical Officer in Northern Ireland, to answer on that, in light of what Professor Whitty has said. That informs our Executive and the decisions that our Ministers take, and we need to have answers to those questions.

I want to conclude on the issue of enforcement, which I raised yesterday. Almost one third of our adult population has been vaccinated, and that is a tremendous achievement. I join others in commending those who have been involved in the roll-out not just here but across the United Kingdom. The Prime Minister got it right when it came to his approach to getting the vaccines and signing up to that, despite the risks that were maybe taken and the criticism that others made of him at the time. We are having a tremendous roll-out of the vaccine, and that is fundamentally changing the way in which we now have to base our decisions. Unfortunately — I hope that this changes and does so quickly — the Republic of Ireland is nowhere at the races when it comes to the vaccination programme. It is not even at 6%. Just over 5% of its adult population has been vaccinated. I really regret that, and I want them to have a much better roll-out of their vaccination programme. The way in which that has been managed right across continental Europe is a problem. However, we cannot allow the removal of our restrictions to be held back as a result of failures that are taking place across the border. We have to be alert to the potential risks that that creates.

One of my concerns is about the mutant strains that may well come here. However, I note in the document published last night by the Government that, when it comes to mutations, the risk that they present is limited. Some do present a risk, and we need to be alert to that.

People have talked about the need for enforcement because of their concern — not one that I share — about the scenes at Divis and other parks and have now called for the police to get involved in restricting that. I hope that nobody suggests that we should put into law the guidance on the 10-mile issue. I really hope that nobody suggests that we should put that guidance into law. Our biggest threat comes from people travelling from the Republic of Ireland into Northern Ireland. Yet, when Members raise the policing of that and introducing enforcement against it, that is almost viewed as a politicisation of the issue. It is not. COVID is the enemy. Orange and green should not come into it. Unionist and nationalist should not come into it. Our unionism versus our nationalism should not come into it. We base our actions on where the risks are, and the risks are now with the Republic of Ireland not having its population vaccinated to anywhere near the level that we have vaccinated in Northern Ireland. Why are there not calls from the Justice Minister for a much tougher approach to protecting our border when the Republic of Ireland Government have introduced laws to fine the people of Northern Ireland for undertaking non-essential journeys into the Republic of Ireland? The police are turning them away, and yet one third of our population has been vaccinated. I really struggle to understand why we have not dealt with that. Let it not be because of political sensitivities, because that should not come into it when taking action. When I have raised the issue of bringing forward regulations on enforcement with the Justice Minister, she has said that I should raise it with you, Mr Swann. If there is to be enforcement against people's movement, we have to realise that the biggest risk is not internal movement within Northern Ireland but movement from the Irish Republic, and that is where I want to see enforcement.

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for giving way. In absolute fairness to Minister Swann and, indeed, the First Minister, they have constantly raised the issue of people travelling through Dublin Airport to access Northern Ireland. They are doing it to access not only Northern Ireland but Great Britain. Many of those people can come from areas where mutations are happening.

People can fly from South Africa to Dubai and on to Dublin. They can fly from Brazil to Madrid and on to Dublin. From Dublin, they can fly on to Great Britain. Therefore, Ireland needs to step up to the mark. Indeed, our Justice Minister needs to step up to the mark when it comes to people travelling across the border. The irony is not lost on me that, although over one third of our adult population are vaccinated and 5% of their population are vaccinated, the restrictions are going the wrong way.

12.45 pm

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for that intervention, and I agree.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I will give way in one moment. I know that the permanent secretary in the Department of Justice heads

up the enforcement task force, so the Department of Justice has a very important role to play in this. When I raised it, I did not appreciate the distraction of someone wanting to put it on to the Minister of Health. I appreciate and accept that the Department of Health is the legal vehicle for taking these things forward, but that does not absolve the Department of Justice, which has the primary role, in my view, for tackling these enforcement issues. I have not seen the kind of engagement that I would expect to see in respect of this issue. I give way to Mr Gildernew.

Mr Gildernew: I welcome the Member's recognition that it is critical that we cooperate right across this island in order to protect our populations. That cooperation needs to include the Departments of Health as well as the Departments of Justice. Does the Member agree that the memorandum of understanding that was signed by the two Health Departments should be developed and delivered on?

Mr Givan: I am all for engagement when it comes to trying to tackle this. However, we cannot ignore the reality that the vaccination programme has fundamentally changed the basis on which, in my view, the Executive now need to take decisions. The Republic of Ireland is not in that game space yet, unfortunately, and I deeply regret that, but we should not be held back as a result.

Finally, we know that how we manage this issue has caused tensions. It has caused tensions politically. The approach that we have taken has caused tensions with our friends. Even within our families, there have been disagreements about the measures that have been taken and why they have been taken. We can debate the policy on all of this, and I think that we can, rightly, do that robustly. However, I also accept that we are all motivated by the same objective: we want to protect and save lives, and we want to get our country back up and running.

I note that the document published last night had step 4 happening by 21 June. England wants to have all restrictions lifted by then, with very few, if any, left in place. I say this to the House: let us have the same ambition to achieve that, and let our population rise up once again to achieve that. We all have personal responsibility, and we all have to take that responsibility upon ourselves. It should not require the Government to tell people how to act with common sense or how to weigh up the risks for themselves and take informed decisions. Therefore, let us have the same aspiration: by the end of June, to be free of these restrictions. Let us dispense with talk of things rolling on into next year, removing hope from our people. I believe that, if we have unity of purpose, a vision and the desire to do it, which is motivated by the same objectives of protecting lives and getting this country back up and running, we can do that.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for coming before the House with regard to these statutory rules. I join others in welcoming Mr Poots back to this place. It is great to see him looking so well and healthy, and I wish him well on his potential return to the AERA hot seat in the days ahead.

It is a matter of, "Here we are again". Weeks after regulations were introduced, we are giving consent to them. Like others, I hope that we will soon be at the end of these restrictions and debates. That brings me to the announcement by Boris Johnson in London yesterday and the anticipated plan from the joint First Ministers that is due

to be published next week. I acknowledge the effort and sacrifices that have been made by all of our community to help to drive down the infection rate. I acknowledge those who are on the front line in health, education, retail, business and all of our front-line services. I also acknowledge the community at large: the families, the sporting organisations and the children who have stayed away from school, sport and engagement with friends. We should also acknowledge the changed role that teachers have taken on and, indeed, that of parents, who have become at-home educators and have been juggling between doing their job and educating their children.

Carers, in hospitals and in the community, have put their lives at risk to keep us safe. Healthcare staff are exhausted, fatigued, and mentally and emotionally bruised. They are punch-drunk from fighting the pandemic, caring for patients and saving lives. They know that, on the horizon, they can see beyond the pandemic, but they can see the epidemic, after the pandemic, of health issues related to delayed diagnoses and treatment. Minister, what plans do you have to support those people, who have nothing more to give?

Members alluded to the plan for easements in the months ahead and stressed the need for decisions to be data-driven and science-led, and I support that principle.

On my way here this morning, I listened to Diane Dawson, a school principal, eloquently and passionately articulate the desire and need for children to get back to school. She was critical of statements made since the Prime Minister's statement yesterday. She expressed frustration at the sudden change in direction from the top of our Executive in just four days. School leaders, teachers, parents and children need clear direction on the way forward. They need consistency of message and certainty. Their flexibility cannot be stretched beyond breaking point. They need a vision and a clear pathway of what lies ahead. They need a plan for educational catch-up, a plan for emotional health and well-being renewal, and a plan for the return of physical education. They need a properly funded restart programme.

As we look at the success of the vaccination programme, people involved with sport are seeking a detailed plan for its safe return, beginning with children's outdoor sports and then the return of all outdoor and indoor sport and places such as gyms.

Minister, you gave every MLA a gift: a reminder to tell us to keep following the guidelines. I thank you for the gift. I have endeavoured, like others, to lead by example and to follow the guidelines. Once again, thank you for the gift. I am asking you, Minister, to give a gift to our children and young people. The scales have tipped. The evenings are getting brighter and the days warmer. Children are getting itchy feet. Where I live, the kerbside kids are bringing joy to the neighbourhood, and it is fantastic to hear and see. Now is the time to tell children, families and sporting organisations when they can return to sports safely.

Minister, I know that you share with me the view about the importance of the health and well-being of children and young people. I know that you agree that a critical part of that is opening up youth sports. It has been said that the kitchen table is no substitute for the classroom. The back kitchen, living room or front hall are no substitute for the sports pitch. Minister, can you give me reassurances

that you will look at that? Will you write to me with your assessments?

Letters sent to the First Minister, the deputy First Minister, the Health Minister and the Minister for Communities contained 80 signatories representing 15 sports, including ladies' Gaelic football, soccer, rowing, rugby, camogie, boxing, triathlon, judo, hunting — hunting? Sorry, that should be hurling; I cannot read my own writing. Some will, of course, classify hunting as a sport, but that is not one of the signatories — handball, athletics, football and Gaelic football. Fifteen sports are represented, and the Sports Forum has also written to you, Minister. They want clear direction on how youth sports can return safely. They know, you know, and I know that sport is much more than physical recreation and well-being.

It is every bit as much about emotional and mental health and well-being. I shudder to think what my youth would have been like with six months with no sport. I implore the Minister to give those children and young people the gift of sport in a safe and controlled way.

Finally, I ask the Minister to outline in his remarks his thought on the return of schools, the return of children to sport, the return of sport in general and, indeed, the economy. The English CMO has said that there is little residual risk for schoolchildren. That risk is lower again for youth sport. I know that the concern is about parental behaviour, but the sports have expressed clearly that they want clear guidance. They are willing to work with the Minister and will put in place mitigations. The Minister must give them that guidance and tell them when they can get back to youth sport. The plan must be data-led, clear and unambiguous and give people hope and a sense of renewal in the months ahead.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: In his remarks, Mr McNulty mentioned Miss Diane Dawson. I must declare to the House that I have an interest: I am a governor of Branial Primary School, and Miss Diane Dawson is the principal of the school, which my children attend. I just want to put that on the record.

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. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time with the Minister of Health. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.56 pm.

2.00 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Health

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I advise Members that question 6 has been withdrawn.

COVID-19: Deprived Communities

1. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Health whether there are any specific public health interventions to address the impact of COVID-19 on the most deprived communities. (AQO 1626/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): The latest coronavirus-related health inequalities report was published by my Department on 16 December 2020, and it shows that the hospital admission rate for COVID-19 confirmed cases in the 10% most deprived areas was more than double the rate in the 10% least deprived areas. However, while deprivation was found to be an important factor in the likelihood of hospital admissions, age was found to be a greater factor. The pandemic has, no doubt, exacerbated existing inequalities, and therefore my Department, with the Public Health Agency (PHA), continues to deliver a range of actions to address the impact of COVID-19 and other health conditions and behaviours in the most deprived communities and to reduce health inequalities.

In April 2020, the health improvement division in the Public Health Agency established a regional group to oversee the recovery of health improvement services throughout the first surge of the pandemic. Additionally, the test, trace and protect contact-tracing service operated by the PHA seeks to provide advice and support to those who need additional help and to help people to isolate, as required, when they have a positive test. The service also works closely with health improvement colleagues in the Department for Communities to address any health inequalities in cases identified through contact tracing or as part of the ongoing management of clusters that may face particular challenges with self-isolation.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer and the detail in it.

Minister, the Executive decisions on the introduction of restrictions and any decisions to lift or ease current restrictions must be firmly based on medical and scientific advice and evidence. Has the medical and scientific advice from the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the interim Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) on the phased reopening of schools changed since last Thursday?

Mr Swann: That is a step away from the initial question. I am not aware of any advice having changed from what was provided either to my Department or the Executive.

Mr Stalford: It is a well-known expression that advisers advise whilst Ministers decide, but, when those advisers choose to take on a very public-facing role, it is legitimate to question the advice that is being given. In that vein, why

is Professor Whitty wrong about school opening but Dr McBride right?

Mr Swann: The Member's opening comments are correct. Ministers — not a single Minister — decide. There seem to be some grounds for believing that Professor Whitty's comments have been misquoted. There was, in principle, a reference to a joint CMO statement that was issued last August/September on the return to schools. In that statement, Professor Whitty also made it clear that a return to school was the best option from the child's point of view, and that has surely never been in dispute. The issue is what schools being open means for wider society and the health service and how it fuels transmission. The Minister of Education brought a paper to the Executive last week that included two options, the second of which was adopted unanimously by the entire Executive. The Executive did not divide on our current stance.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, my constituency of South Belfast is the most diverse in Northern Ireland and probably the most diverse on the island of Ireland. We also know that there is evidence, particularly from GB and North America, that COVID has a disproportionate impact on black and minority ethnic (BME) communities. What are he and his Department doing to speak to that community to ensure that it has maximum information and support when navigating its way through the pandemic?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. The comment is timely. Yesterday afternoon, the two junior Ministers, the Chief Medical Officer and I met ethnic minority groups, including our faith-based groups.

One of the things that came forward, especially from the ethnic groups, was not to, I suppose, contain them within the same information that is coming out of GB about access to services, information and the vaccine. They wanted to be very clear that there seemed to be two different narratives and that the support for and uptake of the vaccine in Northern Ireland was greater than among their counterparts across the water and, shall we say, at the same level as the Caucasian population of Northern Ireland. That is because of the work that they have done, supported by the Public Health Agency and a number of other agencies that have engaged with the key stakeholders through the Regional Traveller Health and Social Wellbeing Forum and the Migrant and Minority Ethnic Council. That information has been disseminated throughout the pandemic.

Mr Gildernew: Minister, given your acknowledgement that the pandemic will have exacerbated inequalities, does it not suggest that the Department needs to implement full equality impact assessments (EQIAs), rather than undertaking high-level screening?

Mr Swann: I think that the Member is referring to the regulations and the change of regulations that are being brought forward. Given the pace at which they move and the way that the changes are made, it is not possible to carry out full equality impact assessments on the change of regulations. I know that he raised the question —.

Mr Gildernew: On the budget, Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order.

Mr Swann: I know that he raised the question of the budget as well. Given the size of my Department and the lack of time that we have had to bring it forward for

public consultation, we have been unable to carry out a full equality impact assessment on all the detail. As the Chair of the Committee, the Member will be aware that that is being done at a high level. That is what my officials provided in their briefing last week.

COVID-19: Childcare Costs

2. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health when the scheme for reimbursement of additional childcare costs incurred during COVID-19, as detailed in correspondence to healthcare workers on 18 June 2020, will be finalised. (AQO 1627/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his support. We all owe our health and social care (HSC) workers a great deal for their exceptional efforts. They have gone over and beyond what one could normally expect to see.

During the initial period of the pandemic, some health and social care trusts provided childcare free of charge to key workers on an interim basis. That is to be commended. Those trusts continue to support staff with their childcare needs and have actively encouraged staff to use the different flexible working options that are available to them, including utilising their local schools, which provide care during the day for the children of key workers.

Following the recent surge in COVID-19 cases and the need for a further lockdown and school closures since the start of January 2021, there have been a small number of cases in which the childminders of HSC staff have ceased operating and/or their working hours have changed, after-school clubs have closed or they can no longer access informal childcare arrangements. In those instances, any additional costs — I stress additional costs — for childcare that have been legitimately incurred by health and social care workers as a result of the pandemic will be reimbursed. My officials, along with trusts' HR and finance colleagues have been exploring a range of options for funding additional childcare costs in those circumstances and the resultant tax implications, given that that is seen by HMRC as a taxable benefit. We hope to resolve those issues as quickly as possible.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response. Minister, can you confirm whether the Northern Trust is aware of that information? I received a communication from a constituent that was based on the 18 June email, which stated that the Department of Health was giving that support to people who work in the Northern Trust. As of yet, that lady has not been communicated with, and, indeed, the trust is not aware of that. I have had several communications with the trust.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. If he is willing to share that information through my private office, I will follow up on it. He referred to 18 June. The additional support is in place for this wave of the pandemic and for the extra work and the extra pressures that it is putting on our health and social care staff.

If the Member could forward that detail to me. I will make sure that all the trusts are aware of the answer that I have given to the Member as well.

Ms Brogan: Minister, as you said, childcare is a pressing issue for many families at the moment, particularly for key workers who are unable to work from home. Can you

outline what plans the Department has to continue that scheme into the next financial year, please?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. As she said, childcare availability in the pandemic was one of the key actions, and it has continued to function in Northern Ireland since the start of the pandemic, although in a limited way. Initial access was restricted to vulnerable children and, as the Member said, the children of key workers.

Support for additional costs above normal childcare costs will be reimbursed by the trust and through working with us, the HSC trusts, HR, Finance and finance colleagues in the Department. Any funding for additional childcare in these circumstances will be covered, but people should also be aware of the resulting tax implications, as HMRC will see it as a taxable benefit.

Mr McNulty: Will the Minister give an update to his recent announcement of the £500 payment to NHS staff and say when he envisages all payments will be made?

Mr Swann: I am on record talking about the value that I place on the skill, dedication and hard work of the health and social care staff. I have seen first-hand the magnificent job that all health and social care workers perform, the risks that they take and the sacrifices that they make. That has never been more evident than it is now in how they are dealing with COVID-19. My officials are finalising the details of the special recognition payment, and answers to frequently asked questions are available on my Department's website.

It is highly unlikely that that payment will be made in this financial year, but we will process it as quickly as possible. It covers a large section of not just our own workforce but additional workforces, which we have acknowledged will receive part of, or subsequently, all of the payment.

COVID-19: Dementia Care

3. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Health to outline what additional measures his Department is putting in place to ensure those living with dementia are better protected during the COVID-19 pandemic. (AQO 1628/17-22)

Mr Swann: I recognise that, for many people living with dementia and their families, the past 12 months have been extremely challenging. Many people who live with dementia will have other significant health vulnerabilities and needs that place them at particular risk from the COVID-19 virus. Monitoring is particularly important for individuals with dementia who may be less able to report symptoms because of communication difficulties. Measures have been put in place to provide protection against the virus for people living with dementia either in their own home or in a care home setting. That protection includes the application of infection prevention and control measures, such as the use of appropriate PPE by care staff, the introduction of social distancing where possible and the suspension of most visits to care homes where there has been a COVID-19 outbreak.

A number of regional supports have been made available to care homes with dementia units, including staffing and financial support on a regional and trust basis, and the provision of extra training and education sessions related to supporting dementia residents and care staff. The aim of that is to understand and respond to changes in

behaviour in people with dementia during the COVID-19 pandemic. People living with dementia who are in receipt of residential and nursing home care were amongst the top priority groups for the first round of vaccinations.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister very much for his answer. Given that the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) has published evidence confirming that over 36% of those who died with coronavirus from March to September also had dementia, are you in a position to commit to making dementia a stand-alone priority in the Department's ongoing reform of adult social care as we look forward to building a better health service?

Mr Swann: The Member partially answered his question. There is ongoing reform of that service. The specific support that is being given to those with dementia who are living in care homes and who have borne the brunt, as the Member rightly indicates, of the pandemic is about the additional supports and measures that we put in place now, rather than our waiting specifically on that piece of work being completed with regard to strategies and implementation. We made sure that those people were part of that vaccination group because of the exact specifics, as the Member realises, that made them more vulnerable from the first wave and that we saw and acknowledged.

Ms Anderson: Minister, we have tragically seen that the make-up of those who have died from COVID has disproportionately been those who have suffered from dementia. I am conscious that you said that, in response to the last question, the reform is ongoing. Do you intend to bring forward plans to transform adult social care? When will we get an opportunity to hear those plans?

Mr Swann: The Member is well aware of my desire to make that change in our adult social care and our social care service across Northern Ireland. I am on record saying at the Health Committee that it is the Cinderella service of our health service. One of the outworkings of the pandemic has been to bring that workforce, and the dedication in the work that it provides, into the limelight. It is my challenge, as Minister, to make sure that those people continue to receive recognition and acknowledgement, not only for their work but for their commitment to the people whom they look after. As I said in answer to Mr McGlone, this is ongoing work, but we want to get it right. My Chief Social Work Officer is leading on that work so that we can progress it and make sure that it not only encapsulates what has happened in the pandemic but encapsulates the longer-term benefits for our health and social care services.

2.15 pm

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Minister provide an update on any plans to allow care home residents, many of whom suffer from dementia, access to family visits?

Mr Swann: The Member raises the impact of restrictions on visiting and contact with families. That has been recognised, and the trusts are working in partnership with families and care homes to ensure that contact is maintained between residents and relatives in line with regional visiting guidance.

It remains my position that care home visiting and the subsequent implementation of the care partner role is

critical to the health and well-being of care home residents, particularly those with dementia. The care partner contact is in addition to visits to a resident, and that is organised according to the care home's visiting policy and the Department of Health's COVID-19 regional principles for visiting. However, the level 5 visiting restrictions should not prevent care partners from being permitted access to care homes. Care homes are being actively encouraged to adhere to all aspects of the revised visiting guidance, including the introduction of care partners. Care partner contact can continue, provided visits are aligned with infection prevention and control measures. In addition to that, my Department is undertaking work to facilitate the testing of care partners as part of the care home staff testing programme. Trusts will continue to engage with care homes to reinforce the care partner message. Key workers are also ensuring through family communications that families are aware of that role and are offering support to them to help them to set up the role when that need is identified.

COVID-19: Outpatient Waiting Lists

4. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister of Health for an update on hospital waiting lists for outpatient appointments in view of the redeployment of staff throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. (AQO 1629/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I fully appreciate that all patients should be able to avail themselves of the best treatment that the health service can provide in a timely manner. Waiting times were wholly unacceptable before COVID-19 and, regrettably, they will be even worse after it.

After the first wave of the pandemic, I was clear that rebuilding services across all programmes of care, including outpatient services, needed to be a key priority of the health and social care system. To that end, trusts were required to publish rebuilding plans on a three-month rolling basis, which set out plans to increase HSC activity incrementally.

Even during a rising number of cases at the end of last year, those rebuilding efforts continued, and, thanks to the huge efforts of staff during phase 3, which was October to December last year, our health service exceeded the projected activity for the number of outpatient appointments delivered at a regional level by 16%. As we emerge from the latest wave of the pandemic, the focus of the health service will continue to be on resettling all elective services, including outpatients, in an environment that is safe for staff and patients.

The situation is extremely challenging. Our HSC trusts are working with clinicians and the Health and Social Care Board to prioritise the care needs of patients who have been referred to the HSC system and to ensure that all available capacity, including that in the independent sector, is utilised as effectively and equitably as possible across the entire region.

Reducing elective care waiting lists to an acceptable level will require significant and sustained investment and additional staffing. I have made it clear that hospital waiting lists must be a major Executive priority in 2021 and beyond.

Mr Chambers: The redeployment of healthcare staff throughout the pandemic has been necessary to deal with the ongoing pressures from COVID-19, and I thank all healthcare staff for the tremendous work that they have been doing in horrible circumstances. Can the Minister provide an update on his discussions with the Executive to secure more funding to deal with all waiting lists when the pandemic is finally over?

Mr Swann: As the Member will be aware, in New Decade, New Approach, the reduction of waiting lists was a priority for the entire Executive. The current Budget is out for consultation, and we will seek support in order to provide additional staff and capacity and to be able to use the independent sector. Anybody who wants to respond to the ongoing public consultation is welcome to do so to ensure that the voice of Northern Ireland society is heard on how it wants to address unacceptably long waiting times. That was the case before COVID-19, and it definitely will be after it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I apologise for omitting to call the Member who asked the original question to ask a supplementary question. I call Harry Harvey.

Mr Harvey: No problem, Mr Deputy Speaker. I know that we have to look after our own, so it is OK. *[Laughter.]* I thank the Minister for his answers so far. I welcome the fact that COVID-related deaths have fallen for the third week in a row. Can he assure us that services for cancer patients will be reinstated as soon as possible?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I am sure that no bias was intended. Rather than being in my favour, it is usually the other way round with the Deputy Speaker.

The Member makes a very important point about getting our health service back to delivering the services that many of our healthcare professionals want to provide. The professional services that they provide are what they have trained for, and they want to see patients back in waiting rooms, in theatres and on operating tables. We are preparing another set of three-monthly rebuilding plans, which I hope to publish in the very near future. We will do that once we see a continuing trajectory of a decrease in the number of inpatients in our hospital system. However, we also have to be cognisant that, through the first wave of the pandemic, our workforce stayed on their feet because of adrenalin. They stay on their feet now because of their dedication to their patients and their colleagues. We must always factor in the well-being of our staff as we look to rebuild as quickly as possible but also support staff who have been at the sharp end of the pandemic since it began this time last year.

Mr Dickson: On the question of rebuilding after the pandemic, considerable sums have already been spent on the hospital estate. In an answer to a question from me, you said that some £4 million had been spent on the COVID recovery unit on the Whiteabbey Hospital site. What is the future for something like that? What contribution can it make to patient services post the pandemic?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. We have been careful to ensure that any large-scale investments that we have made, such as that at the Whiteabbey Hospital facility, are future-proofed. He will be well aware that all the reforms and reviews of the health service that have taken place over the years have been about restructuring services,

rather than closing buildings and hospitals. That is not what I am about.

During the pandemic, we have seen that our current footprint is under too much pressure. The service has been underutilised and underfinanced for the past 10 years. When we have the opportunity to rebuild and rejuvenate sites such as that at Whiteabbey, it is about looking at how we take them forward. Once we get through the work that Whiteabbey is doing to support COVID patients through their rehabilitation, using nurse-led allied health professionals, it will be about how we take that facility to the next step, should it be for orthopaedic provision or for the rehabilitation of stroke patients.

People are welcome to look at the bids that we have for the use of that facility so that they can see how our health service is looking to the future and how we can use the developments and the progress that we have had to make in the past 12 months to create a better health service. We do not simply want to return to what we had this time last year.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. He will, undoubtedly, be aware that the Human Rights Commission (HRC) has been given leave for a judicial review of his failure to commission and fund abortion services that have been legislated for. In light of that, will he move to remedy the situation and ensure that women have access to appropriate modern health services?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Clearly, that is well beyond the original question. It is up to the Minister whether he wishes to comment.

Mr Swann: I have never ducked a question here before, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am not going to start now. My Department does not dispute that women in Northern Ireland are legally entitled to abortion services. The legal advice that my Department received stated that, while the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020 do not require my Department to commission the relevant services, registered medical professionals can now terminate pregnancies lawfully. Such terminations, subject to the regulations, are to be carried out on Health and Social Care premises.

Yesterday, the deputy First Minister stated that, in her opinion, it is my legal responsibility as Health Minister to make available the services to which women have a legal right. I am satisfied that I have executed my duty as Health Minister by bringing the matter, under the terms of the ministerial code, to the Executive for discussion and agreement. I stand by my view that the commissioning of abortion services could be considered to be significant or controversial and outside the scope of the Programme for Government.

The commissioning of the service also seems to cut across the human rights responsibilities of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. In view of that, I am obliged, under the ministerial code, to bring the matter to the Executive to be discussed and agreed, before it can proceed. In order to get to a position where my Department could issue a commissioning direction, as the deputy First Minister is aware, and in furtherance of legal advice, I brought a paper for discussion to the Executive on 3 April 2020 that provided options for the establishment of an early medical abortion service in Northern Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic. As yet, no decision has

been taken by the Executive, and therefore there is no commissioned service for abortion in Northern Ireland.

COVID-19: Vaccine Roll-out

5. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of when the majority of Northern Ireland's population will have received the COVID-19 vaccination. (AQO 1630/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. As of close of play yesterday, 499,206 vaccines had been delivered in Northern Ireland; that is just shy of half a million. Some 468,000 people have received their first vaccine, which is 95% of the over-80s, 90% of the over-75s, 84% of the over-70s and 69% of the over-65s. As the Member may be aware, we have now moved to the groups of people who are clinically extremely vulnerable or carers. Those figures are a testament to the effective work of GPs and trusts in deploying the vaccine as rapidly as possible. It is hoped that, in line with the commitment in other parts of the UK, the vaccination programme will be open to all adults over 50 by 15 April and all of the population by the end of July.

The long-term success of the programme depends on achieving high uptake rates in all sections of the adult community, and every effort will be made to ensure that the programme continues to be rolled out rapidly. The main variable impacting on the vaccination of the population is the availability of vaccine. It is hoped that vaccine supply will increase. That, combined with a strong uptake of the offer of vaccination among the population, should help the rate of vaccinations to rise. The rate of increase should also be assisted by the opening of an additional mass vaccination centre at the SSE Arena that, we hope, will become operational in April.

With the focus firmly on protecting those most at risk from the virus, the programme has expanded to cover everyone aged 65 and over, those who are clinically extremely vulnerable to COVID-19, carers and the clinically vulnerable. That is priority groups 1 to 6. The trusts' mobile and roving teams will focus on groups for whom travel to a vaccination centre would be challenging, such as elderly residents in care homes or supported living centres where the clinical risk is considered to be similar to that in a care home. Again, the programme is entirely dependent on the supply of vaccine, but rapid progress has been made. The vaccine has been offered to those in priority groups 1 to 5 and is now being extended to those in priority group 6. That should be completed in March. All care homes have been visited once —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Minister has exceeded his time.

Mr Swann: — and the residents and staff vaccinated with the first dose, while 99% of homes have received their second visit for the delivery of second doses.

I think that I have proved that I get no favour in the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind the Minister that, if he wishes to have an extra minute for a question, he can request that.

Mr Robinson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Minister agree that the vaccination programme is central to tackling the COVID-19 pandemic and to fully reopening the

economy? What impact has the vaccine roll-out had on our elderly patients and residents in care homes throughout Northern Ireland? The Minister may have answered that question in his previous answer.

Mr Swann: I might have touched on the last piece, Mr Robinson. We are seeing the early shoots of the benefits that the vaccine programme will bring. We have often talked about it being the light during the dark days of the pandemic. While we are seeing good numbers and good uptake and people are about to start receiving their second dose of a vaccine, I caution that we should not take those rays of hope and extinguish them too quickly by rushing out of the current restrictions and regulations. We need to balance the benefits that vaccination brings against managing regulations and restrictions until we see greater vaccination of the entirety of the population of Northern Ireland.

2.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions. I advise Members that question 3 has been withdrawn.

Community Pharmacies: Funding for 2021-22

T1. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Health, in light of the fact that he will recognise that community pharmacies across Northern Ireland have been instrumental in the response to COVID — possible only because of the significant additional investment that he identified for that sector in 2021 — to outline the provisions that he has made in his budget for 2021-22 for community pharmacies, given that COVID is still here and community pharmacy teams continue to face many challenges. (AQT 1031/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for acknowledging the work of community pharmacies. Led by my Chief Pharmaceutical Officer, the Department has had engagement with Community Pharmacy and developed a working relationship with that representative body to develop a commissioning plan for services up until March 2021. The plan focuses on the provision of services to the public during the coronavirus pandemic to ensure access to medicines at this time, including the funding and commissioning of the prescription delivery service for certain patients. It is my Department's intention to continue that work with Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland to negotiate a new commissioning document and road map for the delivery of services during 2021-22 and beyond. That will be developed further in due course, once we are over the current pandemic.

I made it clear to the House earlier that the draft Budget is currently out to public consultation. There have been bids for many things, and I recognise the work that Community Pharmacy has done and continues to do. It is part of our funding process. I am sure that the Member has been lobbied by members of Community Pharmacy to raise the subject, but I encourage him and them to feed into the public consultation process so that it is not just my voice asking for money and support. The Minister of Finance also needs to hear about the support that my Department needs for community pharmacies.

Mr Dickson: I really appreciate the answer that the Minister has given us. He will recognise that people have

a great deal of confidence in community pharmacies. They are often the local shop and the place to which many people will go to get health advice. They are also the place where people can and do get the flu vaccine. What plans do you have to allow community pharmacies to roll out the COVID vaccine as things move forward in the pandemic? People will have confidence in having the service delivered in that setting.

Mr Swann: Our community pharmacy partners are part of the future-proofing of vaccinations when we get to the wider population. They are currently completing flu vaccinations for the younger cohorts that we had not done previously, and we appreciate their support in doing that. Community pharmacies have been able to concentrate on the delivery of the flu vaccine, and that has allowed us to develop our regional centres for COVID vaccines and allowed our GPs to easily identify people who need the COVID vaccine and concentrate on them. It is about working in partnership. The Department now has a strong working relationship with Community Pharmacy that it maybe did not have in the past.

Mental Health Strategy: Consultation Update

T2. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the mental health strategy consultation. (AQT 1032/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I know that this is close to his heart. From my recollection, mental health was never talked about in the House until he raised it and made it a topic of conversation not just here but in elected bodies and among elected representatives across these islands.

On 21 December 2020, I published the draft mental health strategy for public consultation. That was a hugely important step forward, as it will set the strategic direction for mental health in Northern Ireland for the next decade and beyond. The draft strategy was produced thanks to a coordinated effort from many people with lived experience and from across different organisations and sectors.

The creation of a new mental health strategy that puts the needs of the individual in the centre, respects diversity and equality and supports emotional well-being and positive mental health is of paramount importance to our communities. To date, we have held three large virtual events, with over 90 participants attending each, and, over the coming weeks, the Department is holding small, themed consultation meetings to provide an opportunity for individuals to meet virtually with my officials to discuss specific aspects of the draft strategy in more detail.

The consultation, as the Member knows, is due to close on 26 March. I encourage anyone with an interest in mental health to engage and share their views.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister. I am delighted that the strategy consultation is under way and has been so well received. Minister, last Thursday, you recorded a message for the Northern Ireland Youth Forum for the launch of its mental health toolkit, an event that MLA Chris Lyttle and I were honoured to attend. Could I encourage you to share that toolkit with your Executive colleague the Minister of Education for distribution to Northern Ireland's schools?

Mr Swann: Certainly. I think of the engagement that we have had through the mental health, well-being, resilience

and suicide prevention subcommittee of the Executive. On the back of Mr Lyttle's recommendation, we engaged with the group Elephant in the Room. That meeting was very productive and led to subsequent meetings with other Ministers. We will share that document throughout the Executive and ask our Education Minister to share it with all schools. We will also share it with the Minister for the Economy so that she can share it with universities and further education colleges. We should make sure that we share this excellent co-produced document as widely as possible, as it would benefit not just us in the Department and the young people who engaged in the production of it but those who receive it. People need the help and guidance in the document.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Patsy McGlone is not in his place.

School Staff: Priority Vaccinations

T5. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Health to outline his plans to vaccinate staff in our schools as a priority, particularly because of the obvious pressures that are mounting around the need to get our children back to the classroom as soon as possible. (AQT 1035/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Member is aware — I have said it on a number of occasions — that we follow the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) guidance, which assesses by risk with regard to mortality and the implication that it would have should the individual in that cohort contract COVID-19. I will stick by the JCVI recommendation, which is by age and clinical profile.

I am aware that work is going on in JCVI to look at specific occupational cohorts that may be at more risk, but, as yet, we have received no update. Until I receive further guidance from JCVI, I will stick to the guidance that we have, as it has worked for us so far. We see a decrease in the number of infections in care homes and in society and a decrease in the number of hospitalisations.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response. Does he accept that many working in essential jobs, such as in the agri-food sector, have worked right through the pandemic? They should be a priority.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. He moves from teachers to those in the agri-food sector. That demonstrates the difficulty: once you start to identify the importance of one section of the workforce, it expands easily. That is why we concentrate on the JCVI guidance and vaccinate people in order of priority of risk so that we save lives and prevent serious illness. The Member may or may not be aware of it, but we have put in supported testing facilities in some of our agri-food factories across Northern Ireland. That was supported by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) in England. As opposed to simply vaccinating sectors, we can support by increased testing in certain sectors.

Addiction Services: Dual Diagnosis Provision

T6. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the lack of addiction services in the community, especially for those who have a dual diagnosis. (AQT 1036/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. The provision of mental health supports for those with a dual diagnosis has been a significant challenge for the

Department over a number of years, because, often, people with a dual diagnosis will have been seen by one speciality or the other, but never holistically. Rather than producing a dual diagnosis-specific cohort of workforce, there is, as part of the mental health strategy, work ongoing on how we can make sure that any mental health provision is person-centric, so that, regardless of what they are presenting with or their diagnosis, they get the support that they need when they need it, where they need it, which is more important than creating another service. It is all part of the mental health strategy and the consultation that is out at the moment, so I encourage the Member, and any organisation that she may be aware of, to get involved with that so that we can highlight the need for increased mental health services in Northern Ireland.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister is aware that the Committee for Communities is looking at the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill. We have written to him, and he has responded. Will he provide an update on the minimum unit pricing of alcohol?

Mr Swann: That is a piece of work on which we have engaged with the Government of the Irish Republic so that we come forward on it, not at the same time, but as closely as possible, because there is a thought process that if there is a minimum price per unit of alcohol in the Republic of Ireland, and we are not doing something similar in Northern Ireland, it will encourage cross-border trade. It is my intention that we go out for consultation at the end of this mandate. I will be clear to the Member: I do not think that we have the scope in this mandate, by way of capacity in my Department or the time that is necessary, to bring it forward in a meaningful way, but I intend to put it to consultation so that the preparatory work is done for whomever comes into this role in the next mandate.

Pupils: Safe Return to School

T7. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Health, following this morning's debate on the health regulations, when possibly every Member who spoke expressed concern about the mental health of pupils as they return to school, to state whether he is engaging in any specific way on that issue and whether he is prepared to put in place any actions to deliver a safe return. (AQT 1037/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. He highlights one of the areas that has often been underfunded in our service — the support of the mental health of our young people through the child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). I know that the lack of provision and the need for more support is something that the Member has championed, worked for and dedicated himself to within his constituency. The support that we have for our pupils and staff is provided in conjunction with the Department of Education, and the Education Minister has a co-funded project coming forward for that specific task so that we can tackle it.

In the earlier debate, the Member referred to my Department coming together with the Department of Education and the Department for Communities to look at a holistic support mechanism for children going into schools in the summer holidays, or even over the Easter break. If possible, that is something that I would be keen to progress, and it is something that our mental health

champion has also brought to the fore, through a greater piece of work around additional support being available for the children who need it once the school terms end.

Mr Newton: I welcome what the Minister has said. I know that I am not alone in the Education Committee in having those concerns. Perhaps the Minister will devote particular attention to the 2,000-odd children who are at risk and, perhaps, safer in school than they are in their own home, as the schools, hopefully, return to what we regard as normal.

Mr Swann: The Member makes the point, and I know that it is of personal interest to him. It was highlighted in the debate earlier when reference was made to the additional number of children that we have seen being taken into care in the past year. As the corporate parent of those children, it is of concern to me that we make sure that the supports are available and that there is a way of identifying the children who most need that additional support. I want to make sure that mechanisms exist through my Department, supported by the Department of Education, and that there is a collaborative approach to supporting our young people.

2.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of our period for questions to the Health Minister. I ask Members to take their ease before the next item of business, which is a return to the debate on the health protection regulations.

Executive Committee Business

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved. — [Mr Swann (The Minister of Health).]

The following motions stood in the Order Paper:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved. — [Mr Swann (The Minister of Health).]

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved. — [Mr Swann (The Minister of Health).]

Mr Chambers: There are three sensible amendments before the House today, and my party supports them all. One year ago, no one could have imagined the negative effects that we would all suffer in our personal, family, business or work lives as a direct result of the pandemic. Many of us and our families have not been touched by actually contracting the virus. That said, we must recognise and sympathise with the many families with loved ones who have died as a result of this dreadful pandemic.

We must also acknowledge those who are suffering from the new illness known as long COVID, which will have an unknown impact on our NHS. The R number does not reflect that impact. To those families, the pandemic does not just mean sacrifices like not going to the gym, a football match or the cinema; it means the loss of a loved one who had to be buried under very tight controls or watching the debilitating effects of long COVID on a family member. Unless we have a family member working in the NHS, we cannot truly begin to imagine the physical or mental health impact on all staff across our health and care systems. We owe it to those heroes to begin a robust process of transformation of our health service as soon as we have recovered from the pandemic.

It has been obvious that the fight against COVID was never going to be a 100-yard dash but rather a slow and painful marathon. We have all been involved in that marathon, but, sadly, all too many in our society did not and will not get to finish the journey. I am told by those who actually run in marathons that you can hit something called the wall at the 20-mile mark. The finish is a mere few miles down the road, but you can easily lose the will to go on. At that point, it is attractive to simply give up and drop out. Months of sacrifice and hard training can be cast aside by not pushing through the wall and continuing to the finishing line. It is to their credit that most runners continue. The current public narrative and perhaps, indeed, even the narrative in the House suggest that some may have hit the wall. We must not forget that it is only our NHS staff, a compliant public and the efforts of our medical and scientific experts that have allowed us to get in sight of the finishing line.

We owe it to ourselves, our loved ones and the community at large to keep going, to endure additional pain in order to reach the finishing line ahead. It is not the time to let our personal or collective guard down.

I have heard some complimentary remarks today about the words of Professor Whitty, the Chief Medical Officer of England. I prefer to continue to put my faith in the Executive's following our local medical and scientific advice rather than slavishly following a Boris-influenced model. Boris has form for burning some fingers in Northern Ireland on other matters.

If we acted on Professor Whitty's words and suffered another surge in the pandemic, he would not be putting his hands up, but, rather, fingers would be pointed at our local experts and Health Department officials. Mr Sammy Wilson MP made some heavily critical comments about our experts at the weekend. I am disappointed to sense that those criticisms may also be shared by some of Mr Wilson's party colleagues. It is important to place on record our appreciation of our local experts and to pledge our continued support to them. That reflects my position and that of my party.

I had not intended to speak about the return of our children to school, but it was referenced earlier in the debate. It is vital that our children's education be maintained, but it is also important that we take account of any health threat that an immediate and total return to the classrooms might present. The model on the table last week has been described as a hokey-cokey approach, and its logic has left many parents baffled. My take on it is that it is a cautious and graduated exercise to measure any major health issues that might be presented by pupils returning to the classroom. There have been leaks and rumours from the Executive meeting about who said what on the subject. We have even heard a Member say today that the Education Minister confided to him that he wanted to see a complete return to school. Perhaps Department of Education officials need to explain more fully their thinking to the public, or maybe the Minister could come to the House and explain what he really wants.

When I hear Members plead with the Minister of Health to relax various restrictions, I wonder whether they share those pleas with their Executive Ministers. Executive decisions are not made by one Minister; all decisions are made collectively by representatives of the five parties in the Chamber. It is called democracy.

I will close by placing on record my grateful appreciation to all those involved in the successful and efficient roll-out of the vaccination programme that has given us all hope.

Mr Allister: This debate, not for the first time, is irrelevant because of the House's capacity to approve or otherwise largely pass regulations. However, it provides a useful opportunity to take stock of where we are with COVID issues. I am becoming increasingly concerned about the COVID exit strategy. We will all recall that, when this started almost a year ago, it was drummed into us that the key determinant was the R number. Today, when the Minister happily referred to the R number in January and was then asked what the R number is today, there was a lot more foot shifting as to what it actually meant. Suddenly, the R number is no longer the be-all and end-all because the R number is now, on a sustained basis, significantly below 1, which was the magic threshold.

Despite that, we are told that all of the lockdown, essentially, must continue nigh endlessly.

I remember, before Christmas — it was probably about October — asking the Minister in the House what his exit strategy was. He put it in one word: vaccination. We are now very well down that road. I compliment the health service and the professionals who have selflessly brought us to the very desirable position of having half a million of our population already vaccinated. That is a remarkable and fantastic achievement. However, even the vaccination of half a million of the most vulnerable does not seem to be bringing the relief that was promised on the back of vaccination: the easing of lockdown. It seems that, every time that there is some light at the end of the tunnel, you can rely on someone such as Dr McBride to order more tunnel. This time, he took us right through to next year. The answer was the R rate, but it turned out not to be. Then, the answer was vaccination, but we are way down the road on that, and it does not really help us. What is the answer?

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. He has made interesting points about commentary from the CMO and others. Does he agree that there is a lustful desire among some in the media to put across the need for continued restrictions? I note that the Minister clarified the following day some of what the CMO had said. The Minister said that some of the CMO's words had been taken out of context in comparison with what the reality was.

Mr Allister: Yes, we have many Ministers of Health in the media, and they are not shy about sharing their expertise.

It is a serious question: where is the exit strategy if it is not vaccination? How can it be that, if so many of our vulnerable have, happily, been vaccinated, there is no opening up or obvious preparation for it? Take what we got on schools. Last Thursday, there was the most absurd and illogical outcome imaginable: suddenly, P1 to P3 will go back to school, but, in order to let years 12 to 14 in different schools go into school, you have to take children in P1 to P3 out of primary schools. Where is the logic in that? I suggest that it is so absurd that no one could defend it. We have been told in this debate that that was not what the Education Minister wanted; it was what Health officials wanted. No doubt the Health Minister, in responding to the debate, will tell us whether that is so. Did the Health Department say, "If you're going to open schools, only P1 to P3 can be in for two weeks. Then, hokey-cokey them out and put in years 12 to 14"? Is that what the Health Department recommended? Is that what the Health Department insisted on, or was that absurd outcome the product of an ugly compromise? Did some not want any schools open but others wanted every school open, and, in the middle, the crazy creation of, "Well, let's put P1 to P3 in and take them out again" emerged? The public are entitled to know. Sometimes, as politicians, we lose a bit of a grip on reality. We have kids — it is most critical in our primary schools — who, effectively, have been out of regular education for the guts of a year.

A year is a very long time in the life of a seven-year-old child. I see the absence of school in my own grandchildren. No matter how good the homeschooling is, it is not the same. Those kids are losing out. We put P1 to P3 in, but there is no mention of P6. Someone might have thought that, of all the years in primary education, P6 is the most important for many, but it does not even feature. It is after Easter. Where is the hope in this vista of hopelessness for our kids?

3.00 pm

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. His point about school and the need for immediate face-to-face teaching is a critical one that I share. Does he agree that it has been quite useful to hear the commentary from the PHA and others that says, "Oh, schools are not a place of infection", as we were told otherwise by some in the media and the House, who continually put pressure on the Minister of Education to close our schools for the sake of their own political advantage? They played politics with our children's education, and that is what I find regrettable. I am sure that the Member would agree.

Mr Allister: One of the most disgraceful episodes of the past year has been the playing of politics with our schools. We had what should have been a non-divisive issue turned into a wholly divisive issue about whether or not our schools should be opened or closed. The Republic of Ireland was doing some things, so Sinn Féin required that to be the position etc. Throughout this, the pawns, in many instances, have been our kids. That is not acceptable. That has to end. We need to get our children back into school.

Take the situation in England. Professor Whitty says that it is safe. I must say that I am unfamiliar with any evidence that primary schools are rampant breeding grounds for COVID. Professor Whitty says that it is safe and sound and to send them back. I think that it was Mr Givan who quoted that that was supposed to be the united view of the four nations' Chief Medical Officers. However, Dr McBride, on home turf, seems to say something quite different.

Forgive me, but I will make this point: the danger of our system of government is that the advice from medical experts gets corrupted by the politics. In a system such as Westminster's, when medical advisers say, "This is what needs to be done", the advice is taken and it is done. However, because of the unworkable system of mandatory coalition here, you end up with some mongrelisation of the proposition. You do a little bit of this and a little bit of that. No one ends up satisfied, and, certainly, the public are not well-served.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. I have shown considerable latitude. We are here to discuss three legislative regulations. I urge the Member to refer to those.

Mr Allister: Deputy Speaker, I was taking my cue from everyone else who has spoken in the debate, including some very significant and prominent people, such as a former Minister. I really do not think that I should be picked on, but I will certainly bear that —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. I assure the Member that I am not picking on him. I have always endeavoured to carry out this role in a consistent manner that is appropriate to the legislation that is in front of us. I hope that you recognise that I have given you considerable latitude already.

Mr Buckley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I ask for your confirmation on this. One of the regulations that we are discussing, SR 2021/18:

"amends the date that the Department of Health must review the need for restrictions and requirements imposed by ... the principal regulations to on or before 18 February 2021"

and

"amends the expiry date of the principal regulations to midnight on 5 March 2021."

Does that not therefore mean that we have the remit to discuss in the House today any of the regulations?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I have not heard that referred to.

Mr Allister: Mr Deputy Speaker, may I refer to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations, in which all of what we are discussing is rooted? Without those regulations, which are the overarching current regulations, we would not be having any of this debate. It is those regulations, in their various manifestations, that impose the different restrictions, and I want to address those restrictions, the logic for them and the need, or otherwise, for them.

I have dealt with the schools issue. I think that it was Mr Poots, and it is good to see him back, who referred to the fact that we hear much concern about people's mental health, and well might we, and about the advantage of the outdoors, yet, despite the fact that it is coming into springtime, the Executive keep our garden centres, where you get the very wherewithal for gardeners to engage in gardening, closed. The Executive say, "No. Bolt those doors. You'll not get in there. You'll not get your plants". Yes, you will get them if you go to a huge multinational supermarket, but you will not get them from the independent operator who depends on the few months from March to July for his survival. You will not get them from him. Why not? Where is the logic in closing our garden centres?

Where is the logic in closing our golf courses? We are told, "Take your exercise. Do all those things". I am not a golfer, but I can well understand that those who are cannot comprehend how it is that two, three or four people who are socially distanced cannot walk a golf course and play golf. Citizens can come along and walk the golf course with their dog, however. Where is the logic in that? If the regulations are ever to hold credibility and not begin to fray at the edges, surely they will have to be compellingly sensible. They will have to embrace common sense above all else. There is much work to be done to put things in order. We cannot go on as we are.

I hope that what the Prime Minister said yesterday will be a wake-up call for the Executive. We cannot allow a situation to develop in which the rest of the United Kingdom, most particularly the largest part of it, with almost similar R rates, is moving ahead towards freedom while we are enslaved by regulations that are well past their sell-by date. We really need to get with the programme, and the programme should be reopening the economy and getting us back to as much normality as possible, confident in the knowledge that we have an ever-evolving and increasing scheme of vaccination that must surely be doing the job that we were promised.

I hope that we will not be held back on that journey because of the adverse differential with the Irish Republic. I hope that the fact that the Irish Republic, as an EU country, has fallen way behind on vaccination will not be a reason for some to say, "Oh, Northern Ireland has to wait for it to catch up. We fear people coming in unvaccinated". Sorry, but if Northern Ireland, as part of the United

Kingdom, has had the great blessing and benefit of being able to get ahead with one of the best vaccination systems in the world, our people must see the advantage of that. If there is a problem from the Irish Republic, the answer lies in restrictions on entry from the Irish Republic. The gardai have shown that they are willing to restrict people going from North to South. Why are we being so diffident about people going from South to North, if that is a problem? If it becomes an identifiable issue, and there is a threat to our public health because of the low levels of vaccination in the Republic, I trust that the Health Minister will not shy away from bringing in regulations, which would probably come in his name, to introduce restrictions.

I notice that when there is a hard job to be done on this front, it tends to be the Health Minister who is sent here. Sometimes I think that advantage is taken of his good nature and his capacity to cope with these things. I say to the House in all seriousness that we really cannot go on as we are.

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member giving way. My point is about enforcement. I referenced it earlier in my contribution, but to put on the record, when I asked the Minister of Justice about this very issue, her response was:

“Such consideration would be a matter for the Department of Health, which is responsible for the health protection regulations. Any questions regarding the regulations should be directed to the Department of Health”.

Therefore, I trust that Mr Swann will bring this forward as it is his responsibility, according to the Minister of Justice’s response to my question.

Mr Allister: I am not sure whether the Minister of Justice was not engaged in a bit of a cop-out. I suppose that the regulations might appear in the name of the Minister of Health, but I would have thought that the Justice Minister would have an active part in promoting such regulations if they were thought necessary. We will, no doubt, hear from the Health Minister what his plans are, and I hope that we will hear an assurance from him that, if it proves necessary, he will not resile from it and will take those steps. That is if they are necessary and if this is about protecting us from COVID, politics-free, as it should be.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, before I go into my closing remarks, I want to make an announcement to the House with regard to COVID. Three confirmed cases of the South African variant of COVID-19 have been detected in Northern Ireland. Our overall assessment of the wider risk to the public remains low at this time. The PHA has set up an incident-management team and instigated a range of swift public health interventions, including intensive enhanced case finding and enhanced monitoring and surveillance. Our Public Health Agency has also provided support and advice to the individuals who have tested positive and will work directly with them to reinforce all necessary public health advice, including the requirement for the individuals and their contacts to self-isolate.

The identification of the South African variant does not mean that it will become prevalent, let alone dominant, in Northern Ireland. The Department and PHA officials continue to monitor the situation extremely closely and will take all necessary actions to assist in investigating and

managing the situation. I re-emphasise that all variants of the virus spread in the same way and that we can all help to stop them spreading by following the tried-and-tested public health advice.

I wanted to take the opportunity to update the House rather than Members hearing it elsewhere or through the press.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Swann: Yes.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for that update. It is a very worrying development, given the reported difficulties that it can create with regard to the vaccine. Can the Minister update us on what impact this might have on the restrictions that we are discussing and also on the find, test, trace, isolate and support approach to suppress the virus and this strain of it, along with all the others? What impact might this have on the vaccination programme?

Mr Swann: It will have absolutely no impact on the vaccination programme. We are looking at studies that show that any variant that has been detected so far has responded in an appropriate way to the vaccines that have been developed. Our test, trace and protect system has worked well; the Member knows that. There has been support from the PHA and the incident-management team, and we have been able to identify these cases through our pillar 1 and pillar 2 sampling. The three new cases are a group that is solely connected and solely managed, and we will take all the support measures necessary for that family. We will make sure that we identify where the cases came from and that the variant does not spread any further.

I say to Members not to be alarmed or to overreact, because the overall assessment from the Public Health Agency and departmental officials is that the wider risk to the community and public health remains low at this time and will remain managed by the experience that we already have. I wanted to update the House on that.

3.15 pm

I welcome today’s debate on SR18, SR27 and SR29, which are amendment Nos. 2, 3 and 4 of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021, and I genuinely thank Members for their contributions.

I will turn to some of the points that were made during the debate, which extended far beyond the three regulations before you were in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker, and despite your efforts to draw it back into line. Even though we are discussing regulations that have been about for a while, I always find that these debates give Members the opportunity to raise their concerns, queries and questions about where the Executive should take their next steps and what guidance and thought processes should be put into place. It is about looking not simply at what has been done but at what we can do and how we should manage and improve the regulations.

I think that it was in the first debate that I brought to the House on the regulations that I said that they were “draconian”, and Mr Allister gave us a history lesson on who Draco was and his impact. He was right, and I acknowledge the compliment that he paid at the end.

I often find myself bringing regulations to the House when they are hard to bring. When we move to the easing and opening-up, I am sure that I will be supported by ministerial colleagues who will take up their responsibilities to support me in bringing in what may be health regulations under the remit of the Health Department but are brought forward by me and my Department on behalf of the Executive.

Many Members suggested individual, worthy relaxations, such as plant nurseries, the opening of shops selling school shoes and clothes shops. What I want to emphasise is that, even though every one of those suggestions has its merits and may have only an incremental effect on virus transmission on its own, if we open up all those activities together, the cumulative effect can be very serious in terms of the number of social interactions and the potential for the virus to spread. The more social contacts an infected person has, the more rapidly the epidemic could take off again and overwhelm us. That is what we saw towards the end of last year and, unfortunately, got us into the situation that we are now in.

I think that everyone commented on and praised those working on the vaccine programme and the effect that it will have. It is an honour and a privilege to be Health Minister and to witness the dedication, work and delivery of the vaccine programme across Northern Ireland, with all parts of our health service coming together from GPs to trust set-ups and, hopefully, moving into community pharmacies as well.

I always try to balance hope with caution in that, when we have a vaccine programme that, in weeks, has seen large numbers being vaccinated, we do not lose the benefit that it brings. Mr Allister referred to — I think it was just the phraseology that he used — how the vaccine had taken us so far down the road. What I do not want to happen is that we stop halfway down the road and sit down and give up on the benefits that the vaccine programme can really bring when we give it time to embed.

We have vaccinated just under half a million people with their first dose in a number of weeks, so we have to give those people time to develop the antibodies and resilience to COVID.

It is not just a matter of getting a needle in your arm and everything being fine; it takes time for those to develop.

We have seen the positive outworkings of that in our care home programme, which started in December last year. Under that programme, first visits to all our care homes across Northern Ireland have now been completed, and second visits will soon be completed. We have seen a decrease in numbers. As of 11 January, there were 150 care homes with outbreaks. Today, there are 46. We see the benefit of the vaccine programme, but we also see the time that it takes for those individuals to really produce the benefits. We see the advancements and benefits that the vaccine programme brings.

I said to the Member that the answer would be the vaccine, and the Member can now see the benefits that it brings, but we cannot give up now and think that, because people are being vaccinated, the job is done. We have started a very important piece of work, and we must continue it to see the real benefit that it brings.

I will say this to the Member about the Republic of Ireland: I will not be held back by its vaccine programme. We are

part of the United Kingdom's vaccine programme. We pre-bought seven vaccines. I was criticised in the House for being part of that and was told that it would be a shambolic process. We now see that we took the right decisions at that time. We have also seen the threats that were brought about by the attempted invocation of article 16 and how that could have upset our vaccine programme. It did not.

I pay tribute to those people who are organising the vaccine programme and dealing with the logistics behind it and the challenges that it brings. As of yesterday, we have started to administer second doses of the vaccine. It is about how we manage the system by bringing forward the cohort of people who are to get their first dose while bringing forward those who are now to get their second dose for the enhanced protection that it will bring. It is also about managing the supply of two different vaccines that need two very different management systems. The vaccine brings hope — real hope. However, let us not, as, I think, Mr Robinson said, snuff out that hope and the light that it brings by running too quickly. Let us bring those benefits to the fore so that they can be embedded and we can see their true potential.

I will move on now to Members' contributions. The Committee Chair talked about officials coming forward to discuss these regulations when sometimes the Committee wants to talk about the next set of regulations. That is a challenge. We will work on how we look at the next set of regulations so that the discussions that the Executive will have are not breached while we make sure that we can give the Committee as much information as it needs. I think that Ms Ní Chuilín said that there is no accusation that we are holding information back; it is just about understanding what the Committee wants and needs. A large body of evidence is already available on the Department's website about the R paper that we talk about and produce on a weekly basis. As soon as the Executive receive that paper on a Thursday, it is published and up there, ready to go.

A number of Members asked about the next steps and our plan to get there. We have all heard both the First Minister and deputy First Minister commit in the House to the publication of that road map on 1 March. That was announced prior to the Prime Minister launching his road map last night. Once that has been developed and is published and out there, I am sure that the First Minister and deputy First Minister will bring it to the House for discussion. That will give indications on many of the asks that Members have brought forward, from youth sports to additional click and collect and retail.

The Department is also doing a piece of work on what our next rebuilding programme will look like. We took three months during the summer to re-engage lots of vital services. Mr Poots commented on that. Those many dedicated individuals want to get back to what they do best, which are their specialities, in order to support their patient cohort and so that we can re-engage the health service to support the people of Northern Ireland. We will do that best by reducing the number of people with COVID who we still have to support. At present, there are just under 400 inpatients with COVID in the hospital system; 322 at the height of the impact and 51 in ICU. That is still more than we have ever had previously. We have 70-odd funded ICU beds across Northern Ireland. We currently support an additional 70 at surge capacity. That takes up

an awful lot of capacity in the health service and amongst staff.

The Chair of the Committee talked about the hope that the vaccine has brought, but he also said that we must not squander or lose the benefits that it brings. I echo that comment.

Pam Cameron, the Deputy Chair, made comments about click and collect and looking at what is now essential or non-essential. The point has been made at the Executive that what is non-essential during a four-week lockdown becomes essential once that lockdown starts to expand. The Department for the Economy and the Minister for the Economy have done that work, and we have seen some of the recommendations in the proposals on click and collect. We will see them in the next iteration of restrictions.

Ms Ní Chuilín talked about anomalies. I never thought about children getting their feet measured. I have an eight-year-old and a 10-year-old, and, when we were looking at the regulations, we brought forward click and collect for school shoes and school clothes because that made sense. Measuring feet was not part of that, but it is now, and, as I say, the benefit of the discussions in the House is that we can see those anomalies and highlight them.

Ms Hunter talked about the investment and what we do now. It is about utilising the time that we have in the next number of weeks to invest in what we are doing, and we can then get that payback sooner. We can spend the benefit of the vaccination programme and the goodwill of our health staff only so many times before that support is no longer there. It is about how we make sure — I do not say this lightly — that this is our last lockdown. Let us do this one right. Let us come out of it gradually. Let us come out of it in a managed way. Let us come out of it while making sure that we are getting the benefits of the vaccination programme. Let us not rush out of this lockdown now, meaning that we have to rush into another one when we start to see an increase in cases and hospitalisations.

Ms Bradshaw made some comments. I am not sure, Mr Deputy Speaker, whether Ms Bradshaw gets to hear feedback or whether she is still on-screen. It is a new experience. She asked whether the Public Health Agency could publish where we are seeing those outbreaks. A format of that document went to the Executive last Thursday, and my intention is that the Public Health Agency will publish it as part of its weekly summary of outbreaks so that Members and others can see where those outbreaks are happening. She asked about the next round of reviews. Hopefully, the next round of reviews will also look at the Executive's pathway to recovery.

The Member mentioned her constituency and an issue that raised concerns for a short period last year in the Holylands. At that time, the Executive Office established a task force very quickly, which included the PSNI, Belfast City Council and the universities, to decide what support measures could be put in place for residents in the Holylands and to make sure that there was enforcement and compliance among those individuals so that they were following COVID regulations. That is coming out of today's debate. Ms Bradshaw has raised the issue previously, and we will take that forward, as well as highlighting it with other Executive colleagues.

I will move on to Mr Poots's contribution. I made a joke about having Edwin on my back earlier. It was light-hearted, and I am glad to see Edwin back. I would welcome him back to the Executive, because the challenge that he brought to the House during the debate is the same challenge that he brings to the Executive when we are discussing the regulations. That is useful and necessary, because our form of government should not simply be about complying. I have said this in here before: if anybody in the House thinks that I simply walk into the Executive meeting and get everything that I want every time, they are sadly mistaken. If only it were so. Mr Poots can confirm that.

Mr Poots mentioned the benefits of the vaccination programme. Again, I do not think that we should waste what is a world-leading vaccination programme. We should not lose the benefit that that is bringing as part of our response. The purchasing of the vaccines was so far-sighted, and we are now utilising them.

Mr Poots used a phrase that I used previously in the House: "COVID is the enemy". Mr Buckley took me to task when I used that phrase a number of months ago.

3.30 pm

Mr Buckley: I do not recall that.

Mr Swann: You do not recall that? I will get Hansard, Jonny. It is all right.

COVID is our enemy. It is not about health versus education. It is not about health versus the economy. It is not about health versus society. It is about COVID being the challenge for all of us in all those sectors. I think that it was Mr Poots who said that it was about getting a balance and dealing with the challenges that that balance and those decisions bring. When we come out of the current lockdown, let us, to use his phraseology, do it sensibly, not rampantly. We will take that approach. We are so close. It would be a waste to lose that.

As always, Mr Poots made a point about the normalisation of our health service. As a former Health Minister, he speaks about that from experience. Since this time last year — pre COVID — we have struggled with a lack of investment in our staff, our structures and the support that we need. We had a health service that was being run on a shoestring and was on its knees. We now need the Executive to acknowledge that and appropriately support everything that is needed to make sure that we have a health service that not only recovers from the pandemic but is fit for purpose as we get back to normal business. I think that Mr Poots's phrase was that we should "unleash our specialists": with the support of the anaesthetists and the theatre nurses, I would love to do that. However, I want to unleash other parts of our health service without unleashing another wave of COVID. We cannot afford to do that.

I will move on to Ms Ní Chuilín's contribution. Often, these debates serve as personal reminders of what the virus does to many people. Hearing in the House about the passing of a 42-year-old mother dispels the narrative that COVID is a virus that affects only the elderly and people with dementia: it does not. So many people in Northern Ireland and across the world have lost loved ones to what is a cruel, cruel virus.

Ms Ní Chuilín is no longer in the Chamber. She asked me what community engagement I have had, and I will supply that answer to her. The regulations allow support for mental health to continue through the health service and our voluntary mental health support groups, which help with a range of issues, including entering private homes to assist someone in distress. I will supply an update with those specifics to the Member.

Ms Ní Chuilín raised the anomalies that the regulations address. They are anomalies that were highlighted after the regulations were made, such as the measuring of feet for shoes. Such anomalies come up when we have discussions. When we look at the bare bones of what the regulations mean, we can address those anomalies.

Mr Givan has contributed to other debates on health regulations but maybe not in as detailed a way as he did today. There was some commentary about the headlines attributed to our Chief Medical Officer. What the Chief Medical Officer said was that “some restrictions” may continue, and I thank Mr Buckley for acknowledging that his words were taken out of context by some in the media to create the narrative that they wanted. It is often useful to read below the headline and past the tweet to see what our health officials are actually recommending.

Mr Givan asked for clarity on the statement on schools that was issued by the four Chief Medical Officers on 23 August last year. I am willing to share it. I think that the Chair of the Committee asked for it to be shared as well. In earlier commentary — I think that it was during Question Time — I said that there were strong grounds for looking at what has been said and believing that Professor Whitty had maybe been misquoted and that it is principally a reference to the joint CMO statement that was made last August on the return to school. It was made clear that the return to school was the best option from the child’s point of view, and that has never been in dispute. The issue is what schools being open means for wider society and the health service in terms of fuelling transmission.

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Minister’s giving way on that point and referencing a statement from August last year as being attributable to the four CMOs. In light of Professor Whitty’s statements yesterday about the unambiguous nature of the data around opening schools and the balance now being clearly in favour of complete reopening on 8 March for all children in all school settings, on what evidence is our CMO advising the Executive? I note that, at Question Time, the Minister indicated that that advice had not changed. Clearly, there is a divergence now between the Chief Medical Officer in England and the Chief Medical Officer in Northern Ireland. If we are to have confidence in the scientific and medical advice, we need to have an explanation of that divergence of opinion.

Mr Swann: The Member makes the point, and I have often said that I do not discuss conversations that will happen in the Executive prior to them happening. The Member’s party leader, as First Minister, said that she wants the issue to be discussed again at the next Executive meeting on Thursday. The Chief Medical Officer, as always, will make his presentation and his case at that point on his view of the science. The same science and detail is being looked at by the four CMOs. England has taken a very different approach from Scotland, from Wales and from us. It is about taking that balance. Mr Stalford has come in. It

is about Ministers taking that decision and the collective nature of our Executive as well.

That leads into some of the questions that were raised by Mr Allister about schools. I do not do this easily or lightly in regard to conversations at the Executive. There have been conversations about schools in today’s debate: schools are not included or mentioned in the regulations. The matter of schools is brought forward and discussed in a paper from the Education Minister, as it was last Thursday. That paper presented two options, one of which was adopted by the Executive as a whole as it was in the paper. That option was published by the First Minister and deputy First Minister last week and has been commented on since. Schools have always been in that discussion in the Executive: they are not part of these regulations.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Swann: Yes.

Mr Allister: To get absolute clarity: is the Minister saying that that product — namely, P1, P2 and P3 in and out and then years 12 to 14 in — was what the Education Minister asked for in his paper, or was his proposition doctored in some way to produce that?

Mr Swann: We are not talking about doctoring. There were conversations between my Department and the Department of Education on what we saw as a staged response to education, bringing different cohorts back and allowing us to assess what effect that would have on transmission. I would say what effect that would have on the R number, but I do not want to take the Member down that discussion again.

What cohorts were brought back and in what order was not a priority for my Department. It was about the numbers, the structures, the number of movements and the effect that that would have on the transmissibility of the virus in Northern Ireland. The product of the paper that was brought by the Education Minister to the Executive was accepted by the Executive. There was challenge and commentary, but there was no vote or division on it towards the end.

Mr Givan also raised the issue of enforcement of the regulations. As Health Minister, the enforcement of some of the regulations and the reaction of bodies that should be enforcing them as to whether they see doing so as being within their remit has been a running sore for me for a very long time.

Some papers, which Mr Allister referred to, have been brought forward on where ministerial responsibility lies. The responsibility for these regulations lies with me. They have been brought forward in my name. Many papers and propositions are brought to the Executive by various Ministers and Departments on specific issues. Papers on travel were brought forward by the Justice Minister, and she has in the past moved health regulations in the House. It is therefore about collective engagement and a collective assessment of the health regulations in their entirety. In the past, I have brought to the Executive recommendations on restrictions on travel that have not been accepted. In answer to Mr Allister’s other question, however, should restricting travel South/North become a necessity in order to manage the virus, I will not hesitate in doing that.

Mr McNulty’s contribution contained specific asks about the return of youth sport, and sport in general, which is

something that he campaigns for very strongly and in which he has a great personal interest. Again, I refer the Member to the fact that a document will be produced on 1 March. It will come forward with the support of the whole Executive, including his own party's Minister. It is, however, about introducing safe and controlled measures so that all the small pieces do not add up to an increase in the spread of the virus.

Mr Chambers talked about appreciation for our health advisers and the health service in general. The health service is something that we should not underestimate, and I do not think that anybody in the House does. An attack on our health service, however veiled, referring to health officials or health advisers, is felt across the service and is taken personally by many as a challenge to what they are doing. Staff are edgy and tired, having been through the mill for a number of months. This is about the support that the House can give as well.

That ends my commentary on the majority of Members' contributions. Mr Allister was the last to speak, but I addressed a number of his points in my general comments. I hope that I have addressed as many comments and answered as many queries from Members as possible.

In closing, I would like to do two things. First, I express thanks and appreciation from all of us to all those who are working across our health service during this most difficult time. I thank the public for adhering to the guidance and regulations that are in place. I know that it is not easy, so I commend the public for their strong support and contribution to reducing the impact of COVID-19 in our community.

Secondly, I remind everyone that the most important action that people can take to limit the spread of the virus is still to stay at home, to limit our contact with others, and to isolate from others immediately and seek a coronavirus test if they have any symptoms. Doing that has made a difference, and it continues to do so, so I am asking people please not to give up now. We have talked about the hope that our vaccination programme is bringing, and we can see that credibly in care homes, in the reduction in hospital admissions and in the decrease in the number of over-60s who are testing positive. Let us not lose the benefit that our actions are bringing. As I said, they have made a difference and continue to do so, so please do not give up. I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The motion has already been debated.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved. — [Mr Swann (The Minister of Health).]

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The motion has already been debated.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved. — [Mr Swann (The Minister of Health).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments while we make changes at the Table.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Private Members' Business

North/South and East-west Trade

Dr Archibald: I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges the importance of North/South and east-west trade to our local economy; notes that the EU-UK Joint Committee is working to reduce trade barriers and to prevent the creation of new barriers so that businesses can trade freely within the legal framework agreed by the Westminster Parliament and European Commission; further notes the new trading reality as a result of the end of the Brexit transition period; further acknowledges our continued access to the European single market, with its 450 million consumers; and calls on the Executive to develop an overarching economic strategy, including the establishment of an Executive subcommittee on the economy, to give a clear vision and direction to our representative agencies, including Invest NI, InterTradelreland, Northern Ireland Co-operation Overseas, the Northern Ireland Executive Office in Brussels and the Northern Ireland bureaux in the United States of America, Canada and China.

Mr 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 a further 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

Dr Archibald: I welcome the opportunity to move this motion today. It is important to discuss and debate the new trading reality that we now face and that our businesses have to deal with because of Brexit. For four and a half years, businesses and everyone else here have had to deal with uncertainty and lack of clarity around the trading arrangements that would result once the negotiations and transition period ended. This motion is about trade, so most of my remarks will refer to businesses, but, equally, our community and voluntary organisations, young people, farmers and rural communities have all faced the same uncertainty. It is now past time that we had some stability and certainty. Businesses and their representatives have been very clear that they want clarity. The motion outlines, and I have said repeatedly in the Chamber and elsewhere, that the ability to trade across these islands is vital to our local economy, North/South and east-west. It is interlinked, and across this, our highly integrated supply chains underpin much of our trade to Britain and elsewhere.

However, it is important to put some facts on the record because we are told repeatedly in the Chamber, including by the Economy Minister, that we sell more to Britain than to everywhere else combined. That is no longer true. In 2018, according to the latest data that we have, NISRA statistics show that sales to Britain were worth £10.6 billion — down 9.3% on the previous year. Total sales to the South, the rest of the EU and the rest of the world under EU trade agreements were worth £11.2 billion — up 8.1%. Sales to the EU were up 20.9%. More businesses trade North/South than with Britain. North/South trade has been increasing by about 4% year-on-year for the past 20 years.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: Sorry, I have a lot to get through.

In 2018, cross-border trade was worth €7.3 billion. Figures from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in the South, which are available in advance of NISRA's, show that South to North trade increased by 6.9% in 2019. These are positive trends that we should continue to build on, and we can do so because of the special status afforded to the North by the protocol, which gives us continuing access to the EU single market. InterTradelreland has had considerable contact over the past six weeks, with queries about how to develop supply chains across the island, opportunities to trade and how to have a presence North and South. Invest NI also reports interest being shown by businesses that want to take advantage of the ability to sell to both Britain and the EU.

Undoubtedly, challenges have been faced by businesses since the beginning of this year. No one denies that. It was inevitable that a major change in trading relationships would result in difficulties, and this, of course, was compounded by the lateness in reaching the trade and cooperation agreement, which gave businesses only a week to prepare for the new arrangements. It has been well-rehearsed but is worth repeating that a lot of the difficulties around the supply of goods to the North were due to the lack of preparedness of British businesses. That needs to be addressed by the British Government and agencies.

Businesses here have been responding to the new arrangements. Some local businesses have availed themselves of new opportunities to sell products locally because of issues with supply coming from Britain due to that lack of preparation. It is a positive thing for those businesses to fill those voids. Others have quickly reoriented supply chains locally or to the EU. Last week, a Manufacturing NI survey indicated that a quarter of businesses have already done that. Again, that is benefiting suppliers here.

Where there have been issues with the operation and implementation of the protocol, we have seen solutions through the efforts and willingness of business representatives and political and diplomatic efforts to find flexibilities and solutions. Efforts need to continue to find those, because, despite the protestations of Members opposite and others, the protocol is here to stay. It was negotiated and agreed by the British Government, and, over the past couple of weeks, we have heard commitments again and again to its proper implementation reiterated by the British Government and the European Commission.

We need to see the mechanisms of the protocol properly utilised. The Specialised Committee and the joint consultative working group are the bodies that are meant to be used to deal with any issues arising from the protocol. We also need to see the flexibilities that have been agreed to being fully used. The British Government, for example, need to provide access to their data and information where they are required.

Businesses have been clear that they want and need stability and clarity and as much simplification of processes as possible, so our focus should be on working to achieve those and on dealing with some of the issues that have not yet been resolved, including data and the

recognition of professional qualifications, in order to help the smoother operation of business across these islands.

We also need to focus, beyond dealing with the immediacy, on how we can benefit from the protections afforded to the North through the protocol and build on those protections and on the opportunities to bring investment and jobs to the North because of our ability to continue to trade east-west and to have continuing access to the EU single market with its 450 million consumers. Those are two of the biggest economies in the world.

We need to be given a positive vision for that. Our motion calls for the development of:

“an overarching economic strategy, including the establishment of an Executive Sub-Committee on the Economy, to give a clear vision and direction to our representative agencies”,

to send out a message that we are open for business, but, most importantly, to offer the support to our local businesses and entrepreneurs to give them the tools that are needed to take advantage of opportunities to build and strengthen local supply chains across the island.

In a year that has seen global trade stumble, it is vital that, in planning the economic recovery from COVID, we enable our talented local business people to grow and develop their businesses and create sustainable jobs.

The overarching economic strategy needs to act as a driver for our local economy both in the recovery from COVID-19 and in responding to the new trading reality. It needs to be a cross-Executive strategy because, when it comes to the new trading realities, there are important roles for all Departments and Ministers, and, similar to yesterday, when it comes to setting out a vision for our economy, that needs cross-Executive support and buy-in from all Ministers. That is why we proposed an Executive subcommittee on the economy involving all relevant Ministers. It is particularly so if we want to deliver on the greener, fairer recovery that has been talked about by many parties in the Chamber. For that reason, we will not support the amendment to the motion, which is directed at the Executive Office.

As political leaders, it is now incumbent on us to show the way forward and to emerge from the very difficult year that we have experienced because of the pandemic and from the past five years of uncertainty created by Brexit. We need parties to get on board with that in order to end the stunts and the unhelpful and dangerous raising of tensions.

As we deal with the new reality, it is important that there are strong working relationships across these islands North/South and east-west. I am sure that I do not need to remind Members of Ministers' statutory responsibilities in that regard.

We now have an opportunity to build a stronger local economy that is part of an all-island economy that brings the potential for greater prosperity for all citizens across the island. That is something that we should all get on board with. I urge Members to support our motion today and send a clear signal to our businesses and communities that we are going to deliver the certainty and stability that have been sadly missing since the referendum in 2016.

Mr Speaker: I call Matthew O'Toole to move the amendment.

Mr O'Toole: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after “economic strategy” and insert:

“which recognises the opportunities created by the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland in giving businesses located in Northern Ireland open access to both the European Union single market and UK market, and also recognises the need to create a fairer and more regionally balanced economy as we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic; and further calls on the Executive Office to provide clear vision and direction in pursuit of these objectives to our representative agencies, including Invest NI, InterTradeIreland, Northern Ireland Co-operation Overseas, Northern Ireland Executive office in Brussels, and the Northern Ireland bureaux in the United States of America, Canada and China.”

Mr Speaker: The Member will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr O'Toole: First of all, I welcome today's motion. We in the SDLP do not disagree with anything in the motion per se; indeed, we are glad to see Sinn Féin join the effort to promote and sell the value of both the European single market and our dual market access. We have been doing that for the last few weeks, so we are glad that we have its support.

Our amendment makes for a clearer and stronger message from the Assembly, in part because it is important to answer very directly the claim of some on the Benches opposite that those of us who think that the protocol is the only viable solution to the situation in which we find ourselves somehow do not care about east-west links or the importance of the British market to our local economy. That is simply wrong. Our amendment directly addresses that misapprehension by stressing the importance of both the UK and EU markets.

4.00 pm

The amendment places a duty on the Executive Office to drive this work forward rather than simply delegating it to an Executive subcommittee. There are umpteen Executive subcommittees, and it is a matter of some legitimate debate as to whether they are useful vehicles for achieving urgent progress on policy. Given that there is already a Brexit subcommittee, in addition to a renewable heat incentive (RHI) subcommittee — I mention in parenthesis — and that no one would accuse the Executive of having had a particularly coherent approach to Brexit, we are entitled to ask whether a subcommittee would be a truly useful tool.

Our amendment explicitly mandates the Executive to make regional rebalancing a core part of this strategy and to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the protocol. Some parts of our jurisdiction that have traditionally not been as well developed as they should have been — most notably, the north-west — are particularly close to the EU market into which we can sell. The EU is a market of 450 million people into which, it has previously been mentioned, we have unfettered access.

Having explained the purpose of our amendment, I come to the substance of my remarks. I want to dwell for a second on the notion of this place being at a crossroads. Famously, a unionist Prime Minister of this place, more than half a century ago, talked about Ulster being at a crossroads. That is not the type of crossroads that I am talking about, although I am tempted to mention that some of the people who opposed him back then are still angry today. Nor am I talking about the 1970s show set in a Birmingham motel. Some might compare this institution to a badly acted soap opera, constantly on the verge of collapse, but not I. Some in the Chamber are old enough to remember both those references, but they are not what I am talking about.

My party and I did not want Brexit, and we would have preferred the much more fulsome protection offered by the original backstop to the people of Northern Ireland, which would have avoided much if not all of the east-west disruption that we have seen in recent weeks. However, we are where we are. Although there are real, short-term issues that we need to resolve around movements of goods from east to west — I do not seek to underplay any of those — there will always be issues when decades of seamless trade are disrupted at short notice. However, Northern Ireland is now at a crossroads between two major markets: the UK market, into which we can move goods seamlessly, and the EU single market of nearly half a billion people. Any product, whether a piece of technology, a life-saving drug or a food product, can move seamlessly from this jurisdiction into not only the EU single market of nearly half a billion people but the British market. That is not just unique in these islands; it is unique in the entire continent of Europe.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the EU demonstrated its commitment to the free movement of medical supplies when it invoked article 16 to try to strangle off ours?

Mr O'Toole: I am pleased that the Member asks that question because it gives me the opportunity to correct him. The EU did not invoke article 16.

Mr Stalford: It did.

Mr O'Toole: No, it did not. It corrected —.

Mr Stalford: It did [*Interruption.*]

Mr O'Toole: It did not.

Mr O'Toole: Let me move on.

Dr Aiken: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Toole: Sorry, excuse me, I have not given way, so I will continue.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Dr Aiken: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Just for the record to be correct, we should acknowledge the fact that the European Union invoked article 16. That is a matter of record.

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order. It is a matter for debate.

Mr O'Toole: It certainly is a matter for debate. As we go on, we will see that, unfortunately, too many Members

opposite are all too willing to get very angry, very quickly about the European Union, and far too slow to come up with options and realistic proposals to boost the chances of our economy and resolve the issues that we face.

I am not being Panglossian. There are problems that need to be resolved. Like others, I have dealt with queries and concerns that vary from VAT on used cars to steel tariffs. We dealt with those, one by one, and addressed them. I know just how much of a challenge the last month has been for our logistics sector, retailers and small businesses. As has been said, we need to see the Joint Committee, the joint consultative working groups and the panoply of consultative bodies work so that we can make the protocol work in a way that is effective and seamless for people and businesses here, and it can do that. There is goodwill. Those who say that there is no goodwill from the European Union are, I am sure, for their own political reasons, choosing to peddle a different line. That is up to them.

When we are talking about these things, it is important to point out that the problems are mounting in Britain, too. Some in the Chamber would have us believe that the protocol is the root of all evil. I am afraid that the root of all the problems is Brexit. The fashion industry in GB is warning the UK Government that it could be decimated by barriers to trade that have been thrown up by the UK's new relationship with the EU; Cornish fishermen, who were promised an amazing universe of post-Brexit opportunity, are facing ruin because they cannot get their products to market on the continent; and world-leading arts organisations, such as the National Theatre, are in crisis because they fear that they may never again be able to tour on the continent because of the complexities in securing work visas. There is silence on the Benches opposite, where I see that eyes are averted. This is the reality. I am afraid that it is true. We hear repeatedly that the protocol is the source of all evil and that it has created all of these problems. I am afraid that it is Brexit that has created all of these problems. We have disrupted just less than half a century of complex trade flows and interlinked economies, and that has consequences. The damage being done by Brexit across the UK economy is real and deep, and it was both predictable and predicted. Forgive me, therefore, if I push back at the notion being traded by some in the Chamber that the protocol is the root of the challenges that we face. The root — the poison root — is Brexit.

The good news is that, because of our unique position, we have some protection from some of the impacts. We have something else, something that we have never had before: a competitive advantage. Not only do we have seamless access for goods into the UK and EU markets but people born here are entitled to UK and EU citizenship and therefore have a permanent right to work in the UK and EU markets. That is a unique position. That is why my party has written to all relevant investment agencies and Departments across these islands, and in Brussels, to ensure that they work together to sell our unique position. You do not need to take my word for it, because Invest NI is already doing just that. It knows more than most about the damaging impacts of Brexit, because it has lost tens of millions of pounds in EU funding. We have written to not just Invest NI, but the Industrial Development Authority (IDA) in Dublin, InterTradelreland, the Department for International Trade in London and the director-general of trade at the European Commission, because we want

to see a joined-up approach to taking advantage of the opportunities that we find at our fingertips.

We have outlined specific areas of potential growth, one of which is obvious: replacing GB food producers in the continental market. As I have said in the Chamber before, Scottish langoustines, Welsh lamb and Somerset Cheddar cannot get to market. Our Portavogie prawns, Sperrins lamb and Coleraine Cheddar can replace those products. We can be doing that, and we are already doing it in an entire continent of opportunity for our food producers. Why would we spurn that? We also have life sciences and pharma. We already have a dynamic life sciences and pharmaceutical sector here. That is a highly regulated sector. It needs seamless access and regulatory certainty to be able to get into the UK and EU markets. It has that; it has that because of the protocol. Why would we spurn that? Finally, as touched on by the Member who spoke previously, Caoimhe Archibald, there is green energy and low-carbon manufacturing. We are at the crossroads. The European green deal is a decade-long initiative across the EU on the transition to a low-carbon economy and what Boris Johnson keeps calling, “a green industrial revolution”. I do not know whether it will come to that, but, if it does, we are at the hinge point; we are at the crossroads of those agendas. Why are we not selling ourselves as a place where low-carbon technology can be manufactured and find its way seamlessly into both markets?

For too long, we have thought of our unique society as being just a complexity. Our uniqueness does not need to simply be a hang-up. We can benefit from our unique status; we can benefit from being different, distinct and special; and we can benefit from being at the crossroads of two major markets.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: We can grasp the competitive advantage that we have. Let us do it.

Mr Buckley: The motion rightly focuses on the engine room of the Northern Ireland economy — North/South trade, east-west trade and worldwide trade — but the motion is a guise for what Members have said in relation to support for the Northern Ireland protocol and the apparent land of milk and honey that comes from it that parties are advocating. The parties opposite know full well the doublespeak that they advocate and the damage to east-west trade via the protocol, and it is important that we challenge the assertions.

An academic article published by Queen's and Ulster University economists that analysed how the trade in goods was impacted on by the new internal UK trade frontier shows that Northern Ireland buys more goods from the UK than from the Republic of Ireland, the EU and the rest of the world combined.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buckley: Absolutely.

Mr Stalford: Does the Member agree that it demonstrates that some Members seemingly have a higher allegiance to the European Union than to their constituents and are prepared to inflict this suffering on them?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Buckley: Thank you. Indeed, the Member points out a useful point.

Dr Birnie and Dr Brownlow's article for the Economics Observatory said:

“Optimists argue that the NI economy will eventually be buoyed up by having the best of both worlds: ‘unfettered access’ to the GB market while still being part of the EU’s single market. This becomes less likely to the extent that persistent frictions GB-to-NI lead to higher costs associated with the new regulatory environment.”

That new regulatory environment was brought about by the protocol.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buckley: No, I will continue.

This is the reality. Protocol sycophants in the House, namely those in the SDLP, Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party, and, indeed, politicians from the Republic of Ireland tell us that the fettering of trade with our largest trading block — the United Kingdom internal market — is in some way good for the Northern Ireland economy and in some way good for our businesses. We are told to dial down the rhetoric. Does anybody remember their actions throughout the Brexit process, such as the dressing up of toy soldiers at the borders, the smashing of sledgehammers against brick walls and Mr Varadkar going to the Europeans to show the damage of border posts and the potential threat? Meanwhile, parties opposite trailed off to the European Union to have champagne with Monsieur Barnier and so on to talk about a protocol, all to the detriment of the Northern Ireland economy. Yet, they come to the House today with a motion that talks up the potential benefits and the importance of east-west trade. It is almost a case of, “Come into the parlour, said the spider to the fly” from the parties opposite.

Unionists remember full well what the protocol means. I listened to Mr O'Toole talk about the positive engagement from the European Union. We remember the comments of leading EU diplomat Martin Selmayr that losing Northern Ireland is the price that the UK should pay for Brexit, so we do not take lectures from the Members opposite on the goodwill that Europe has shown. Trade is impacted by the protocol, and we have sacrificed, by means of the protocol, our trading east-west for the fantasy of North/South trade.

Let us examine the twisted logic of the pro-protocol parties. In times gone by, they were the stoutest defenders of the Belfast Agreement, yet the reality is that, only a number of weeks ago, they allowed the big, bad Tories, by means of the Secretary of State, to tamper with one of the key tenets of the Belfast Agreement, that being cross-community consent, with not even a whimper and not even an eyelid batted. The reality is that trade by means of the protocol is damaging to Northern Ireland business. We cannot allow the distortion put forward by members of the SDLP and others that, in some way, the protocol benefits Northern Ireland. We can all see through that. We have only to talk to our businesses to ask them where they feel the friction and where they feel the hurt right now. It is with their largest trading partner, that being the internal market of the United Kingdom. That needs to be addressed.

I hope that, as time goes on, the Members opposite will come to realise that, because I have noticed a dialling-down of the rhetoric when it comes to their support for a rigorous implementation of the protocol. Members of

the House voted for that, with opposition from unionist parties. They did not want to listen to unionist concerns and to business concerns. There is no doubt that the protocol breaches the constitutional and trading settlement for Northern Ireland. It is an impediment to our trade. I therefore hope that, in the days ahead, the Members opposite will come to realise that and seek solutions that will bin this protocol so that we can look to better trading days for the people of Northern Ireland.

4.15 pm

Dr Aiken: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing the motion to the Assembly today and the SDLP for tabling its amendment. It has taken quite a long time, but I am glad to see that they recognise the importance of both North/South and east-west trade. My party has said for three years that we need to get an arrangement that works so that we can have frictionless trade North/South and east-west. Here is the reality: the Northern Ireland GDP and market represents 0.02% of the combined markets of the United Kingdom and the European Union. If ever there was a place to put into practice the importance of no borders North/South or east-west, it was here, in order to demonstrate a commitment to the future of Northern Ireland and a proper commitment to the Belfast Agreement. How can bringing across bare-root trees to Northern Ireland possibly be interfering with the European market of half a billion people?

It has been 54 days since the protocol was introduced. Yesterday, export health certificates came in for the first time. I want to read into the record the remarks made by Richard Ramsey, the well-respected Ulster Bank economist. He said:

“Meanwhile, the rollout of red tape linked to the new Brexit arrangements will hinder Northern Ireland’s economic recovery by adding costs to business and restricting trade ... it finds itself on the wrong side of a regulatory sea-border which has effectively redrawn the map of the UK’s single market and customs union.”

Might I remind everyone that Northern Ireland is, or was, a fully integrated, interdependent and interconnected part of the United Kingdom. The entire Northern Ireland market — manufacturing, logistics, agribusiness and the rest — is based on what some of us knew in the past as a circular trade. Members will have heard me say in the Assembly many times, as the ex-chief executive of the British Irish Chamber of Commerce, that the billion euros a week worth of trade North/South and east-west was, in fact, a fully circular trade. That circular trade has been fundamentally damaged by the Irish Sea border and the Northern Ireland/Ireland protocol.

Mr O’Toole: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Given that the Member has mentioned Richard Ramsey’s comments, will he agree that, by definition, GB’s recovery from the COVID crisis will also be hampered by increased trade barriers with the EU? Whatever he thinks about the Irish Sea border, it is Brexit that has caused additional trade barriers to be erected and extra costs for businesses.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. The Member will have no problems whatsoever, as someone who

believed very strongly that we should have remained, with the major implication being that the damage has been done, but that is past. The issue that we now have to deal with is the Irish Sea border and the implications that that has for Northern Ireland, and for every single one of us, our companies and our consumers.

As you said, you are looking for particular solutions, and you mentioned other parties. I have to remind the Assembly that, as leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, I have written to all the other parties on several occasions. Over the past couple of years, when the Executive was in position, I asked them to join together to take a combined approach to make sure we would not have something like the Irish Sea border. I must say thank you to Sinn Féin, as it was the only party that bothered to reply to me.

The fact that it was not a particularly polite reply and that it reminded me of your position and how facile you thought mine was is neither here nor there. There was no response from the SDLP, the Alliance Party or the DUP.

What we are dealing with right now — 54 days in — is a significant problem that is getting worse every day. In the next couple of weeks, we will have to deal with more and more implications. We in the Assembly will be presented with legislation that will be enacted in Northern Ireland that we have no say in whatsoever. We will not be able to amend it; we will hardly be able to scrutinise it. The Examiner of Statutory Rules will bring things before us that she has absolutely no say in whatsoever. I have written to the Attorney General in an attempt to get some clarity on the legality of that. We will have no say in over 60% of the legislation that will come to Northern Ireland, and yet here we are, tinkering around the edges and somehow believing that more protocol is the solution. In fact, the protocol is the problem. The sooner we recognise that the protocol is the problem, the sooner we can move on and improve the situation.

I have not heard anybody in the Assembly say that the Irish Sea border is in any way a good thing. I have not heard anybody in Northern Ireland say that the Irish Sea border is helping Northern Ireland. I regret to say that we are now in a situation —

Mr Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Dr Aiken: — where things will get progressively worse.

Mr Dickson: This is round 2 of the circular debate that we seem to have in the Chamber. It rarely takes us forward.

I support the motion and the amendment and welcome the opportunity to do so. For those who thought that Brexit was over at the end of last year, the reality is that it has just begun. There was never any such thing as a good or sensible Brexit. People across the United Kingdom are experiencing that. We are not alone in the difficulties being experienced in relation to trade. Leaving the single market brought trade friction, reams of red tape, and loss of opportunities, both social and economic.

The Alliance Party takes a practical and pragmatic approach to these matters. We recognise that the protocol is an inevitable result of the United Kingdom’s pursuit of a very hard Brexit. That pursuit was supported wholeheartedly by the DUP. We supported the original backstop, which would have seen no new borders. That was a plan that the DUP sank with much fanfare.

Nonetheless, as expected, there are issues with how the protocol operates. My party and, in particular, our Member of Parliament, Stephen Farry, has been working hard to engage in and resolve those issues. However, we will not fix the problems through media stunts, court appearances and boycotts; it will require diplomacy and constructive engagement. I encourage everyone to work to that end. That is how —.

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: I need to continue through the speech.

That is how we resolve politics. That is how we should learn to resolve politics in this country.

One key point of friction is sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) checks. It is bizarre that a country with a direct border with the EU has more stringent SPS rules on export to the EU than New Zealand. However, let us be clear: that is the United Kingdom Government's fault for not seeking an agreement. It is red tape for Northern Ireland and GB-based businesses as well. Many have found that their inability to trade easily into the single market is a sharp reminder of the trade barriers that exist outside the world's largest market.

I welcome the Economy Minister's change of heart from Tuesday to Wednesday last week; she has now indicated support for Swiss-style arrangements in regard to SPS rules. I note that organisations such as the Ulster Farmers' Union support that as well. I hope that our Executive will speak with one voice on it and call on the United Kingdom Government to pursue a comprehensive veterinary agreement with the EU. As I have said, we all knew that Brexit would be bad for the United Kingdom economy, not just the Northern Ireland economy. Many businesses in Great Britain have had to give up on exporting to the EU or have had to relocate. However, we do not face the same barriers, and that brings the potential upside to this. There are those who criticise the protocol, but there are advantages for us. Businesses based in Northern Ireland have full and direct access to the UK market and the EU single market for goods. It cannot be denied that this is a unique and considerable advantage that no other part of the world has. In fact, we have heard over the past few days that Invest Northern Ireland — others have repeated it in the Chamber — has had increased enquiries on that basis. That is an encouraging sign.

That brings me to the severe need for a comprehensive economic recovery strategy for Northern Ireland. If we are genuinely to build Northern Ireland's economy for the future post COVID, it is our job to actively work towards a prosperous, sustainable and forward-looking society. Stop dragging us backwards. The economy and social security for everyone are what we need to concentrate on. Right now, we are in a situation of drift. Our future prosperity requires us to be practical and to work to maximise our competitive advantages. There are many such advantages, including our dual access. Denial and drift simply will not do. People need to take responsibility for Brexit. It is somewhat surreal that those who called for a hard Brexit and dismissed the obvious trade friction that would result now lament the red tape and bureaucracy that is being faced. They brought that upon us; they certainly did not put it on the side of a bus.

We all need to face the reality: hard Brexit brought the protocol. We must work with what we have. Unless

the United Kingdom Government can make a UK-wide agreement that makes the protocol unnecessary, we will need to look for long-term solutions for Northern Ireland to streamline our trade east-west and take advantage of the tangible benefits of full access to the EU market.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Dickson: Geographically, we are an island on the edge of Europe. We do not need to be peripheral in economic terms. The new trading reality needs to make us the pivot point for trade in Europe.

Mr Stalford: As the previous Member who spoke indicated, this is a somewhat circular debate. I am at a loss to understand what the party opposite hopes to achieve by bringing non-enforceable motions like this before the House week in, week out, but that is its prerogative of course.

Some comments that have been made in the debate merit response. The previous Member who spoke talked about the right of people to test the law on these issues. I seem to recall members of the Alliance Party, on several occasions, scurrying in and out of the High Court in Belfast testing the law on Brexit. Indeed, I think that a legal case was even taken to prevent article 50 from being invoked. If unionists choose to test the law in court, that is their absolute right. I commend the Member for North Antrim and my former boss, Mr Jim Allister, and Baroness Hoey for the action that they are taking to test the law in this area, because it is important.

Throughout this process and when we debate motions like this, it is clear that ideological rather than economic considerations are to the fore. I think that some Members opposite are suffering a form of political Stockholm syndrome. The people who are determined to inflict higher costs on consumers and make it more difficult to run a business are the people whom the Members opposite will rise to their feet to speak in defence of.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: Just give me two seconds.

I find that incredible. I also must disagree with the contention that the situation that we now face is the consequence of Brexit. No; it is not. It is the consequence of Brexit denied to this part of the United Kingdom. The parties opposite, who scurried in and out of Barnier's office in Brussels demanding these provisions, made this.

Let us also be clear that a none too subtle threat of violence was used to achieve these provisions. That is indisputable given that we had performing street-theatre troupes at the border, people dressed up as soldiers, and the Irish Prime Minister showing pictures of a bombed border post. A none too subtle threat of violence was used to deliver these provisions.

4.30 pm

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He mentioned prioritising ideology above the economy. I know that he originally supported Brexit and was entitled to do so, so will he indicate which he thinks he prioritised in supporting it? Was it ideology over the economy? If it was the economy, will he outline some of the economic benefits that have been realised thus far from Brexit?

Mr Stalford: I liked the concept of free trade with the rest of the world. That is why I supported leaving the European Union, which is an ever-diminishing bloc in the world economy. When we joined, western Europe accounted for something like 35% of the world economy. Today that figure is less than 20%. It is a diminishing market, and the allegiance that some wish to show to a diminishing market is for them to justify. I supported the United Kingdom getting out into the rest of the world. To be fair, the motion refers to “China”, India, “the United States of America” and other markets for us. I absolutely want to associate myself with that element of the motion, but, unfortunately, it is worded in such a way that means that we will not vote for it or the amendment.

The protocol is damaging and dangerous to business. People talk about removing barriers to trade, but those are the barriers to trade that some of the parties opposite openly campaigned to have put in place. They own them; they made them; they demanded them. The motion refers to the protocol being:

“agreed by the Westminster parliament and European Commission”.

Let me tell you who it is not agreed by: it is not agreed by the unionist people of Northern Ireland. The concept of parallel consent that has governed, or supposedly governed, this place since the fall of the old Stormont Parliament — reference was made to Captain O'Neill — means that the two major communities can move forward only in parallel together. The protocol drives a coach and horses through the concept of parallel consent.

It was very telling to me that the motion that demanded the “rigorous implementation” of the protocol was passed by the House without a single unionist member voting for it. It speaks volumes to me that the second that people who for many, many years insisted that parallel consent was an inviolable principle of how this place was to be governed had a majority, out went parallel consent. It is for Members to justify that and how it squares with their previously stated positions. Anyone looking at this in a reasonable or fair way would conclude that it does not have the consent of the unionist people of Northern Ireland, nor shall it ever. Motions like this can pass in the House presently. I hope that in a few years' time we have a sufficient number of unionist Members elected to the House in order to banish the protocol and free our people from living under it any further.

Ms Ennis: I welcome the opportunity to speak to Sinn Féin's motion. I am old enough to remember when the DUP told Sinn Féin, the SDLP, the Alliance and others that we were engaging in Project Fear when we articulated our justified concerns over Brexit and the impact that it would have on our people and our economy. We were accused of peddling prophecies of doom. That is why I and, I think, the vast majority of people find it so galling that now the DUP and others are using that same rhetoric to undermine the very instrument that has been put in place to protect us from the worst aspects of the type of Brexit that was argued for, voted for and delivered courtesy of the DUP. The protocol is not perfect, but, unfortunately, it is necessary. It avoids a hard border on the island and protects our peace agreement and our all-island economy. It is legally binding, and it is here to stay.

Much has been made of recent EU blunders by Members who seem determined to keep walking us into political crises. I suggest to those Members that the least that they could do after foisting their hard Brexit on us is to join the rest of us as we attempt to find solutions for businesses here and mitigate the worst impact of Brexit on our economy. We have had some success in resolving the potential impact on the second-hand motor trade, for example, but it is clear that support for businesses in terms of the British Government's level of preparedness was not there. The trader support scheme and other related schemes clearly failed in their mission to properly prepare and inform businesses here and in Britain on the upcoming changes. That is endemic of a wider failure of leadership at every level in the British Government. This institution must therefore step in and fill that vacuum. Members must lead from the front and steer our economy in the right direction.

In a debate like this, it is important to look at the facts and the reality of where we are and where we need to go. We are in the middle of a double whammy impact on our lives and economy. COVID and Brexit have combined to deliver the biggest trading shock that these islands have experienced in decades. We are in no position to cut ourselves off from any trading avenues, be that North/South or east-west.

In the past few weeks, the Members opposite have suddenly become very exercised about the impact that Brexit will have on east-west trade, which totally ignores the fact that the destabilising effect of the Brexit referendum has meant that east-west trade has been in decline since 2016. While it is true that east-west trade has been in decline, it is important to note that GB-NI trade so far in 2021 is up on the same period last year. I suppose that that fact does not fit with the current narrative. While east-west trade has been declining since the Brexit referendum, North/South trade in services rose to an all-time high of £3.07 billion in 2018, according to InterTradeIreland. In 2019, the value of goods exported from the South to the North increased by €140 million. That is up 6.85% on the previous year. Prior to COVID, cross-border trade among SMEs was at an all-time high and was valued at £6.5 billion. North/South trade remains resilient despite COVID disruption. That tells me that businesses here had already begun to pivot towards the South and the EU's 450 million consumers, and that pivot is becoming more apparent.

Many local businesses and producers now see new opportunities opening up. They are stepping up and stepping in by filling new orders from supermarkets, when those contracts would previously have been snapped up by British contractors. I need only to look to my constituency to find a good example of that. Deli Lites, a gourmet food sandwich company located in South Down, is now the primary sandwich supplier to Boots stores in the North and across Britain after securing a major deal in January. That new partnership is a prime example of the unique opportunities that exist among the Brexit difficulties. It is incumbent, therefore, on the Economy Minister to work with agencies such as Invest NI and others to support local suppliers and businesses to fill the void left by British exporters. Now, more than ever, there is an onus on the Minister and the Department for the Economy to support producers and suppliers to diversify their product offerings. An Executive subcommittee on the economy could provide that leadership to trade representatives and agencies.

I recently listened to the respected economic journalist and commentator, Paul Gosling. He said that the British subvention to the North was a subsidy for failure and not an investment for future success. The institutionalised belief that a failed and weak economy in the North is the norm permeates the Civil Service, and that has clouded thinking.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ennis: I am nearly finished.

Sinn Féin has always believed that there is a better way to do business. Increasing numbers of businesses and civic voices —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Ennis: — are articulating the need for us to find a better way. It is critical that we listen to the voices of the business community. They must have a say in the long-term strategy to minimise the problems —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Ennis: — and to capitalise on the benefits of our changed trading reality.

Ms Brogan: I support the motion. I ask Members to take a moment to consider businesses in constituencies such as mine: West Tyrone. It is a large rural constituency where farming and food production are a major part of the economy. Significantly, food processing takes place across the island of Ireland, and our businesses are highly integrated. For example, over 400,000 pigs are moved from the South to the North for processing each year. Likewise, almost 500,000 lambs are moved from the North to the South for processing each year. Over 800 million litres of milk are transported between the North and South of Ireland annually for processing and for sale. North/South trade in agri-food alone is worth £1.3 billion annually. The simple truth is that the agri-food industry is pivotal to the economy in the North and is an integrated part of an all-island economy. In 2018, that island-wide trade was valued at £6.5 billion, with a 6.7% growth rate. In the same year, the UK's growth rate was just 1.3%. That translates into one clear message about our all-island economy, and the message is opportunity. Even in the midst of the pandemic last year, that North/South economic activity fell by only 4.9%, which compares with the UK's drop of 9.9%.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Ms Brogan: I am sorry; I want to get through the speech.

People in the North of Ireland did not choose to leave the European Union, but Brexit will impose enormous difficulties for their economic lives and livelihoods.

That is why it is so important that we use all the tools that we have to support our economies, North and South. Those tools include the EU-UK Joint Committee working to reduce barriers to trading and to prevent the creation of new barriers. They also include our continued access to the European single market and its 450 million consumers.

It is our duty to work hard and in good faith to ensure that opportunities forged by our membership of the European Union, and in the Good Friday Agreement, are not lost. That is why I support the call for the establishment of an Executive subcommittee on the economy and the

development of an overarching economic strategy. That is the responsible thing to do.

We need a clear vision and collective determination to provide leadership to all those agencies tasked with progressing economic development here. Only the Members opposite know why, as representatives of a six-county region that was a net beneficiary of European funding and goodwill, they backed Brexit. Given the scale of disruption and hardship that Brexit is already inflicting, working together to protect livelihoods, rather than engaging in an attempt to tear apart our only economic protections, is to be recommended.

Please support this motion.

Mr Muir: I support the motion and the amendment. I recognise the importance to Northern Ireland of removing barriers to North/South and east-west trade. That is why I voted to remain in the European Union. Anyone who says that they recognise the same but voted to leave the EU did not understand or were misled on the implications of that vote.

Like many others in the Chamber, I do not like the protocol. Like some others in the Chamber, I see it as the least bad option for Northern Ireland after the decision to pursue a hard Brexit. Ever since the protocol's implementation, the Alliance Party has been the first to identify practical solutions to the very real problems created by Brexit.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. If that is the case, why did the Member and his party vote in this House for its rigorous implementation?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Muir: Thank you. Mr Buckley will probably remember that debate. It touched on the Trade Bill that was being brought forward, which was a breach of international law. That was the context.

An extension to the current grace periods is one thing that the Alliance Party has been pushing for. It has also been pushing for a veterinary agreement between the UK and the EU, or, in its absence, a bespoke agreement for the Irish Sea border based on existing logistical systems and trusted trader schemes. Those are just some of the realistic, workable and practical solutions that we propose to tackle the problems faced this year.

I welcome DUP support for the veterinary agreement that the Economy Minister rejected last week, perhaps blinded by her own Euroscepticism. If implemented, those actions could make a real difference to people and businesses across Northern Ireland. At the same time as dealing with those issues, the Executive should turn their attention to working with all relevant bodies to create a strategy to take advantage of Northern Ireland's unique position. I fully acknowledge the extent of the issues faced by my constituents because of Brexit. I will continue to push hard to promote all workable solutions.

I hear the concerns of people who feel that Brexit undermines their identity. Identity and the impact of borders on identity have always been extremely sensitive issues in Northern Ireland. That is one of the reasons why Brexit simply does not work for us. We are working through the ramifications of that for people here. However, I am not sympathetic to the tactics adopted by the unionist political parties, led by the DUP — or should it be the TUV? Their

tactics amount to, “Never, never, never”. I argue that those tactics never worked in the past, they will not work now, and the people of Northern Ireland will never buy them.

We learned recently that unionist political leaders plan to challenge the Northern Ireland protocol through a judicial review, as is their right. That reminded me of when the McGimpsey brothers, in their desperation, brought a legal challenge in the Irish courts, declaring that the Anglo-Irish Agreement was unconstitutional. That case was dismissed, and I expect that the same fate awaits the most recent challenge.

The next part of the so-called plan was the petition that led to yesterday’s debate in Westminster, on which there was no vote.

It is, therefore, unclear what the DUP hoped to achieve. Finally, the DUP decided to withdraw its Ministers from North/South bodies, despite the practical, economic and social benefits that are derived from North/South cooperation. It is long past time that all political parties got real, stepped away from fantasy-unicorn solutions and turned their attention to genuine, tangible ways in which we can support people and businesses across Northern Ireland.

4.45 pm

In conclusion, I want to touch upon Mr Stalford’s comments about parallel consent. The fundamental issue at the heart of this is that Northern Ireland did not vote to leave the European Union; it voted to remain. I wanted to remain in the European Union. I believe passionately in it. However, we have left. The focus now is on mitigating the damage that has been caused by that. As I have said, the protocol is the least-worst outcome that is associated with that. We have to work with it and to pursue practical solutions. Calling for the abolition of the protocol and the invoking of article 16 does not actually bring us any further forward; it is simply full of distortions and lacks full understanding of reality. If one is going to say, “Let us invoke article 16 and get rid of the protocol”, one must be honest with people and tell them what practical solutions there actually are.

Mr Allister: Sinn Féin, the SDLP and Alliance, which are variously supporting the motion and its amendment, have much in common. One of the abiding stains on their political records is that each of them has repeatedly in the House demanded the rigorous implementation of the protocol. What does that mean? It means that they embraced with enthusiasm the strongest possible barriers between the rest of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland; wanted to fetter, to the greatest possible degree, trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland; and wanted to cut off, to the greatest possible extent, supply chains from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. That is what the protocol does. It takes Northern Ireland and abandons it within the EU single market for goods.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: I will in one moment. It abandons us in the EU customs union under its customs code. It subjects us to the EU VAT regime and to all the vast area of law that enforces that. It creates a circumstance where we are subject to laws that we did not make and cannot change — a foreign code of law, all subject to the supervision of a foreign court. Then, some Members come here and try to pretend that they really have Northern Ireland’s best

interests at heart. If they want to talk about unicorns, the unicorn is in the motion and the amendment; that of pretending that there is advantage in still being part of the EU single market. I will give way.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to my friend for giving way. It is important that we have accuracy in the debate. It is inaccurate for another Member to claim that the European Union did not invoke article 16. That is precisely what it did. Then, when there was blowback from its despicable behaviour, it performed a reverse ferret and changed its position. However, it did invoke article 16, and that sword of Damocles still hangs over the heads of the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Allister: Thank you. The EU showed itself in its true vindictive colours and, of course, usefully indicated where the border should be —

Mr Stalford: Yes.

Mr Allister: — namely where it wanted to put it for vaccines. Of course, it is only when it suits the EU that it will go down that road.

Let us be clear: there is no advantage to Northern Ireland in trading with the EU, if, at the same time and as the price of that, our supply chains are fettered from GB.

There is no point in saying to a company, “Oh, come and set up in Northern Ireland. You can sell to GB and to the rest of Europe”, without telling that company, “You will not get your supplies easily from GB. You will not have the supply chain that you need to run your business, because we, the protocol promoters, are in the business of cutting off that supply chain”. That is the hypocrisy of all of that.

Mr O’Toole: I thank the Member for giving way. Out of interest, I ask him this: if a business contacts him and says, “We know that there is low-carbon activity in North Antrim, and we would like to invest there because of access to the EU and UK markets”, would he, as an MLA, encourage that business to invest on the basis of that dual market access?

Mr Allister: Not on that basis, because that is a fraudulent basis. I would encourage the company to invest in Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom, and I look forward to the day when we restore Northern Ireland to being a full and complete part of the United Kingdom. The upcoming judicial review may be able to help do that. Apparently, that irks so many. Lord Justice Muir is outraged that we would dare take legal action on the matter [*Laughter.*] Never mind the fact that he and the SDLP were involved in the process. No, it is only for nationalists and their acolytes to dare to have recourse to British courts. If a unionist takes it upon himself to go to a British court and mention such foundational issues as the Act of Union, there is horror. Lord Justice Muir is outraged. I might well be thrown in the Tower for daring to do such a thing.

Let us face the reality. Northern Ireland is an integral part economically and politically of the United Kingdom. If you stymie that and cut off its economic links, you damage Northern Ireland’s economy. I know why Sinn Féin wants to do that. It wants to build the all-island economy as a stepping stone to political unity. That is how the EU worked. It got ever-closer union by ever-closer economic

union. It is the same template: create an all-island economy, and you will create an all-island nation, so called. Unionists are very alert to that. We know what plan is afoot. We have woken up to what it is about, and that is why we are determined to make all and every lawful effort to usurp —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Allister: — and upset that plan.

Ms McLaughlin: I welcome the opportunity to make the winding-up speech on our amendment and the opportunity for the Assembly to air its concerns about trade and jobs. The SDLP agrees with the substantive part of the motion that Sinn Féin has brought to the House. Our amendment is about seeking to improve it by ensuring greater accountability and responsibility for delivery. Importantly, our amendment would also address inequality and the need to create a fairer and more regionally balanced economy post COVID-19.

Throughout the debate, Members across all parties have acknowledged the importance of North/South and east-west trade. That is not in dispute. Members across the House have rightly expressed that there is an urgent and pressing need for businesses to resolve the trading issues brought about by the Brexit protocol. I will now reflect on some Members' contributions.

Ms Archibald opened the debate and listed the changing and positive trading trends. She indicated that there was something to build on and that it was important that we had stability and clarity for businesses in Northern Ireland. My colleague Matthew O'Toole articulated clearly the opportunities to rebuild the North's economy through access to both the UK market and the EU single market. He stressed the unique status of being at the crossroads of two major markets. Jonathan Buckley and Chris Stalford said that Members on this side of the House were protocol sycophants, had twisted logic and suffered from Brexit Stockholm syndrome. Mr Dickson said that we need to consider the new trading realities and indicated that we should concentrate on economic recovery and economic advantages. Mr Aiken highlighted the need for the protocol to work. He said that it was not working now, that it would get worse and that it needed to be reversed.

Mr Allister spoke about Northern Ireland being abandoned and suggested that there was no advantage in investing in Northern Ireland or businesses here as long as the protocol was in place.

Members, let us consider the bigger objective: a more successful economy, more jobs and higher wages for people living here. It is time for us to make sure that the protocol works and make the North a better place. My party agrees that it is not enough to leave the challenges of creating a more effective economic policy to just one Minister or Department. There are fears that a subcommittee will not achieve that. Instead, we are calling for a task force, led by the joint First Ministers, to bring together not just the Departments but outside expertise. We need Invest NI and InterTradeIreland at the table, and they should help to formulate decisions under the strong central leadership of the head of the Civil Service. Northern Ireland's citizens expect our joint heads of government to show leadership and to be responsible and accountable for delivering a coherent economic vision that is robust and reflects the urgency of the situation.

I hope that the debate has perhaps persuaded our DUP MLAs to go back to their previous de facto policy of supporting the protocol and of recognising the opportunities to rebuild the North's economy with access to the UK market and the EU's single market. We need solutions. We need a comprehensive recovery and investment strategy. We do not just want another talking shop with narrow interests that prevents necessary decisions from being taken. That is why I urge the House to support our amendment.

Mr O'Dowd: I think that we have had several debates in one. We had a debate on the motion and the amendment, a debate on the inter-concerns in the DUP and unionism in general about the protocol, the future and where things are going, a debate on the all-Ireland economy, and a debate on the champagne-swilling Europeans.

What summed up the debate for me was Caoimhe Archibald's opening comments, which I will paraphrase. Caoimhe said that we now have a new trading reality after four years of trading uncertainty. Businesses now have certainty and know the trading environment within which they are working. Despite our best efforts to make sure that it did not happen to this part of Ireland and the island, Brexit has happened, the protocol is in place, and, 50-odd days afterwards, the problems, some of which are significant and some of which have been highly exaggerated, are beginning to be resolved. They will not all be able to be resolved, because the reality is that the protocol is the love child of Brexit. Therefore, as long as Brexit exists, the protocol will exist.

Our motion recognises the reality of North/South and east-west trade and its importance to our economy. What businesses, employees, families and workers desire most is certainty. Unless there is a major change in the economic trading strategy of the British Government — this one or, perhaps, the next — the protocol is going nowhere. That is the major flaw in the unionist strategy. No matter how angry you get — I think that some of the anger is with yourselves, some of your negotiators or some of the parties in the negotiations — the protocol is going nowhere. Why would the British Government risk the economy of England, which was largely what Brexit was about? Would Scotland and Wales allow them to risk further uncertainty in their economies by renegotiating the protocol? It simply is not going to happen.

Mr Muir: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes.

5.00 pm

Mr Muir: Will the Member accept that one reason that the protocol is not going anywhere is because there are no viable and credible alternatives to it?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes, I do accept that, but the most important reason that it is not going anywhere is that there is no desire within the British Government for it to go anywhere, for the reasons that I have outlined.

On article 16, whether the EU invoked it or not — I am on the side of the argument that it did not invoke it, but I am not going to go down that rabbit hole at the minute — if you cannot — the EU backed down on this — invoke article 16 to protect life-saving vaccines, under what circumstances can you invoke article 16? Think about it. The EU was not

prepared to invoke it to protect vaccine supplies. What do you think the British Government are going to invoke it for? They all stepped back from it and said, "No, we are not going there".

Here we are, back to where Caoimhe started and the reality of where we are and the certainty of it. We have a new certainty, the protocol with its flaws, an opportunity to trade with 450 million people in the EU and the opportunity to trade with 60 million people in the UK. How do we exploit it? How does our Economy Minister exploit that opportunity to ensure that she creates and sustains businesses, creates new, well-paid jobs for our society, attracts investment here and supports our small and medium enterprises and our indigenous businesses? There has to be a change of focus and mindset from our Economy Minister and the political party that has run the Department for the Economy for the last 10 years. Despite the fact that successive Economy Ministers have turned their back on the all-Ireland economy, it has grown. It has grown incrementally every year. Despite the fact that it has not been supported, has not been invested in in the way that it should be and, at times, has been ignored, it has grown. There is an opportunity there, as part of our broader trading with the EU, to create more jobs, businesses and wealth for the people we serve.

Today's motion calls on the Executive to establish an all-encompassing strategy to ensure that the trading opportunities that exist around the world are achieved. We are talking about reaching out, through Invest NI, InterTradeIreland, Co-operation Overseas, the Executive's office in Brussels and the bureaux in the United States of America, Canada and China, to those investors to say, "You have an opportunity." Mr Allister said that we would be being untruthful, or perhaps presenting half-truths, with investors if we were to say to them, "Come here, there is huge opportunity for your business to grow". He claims that they cannot grow because we have closed off trade with Britain, but we have not. Others refer to the suffering of people because of the protocol. It depends on the definition of suffering. As a society that has been all too familiar with suffering, we know the scale of suffering. However, I think that we can be pretty sure that nobody is going to a food bank because of the protocol. People are going to food banks for a lot of reasons, but it is not because of the protocol. What is this suffering that we talk about?

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will in a moment. Some businesses are facing difficulties. Other businesses are expanding, growing and taking on new employees. I give way to Mr Allister.

Mr Allister: Does the Member not recognise the chilling impact on commerce, and therefore on our economy, of the unnecessary and daunting barriers, in bureaucracy terms and in legislative prohibitions, on trade from GB? The issue is not trade to GB, it is from GB. If you are bringing in goods from GB, there are certain things that you are not allowed to bring in, and there are other things that you can only bring in if you subject yourself to excessive, protracted, expensive burdens. How is that aiding commerce?

Mr O'Dowd: Some businesses face the barriers that you outlined, and the Joint Committee and others should try to

their full potential to minimise them. However, if trade and jobs can be created here because the goods cannot be brought in from elsewhere, no matter where that elsewhere is, let us create the trade here. Was Brexit not about taking back control? Was that not what it was about?

Listening to some from the unionist Benches, the mistake that they made from the very start was to believe their own propaganda about Brexit. They hitched their wagon to English nationalism, and now they appear to be more concerned about industry in the south of England than they are about industry in south Antrim, north Antrim, south Belfast or wherever it may be. Despite everything that has been thrown at us, we have an opportunity to create businesses, well-paid jobs and a flourishing economy.

Mr Stafford referred to us bringing forward non-binding debates. I was surprised yesterday when I learnt that, despite a petition being signed by 140,000 people — a petition is a legitimate political device to use — a debate in Westminster was held in a side room, 20 MPs turned up, largely remotely, and no vote was taken. One of the biggest mistakes that the current generation of unionism has made is this: you have gone elsewhere looking for friends and allies, when your friends and allies are actually in this room. You have spent too much time chasing English nationalism instead of sitting down with Irish nationalism and Irish republicanism in order to map a way forward. I have no interest in sipping champagne in Europe or in London or elsewhere —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Dowd: — but I am interested in having a cup of coffee with my unionist neighbours and working our way through this. You need to learn that this room is where you need to make your friends, not elsewhere.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and negatived.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that they should adhere to the very strict social-distancing requirements in the Lobbies.

Main Question put.

*The Assembly divided:
Ayes 49; Noes 39.*

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, 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 Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Ms Sugden, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Archibald and Ms Ennis.

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 Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Harvey and Mr Stalford.

Main Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly acknowledges the importance of North/South and east-west trade to our local economy; notes that the EU-UK Joint Committee is working to reduce trade barriers and to prevent the creation of new barriers so that businesses can trade freely within the legal framework agreed by the Westminster Parliament and European Commission; further notes the new trading reality as a result of the end of the Brexit transition period; further acknowledges our continued access to the European single market, with its 450 million consumers; and calls on the Executive to develop an overarching economic strategy, including the establishment of an Executive subcommittee on the economy, to give a clear vision and direction to our representative agencies, including Invest NI, InterTradeIreland, Northern Ireland Co-operation Overseas, the Northern Ireland Executive Office in Brussels and the Northern Ireland bureaux in the United States of America, Canada and China.

Mr Stalford: On a point of order, sir. Can you confirm that no unionist Member voted for that motion?

Mr Speaker: I cannot confirm that, but you were one of the Tellers. The results will be available on the website, as the Member knows.

Adjourned at 5.28 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 1 March 2021

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statements

British-Irish Council Collaborative Spatial Planning and Housing: Infrastructure

Mr 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 light of social distancing being observed by the parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members who are participating remotely must make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. Members who are present in the Chamber must also do that, but they may do so by rising in their place as well as by notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their question. I also remind Members that, in accordance with long-established procedure, points of order are not normally taken during a statement or the question period afterwards.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): With your permission, Mr Speaker, and in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement to the Assembly in respect of a joint British-Irish Council (BIC) ministerial meeting of the collaborative spatial planning and housing work sectors, which was held virtually on 25 February 2021.

I co-chaired the joint ministerial meeting with the Minister for Communities, Minister Hargey.

Given the joint nature of the meeting, I propose to make a statement on the spatial planning elements of it. I understand that Minister Hargey will make a similar, separate statement on the housing elements of the same meeting. Members will note that to ensure appropriate community representation at the meeting, junior Minister Middleton was also in attendance, and he is aware that I am making this statement to the Assembly today.

Members will be aware that the British-Irish Council, established in 1999, is a forum for its members to discuss, consult and use their best endeavours to reach agreement on cooperation on matters of mutual interest within the competence of its member Administrations.

The British-Irish Council collaborative spatial planning work sector is chaired by my Department on behalf of the Executive. The group provides a constructive forum for facilitating thematic evidence exchange and the sharing of best practice, and it promotes practical collaboration. The joint ministerial meeting on 25 February focused

on the joint work that the collaborative spatial planning work sector has recently taken forward in conjunction with the housing work sector and considered how these work sectors can enable BIC member Administrations to continue to work together on the key areas of planning and housing, particularly in the context of the impact of COVID-19.

As I previously highlighted, Minister Hargey, junior Minister Middleton and I represented the Executive. The Government of Guernsey were represented by Deputy Victoria Oliver, President of the Development and Planning Authority. The Government of Ireland were represented by Mr Darragh O'Brien TD, Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and Mr Peter Burke TD, Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The Isle of Man Government were represented by the Hon Tim Baker MHK, Minister for Infrastructure, and the Hon Ray Harmer MHK, Minister for Policy and Reform. The Government of Jersey were represented by Deputy John Young, Minister for the Environment, and Deputy Russell Labey, Minister for Housing and Communities. The Scottish Government were represented by Mr Kevin Stewart MSP, Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning. The British Government were represented by the Rt Hon Christopher Pincher MP, Minister of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. The Welsh Government were represented by Julie James, Minister for Housing and Local Government.

Ministers considered and reflected on papers from each of the work sectors that were presented at the ministerial meeting, which included a discussion on challenges and opportunities for the housing and spatial planning sectors. Ministers also endorsed a joint publication prepared by both work sectors on the key spatial planning and housing challenges associated with an ageing population. The booklet, titled 'Creating an Inclusive Future Vision for our Ageing Populations', focuses on the implications of the changing demography of the BIC Administrations and the potential impact of an ageing population on spatial planning and housing. It builds on a symposium event on ageing, which was held in Belfast in November 2019, and aims to provide key advice for those working in housing and spatial planning. It shares some best practice examples of how places, and the housing within those places, can be developed to meet the needs of our ageing populations.

Ministers also noted and agreed the content of a forward work plan for the collaborative spatial planning work sector up to 2023. The forward work plan identifies a number

of areas of focus, including the contribution of spatial planning to the revitalisation of towns, the contribution of spatial planning to building better places in the context of COVID recovery, the continued sharing of best practice in relation to national and regional planning frameworks, and the promotion of expert learning and experience sharing across the member Administrations.

The agreement of this forward work plan is particularly timely and aligns with many of the ambitions of my Department to create better places in which people want to live, do business and spend their leisure time. As an Assembly, we have already acknowledged that we need to revitalise our town centres, and, as we start to emerge from the pandemic and the focus moves to a post-COVID recovery, an opportunity exists to consider how spatial planning can support our places to build back better and tackle the climate crisis. In this context, the British-Irish Council continues to offer an essential framework for sharing challenges and best practices across the Administrations.

Finally, I want to place on record my thanks to those ministerial colleagues across the BIC member Administrations who participated so productively in the joint ministerial meeting. I look forward to learning about the outcomes arising from the collaborative spatial planning forward work plan and associated ministerial meeting, which it was agreed should take place in 2023. I am happy to take questions from Members in respect of the spatial planning elements of the joint ministerial meeting.

Miss McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): I welcome the principles set out in 'Creating an Inclusive Future Vision for our Ageing Populations'. Over the years, development plans in the UK and other countries have placed a great deal of focus on the young and have largely excluded older people. Cities and towns are not the exclusive property of the young, and it is important that spatial planning policies are developed to be as inclusive of all groups as possible. The constituency that I represent has one of the oldest age demographics in Northern Ireland.

The pandemic has highlighted the great lack of open public space for exercise in some areas, and we all know the benefits of access to green space and nature for mental well-being. Does the new joint approach recognise the importance of green space? Will the Minister take more proactive steps to protect green space in our towns and villages?

With an ageing population, will the Minister look at embedding policies that are not only age-friendly but dementia-friendly? Again, my constituency has not only one of the oldest populations but one of the highest incidences of dementia.

Given that councils are significantly down the road in the development of their local development plans (LDPs), what impact will the new approach have on those plans and their reassessment and adoption?

Mr Speaker: I call Cathal Boylan.

Mr Boylan: I call the Minister. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: I am sorry about that, Minister. My apologies. I am away ahead of myself. It is Monday. It shows you how

eager I am to get the business done today. It was not about hearing his dulcet tones as opposed to yours. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Mallon: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Chair for her comments and questions. I absolutely agree on the importance of ensuring that as many citizens as possible can access open spaces. As the Chair of the Infrastructure Committee rightly points out, it delivers multiple physical and mental health and well-being benefits. That is one of the things that we have learnt the value of as a result of the pandemic.

The Member will be aware of the investment in our greenways that I announced. She may also know about the £5 million contribution that my Department made to the revitalisation fund, which was a joint venture by my Department, the Department for Communities and DAERA to support councils. My contribution is about ensuring that we can maximise open and accessible spaces for all our citizens.

I agree with her that we face challenges with our population's ageing demographic, and our planning, housing and health sectors will have to adapt to meet them. I also agree with her on the importance of ensuring not just that facilities and spaces are accessible, inclusive and safe but that they are dementia-friendly. That is an area that I have a particular interest in. I have worked with the sector in my capacity as an MLA, and I acknowledge the great work that is being done by some of our councils to make their areas dementia-friendly places. I am happy to continue to support all that work.

As the Member points out, councils are advancing their new development plans. My departmental planning officials have oversight of the LDP programme, so we will be working closely with them to ensure that we "build back better" together, to use that phrase. We all have a role. I have it at strategic level, but a critical role has to be played by our councils in their local development plans and community plans.

Mr Boylan: I am glad that the Minister answered that question. I will follow on from the previous question. The Minister is keen on active travel. Were there any discussions about bolstering active travel? She will know that we have learnt through COVID that there is an opportunity now for people to live more active and healthier lives. As part of any planning process or any planning regulations, will she ensure that active travel is built into any physical infrastructure?

Ms Mallon: I assure the Member that the representations that were made across all the Governments and Administrations were very strong on that point.

They talked about the importance of making sure that we provide more opportunities for active travel for all our citizens and said that, because of the benefits that it will bring, it is a key element of the revitalisation of town and village centres.

12.15 pm

We talked about the importance of people-centred place shaping. It was fascinating. We may have different terminologies in the strategies that each of our Governments is moving forward, but there was greater commonality in identifying the challenges and opportunities for embedding active travel and climate

action in everything that we do. It is certainly a shared ambition across all the BIC Administrations and something that will be a strong element when the final reports on the forward work programme are being carried out.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her statement. It is clear that she values the relationships across these islands, east-west and North/South, and the shared learning on Brexit, COVID and climate change. Minister, your statement particularly referenced spatial planning. Fear of crime is a particular anxiety amongst the older demographic. If we are to look at the needs of older people, what was discussed on designing out crime?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. She makes an important point about the need for collaboration and partnership working right across these islands. As I have said time and again, the challenges that we face know no borders, whether on Brexit, COVID or the climate emergency. At the meeting, it struck me how valuable it was to get to listen to other Ministers speak about those challenges. Some of the strategies that they are bringing forward are at a more advanced stage than others. That collaboration was hugely beneficial and is something to which I remain committed.

The issue of designing out crime is very important. It is something that councils and local communities in particular are working on. I am conscious of that in my constituency of North Belfast. We have to be very careful that we do not see designing out crime just as gating up communities. It needs to be much more holistic in its approach so that it is about the design of places, engagement with young people, a policing response and community empowerment. It is about all those things. Planning and spatial planning have a role to play in all of that.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for her statement. It refers to the challenges of COVID, climate change and an ageing population, and it endorses the document, 'Creating an Inclusive Future Vision for our Ageing Populations'. It recommends that, to create opportunities for the future, properties should be developed and residents housed along existing transport routes, where there will be short walks, proximity to urban centres and easily accessible services. Does the Minister feel that there is a need to change any of our current planning regulations and guidance? Is there a need to have additional interaction and discussion with our councils as they finalise area plans?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. There is always room for improvement in the planning system. The Department has undertaken a number of measures. One in particular that I feel very strongly about is improving our engagement with communities. The Member may be aware of the Planning Engagement Partnership (PEP) that I recently announced. It is all about improving communities' experience of the planning process, but it is also about making sure that they can play a much more influential role. One of the things that I am mindful of is the fact that the planning process is difficult to navigate. It has such a huge impact on communities' lives. Communities should be more involved in the shaping of plans and feel comfortable about navigating, objecting and supporting. That is an area that I would like my officials to continue working on at a departmental level.

The Member is right about our engagement with local councils. Through the local development plans and the

community plans, there are huge opportunities to do things differently and better.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her statement. The major legislation that underpins planning in Northern Ireland is the Planning Act 2011. The Minister will be aware that a review is being undertaken of it. Will she provide an update on that? Will she also provide an assurance that nothing will be off limits in the review and that all feedback will be duly considered?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The review of the implementation of the Planning Act is ongoing. On 15 February, the Department issued a call for evidence to a targeted list of stakeholders and interested parties asking for their views. Responses are requested by 15 March. The call for evidence has been posted on the Department's website, and, although it is primarily targeted at identified stakeholders, anyone who wishes to express views will have the opportunity to do so, which is important.

The focus of the review is the implementation of the legislative provisions of the Act and the extent to which the original objectives of the Act have been achieved. That will inform whether there is a need to retain, amend or repeal any provisions of the Act. The review will also provide an opportunity to consider any improvements or fixes that may be required to the way in which the Planning Act has been commenced and implemented in subordinate legislation. Issues with the planning system that have arisen as a result of the coronavirus pandemic will also be considered as part of that review. That may not always require legislative change. Once the responses to the call for evidence have been collated, the Department intends to engage further with the Committee for Infrastructure before summer recess to set out and discuss the views received and the Department's suggested response.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her statement. I see that the contribution of spatial planning to the revitalisation of towns, as well as to COVID recovery, was agreed as an area of focus for the sectors. It is vital that we help our towns and businesses to come out of COVID on a strong footing. The parklet scheme in Belfast has attracted the eyes of many. It is an innovative way of adapting to the new dispensation and to helping businesses. I encourage the Minister to work closely with councils across the North in the further roll-out of that initiative. I wrote to the Minister, recently, about interest in the scheme for Newry. Was that discussed, on a broader basis, obviously, at the meeting? Has the case for parklets across the North strengthened since the meeting?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. We did not get into a discussion on parklets, per se, but we did discuss the need to reimagine spaces in our town centres to make them better and more accessible so that people come to visit and spend their money in supporting local businesses. It is something that I am keen to continue to work on with councils. The Member referenced the Ormeau Road parklet. It has been a huge success, and I would like to see many more of them developed across Northern Ireland.

Ms Anderson: I thank the Minister. Waste water capacity is one of the biggest issues facing housing and planning in the North. Plans are under way to build a waste water treatment pump at the Derry/Donegal border, for instance,

so that the lack of sewerage capacity does not literally block the development of 4,000 housing units in the border area of Skeoge. That could benefit from the collaborative spatial planning that the Minister's statement addresses. Was the collaborative development and collaborative spatial planning development, rather than back-to-back development, with regard to sewerage in such places as Derry and Donegal discussed or raised at the meeting?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. The issue of water and waste water infrastructure was not referenced at the meeting, but the Member is right to highlight it today. There has been historical underinvestment in our water and waste water infrastructure, and, as a result, 116 locations across Northern Ireland are at, or almost at, maximum development capacity. That will, inevitably, have a knock-on effect on development, be that the building of the many new homes that are needed, schools or, once we get through this, hotels. It is a huge challenge. It is a huge challenge when we reflect on the fact that some £2 billion has been identified for capital investment in the next price control period.

I will continue to engage with my Executive colleagues on the matter, because, if we are to realise and deliver on the ambitions and outcomes of our Programme for Government, we have to have significant and sustainable investment in our water and waste water infrastructure, because that is what underpins it all.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her statement and answers. A Member has already asked about the importance of revitalising our town centres. At the meeting, did the Minister discuss with, or take the opportunity to learn from, her counterparts from other regions anything that might inform her actions to revitalise town centres? Our town centres were struggling, but now many of them face decimation.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. As I said, I was heartened by the fact that all of the Administrations recognised the importance of the revitalisation of our town centres and our villages. We reflected on the fact that our town centres were struggling pre-COVID, and the reality is that life will change now as a result of COVID and our high streets will take on a different form. They need to be supported to do that. We need to make our town centres attractive places for people to visit and to spend money and time, so I am keen to work and remain committed to working with councils to do that.

One of the initiatives that were discussed at the meeting was the 20-minute-to-town approach by the Scottish Government, which ensures that towns and facilities are within a 20-minute walk. I certainly think that that will bring huge benefits to citizens, and I want to look at that much more carefully.

Mr McAleer: I note that the Minister has referred to spatial planning in the context of revitalising towns, and I very much welcome that. Our towns are under pressure, and, no doubt, the announcement of the plans to close 15 Bank of Ireland branches throughout the North, in towns such as Strabane and Lisnaskea, will come as another body blow.

Minister, was the issue of rural needs discussed in the context of spatial planning? Hopefully, you will appreciate that, in the rural west, which I represent, we have an historical issue of regional imbalance. If we are to use

spatial planning correctly to address regional imbalance, rural needs will have to be taken into account.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question and share his concerns about the impact of the closures announced today, across the island, by the Bank of Ireland. I can assure him that the needs of rural communities were discussed at our meeting; in fact, one of the agreed areas for the forward work programme around the contribution of spatial planning to the revitalisation of towns makes specific reference to how the sector will explore the urban and rural dimensions of town revitalisation, particularly in the context of post-COVID recovery, and to the fact that this work that will consider how positive place making can support revitalisation in our rural areas and the decarbonisation agenda, which, I know, is a significant challenge for our rural communities, given that they do not have the same access to public transport as other places. Yes, the needs of urban communities and the needs of our rural communities were discussed.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for her statement. Minister, in your statement and in answer to questions, you have made much reference to the involvement of the community in the initiative, and that is right. The phrase "involving the community" is often used: what does "community" mean in making decisions around this? Minister, there are groups and bodies that have a particular interest in the development of whatever asset or factor of life for our ageing population. In community development, as development takes place around spatial initiatives, will the Minister give weighted preference to bodies representing the needs of the ageing population?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He is right to point out that we talk about community involvement to community participation, and sometimes that can be a slogan as opposed to demonstrable action. To reassure him around the planning engagement partnership that I have convened, I say that it is specifically to look at how to enhance the quality and depth of community engagement in the planning process at the regional and local planning levels and to help to improve the planning system experience for users.

The partnership provides an opportunity for sharing experience, good practice and learning gained through the operation of the planning system since the reforms were introduced in April 2015 and for considering what more we can do to enhance community involvement. The cross section of people in the partnership should assist with ensuring that a wide range of experience and views informs the work so that we are not just hearing from the "usual voices". The response to the invitation to participate in the partnership is encouraging, as is the level of interest shown by the general public.

12.30 pm

The Member will know that the majority of planning applications are determined at council level, but, as I said in response to other questions, community development plans and local development plans provide a real opportunity to better involve our communities at every level. There is an obligation on all of us to, where we can, try to be creative in reaching out to hear the voices of those who do not feel that they can access processes in the same way. Whether we term them the harder-to-reach groups, there is a responsibility on all of us to try as best

we can to listen to as many voices as possible across the community. I always operate from the principle that local people know best. The Member will know that, with the blue-green fund, for example, I was very clear that I am not imposing change from on high. That does not work; it is not sustainable. It is about supporting communities to drive lasting change from the ground up.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her statement and her answers so far, especially on raising the voices of those who are traditionally silenced in the community on planning. We need to have equal rights of appeal in our Planning Act as a starter.

The Minister said:

“an opportunity exists to consider how spatial planning can support our places to build back better and address the climate challenge.”

However, there is no mention of climate-based reforms of planning in the forward work programme. Does she agree that it is not a challenge but a crisis that we face and that there is not an opportunity but an urgent need to address climate breakdown? How does she envisage the spatial planning work sector of the BIC playing a role in improving accountability in our planning system when it comes to climate impacts?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. Multiple Administrations were at a meeting, there were many topics that we would have liked to discuss and there are many areas that we would have liked to focus on in our forward work programme, but we had to be targeted. I assure the Member that, under the agreed forward work programme on the contribution of spatial planning to building better places in the context of the COVID-19 recovery, we made it clear that consideration will also be given to how post-COVID place making can contribute to supporting the green economy and the decarbonisation agenda and to improving mental health and well-being. That will be interlinked with our agreed commitments on the revitalisation of our towns and villages.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two.

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

British-Irish Council Collaborative Spatial Planning and Housing: Communities

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey, that she wishes to make a statement.

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I wish to make the following report on the British-Irish Council's (BIC) joint ministerial meeting on the collaborative spatial planning (CSP) and housing work sectors, which was held in virtual format on 25 February. It was a joint ministerial meeting, which I co-chaired with the Minister for Infrastructure, from whom you have just heard. I will make a statement to the Assembly in respect of the housing elements of the meeting. Minister Mallon addressed the Assembly on the spatial planning aspects of the meeting. Gary Middleton MLA, junior Minister in the Executive Office, also represented the Executive at the meeting. This report has been endorsed by junior Minister Middleton, and he has agreed that I make the statement on the housing element of the meeting on behalf of both of us.

The British-Irish Council, established in 1999, is a forum in which its members discuss, consult and use their best endeavours to reach agreement on cooperation on matters of mutual interest. The British-Irish Council's housing work sector group is led by the Executive, and it has proven to be a constructive forum for facilitating the exchange of thematic evidence and practical collaboration.

The meeting last Thursday focused on the housing work sector group's programme of work as well as on the joint work that the two groups had undertaken recently. The meeting also considered how the future work of the housing work sector group can enable BIC member Administrations to continue to work together on the key areas of planning and housing, particularly in the context of the impact of COVID-19.

As I said, I jointly chaired the meeting with Minister Mallon on behalf of the Executive. Ministers considered and reflected on the papers from each of the work sectors that were presented at the ministerial meeting. That included a discussion on challenges and opportunities to improve housing supply. Ministers also endorsed a joint publication that was prepared by the spatial planning and housing work sector groups on the key spatial planning and housing challenges associated with an ageing population: 'Creating an Inclusive Future Vision for our Ageing Populations'. The booklet acknowledges that the issue of changing demographics is important and that it needs to be considered in order to increase the supply of social and affordable homes for some of the most vulnerable in our communities. The booklet highlights a number of examples of emerging innovations in the design and completion of housing units, and I am keen to continue working with planning colleagues to maximise the role of the planning system in increasing housing supply.

That work will inform the development of the housing supply strategy that I will bring forward for Executive consideration in this mandate. The strategy will explore and seek answers on how we can increase the supply of quality, sustainable and affordable homes. The key principles and examples of best practice that are outlined

in the joint housing and CSP work sector booklet can help to inform that work.

Ministers noted and agreed the content of the forward work plan for the housing work sector group, which identified the group's areas of focus over the next three years. The obvious point is that we all face the same challenges, and there is so much that we can learn from each other.

The first area of focus for the housing work sector group agreed by Ministers is the challenge presented by climate change, which affects us all. Constructing new homes generates pollutants, which accelerate global warming. Similarly, heating the homes that we have as well as the new homes that we build will mean that we end up burning more fossil fuels. About 14% of our greenhouse gas emissions come from our homes. To be carbon-neutral by 2050, that will have to change. We will need to find new ways to ensure that those challenges do not limit the supply of homes, particularly for those who need our help the most. We must all address that issue, and I am particularly keen for my officials to work with their counterparts in the other BIC Administrations to come up with solutions to the challenges that affect all of our society.

The second area of focus is the provision of suitable affordable housing. I strongly believe that housing is a basic need and right for all. Our Executive policy, as set out in the New Decade, New Approach agreement, aims to achieve a fair and compassionate society that supports working families and protects the most vulnerable. Crucial to that is ensuring that every household has access to a quality, affordable and sustainable home that is appropriate for its needs. Housing should be a stand-alone outcome in the forthcoming Programme for Government. I am therefore always interested to hear how policymakers tackle the difficult issues, and my officials engage regularly across the Administrations to share experience, knowledge and information.

Ongoing engagement through the British-Irish Council and the delivery of the work plan will be helpful in informing my ambitions for the housing agenda, which will, amongst other things, seek to expand the range of affordable intermediate housing options available.

The final area of focus is housing's role in health and social care, and I am particularly pleased to see that being considered as part of the forward work plan. Throughout the pandemic, I have seen at first-hand how an effective, joined-up, collaborative approach from the housing sector, health professionals and the third sector can make a huge difference to those in acute need of support. That work has been critical and has provided support and refuge to those who might otherwise have been left to face a truly desperate situation. For example, my Department has worked closely with health and social care professionals to support the chronically homeless, who are some of the most vulnerable, and, at the start of the pandemic, I was very concerned that they would be left exposed. The work included the Department of Health housing rough sleepers with no right to homeless assistance. I thank the Minister of Health for providing assistance so that everyone on our streets was able to come inside and comply with the Government's guidance on shielding, self-isolation and social distancing. Collaboration like that makes a real difference to people on the ground. Unfortunately, that issue is common across all the BIC Administrations and

was discussed at last week's meeting. Collaboration on it and other issues where housing impacts on health and social care will be further explored as part of the ongoing work programme.

Finally, I put on record my thanks to the ministerial colleagues across these islands who participated productively in the meeting. I look forward to a further meeting on the housing work sectors in 2023.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the Chair of the Communities Committee, I remind the House that I have quite a lot of Members on my list, and there is an hour for questions. The Committee Chair will get a bit of leeway, but I ask Members to be succinct in their questions. I said, "a bit of leeway", Ms Bradley, not "too much leeway".

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I thank the Minister for bringing forward this statement today. The statement talks about "improving housing supply" and:

"how we can increase the supply of quality, sustainable and affordable homes."

Councils have been asked to submit their draft community plans, which detail, amongst other things, GP surgeries, libraries and many other services, yet planners and developers do not seem to look at those services when future-proofing, especially when it comes to affordable housing. They think that affordable housing should be the housing that is stuck out in the middle of nowhere. How can you ensure that our councils' community plans are used for any future social and affordable housing and that such housing is in areas that are suitable for lifelong living, given that we have an ever-increasing ageing population?

Ms Hargey: That is a critical area when looking at housing supply, waiting lists and, indeed, where homes are being built. My primary focus is on increasing the supply of social homes. Affordable homes also come into that equation. I am looking at a housing supply strategy to start to deal with those issues. That has to be mapped to the availability of publicly owned land, and the local development plans that councils are exploring come into question around that. We are doing a fresh mapping exercise across Departments, and, indeed, across local government, to see what land is available in the time ahead. I am looking at introducing ring-fencing in areas with the highest housing need and longest waiting lists. It will be a combination of all of those.

The Minister for Infrastructure and I have discussed and looked at the changes that need to be made to the planning process. Councils need to take responsibility as well, and I know that many have done so. They all have ambitions for growth, but that growth has to be sustainable. Housing needs to be prioritised. That has caused debate and conversation in many councils. Many have come forward with public inquiries into local development plans that included thresholds or limits for social and affordable homes. I want to work with local government in the time ahead to ensure that they prioritise such housing as they develop their local development plans and identify other public land that they or other parts of government own.

Creating more homes is the quickest way of dealing with some of the issues around homelessness and all the vulnerabilities that we have listed. As we move forward

with the strategy on housing supply, we will start to identify what we need to do in the time ahead.

12.45 pm

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for her statement. Can the Minister provide an update on her plans to increase the stock of social and affordable housing?

Ms Hargey: The statement on revitalisation of the Housing Executive was made by Carál Ní Chuilín when she was temporarily the Minister at the end of last year. That looks at the financing issues and the ability to build social housing again. I am looking at the supply strategy, and we are working on that at the moment. We are also looking at the right to buy, and there will be a consultation on that, because of the loss of social homes over the last few decades. As I said, we are also looking at public land for public housing and doing a remapping exercise of available land that we can identify for housing.

Work will take place with the Minister for Infrastructure on the waste water and sewerage infrastructure and what we need to do in terms of future connections. That was brought up earlier. We will also look at new work on how we can build homes more quickly; for example, building off-site and looking at new methods of construction. We will engage with the Housing Executive, housing associations and others as we start to bring the plans forward. They are at an early stage of design, and I hope that, over the coming months, I can bring more intensive discussion papers on what I propose to do in the time ahead. The ultimate aim is to be more ambitious with our housing development programme for the social housing that we can bring forward. We are looking at the issue of intermediate rents and at affordable housing as an option for people.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her statement. The Minister has referred to the plans announced by her predecessor and party colleague to reclassify the Housing Executive's landlord function to a mutual or cooperative designation to enable it to borrow and build. I may be mistaken, but I believe that the transfer of 85,000 public homes would be the largest ever on these islands. Has the Minister had an opportunity to discuss with her counterparts from elsewhere the impact that such transfers in their jurisdictions have had on rents and security of tenure?

Ms Hargey: There was no direct discussion of that at the meeting last week. However, obviously, the supply of housing and increasing social and affordable housing is a key work programme that we are looking to do in the time ahead. The statement last year on housing — it was welcomed by all in the Chamber — said that something needed to be done as our current housing system is broken. I think that people across these Benches recognise that we need to see change, because those on housing waiting lists demand it, and ensure that we can increase and be more ambitious about the supply of homes. At one point, the Housing Executive owned more than 240,000 homes, and that has been reduced to just over 80,000 homes, as the Member said.

We need to deal with the fundamental issues. Allowing the Housing Executive to be able to build and to have the finances to do that will be crucial. I am exploring whether I can find a way of doing that while keeping the function

as it is at the moment. There are other options, such as a cooperative. I am clear that any change will be in consultation with tenants, those on the waiting list, the Housing Executive and others. I am also ensuring that there will be ownership, so that, if it is a different model from the one in place now, tenants will have a central role in the ownership and in where we will take this forward. We are still at an early stage in looking at the reports and drawing up the plans.

Part of that will be looking at other jurisdictions and at models of best practice. The incoming chief executive of the Housing Executive has extensive experience across this island and, indeed, across the islands. I will work closely with Grainia and others as we meet the challenges in the time ahead.

Mr Allen: I thank the Minister for her statement, which refers to 'Creating an Inclusive Future Vision for our Ageing Populations'. I have been contacted recently by some of our ageing population in Knocknagoney who are being uprooted from their homes. Minister, what do you intend to do as part of that vision to ensure that people who have lived in our communities all their life are not uprooted and forced to move to other areas?

Ms Hargey: The big thing to say about future housing supply is that we are becoming an ageing population. People are getting older, and that presents unique and specific challenges. I want to maintain traditional communities. I think that it was Paula who said that it is not just about building homes but about the services and the infrastructure that go with it to make sustainable communities.

I want to look at a co-design approach, working with communities and with the various age groups and sectors as we start to look at the future trends and the needs of our communities. That will be done on a geographical basis as well for communities that are already there. We will look at their future needs to determine how they can grow and develop. We will consider what social housing provision and affordable homes will look like. That may mean that, if people want to upsize or downsize, we need to look at that in a longer-term way.

It will also mean working with councils. Councils have ambitious plans for growth in the local development plans. What will those look like in the time ahead if we start to utilise more town and city centre spaces that have traditionally not been built on in the past 30 to 40 years? There is a real opportunity to do that, particularly when we look at the economy, at future working trends and at office accommodation and other unutilised buildings.

Is there an opportunity to look at having, for example, more city centre living? That should not happen at the expense of displacing people or forcing them of their home. That should not be what it is about; it should be about choice. It should be about where people want to live and the type of accommodation that, they feel, meets their needs. We need to start planning more for the longer term to meet those needs. I am talking not just about the next year or the next five years but about the next 20, 30, 40 and 50 years. What will that look like? How do we ensure that we design housing, communities and infrastructure to go along with that? Even climate change and its impact need to be considered. I sit on a recently established cross-departmental working group with the Department

for Infrastructure, the Department for the Economy and DAERA. It is to look at the challenges and at what we need to do over the next 20, 30 and 40 years.

Sorry, Andy. If you have a specific question about Knocknagoney, I am more than happy to come back to you on it or to speak to you after this.

Ms Armstrong: Minister, I am delighted to hear your reflections on the flexibility of tenure to ensure that people can stay in their community when the house that they live in is no longer fit for purpose as they grow older.

I want to come back to this point. While we can talk plenty about the growth and development of new housing, we still have 85,000 houses in the Housing Executive and many of them require significant investment and retrofitting to enable our zero-carbon targets to be met by 2050. We could meet those earlier. Have there been any discussions about how we will make the homes of existing social tenants fit for purpose?

Ms Hargey: That is key to the revitalisation statement made in the House last year. The Housing Executive faces financial challenges not only in investing in new homes and having the ability to build again but with existing stock, some of which is in poor condition and needs upgraded. We have some of the highest fuel poverty numbers not just across these islands but across Europe. There are specific challenges that we have to face over the next couple of years and, indeed, over the next few decades.

As I said, I sit on the working group to look at the challenges of climate change along with the Infrastructure, Economy and Agriculture Departments. One area that we look at is the work that needs to be done to replace boilers and retrofit properties. Obviously, that will have a huge financial impact, but it can also build the green economy. We are looking at job creation in that sector and how we will make sure that we design the new houses that come on-site so that they are fit for purpose for the next 20, 30 or 40 years. We are not just looking a couple of years ahead; we are ensuring that we look a few decades ahead with regard to climate change. There is a target.

The cross-departmental group has had only one meeting. There will be a follow-up meeting. From that, a specific work stream will look at boiler replacements, retrofitting properties and changing housing build standards in the time ahead; indeed, building standards need to be upgraded desperately. Obviously, more families, particularly children, now live in the private rented sector rather than in social housing. I will also look at legislating during this mandate on health and safety conditions in the private rented sector to ensure that landlords upgrade properties and ensure that they are safe and provide a good standard of living.

Various work streams are ongoing. As I said, once those start to develop into concrete plans, I will bring them to the Committee and to the Chamber.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for her statement. She mentioned climate change, building new homes, the fact that 14% of greenhouse gas emissions come from our homes and trying to be carbon-neutral by 2050. As my colleague Kellie Armstrong said, the Housing Executive cannot even sort out social housing. What guarantees can the Minister give the Assembly that we can hold the Housing Executive to account for issues such as cavity

wall insulation or roof insulation, for example, that it cannot even sort out now?

Ms Hargey: I thank the Member for his question. It is an important area. We know that the Housing Executive has challenges with historical debt, corporation tax and other issues. The main reason for the housing statement in November 2020 was to start to look seriously at those issues. We have been talking about them for over 10 years, but we have not really looked at or moved on them seriously. Since the statement, that has started to change. We are saying that it needs to be a priority and that, if we want to look at upgrading existing properties and be more ambitious in our house-building projects to build more social homes, we need to deal with the issues of historical debt.

At the moment, the Department is starting to look at that. Work plans are being developed. We are also looking at teams and experts who can help us with that work in the Department. We are working with the Housing Executive and looking at external bodies. I suppose that the role of the British-Irish Council will be to allow us to look at best practice and the challenges faced in other places. We want to bring all homes in the Housing Executive's existing stock up to a good standard. Building regulations also need to change. That needs to happen as well to make sure that new homes are built that are fit for purpose. We have to deal with the historical issues of debt and look at ways to allow the Housing Executive to borrow, so that it can look at a more ambitious house-building programme while maintaining its existing stock.

Tied in with that is the assessment of rents and making sure that, while there is a trajectory for rents, we maintain some of the lowest rents across these islands; indeed, we do that through the Housing Executive. There is an investment challenge. At the moment, work is ongoing, on the back of the statement in November, to look at that more seriously and to put teams on it to come up with proposals for the changes that we need to make. There are ongoing discussions with DOF and the British Treasury on the historical debt and corporation tax issues.

They are ongoing, and, once we have a conclusion on those issues, I will bring the matter to the Executive, the Committee and, indeed, to the Chamber.

1.00 pm

Mr Newton: Minister, Mr Andy Allen referred to Knocknagoney Avenue, where, for the last 10 years, discussions have been going on about the future of the maisonettes and the shops. My understanding is — it has been confirmed — that the Housing Executive has made a recommendation to you and is awaiting a decision from you on the future of that block. I believe that demolition was the recommendation.

I welcome the statement, particularly the fact that you are beginning to identify the role of housing and the provision of housing in a much wider sense than just the provision of a house, particularly in the final area of focus. You understand housing's role in health and social care.

Minister, it is my belief that we will never, certainly in the Belfast area, see the provision of bungalows again. I hope that I am wrong about that. There are many folk who, in the future, will look towards a bungalow and will never attain a bungalow, yet they will be offered accommodation in

apartments. There is nothing wrong with apartments for a certain age of person, but, when people reach a mature age, many are looking for the peace and quiet that can be established within the boundaries of their own home, and, at that age, that, generally speaking, is a bungalow. Minister, can you give consideration to the provision of bungalow-type accommodation for those whom you are dealing with in the statement?

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much for your question. It is an important one. All options are being looked at the moment. When you look at housing supply and the future needs in population trends and demographics, all those issues have to be considered. Availability of land becomes critical as well, and that is why the local development plans are crucial. We know that many councils have an ambition for housing growth through those plans. They are looking at the ageing population and how future population trends are taken into account. When we are looking at all these plans, it will be important that we engage with people, including those who are on the transfer list, those who are on the waiting list and those who are in housing. We should engage with the different sectors and the different age groups when looking at future housing needs and supply. That all comes into question in terms of the type of home.

I dealt with the issue even as councillor in Belfast. You will know, Robin, that, in the Belfast City Council area, communities that have been there for a long time are used to the area in which they live and they often want to stay in that area, but they want homes to be available to meet their needs. That is why we are looking at those areas and ring-fencing areas of highest housing need to ensure that we are building, where possible, homes where people want to live. I do not want a scenario where people are being forced to move 10, 15 or 20 miles away, because, again, that leads to a breakdown in the social fabric and their support networks. We want to look at that in the time ahead. There is a commitment that that will include different types of homes that meet the needs of older people.

Mr Newton: Including bungalows?

Ms Hargey: Yes. All those options will be considered.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: A former Speaker should know not to chunter from the Back Bench like that.

Mr Lynch: Given the positive impact of the initiatives that you mentioned in your statement, Minister, do you intend to increase the level of collaborative work with the Department of Health?

Ms Hargey: That is an important area. Thanks for the question. The pandemic, in many areas, has really shone a light on issues that we knew were there. Some of the good work that has taken place has been done through housing officials in my Department and also with officials in the Department of Health. Real, practical steps have been taken through collaborations to ensure that no one from the vulnerable categories is homeless and on the streets.

We have also looked at those who have no recourse to public funds to ensure that housing was made available to them at the height of the pandemic. If that can be done at the height of a pandemic, it should be done outside the pandemic as well. There is a willingness in my Department and the Department of Health to increase collaboration and to look at cross-departmental working groups on the

issue. There is a cross-departmental working group on the anti-poverty strategy and its impact, and housing will be a key component of that.

The answer is yes. We have a memorandum of understanding on accommodation that was agreed between the Departments and the Housing Executive, and we can only increase that collaboration and understanding in the time ahead.

Ms Dolan: Minister, you have touched on this slightly. We have heard of increasing difficulties with costs and conditions for tenants in the private rented sector. What measures can you put in place to address that?

Ms Hargey: I am looking at the private rented sector and will bring forward proposed legislative changes in this mandate to strengthen protections in that sector, including the health and safety checks that need to be conducted. I am looking at letting agents and some of the precarious characteristics and behaviours there. I am drawing up a Bill to strengthen the protections for those in the private rented sector. Again, during the pandemic and as a result of it, we were able to make changes to things like the notice to quit period. All those are being considered, and I will bring forward a Bill to the Executive and the Communities Committee very shortly.

Mr McNulty: Minister, what discussions you have had with the Minister for Infrastructure and the Minister of Finance about upgrading existing waste water treatment capacity to enable the construction of social housing in places like Newry and elsewhere?

Ms Hargey: There have been ongoing discussions through the work streams not only on climate change, which I touched on, but on what we need to do on infrastructure. There is ongoing collaboration between the Departments. On the draft Budget and reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing, the two key areas in the draft Budget are housing and infrastructure. There is a recognition that the two issues are linked.

I had a meeting recently with the Minister for Infrastructure at which that was raised again. We look forward to a follow-up meeting to talk specifically about infrastructure and housing needs in the time ahead. Discussions are ongoing.

Those two areas have also been identified in the Programme for Government. Housing needs to be a specific outcome in the Programme for Government. I hope that, on the back of the public consultation, the Executive will agree to that in the time ahead.

Mr Beggs: The statement spoke of spatial planning, the challenges of an ageing population and climate change. The Minister has also indicated that people want to live close to where they grew up. In Larne, two blocks of multistorey flats were brought down some years ago, and the third and final one is in the process of being brought down. Will the Minister reassess the relatively modest plans to build social housing in that public space, given all the assets that come with it, its central location and its access to essential services and facilities for those who are 55-plus and, indeed, anybody else in need of social housing? It meets all the criteria that were spoken about.

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much. I signed off on an answer to a question for written answer about that from the

Member last week. The housing development programme is based on where the housing need is.

I recognise that we are not building enough social homes to meet the growing need and demand. That has been exacerbated by the COVID pandemic and its impact on homelessness. We need to be more ambitious in our housing plans.

Work is progressing on projected needs and on how people want to live in the time ahead, in local development plans (LDPs), in the Programme for Government and in engagement with Infrastructure and others. We continuously look to identify public land for housing, but the housing development programme is primarily about housing need and where homes will be developed. Obviously, we need to build more homes. When you look at the housing development programme and the numbers experiencing housing stress in areas such as west Belfast, north Belfast and the Foyle area, we can see that more houses need to be built in those areas.

I wrote to you, Roy, specifically on the issue in Larne, and that will be based on the housing need in that area at that time. If there are other plans such as growth plans, we will link in with the local development plan and look at affordable housing and what that will look like in the time ahead. Those are in the early stages of discussion and will start to pick up pace over the coming months.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her statement and for her ongoing, steadfast commitment to the provision of housing. What work is ongoing in the Department to identify land that is needed to meet housing demand?

Ms Hargey: An initiative for public land for public housing was commissioned as part of an asset management strategy action in 2016-17. A number of housing sites were brought forward as part of that. Developments were built and people are living in those homes. However, we need to be more ambitious in how we look at the issue. We need to work with councils, because local development plans are critical, in particular with public land that is in council ownership and in ring-fencing and targeting those areas for housing.

We are reviewing public land for housing. We are conducting an assessment and engaging with other Departments on the availability of land and matching that against where the need is and the projected growth is for LDPs. I am working with the Department for Infrastructure on infrastructure needs and what needs to run alongside that.

All of that work is being brought up to date and is part of the housing supply strategy that we are starting to devise. Once that is completed, the information and work programme will be shared with Members.

Mr McCrossan: The Minister rightly referred to the blight of homelessness across these islands. However, the pandemic has demonstrated that rough sleeping is not inevitable and is a consequence of political and budgetary choices. Is the Minister exploring other policy initiatives that colleagues elsewhere have implemented? What impact will the Finance Minister's rejection of her bid for homelessness services have on the number of homeless people here over the next 12 months?

Ms Hargey: On the budgetary challenges, it is not a rejection by the Finance Minister, as, I am sure, the

Member knows. It is about how budgets are made and how the block grant is given over. We were given a flat budget, which has been passed on to the Executive as a whole and which all Departments face. In real terms, a flat budget means a cut and an impact on services. Collectively, we need to highlight the impact of that to the British Government and the Treasury, particularly in the midst of a pandemic. We need to look at that critical area.

As I said, we have done a lot of good work with Health and housing about how we look at homelessness and at those who find themselves living rough on the streets. That has required resources, and we have managed to do it through COVID moneys. We are reviewing the homelessness strategy and working with the Housing Executive, the Supporting People programme and others.

1.15 pm

I see housing as a fundamental right, and that is why it has to be included as a key outcome of the incoming Programme for Government. Then, we need an agenda for how we will address that issue. As I touched on, there are huge investment challenges for the Housing Executive in undertaking housing builds, and some of those may take a bit longer. However, the work has started to fix the broken system that we have at the moment.

We can learn from other areas. At the meeting, we touched briefly on the challenges of homelessness for all of the Administrations. My focus is on ensuring that we increase the supply of social housing, that we produce a renewed homelessness strategy to deal with the issue and that we find the finance for that. I hope that the Assembly, along with all the parties in the Executive, can make representations to and urgent requests of the British Government and the Treasury to change the proposed Budget to a more ambitious one that invests in public services, including social housing.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Unable to see Mr McCrossan, I felt almost as though I was at a seance or something. There was just a voice coming from the Gallery.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her statement and for her specific comments about future-proofing. She will know of my interest in the need for zero-carbon Passivhaus standards, insulation and retrofitting. I also note the mention of collaborative work to address homelessness in light of the pandemic. However, we need to continue to provide permanent housing solutions for people who are homeless, and we need to ensure that those are sustainable. Will the Minister bring the housing supply strategy to the Executive with a budget and resources attached?

Mr McNulty: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I take points of order at the end of the statement. I will be happy to do so after the statement.

Ms Hargey: The work on the housing supply strategy is ongoing. We are looking at all of those issues. That work will have to be costed. The Member is right: the fundamental issue for someone who is homeless is to have a home and a roof over their head. People who have complex needs need to be supported. Having a home will

not, in itself, do that. We have found that some who get a home may lose it because they have not been able to sustain it. That is a critical issue that we need to fix.

When it comes to the Housing First agenda, we want to work with Supporting People and housing sector organisations such as Housing Rights to look at housing supply issues. I agree that having a house, in itself, will not deal with all of the issues. During the pandemic, our collaboration with the Department of Health has shown that we need to build health and social care. We need to make sure that we are working collaboratively, not in silos, so that the two services are stitched into one another. People have seen the value and the impact of the work that has been done, which has re-energised officials in both Departments. We need to ensure that we continue to step up the work and the focus on that in the time ahead.

Mr Allister: I have heard very few questions or answers arising out of the subject matter of the statement, which is probably a reflection of its lack of substance. However, the statement says:

“there is so much that we can learn from each other.”

What has the Minister learned from other Administrations? Is that just a platitude, bearing in mind that the group will not meet for another two years?

Ms Hargey: Other people may do platitudes, but I do not. I was not in the Assembly when the last meeting of the group took place, and the institutions were down for a period after that. Nevertheless, the work programme between officials continued.

There has been collaboration across the different areas. For many Members, it was their first time going to such a meeting, because of elections and everything else that has passed in-between. The issue is around how officials collaborate and engage on an ongoing basis. There has been collaboration about how we respond to the pandemic and to people who find themselves homeless and on the streets. We have had engagement on health and social care and the need to collaborate, and we have shared direct examples with other jurisdictions on that. We have also looked at the issue of public land for public housing and, indeed, sharing and collaboration. If you read the details of the reports and work plans, you will see the work that is being done at the moment. If I put it all in the statement, I would be here for another two hours and the Member would say that I am talking too much. I do not want to be accused of such a thing, so I kept the statement short.

There has been collaboration. My focus now is on the revitalisation programme, increasing the supply of social housing, looking at affordable housing and dealing with the historical debt that has impacted on the Housing Executive. We will engage with the BIC on whether other areas have faced similar challenges and how they have overcome them. We do that as a matter of course with official engagement.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister.

Mr McNulty: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. My colleague Daniel McCrossan will not appreciate the description of his contribution to this

important matter as being akin to comments from a seance. The Chair should reconsider those comments.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member care to tell me which Standing Order he is referring to?

Mr McNulty: I cannot refer to the Standing Order, but it is completely inappropriate.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Really? Your comments are on the record. The rules on behaviour and courtesies in the House remind Members to be of good nature and good humour at all times. I think that Mr McCrossan will appreciate that that was what it was. Do you wish to make another point of order?

Mr McNulty: I did not find it funny.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Well, humour is obviously a subjective matter and is not referred to in the Standing Orders of the House.

Members, please take your ease for a few moments before we move on to the next item of business.

Executive Committee Business

Damages (Return on Investment) Bill: First Stage

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I beg to introduce the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill, which is a Bill to make provision in relation to the assumed rate of return on investment of particular damages awarded in personal injury cases.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4): Suspension

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 1 March 2021. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2020-21 and Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates: Vote on Account 2021-22

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next two motions are to approve the Supply resolution for the spring Supplementary Estimates 2020-21 and the Vote on Account 2021-22. There will be a single debate on both motions. The Minister will commence the debate on both motions. When all Members 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. I will then call the Minister to move it, and the Question will be put on that motion. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £22,220,328,000, 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 £25,124,542,000, 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 columns 2(c) and 3(c) of table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland spring Supplementary Estimates 2020-21 that was laid before the Assembly on 23 February 2021.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £10,081,611,000, 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 2022 and that resources, not exceeding £11,194,733,000, 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 2022, as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of table 1 in the Northern Ireland Estimates: Vote on Account 2021-22 that was laid before the Assembly on 23 February 2021. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four and a half hours for the debate. The Minister will have 30 minutes to allocate at his discretion between proposing and making his winding-up speech. The Chair of the Finance Committee will have 10 minutes in which to speak, and all other Members who are called to speak will have seven minutes. I call the Minister of Finance to open the debate on the motion.

Mr Murphy: As you have set out, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, this debate covers the Supply resolutions. The first resolution seeks the Assembly's approval for the 2020-21 spending plans of Departments and other public bodies, as set out in the spring Supplementary Estimates (SSEs), which were laid in the Assembly on Tuesday 23 February 2021. Alongside the SSEs, the 2021-22 Vote on Account was also laid. It will be the subject of the second Supply resolution. I will now speak on both of those.

The first resolution before the House relates to the supply of cash and use of resources for the current year, 2020-21. Since the Main Estimates in October 2020, the Executive have continued to manage the public expenditure position, including the allocation of additional funding received from Treasury, as well as the reallocation of existing resources. To date, the Executive have allocated over £2.9 billion in additional resources. Those are unprecedented levels of allocations. The detail of the allocations are a matter of public record and are published on my Department's website.

Before Christmas, the Treasury announced an increase in the amount of COVID funding guaranteed to the Executive in 2020-21 to £3 billion, which provided an additional £200 million of resource DEL. Initial indications were that Treasury would look favourably on requests to carry that over to the next year, and it was therefore not allocated as part of January monitoring. Treasury subsequently advised, however, that that flexibility would not be granted. I have therefore urged my colleagues to bring forward proposals to spend that money on further COVID support.

To ensure that the additional funding from Treasury was not lost, a number of Departments included headroom in their Estimate to provide legal cover for any further allocations. Allocations have already been made to a number of those Departments, details of which have been set out in my written statements to the Assembly. Even after meeting departmental bids, however, unallocated funding remains, and, in the absence of any further proposals, my Department will take forward work on additional grant support.

I had hoped that a broad hardship scheme to support businesses that have not received any support to date would be put in place, but, unfortunately, that has not happened. Once again, it therefore falls on Land and Property Services (LPS) — our rates collection agency — to provide support to businesses. Unfortunately, the rates database held by LPS is not capable of delivering a broad hardship scheme, but, as far as is possible, I will try to incorporate businesses that have not yet received support. I will bring a paper to the Executive on that shortly.

On 15 February, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury announced that a further £327 million would be allocated to the Executive and confirmed that that can be carried forward in full until 2021-22. That £370 million breaks down

into £238 million of resource, £75 million of capital and £14 million of financial transactions capital (FTC).

Given that Departments have been considering ways in which to spend available money beyond the January monitoring round, it has not been possible to introduce the Bill along normal time frames. The recent decision by Treasury on carry-over has meant agreeing allocations at a much later point in the year than usual. Both accelerated passage and suspension of Standing Order 42(5) are therefore required to secure Royal Assent by the end of the financial year.

The COVID-19 crisis has necessitated unprecedented, immediate and extraordinary public expenditure.

The process needs to be expedited to ensure that Departments do not run out of cash. The Bill is essential to authorise all allocations that have been agreed between the Main Estimates and now.

1.30 pm

Alongside the SSEs, which are for 2020-21, there is the Vote on Account. The Vote on Account provides authority for Departments to spend in the first few months of 2021-22. I emphasise that the Vote on Account does not represent the setting of the 2021-22 Budget. That is something that the Executive will do in the coming weeks, and I will bring it to the Assembly before the end of March. Rather, the amount for each Department in the Vote on Account is, in most cases, set at approximately 45% of the 2020-21 provision and is designed to ensure that Departments can continue to deliver services until the Main Estimates and Budget (No. 2) Bill, which will be based on the final Budget, are presented to the Assembly for approval in June.

There are a number of procedural issues that I must also address. On behalf of the Executive, I request and recommend the levels of Supply set out in these two resolutions under section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Moreover, as is normal for a Budget Bill, accelerated passage is required for the legislation. Indeed, there is a specific provision for this in Standing Order 42(2). I understand that the Finance Committee has already agreed to grant accelerated passage, and I place on record my appreciation of the Committee's vital role in agreeing this important step in the financial process.

In addition, to ensure that the Bill receives Royal Assent before the end of the financial year, I require the Assembly's approval to suspend Standing Order 42(5) to allow the passage of this Bill in under 10 days. Given the timing of funding allocations and reallocations, and uncertainty around the carry forward of additional Treasury funding, it was not possible to introduce the Bill any earlier. Doing so would have either hindered Departments' ability to use the funding available or resulted in significantly more headroom being included.

I am sure that Members are aware that today's debates on the resolution is time-limited, and I encourage them to use their limited time to focus on the issues specifically related to the 2020-21 Supply resolution before us. Members will have ample opportunity to debate the Executive's 2021-22 Budget, not just when it is announced before the end of March but when I bring the 2021-22 Main Estimates and Budget (No. 2) Bill to the Assembly later in the year.

For now, the focus should be on the Budget Bill and the associated spring Supplementary Estimates, which are essential for the delivery of vital public services such as schools and hospitals, as well as supporting local businesses and the economy. It is vital that we debate the legislation and pass it expeditiously.

I look forward to putting the Executive's final spending plans for 2020-21 on a legal footing through the spring Supplementary Estimates before you today, together with a corresponding Budget Bill, which we will debate tomorrow. I request the support of Members for the resolution for the 2020-21 spring Supplementary Estimates and the resolution for the Vote on Account to allow services to continue to be funded into the first few months of 2021-22.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): On behalf of the Finance Committee, I thank the Minister for his opening remarks on the Supply resolutions relating to the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account. The Minister's officials have kindly provided written and oral explanations of the Estimates and the Vote on Account at a number of Finance Committee meetings. On behalf of the Committee, I thank him for this and express the hope that these useful engagements will continue in a spirit of cooperation, as indeed they have done, for the remainder of this mandate.

The Committee finds these exchanges with officials most instructive. In fact, members learn something brand new every time officials come to speak to us. In tomorrow's debate, I will, with your indulgence, address this further and speak fairly briefly on the issues relating to accelerated passage for the Budget Bill. For now, I will address the Supply resolutions.

To put it mildly, this has been an unusual year. In order to deal with the very serious regional consequences of the global pandemic, our Government have made significant additional sums available to the Executive. There have also been some underspends as various functions have had to stop or be curtailed and the associated finances have had to be redirected. That has made the reconciliation of the Main Estimates and the spring Supplementary Estimates utterly different from previous years, and allocations from the UK Government have been in excess of the £3 billion of resources. The subsequent Executive allocations often had to be made at short notice and outside the usual monitoring round process.

Furthermore, and as we are aware, the Executive apparently find themselves, even now, with a considerable underspend of sums of, perhaps, over £500 million. Thanks to the special carry-over arrangements with HM Treasury, some of that will be spent in 2021-22. However, it seems that quite a lot of money remains to be disbursed in the current financial year. The Committee has recently urged the Minister to work with his Executive colleagues to bring forward new schemes, or bolster existing schemes, particularly for under-supported business sectors, in order to use up the money and to help other good and applicable causes.

In order to allow for departmental flexibility in that regard, the Estimates show a headroom of almost £1 billion, even though the available resource is considerably less than that. Members and, sometimes, officials have struggled to keep abreast of the multiple allocations and to understand

the use of headroom in the Estimates. I ask the Minister to provide, in his response, a further explanation of the latter and, perhaps, to issue an epilogue to the Estimates that will provide a final record of where the most recent allocations have been made in 2021.

It is understood that the Vote on Account provides finance to allow existing services to continue in the early months of 2021-22 pending the passage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill. The Department advises that existing services should be read as including not only services for which sums have been appropriated before 31 March 2021, but services in respect of which specific legislation has recently been passed or is under consideration. Thus, the Vote on Account is not always simply a financial float that allows things to continue as they are for the first few months of the next financial year. It can be more than that: it can allow other new services to start. Even if that is not the case this year, the Vote on Account is always worthy of the scrutiny of the Committee and the House.

The Department of Finance has benefited from additional allocations of over £200 million to cover the cost of business support measures, including the localised restrictions support scheme. Members have had concerns about the speed of payments and the limited support for some hard-pressed and, apparently, forgotten sectors. That said, the Committee was pleased by the rapid disbursement of support, well in excess of £100 million, which took place between December and January. The Department retains headroom of £300 million to cover the possible costs of additional support measures. Perhaps, the Minister might tell us a little more, if he can, about what he has in that regard, particularly for the sectors, such as the travel industry and driving schools, that have not yet benefited significantly. Every Member can give examples of small and medium-sized companies that have had difficulties.

It is also important that I, as Chairperson, warmly welcome the rates holiday for businesses and recognise the challenge that LPS has had to rise to in respect of the provision of a programme of rates relief. On behalf of the Committee, I endorse both Supply Resolution motions.

I will make a few short remarks in my capacity as the Ulster Unionist Party spokesperson on finance. During the reading of the Supply Estimates, and at last week's Committee meeting, there was much discussion about support for the victims' payment scheme. One of the issues that has exercised many Members and victims is the matter of when the funding to victims is likely to happen. This month marks the 49th anniversary of the despicable attack on the Abercorn bar. Jennifer McNern, whom some Members will know, is still waiting. We have an opportunity to make sure that victims know when that money is due to come to them. Expectations that were raised last week in the Finance Committee have been changed by comments and clarifications from the Department. It is beholden on us to make sure that that much-needed money for the victims of terrorism gets to them.

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I intend to speak on the in-year monitoring rounds, the several COVID allocations, unspent funds and the difficulty for the Committee in being able to scrutinise budgets this year. The Department for the Economy has been delivering schemes to help businesses and

individuals cope with the impact of restrictions on their livelihoods. I put on record the Committee's appreciation of the hard work and dedication of the Department's staff. All credit must be given for the work that has been done against a very difficult backdrop in order to deliver support.

A Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, you will be aware that, in the summer, there was an exercise when the Department for the Economy made 32 bids across 13 themes, including assistance to business; skills and youth training; tourism; the energy strategy; and university research. The Department of Finance made a number of urgent allocations to the Department as part of that exercise, including £23.1 million for interventions for apprenticeships and further education safe learning. The Department's 32 bids were considered key to addressing the economic recovery. Those bids and a further six inescapable pressures total £88 million resource DEL in 2020-21, with future resource DEL funding commitments of £63 million up to 2023-24 and an ongoing recurrent commitment of over £8 million per annum. The modelling for COVID response measures has been difficult. Over £50 million in underspend was returned to the centre in the summer from the Department's initial COVID schemes. The Committee has campaigned for greater flexibility for movement of funds across COVID relief schemes, and thanks must be given to the Finance Minister for the additional flexibility that has been introduced.

The relaxation of restrictions last summer gave false hope for our direction of travel, and the Department's bids in the summer exercise reflected the belief that a recovery phase approached. However, we now know that that was overly optimistic and again required the return of substantial funds that could not be spent. As late as December, the Minister briefed the Committee that the Department was looking at a shortfall of approximately £140 million in its budget. She highlighted a considerable shortfall of approximately £70 million in funding that would have come from EU sources but is not anticipated to be replaced by the British Government's Shared Prosperity Fund.

By the January monitoring round at the beginning of this year, things had changed. The expectation that a recovery phase was beginning was gone, and we found ourselves in the current restrictions and lockdown. As part of January monitoring, the Department submitted bids of £33.9 million for five inescapable non-COVID pressures; five COVID-19 bids totalling £54.7 million to support economic recovery; and one high-priority bid of £8 million for higher education for quality-related research. Also, £17.6 million of resource DEL easements were identified and utilised in other departmental spending, including £3.8 million towards meeting the European social fund (ESF) shortfall. The Minister sought £16 million for Invest NI to replace any European regional development fund (ERDF) shortfall. Additionally, £93 million that was received for the high street voucher scheme was returned and has been included in bids for 2021-22.

The current lockdown restrictions meant that a number of anticipated spends could not be utilised as planned. A further £12.4 million in COVID support funding was returned to DOF as it could not be utilised during the current restrictions. However, the Department indicated that it would seek over £200 million in annually managed expenditure (AME) for 2021-22 in order to cover commitments that had been made.

A Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, that perhaps gives some illustration of the financial roller coaster that the Department for the Economy has been on over the past year, and, as you will appreciate, it has made the Committee's scrutiny role very difficult to fulfil. However, the Committee remains committed to providing as much scrutiny as possible.

I will now make some brief remarks as Sinn Féin economy spokesperson. As I outlined, it has been a very difficult and busy year with bids and allocations from all Departments, particularly the Department for the Economy. The Finance Minister will be aware that the Department for the Economy handed back some £54 million in COVID funding in January, and, since then, bids for further supports from DFE have not been forthcoming. That is despite, as the Chair of the Finance Committee highlighted, groups of businesses having little or no specific support. The Finance Minister will be aware of those because they are issues that have been raised with him, and it has been well rehearsed that there is a good case for support to be made available. That includes support for travel agents, who everyone will recognise have been badly hit. They have been out significant sums from returning deposits and have had a lack of any new bookings. There are also independent agents who do not have premises so have had little other support. There are some self-employed people who have been failed by the British Chancellor because they became self-employed too late in the previous tax year to qualify for the self-employed income support scheme and who were self-employed for too long to qualify for DFE's scheme.

That could be rectified by the Economy Minister making a bid for funds to extend the criteria of the existing scheme.

1.45 pm

Another sector that has been badly hit is the events sector. It previously missed out on support and is not included in the tourism and hospitality support scheme. Again, that could be rectified by bidding for more funds for that scheme and amending the criteria. With £250 million to be allocated, it is difficult to justify not bidding to support businesses and workers who are struggling. We all recognise and appreciate the significant work that departmental officials are putting into delivering schemes, but there are people out there who are really struggling. It is important that all efforts are made to get support to them while that money is available, especially if it is a case of relaxing or amending the criteria of existing schemes rather than designing new ones. Perhaps the Finance Minister could update us on any discussions that have been had or bids that have been made in respect of further business supports.

The Minister will be aware that the Tory Chancellor is due to make a Budget statement this week. I am hopeful that there will be an announcement of an extension to the furlough scheme. I am sure that the Minister agrees that businesses — some sectors in particular — will require support to continue beyond the end of April. I ask the Finance Minister to continue to make representations and to urge the Chancellor to move finally to support some of those whom he has excluded in the past year.

We will debate the incoming year's Budget tomorrow, so I will keep my remarks about that until then.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Now, via StarLeaf, can we call up the Chair of the Education Committee, Mr Chris Lyttle?

We will move on.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I welcome the opportunity to speak today on behalf of the Health Committee and will provide some information on the Committee's consideration of current financial pressures.

We are all aware that this has been a difficult and challenging year. The unprecedented pandemic has meant that a lot of the original Budget planning had to be put on hold and resources directed towards the Executive's response to COVID-19. While we understand the reasons and the need to redirect the Budget and funding, it has left the Department of Health and the wider public in a difficult position. In the coming years, the Department needs to consider how it can recover and restart vital services with considerable and growing backlogs.

We have seen the widespread postponement of elective surgery and services. The recent publication of waiting lists has only highlighted the difficult position in which the Department finds itself. We find ourselves in a position where we have over 320,000 people waiting for their first outpatient appointment, with over 50% waiting for over one year. The target is that no patient should wait for longer than one year for their first appointment. The statistics for inpatient day case and diagnostic waiting times also make for bad reading. We can and should outline the difficulties with COVID, but the situation goes beyond COVID and only outlines the need for the Department to drive forward the transformation programme and ensure that our wonderful and dedicated health and social care professionals have a system in place that is efficient, effective and reactive to the needs of the population. I pay particular tribute to all the health and social care staff who, over the past year, have gone way above and beyond what was or should be expected of them and have striven to ensure that everyone has had the care and support that they needed.

It is concerning that, at a Committee meeting just a couple of weeks ago, the Department's director of finance briefed the Committee and outlined that the funding available did not allow the Department to undertake a transformation programme with any level of ambition and that there would not be enough money in the budget next year.

The Committee received briefings from the Department throughout the year on the 2020-21 Budget. The Department received a number of allocations throughout the year for the response to COVID-19. The Department has advised that, following the Executive's agreement to allocate additional funding of £175 million to purchase additional PPE, the post-January monitoring round position was almost £7.3 billion of resource and £358 million of capital.

The Committee welcomed the flexibility over the past year in allocating spend within the Department, but it raised concerns about the £90 million being surrendered by the Department in the January monitoring round. The Committee would like to see better budget planning and prioritisation over the next Budget period. That has also highlighted the need for multi-year Budgets, which would allow better planning and enable the Department to take

forward a number of transformation projects, rather than having to rely on monitoring rounds to fund need.

I will also outline the difficulty that the Committee has in scrutinising the health and care budget, given that the Department of Finance, the Department of Health and the trusts allocate money under different headings, which can make it difficult to follow the funding. I encourage those involved to progress towards a clear line of sight in budgeting, which would increase transparency and improve the scrutiny of a large and complex budget.

If I may, I will make a few remarks as the Sinn Féin spokesperson on health. Many of the challenges that the health and social care sector faces predate the COVID-19 pandemic, although they have been exacerbated by it. It is undeniable that, under 10 years of Tory austerity, our health and social care sector has been starved of the resources that it needs to provide a reliable and efficient system of health and social care. For example, waiting lists are not a new development. They existed long before the arrival of COVID-19 and are the result of long-standing financial pressures caused by Tory austerity. The pandemic has exacerbated the waiting lists, and we now have the terrible reality that life-saving and red-flag surgery and procedures are being cancelled, causing additional intolerable suffering to patients across the North.

To date, there is little evidence that any proactive planning is taking place in the Health Department: for example, there has been none of the workforce planning needed even to begin recommencing many of the non-COVID health procedures that patients have been waiting for for such a long time. Planning for health and social care requires long-term surety of funds. Therefore, rather than relying on monitoring rounds, we need multi-year Budgets that allow the effective, efficient planning and development of a health and social care sector that serves the health needs of our population.

We are told by the Department of Health that the long-awaited and much-needed transformation project will be less ambitious than previously thought because the funding simply does not exist. That is hugely disappointing and does not augur well for an improved health and social care sector.

As I mentioned, it is with consternation that I note the £90 million that was surrendered by the Department in the January monitoring round when so many priorities in health and social care could easily have benefited from that funding. It is worrying that, with the healthcare system showing so many stresses, the Department and the Minister could not identify an area of health where that money could be spent.

Of particular concern to Sinn Féin is that the pandemic has brought into sharp focus the impact of health inequalities across our more deprived communities, where infection and death rates during the pandemic have been significantly higher. As the problems with long COVID surface, time will tell whether the damage done will further impact on the health of our less well-off.

Finally, we in Sinn Féin are concerned that the Department of Health has opted to carry out a high-level screening exercise, rather than a full equality impact assessment (EQIA), of the Department of Health's draft budget for 2021-22. Using a high-level screening exercise is a

completely inadequate means of gathering the information needed to assess the relevant equality impacts or opportunities. Therefore, the Department of Health should proceed to a full equality impact assessment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Members. It has just turned 1.54 pm. That being the case, I propose to suspend the debate in order to allow Question Time to take place at 2.00 pm. When we return to this item of business, the next Member to speak will be Mr Declan McAleer, the Chair of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee.

The debate stood suspended.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McGlone] in the Chair)

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Infrastructure

Bus Operator Financial Assistance Scheme

1. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the bus operator financial assistance scheme Northern Ireland 2020. (AQO 1641/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I thank the Member for her question. With the pandemic continuing, private bus and coach operators are, like many others, dealing with an extremely difficult situation, particularly as a result of the shutdown of the tourism industry. I am pleased to have already delivered support to many operators in the sector through my first support fund, which closed just before Christmas. A total of 140 valid applications were received for the first financial assistance scheme, and, to date, most of those applications have been considered, with the one remaining application being processed at pace. Ninety-nine applicants have been assessed as being eligible for the scheme, resulting in payments. The main reason for ineligibility is that some operators are still profit-making despite a decline in business. The scheme, however, was set up to provide funding only when losses have been incurred, in order to help those most in need and ensure value for money.

The evidence presented to my Department has confirmed the ongoing impact on the sector since September. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister have therefore agreed to my request for a further determination and designation under the Financial Assistance Act 2009 for a second financial assistance scheme. It will provide further support for the period between 1 October 2020 and 31 March 2021. I have engaged with the sector on the scheme and intend to launch it in early March.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for her response. She will be aware that representatives of the sector have raised significant frustrations with the first scheme, given the high level of ineligibility and the fact that others did not receive full payment. Can the Minister give her assessment of the scheme and say whether she believes that it is serving the needs of industry? Will she commit to engaging with representatives of the sector who believe that their concerns are not being heard?

Ms Mallon: I have engaged with the sector, and my officials have again engaged with sector representatives as recently as last month. We have considered their written submissions and suggestions. The sector articulated its concerns about the first scheme, and I understand the issues that it raised. In developing the second scheme, the £100,000 maximum cap has therefore been removed. Officials are working to ensure that there are no limitations placed on payments owing to state aid rules, and they will also seek to improve communications with operators. Those are three of the issues that the sector raised with us. Many of its other requests have not been taken on board, however, because they do not meet the test of

value for money. For example, payments will not be made to profit-making businesses. In addition, administration and scrutiny of claims as well as sign-off by accountants are still needed to protect value for money. I assure the Member that we will continue to engage closely with the sector, because it is in a turbulent time, and, with the ongoing impact on the tourism industry, it will be affected for quite some time.

Mr K Buchanan: Minister, the first scheme had a reach-out to 67% of people in the industry who were eligible. Do you think that that is high enough? Will the second scheme bring in more people? As my colleague across the way said, do you intend to have more dialogue with operators in the next week or two, before the second scheme is launched, to make sure that the eligible percentage rises?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. A total of 140 valid applications were received. That was once the duplicate applications and those bus operators who provided no evidence were disallowed. As of today, I can confirm that 99 applications have been assessed as being eligible for the scheme, while 40 applicants have been notified that they did not demonstrate that they meet the eligibility criteria. That is because they were not making a loss, and this scheme is very much about targeting support at those who need it. As I said, there is one remaining application to be considered, and my officials are working at pace to progress that.

As for taking on feedback and learning from the first scheme, we have made changes to the second scheme that reflect the concerns raised by the sector, and we will, of course, continue to engage with it going forward.

Speed Limits

2. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the current regulations that determine speed limits on roads. (AQO 1642/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The Department uses the GB system of speed limits. Our policy document 'Setting Local Speed Limits in Northern Ireland' is publicly available on the Department's website. It outlines our approach when setting speed limits outside this system. Our system of speed limits primarily uses the presence of street lighting to distinguish between urban and rural environments. Broadly speaking, where street lighting is present, the speed limit will be 30 miles per hour; elsewhere, unless indicated by traffic signs, the national speed limit applies.

The Department considers a number of factors when assessing the need for a lower speed limit on a road, including the average speed, collision history, and the function of the road. The Department also considers the demographics, as well as the needs of local people, including vulnerable road users and the level of community support for a reduced speed limit.

As the Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce the deaths and serious injuries on our roads. Setting appropriate speed limits is part of the solution. However, I firmly believe that attitudes to speeding have to change. Drivers need to view speed limits as a limit, and not as a target. My Department's public information campaigns repeat the message that speeding is not acceptable. I also

believe my commitment to providing part-time 20 miles per hour limits at 100 schools, as well as helping to improve road safety at schools, will go some way to changing attitudes and behaviours, but all road users need to play their part.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister and commend her for the 20 miles per hour initiative. I asked her officials to look at the speed limit at Teal Rocks on the peninsula side of Newtownards. That was following concerns from a young mother about the number of accidents and her belief that a pedestrian may be killed. Your officials said no. However, I understand that, of the nine relevant factors for changing a speed limit, one is reducing public anxiety. Therefore, I ask the Minister to take a personal interest in reviewing that speed limit.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I am aware of his correspondence on this matter, and my officials will be looking at it to assess the situation.

With regard to public anxiety, it is an important factor that I want to try to address, not just on an individual basis but collectively. The Member may be aware that a number of activities are being carried out through my Department's multimedia approach to address public anxiety, to send a clear message to vulnerable road users that their safety is important, and that the Department wants to do all that it can to make all those who use our roads feel safe.

Miss McIlveen: Like my constituency colleague, I have asked for a review of the speed limit along the A20 Portaferry road, along with the A21, A22 and A23 in the constituency. Despite accidents, none of them has been reduced. Unfortunately, and perhaps unfairly, the Department has a reputation for not wanting to act until there is a fatality. Minister, is it not time to review the national speed limits, with a particular focus on single carriageways in the countryside and on the edge of towns?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. I hope that she will understand that I have to refute very strongly any suggestion that the Department sits back and takes action only when someone is injured. We take our commitments on road safety very seriously.

With regard to changing the national speed limit, there are no plans to change the current system of speed limits, as the Department's view is that the approach has the flexibility to take into account local conditions when determining the appropriate limit. The Department's policy for setting speed limits contains a desire to assess speed limits on the upper tier class A and B road network, the workings of which would have informed a possible assessment of the ongoing applicability of the national speed limit and consideration of which was contained in an action of the road safety strategy to 2020. My Department remains committed to doing what it can to address road safety. While there are no plans in this mandate to change the speed limit, I assure the Member of my ongoing commitment to doing what we can to improve safety on our roads for all users.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her answers. While the roll-out of the 20 miles per hour zones is a very welcome development, I know that a number of schools were disappointed that they were not included in it. What assurances can the Minister give that she will prioritise the further roll-out of this scheme as part of her road safety programme?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. I was delighted to be able to commit funding from this year's budget to introduce part-time 20 miles per hour speed limits at some 100 schools, and I am pleased that good progress is being made to implement this programme. I am determined to make the roads around all our schools safer for everyone. Therefore, it is my intention that many more schools will have a part-time 20 miles per hour speed limit outside their gate.

The scale and extent of any future programmes will be dependent on the funding allocated to my Department.

Mr Muir: As the Minister will be aware, the default speed limit in urban areas is 30 mph. In Wales, this summer, they are going to trial a reduction to 20 mph in eight areas. Has the Minister given consideration to trialling that in some areas of Northern Ireland?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I have been very focused on the roll-out of the 20 mph speed limit schemes at 100 schools. I am also conscious of initiatives that are taking place across these islands, and I always ask my officials to monitor any pilots and to ensure that I am updated on feedback and can give consideration to the merits or otherwise of similar initiatives in Northern Ireland.

Flags and Banners: Legislation

3. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to bring forward legislation to regulate the flying of flags and banners on street furniture. (AQO 1643/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. The flying of flags and the attachment of emblems to departmental street-lighting columns is an offence under the Roads Order 1993, and my Department has the power to remove them from its property.

One of my Department's primary considerations is the safety of the public, and where unauthorised flags or attachments pose a hazard to road users, my Department will always seek to remove that danger. Where there is no such danger, my Department will liaise closely with other key stakeholders to seek to develop a solution.

While recognising my Department's responsibility, the reality is that if we, as a society, are to find a sustainable and lasting solution to the problem of illegal flags and emblems, we must all step up. That includes not only me and my Department but other Executive leaders as well as Members of all parties in the Assembly.

This area is being explored by the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition, which was set up as part of the Fresh Start Agreement, and I understand that the report has issued to the Executive Office. I wrote jointly with the Justice Minister on the issue of flags to the Executive Office on 18 September last year, and I have asked for sight of the commission's report so that, collectively, we can make progress on this important and challenging area.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister. The Executive Office responded to a question for written answer from me regarding the commission's report, and indicated that the junior Ministers were establishing a working group to look at its recommendations and findings. Have your

Department's officials been invited onto that working group, and what role could they play on it?

Ms Mallon: I am not aware of a working group being set up, so I cannot comment on the involvement or otherwise of my officials, but I will certainly look at that. With the Justice Minister, I wrote to the Executive Office on 18 September. Unfortunately, I have yet to receive a response. I am committed to doing what I can to address this long-running problem in our society, but, as I said, we will find a lasting and sustainable solution only when we work collectively.

Mrs D Kelly: It is deeply troubling that the Minister wrote on such an important issue on 18 September, because, in my constituency and others, we have seen the erection of sinister posters of late, and people would question why they are allowed to remain on street furniture. Minister, do you share my concern that the Executive Office is not showing due diligence on and consideration of that report? Why has it not been shared with you yet, given that your Department would play a central role?

Ms Mallon: Unfortunately, I am not in the Executive Office, so I cannot answer questions on its behalf. What I can say is that I am up for trying to address this wider societal problem with all my Executive colleagues, all parties in the House and all councils and communities.

It is a long-running issue; we need to address it. As you say, we have seen the erection of posters on Brexit and the Irish Sea border. We have seen inflammatory messages throughout our history that cause intimidation and great upset. It is long past time that, as a society, we came together and found a lasting solution.

Mr Beggs: The Minister acknowledged, rightly, that she already has the power to remove many banners should she so wish. Since the creation of the border down the Irish Sea, we have a very aggrieved unionist community, and there has been no attempt to gain cross-community support and honour the protections in the Belfast Agreement.

Does the Minister acknowledge that, were her officials to attempt to remove non-threatening banners that were erected peacefully and democratically, it is likely that they will be replaced by many more?

2.15 pm

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I understand that there is a sense of anxiety in the unionist community. However, that requires leadership and honesty. The truth is that there has been no change to the constitution. I urge people, when they are making comment, not to use terminology like "guerrilla warfare" and to be mindful that our words have serious impact. When people are feeling anxious, we should be honest with them and try to address those anxieties.

I brought forward a suggestion in the Executive that we find consensus, as an Executive, to request a three-month extension to the grace period while trying to find pragmatic solutions to the difficulties that businesses face and while working to maximise the opportunities that can be presented. Unfortunately, to date, I have not been able to secure the support of my unionist colleagues to do that. However, I have no interest in causing division or anxiety. All that I want to do is work hard as the Minister

for Infrastructure with my Executive colleagues so that we can improve the lives of all citizens, whatever their political persuasion.

Mr Boylan: Following on from that, what is the Department's approach to dealing with the flying of flags and banners? Has she any statistics on the number of times that the Department has been asked to remove such items?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. Where flags have not been attached securely to lamp posts, it is possible that the detachment of flags and other materials from lamp posts and other street furniture could distract or injure road users. Fortunately, there have been no significant incidents of that nature to date. My Department has removed successfully and discreetly a small number of flags and banners over recent years. Records of that are not kept. Records were kept previously, but that practice ceased around six years ago.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for her answer. However, I have to take issue with her when she says that her Department takes measures to remove such emblems. Having written to a previous Minister, Mr Kennedy, and raised the matter repeatedly, we still have, in the village of Rasharkin in my constituency, signs from republican organisations that do not have the support of the community. They should have been removed a long time ago. That is a failure by your Department, Minister, to deal with the issue in a village that has been subjected to a lot of intimidation in the past, part of which emanates from those illegal signs.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Does the Member have a question?

Mr Storey: When will they be removed? Can I have an assurance that they will be removed?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. Let me be unequivocal about this: I have no support for or any truck with the erection of flags or emblems that cause intimidation to anyone. However, this is the complexity of the issue: in a previous question, Mr Roy Beggs appealed to me not to remove emblems that had been erected in one part of Northern Ireland, and you now request the removal of emblems in another part. The reality is that the Minister for Infrastructure, whatever political party they belong to, will never be able to find a lasting solution to the issue. It requires political leadership. It requires the Executive to come together to address the issue holistically, collectively and responsibly.

Park-and-ride Scheme: Dungiven

4. **Ms Hunter** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on plans for a park-and-ride scheme in Dungiven. (AQO 1644/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Last week, I was delighted to announce plans for a new park-and-ride scheme at Dungiven. It will provide around 150 spaces adjacent to the junction of the new A6 Dungiven to Drumahoe dual carriageway with the Feeny Road and will help to deliver cleaner, greener sustainable transport for the local community. My Department will now begin the pre-application discussions with Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council as a precursor to applying for planning permission later in 2021.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister for her answer. That is fantastic news for the people of Dungiven. I know that you have worked hard to provide the park-and-ride scheme. On accessibility, will a shuttle bus be provided to take people from Dungiven town out to the park-and-ride facility?

Ms Mallon: I can confirm to the Member that the Department is working closely with Translink to consider operational requirements for public transport through Dungiven when the park-and-ride project is completed. Translink is committed to continuing to provide an appropriate level of service to Dungiven, and we will certainly look at that request in order to assist the local community.

Dr Archibald: I welcome the progress to date and the announcement that was made last week after I met the Minister and raised the importance of the scheme. Indeed, the right public transport infrastructure will help public transport to bounce back after the pandemic. Minister, what is the timescale for delivery of the project, and will it be in place when that section of the A6 is completed? Will cycling infrastructure be put in place to encourage active travel?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. Subject to successful land acquisition, planning approval and procurement, I anticipate that the park-and-ride site could be operational to coincide with the completion of the A6 dualling scheme in 2022. I can also confirm that there will be active travel, through a walking and cycling link, to the park-and-ride site as well, because we need to maximise all opportunities to increase active and sustainable transport and to offer our citizens increased choice.

Mr Storey: I am intrigued by the Minister's commitment to deliver planning for this issue. In light of the unacceptable delays in the planning system, particularly in the Causeway Coast and Glens area, will she look at that issue to ensure that there is a process in place that gives an outcome and not what we have had for too long in that area: delay, delay, delay?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware, as a veteran MLA, that we moved to a two-tier planning system, so a significant number of applications fall to councils to be processed. The Member will also be aware of the improvements that my Department is undertaking at a strategic and regional level to improve the planning process and its efficiency. Of course, we will continue to work with councils and support them. I encourage the Member, if he has concerns about the planning processes in his council area, to raise that directly with the council.

Infrastructure to Connect Northern Ireland and Scotland

5. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline any discussions her Department has had with its UK counterparts regarding infrastructure connecting Northern Ireland and Scotland. (AQO 1645/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the Union connectivity review in June 2020 with no communication beforehand with any of the devolved Administrations, even though I

had previously raised my concerns with Grant Shapps MP, the Secretary of State for Transport.

Following the announcement in August 2020 that Sir Peter Hendy would chair the Union connectivity review, I held further discussions with my counterparts in the Welsh and Scottish Governments to discuss our shared concerns regarding clause 46 of what was then the Internal Market Bill, which would give the British Government the ability to spend directly on projects in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, even if those policy areas normally fall under devolved competences. Accordingly, in September, a joint letter was sent to the Secretary of State for Transport setting out our significant concerns and reminding him that devolution must be respected and that locally elected, locally accountable Ministers are best placed to make local decisions.

I spoke to Minister Shapps again in October to restate my concerns, and I met the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland soon after and reaffirmed my determination that decisions on local infrastructure priorities should be determined by local Ministers. I also provided the Secretary of State with a list of priority infrastructure projects as determined by New Decade, New Approach.

Members will be aware that I met Sir Peter in December 2020 to discuss the Union connectivity review in detail. I outlined my concerns and again affirmed my opposition to any extravagant vanity projects. I heard nothing further on the matter until media reports in February stated that agreement on a tunnel between Scotland and Northern Ireland was shortly to be approved. While my officials got in touch with the Department for Transport and were assured that that is not the case and that news articles had greatly overstated the situation, I made my position extremely clear: I am the Minister for Infrastructure, and devolution mandates me to take decisions that will improve the lives of citizens here.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for her response. Although I know that the Minister received late notice of the Union connectivity review, there has been a lot of time since June in which the Minister's Department could have become involved and helped. The Minister has form for talking down east-west connectivity, so has she or her Department submitted any written evidence regarding Northern Ireland's need for infrastructure as part of UK connectivity? These exciting projects have the ability to transform the connectivity and infrastructure of the Union. Will she please outline whether she has submitted that information?

Ms Mallon: As I said to the Member, I met Sir Peter Hendy. I have also written to the Secretary of State, Grant Shapps, and a number of Ministers. In fact, as recently as today, I wrote to remind Ministers of their commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach' to "turbocharging infrastructure".

Members rightly raise concerns about potholes and street lighting, yet here we have a proposal for three tunnels and a roundabout under the Isle of Man. Clearly, that is a vanity and distraction project. If money is coming our way, I will ensure that it is spent on infrastructure projects that Ministers across all political parties have committed to and that the British Government committed to in 'New Decade, New Approach'. I think that Simon Hoare summed up the project perfectly when he described it as follows:

"The trains could be pulled by an inexhaustible herd of Unicorns overseen by stern, officious Dodos. A PushmePullYou [sic] could be the senior guard and Puff the Magic Dragon the inspector. Let's concentrate on making the Protocol work and put the hallucinogenics down".

Mr Allister: The Minister should be better than that. It is quite clear from her first answer that she has expended a great deal of energy on opposing connectivity. I want to ask her specifically about the A75. In an answer to a question for written answer on 15 July, she told Mr Beggs that her:

"departmental officials have not yet had detailed discussions with their Scottish counterparts" — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 129, pWA392].

about the 'South West Scotland Transport Study', which includes improvements to the A75. Has she had those discussions yet or is she so besotted with —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Has the Member concluded his question?

Mr Allister: — those other issues that she has not had the time?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I am keen to see the A75 and A77 upgraded. Those key links into Scotland and England are of significant importance to Northern Ireland trade. Upgrading the routes would reduce journey times, improve journey time reliability, increase safety on the routes and complement the relatively recent improvements that have been completed on the strategic links to Larne port. However, while I am supportive, I am conscious that those roads are in Scotland. Therefore, I recognise that that is very much a decision for Scottish Ministers.

My departmental officials are familiar with the 'South West Scotland Transport Study'. One of the key aims of that study is to consider the rationale for improvements to key strategic corridors, including the A75 and A77, with a focus on access to the ports at Cairnryan. My officials remain ready and willing to engage in detailed discussions with their Scottish counterparts about that transport study. Those discussions have been delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, but we expect them to take place very soon, with the study feeding into Scotland's Strategic Transport Projects Review 2, which is expected to report towards the end of this year. The Member will also be aware that I have very regular engagement with my ministerial counterpart in Scotland. I will, of course, continue to raise that issue when we meet.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I can fit in a very brief question from Mr Aiken and, hopefully, a brief answer to conclude listed questions.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. Obviously, we are all against fantasy bridges, tunnels and roundabouts. Will the Minister say why she is still committed to the Narrow Water bridge when, in fact, she should be using that investment to deal with the infrastructure problems on our roads?

Ms Mallon: I will be very succinct, Mr Deputy Speaker. Narrow Water bridge is a commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach', the basis on which your party, my

party and the other parties in the Chamber entered the Executive.

Dr Aiken: It did not say that in 'New Decade, New Approach'.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will Members refrain from making commentary from a seated position, please? It interferes with the recording, and it is also bad manners.

That concludes the period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions.

Driving Tests: Key Workers

T1. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to reinstate driving tests for key workers, such as health workers, ambulance staff and Fire and Rescue Service personnel, for whom driving is a key part of their work. (AQT 1041/17-22)

2.30 pm

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for raising this issue; it is an important one. The Member will know that, during the initial lockdown period, the DVA assessed requests from key workers to provide them with priority driving test appointments once driving tests resumed. The DVA has received a number of requests from key workers requesting that it reinstate a priority service for them to avail themselves of early appointments. The DVA is actively considering the facilitation of priority requests from key workers whose jobs are ancillary to medical, health or social care services and who are required to drive for the purposes of their work. However, the approach will be based on engagement with the relevant employers, rather than individual learners, in order to provide the DVA with a list of relevant staff who fall within that priority group. I am pleased to report that, in working with the Ambulance Service, we have been able to facilitate a number of driving tests. We are keen to do what we can to ensure that those who need to get driving tests, and who are on the front line putting their lives at risk to save ours, are supported to do so safely.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank the Minister for that response. The Minister said that some ambulance drivers have been facilitated, but can she give any indication of a time frame for when it will be opened up for all key workers who require a licence for their work?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. Our work is ongoing to ensure that, when restrictions enable us to do so, we can open up the driving test facility to all our customers. I am not able to give a definitive date for when it will be opened up to priority workers, however, I assure you that we are working with key employers to address the issue, and I am happy to provide the Member with a further update.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before we move to the next question, I wish to notify Members that question 8 has been withdrawn.

Casement Park

T2. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the planning application for Casement Park. (AQT 1042/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. I am pleased to advise that, since my announcement, in October, recommending planning approval for the redevelopment of Casement Park, there has been considerable progress towards issuing the final planning decision. Following the council and applicant conferring that they agreed with the notice of opinion to approve the application, departmental officials have been working at pace to progress the required planning agreement, which must be in place before the final planning decision can issue. I look forward to the final planning decision issuing for this project, as I am of the view that the project will give a real boost to sport across our island and to the local economy and, finally, give the GAA its home in Ulster.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for her response. The Minister will know that the Casement Park project can have a transformative impact in west Belfast and in the wider Gaelic games community. We all want to see the project delivered. Can the Minister explain why, five months after she made the very welcome announcement, the planning approval process has not yet been completed and is causing further delay?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. The Member will be aware, as will anyone who has a keen interest in this application, that it is extremely complex. However, I assure the Member that my officials are progressing it at pace and properly. Officials remain committed to working on this, and I have made clear my view that I remain committed to doing this. Work is ongoing at pace. As with all planning applications, they must be processed not only quickly but properly.

Capital Projects

T3. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that respected EU commentators such as Tony Connelly are advising that a degree of rethinking is going on, whether she agrees that it would be wise not to spend money on capital projects that may not be needed, especially in light of the widening acknowledgement that the current EU trading arrangements with the United Kingdom, along with the Northern Ireland protocol, are causing difficulties for the haulage sector and small businesses. (AQT 1043/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I am not entirely sure which capital projects he is referring to. What I am doing is progressing Executive flagship projects. I am also trying to progress, where possible and where funding permits, commitments that we made in 'New Decade, New Approach'. My frustration is that I am not able to progress more capital projects that will be transformative for our citizens. I do not see investment in Executive flagship projects or any of the commitments that we all signed up to as a waste of money.

Mr Beggs: Sorry, the Minister has not picked up my line of questioning. I am talking about the planned infrastructure that is being built at our ports. If changes occur with increased recognition of the difficulties and if, in particular, there is a sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) agreement — I understand that every party in the Chamber except Sinn Féin is supportive of that — much of the infrastructure being built will not be needed.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I will answer it by going to the heart of the issue. This is about

implementing the protocol, and there is a legal requirement on the AERA Minister and on all other Ministers in the Executive to do so. It is imperative that the protocol be implemented. As I said, there are difficulties, and no one is denying that. That is why the SDLP has been proposing an extension to the grace period. Although we are working to address and find pragmatic solutions to the difficulties that, for example, hauliers are facing, we should also work hard to maximise the economic opportunities that are there to be had for businesses right across Northern Ireland.

Strangford Ferry: Additional Shelter

T4. Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of the fact that social distancing is likely to be with us for some considerable time, whether she will commit to looking seriously at alternative types of shelter for the Strangford ferry, given that, in answer to a question for written answer on the provision of additional shelter for foot passengers, including schoolchildren, to protect them from inclement weather, she suggested that they wear suitable clothing, albeit the Minister probably would not find it acceptable for anyone close to her to travel around Belfast on an open-top bus in the rain and then go to school in wet clothes. (AQT 1044/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. She has a keen interest in the Strangford ferry, so she will be aware of the additional services that we have put on to cater for schoolchildren. The mitigations and measures for the Strangford ferry were put in place following risk assessments, and, in line with the public health advice, we have liaised very closely with the Department of Health. I, of course, do not want to see any child heading to school in the rain, but the challenges that were articulated in that answer to the Member's written question were that we have to balance public health and safety needs against social-distancing requirements. There is also a safety element to a canopy being put on the ferry.

I assure the Member that we are continuing to look for solutions to the situation. We will continue to revise the mitigations for the ferry and other services across my Department in line with the public health advice as it changes and, hopefully, as we move through the restrictions.

Miss McIlveen: As the Minister will be aware, residents of the Ards peninsula use the Strangford ferry as others across Northern Ireland use the bus to go to work. Will she commit to introducing a permanent 7:00 am ferry from Portaferry for workers, many of whom are key workers in the health and social care sector or in construction, who cannot get to work on time at the moment?

Ms Mallon: I can assure the Member that we keep the situation under constant review. If there is evidence of a clear need, we will do what we can to cater for our customers. As I said, we have put on the additional service in the morning for schoolchildren. She will also be aware that, using the blue-green fund, we are making changes to the ferry to ensure that particulates are taken out of the system, thereby improving air quality for its customers. We are therefore always on the lookout to see how we can improve our service.

Planning Appeals Commission: Powers to Revoke

T5. Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she thinks that it is sensible that the Planning Appeals Commission does not have powers to revoke permissions that, on reflection, were wrong, particularly the Kells battery energy storage scheme, which was approved on the basis of being non-generating, with the Department now decreeing that such schemes are generating. (AQT 1045/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I am aware of an issue with the treatment of energy storage systems in the planning system in Northern Ireland. The Member will know that, following a review of that type of development, my chief planner issued an update on 16 December to clarify the Department's position, which is that, for the purposes of planning in Northern Ireland, the Department considers that electricity storage development falls within the meaning of "electricity generating station".

The chief planner's update is not a legislative or policy change but is, instead, provided as clarification from the Department. Local planning authorities are therefore advised to adopt that position when processing applications for electricity storage facilities such as battery energy storage systems. I am aware that the Member has written to me about revocation of the planning permission. I understand that Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council has decided not to revoke planning permission for the Kells battery energy storage scheme, by way of a discretionary council power under section 68 of the Planning Act 2011.

Mr Allister: Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council did not give the planning permission; it was the Planning Appeals Commission. That is my point, as it is now patently obvious that the permission should not have been given. The council does not want to get involved, but the Department has extraordinary revocation powers. Why does the Department not exercise them? In what circumstances does it exercise revocation powers?

Ms Mallon: While I acknowledge that my Department has revocation powers, they are a check and balance in the two-tier planning system intended to be used only exceptionally and as a last resort. The council, as the planning authority for the area, is best placed to make the decision and is the authority with the responsibility to do so. That is in keeping with the spirit of the then Northern Ireland Executive's decision to transfer local planning decisions to councils and create the two-tier planning system.

Cycle Route: Cavehill Road/Limestone Road

T6. Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Infrastructure when, although it is early yet, the proposed and welcome cycle route along the Cavehill Road and the Limestone Road, which she announced last month, will be completed. (AQT 1046/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her support. North Belfast has been left behind with active travel. I am keen to work with councils and with other Departments to address that. At the minute, we are working up some suggestions about the experimental nature of the scheme. We will then move to a public consultation. As I have said before, if you

want to deliver lasting change, it is important to do it with communities, so we will consult local residents — local sporting groups, such as North Belfast Harriers, have been in touch — and elected representatives. I am keen to see greater cycle provision in north Belfast at the earliest opportunity.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, you and I know that North Belfast is not the flattest of constituencies and does not often lend itself to cycle routes. We go out as far as Glengormley, and people living in the greater Belfast area commute to Belfast to work. We want to see that increase. Will you look further at other parts of north Belfast?

Ms Mallon: We have written to all councils, including Antrim and Newtownabbey, asking them to bring forward proposals and ideas that we can support with resource and capital moneys. I am keen to maximise whatever opportunities there are to enhance active travel provision for citizens across north Belfast. As the Member said, it is a hilly place, but there is always the opportunity to have an e-bike because we have changed the legislation on that. Having used it myself, I can say that it is effortless going up a hill, so I recommend it to the Member *[Laughter.]*

Hightown Incinerator: Update

T7. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Hightown incinerator application. (AQT 1047/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. My officials continue to progress the application in line with planning policy. The applicant voluntarily submitted further environmental information to the Department in October and December 2020. I am keen to bring a resolution to this long-standing application for all involved, but, if a sound decision is to be reached, it is important that the planning system be completed correctly. The necessary administrative processes have been undertaken, including advertising the further environmental information and requesting consultation advice from the necessary interested bodies and public authorities. My officials will make a recommendation to me on the planning application. It is important that I consider it carefully and take all views into account in reaching any decision. In the interim, as, I hope, the Member appreciates, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the individual planning merits or otherwise of the application.

Mr G Kelly: I thank the Minister for her answer. The Minister will be aware, as it is within her remit, that there are 5,000 signatures against this. I understand that she cannot give her decision at the moment, but is she aware of the costs? One in Edmonton, in London, went from £650 million to £1.2 billion. Does she know anything about that? There was full cross-party support for the residents and against the incinerator: has that changed, or has the Minister been lobbied to change that?

Ms Mallon: I am aware of the number of responses to the planning application and the opposition that exists locally. As Minister with responsibility for planning, I will carefully consider all the representations and will consider carefully the recommendation that comes from my planning officials.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes topical questions. Members should take their ease while we move to the next set of questions, please.

2.45 pm

Justice

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before we move to questions to the Minister of Justice, I advise Members that question 8 has been withdrawn.

Court Cases: Backlog

1. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the current backlog of cases in the court system in comparison to pre-pandemic levels. (AQO 1656/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): At 1 February 2021, there were around 10,000 criminal cases, compared with approximately 8,100 cases in March 2020. That increase is down significantly from a high of approximately 12,800 cases in the court system in September 2020. Although jury trials have recommenced, the number of new cases coming into the system currently exceeds the number of trials held.

It is not possible to accurately determine the overall backlog of cases for civil business in exactly the same manner as for criminal. However, business volumes in the County Court are currently around 60% of those in the first 11 weeks of 2020 prior to lockdown.

Family court receipts and disposals declined from the start of lockdown. However, the dip in receipts was less marked than those seen in other business areas. Following the reopening of most courts in August, the average number of receipts and disposals has increased significantly and now slightly exceeds pre-lockdown levels.

Mr Harvey: Will the Minister outline how she plans to address the backlog?

Mrs Long: The Member will be aware from previous answers of the work that has already been done in the criminal justice system to ensure that we are able to continue to work our way through the backlog. Court business was initially consolidated into five court hubs to facilitate the delivery of urgent matters whilst maintaining the safety of all court users and staff in line with public health advice. Following a series of COVID-19 risk assessments, significant work has been undertaken to make sure that court buildings are kept safe, secure and clean and that social distancing occurs in line with Public Health Agency (PHA) guidance.

The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) continues to move forward towards full business recovery following the initial peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Only three of the smallest hearing centre venues are now non-operational. Those venues will be risk-assessed in due course. However, the initial focus has been on the larger venues, which offer greater flexibility. The reopening of the court estate, along with business directions from the Office of the Lord Chief Justice, has seen the full range of services resumed by the end of September 2020, albeit at reduced capacity due to the necessary social distancing.

Mr Boylan: There was excess funding available in this financial year: did you bid for additional funds to tackle the backlog?

Mrs Long: There are a number of areas where we received additional funding for the court service. However, the current underspend is not something that we could bid for and use in this year, which is the requirement as things stand. The physical measures that were put in place and a number of the other options including, for example, hiring external venues to allow for additional circulation space, such as at the international convention centre (ICC) at the Waterfront Hall, has all been paid for either through additional receipts from the Department of Finance or from the reallocation of funding in the business area of the Department of Justice. Where some of our business was not able to be completed earlier in the year, we have been able to use that money in order to support recovery.

Mr Beattie: I know that an awful lot of work has been put into this over this last number of months. I know that you have been creating COVID spaces for jury trials. Will you let us know how you are getting on with the ones that are due to be finished in April in Antrim, Dungannon and Newry?

Mrs Long: Work is being done in the three smaller courthouses, which are not operational at the moment. They are still undergoing risk assessment, and that work will be completed in due course. However, by the end of the current phase of work, we will have more jury court space available than we did pre-pandemic. We have more courtrooms that are able to operate for jury trials, even with those three facilities closed, than we did at the start of the pandemic. I think that 13 courtrooms will be able to operate for jury trials.

There is an issue with jury trials that is to do not with capacity in the system but with the complexity of the trials. For example, where you have multiple defendants, you will have multiple legal teams and a much larger group of people in the court system. Whilst they can be physically accommodated, trials of that nature run the risk of someone in that trial system being identified as having contracted COVID or of having been exposed to it and needing to self-isolate. For that reason, those more complex trials are much more difficult to schedule. Most of the jury trials that have been proceeding to date have been those that are slightly shorter cases that can be seen in a number of days rather than weeks and those that have single defendants.

Ms Armstrong: Will family courts be able to sit into the summer to allow that critical service to continue and avoid further delays, especially when we hear that so many people have partners who have used COVID to postpone hearings?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for her question. The family proceedings courts (FPC), in which most family cases are dealt with, are part of the Magistrates' Court tier. Those courts remain open throughout the year. Family care centres (FCCs) at County Court level and the High Court family division normally have recess over the summer; however, judges will be available for hearings at both FCC and High Court level during the summer, as they were last year, where a hearing is considered appropriate.

From mid-April 2020, family cases that have been received and disposed of have steadily increased. Following the

reopening of most courts in August 2020, the average number of receipts and disposals has increased further and now slightly exceeds pre-lockdown levels. The number of Children's Order sittings between July and December was 5% higher than in the same period in 2019. Some 13.5% more hours were sat between July and December 2020 than in the same period in 2019.

There comes a point, however, when we need to look at the capacity in the system in terms of the judiciary and others qualified to hear cases, as well as the physical capacity and the time available in the courts. It is about ensuring that there is a proper balance in all that as we go forward. The Criminal Justice Board (CJB) fulfils that role for the work that we do in the criminal courts, but we also work in the civil courts as far as possible. The Member will recognise that many of the control elements are not in the gift of the Department of Justice in civil matters.

Mr Carroll: Over 1,000 magistrates' defendants were received through the court process for the non-payment of TV licences from March to December last year. How fair is that, when so many people are waiting for court cases for instances of serious crime, which you referred to?

Mrs Long: The scheduling of cases in the courts is not a matter for the Department of Justice; it is entirely a matter for the independent judiciary. It is not for me to tell it what should and should not be prioritised, and it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the Member's question.

Domestic Abuse: Media Campaign

2. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Justice when the media campaign in relation to the new domestic abuse offences is due to be launched. (AQO 1657/17-22)

Mrs Long: It is my preference and intention that an advertising campaign will start in late autumn to align with the introduction of the new domestic abuse offence. It will involve a multimedia approach similar to the "See the Signs" campaign that has been running for the past three years. It will be important in raising awareness that we reach all sections of society regardless of gender, age or sexual orientation or any other attribute, given that anyone can be a victim or an abuser. The campaign will be externally sourced, but it is important that key messaging is developed in consultation with our statutory and voluntary partners, representing as wide a range of views as possible. Tackling domestic abuse is a key priority for me and the Department, and, along with our partners, we are committed to ensuring that victims and perpetrators are aware of the new offence and that victims are aware of where they can get the help and support that they need.

In advance of any new campaign, my Department, together with partners, continues to deliver a number of initiatives to raise public awareness of domestic abuse. I relaunched the Department's "See the Signs" campaign at Christmas and into the new year, and, similarly, other organisations undertook campaigns earlier this year to promote the important message that help remains available, including from the PSNI and Crimestoppers. Awareness also continues to be raised through a media campaign run by the 24-hour domestic and sexual abuse helpline, ongoing social media activity and work being undertaken by our statutory and voluntary sector partners, including the policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs).

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister for her response. We have welcomed the introduction of the incredibly important legislation and would like to see it implemented as quickly as possible. An important aspect of that is the messaging that goes with it. Will the Minister confirm that no budgetary pressures will hinder the roll-out of the important campaign to make sure that there is full awareness in the community of all aspects of the legislation?

Mrs Long: I expect the cost of an effective three-year multimedia advertising campaign of this type to be around £500,000. It is likely that that cost will be skewed towards year 1 in order to allow the development of materials for television and radio. A campaign over three years will provide exposure to a wider audience and ensure the longevity of the key messages being delivered. I am confident that we will be able to take that forward and that the Department is committed to doing so ahead of the operationalisation of the domestic abuse offence.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Minister give an update on the tendering for an advocacy support service for victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse?

Mrs Long: As Members will be aware, the tendering for the support service is something on which I have answered questions in the Chamber previously. It is currently out to tender, because, unfortunately, we were unable to get the kind of collaborative approach that we had hoped to have. We have, therefore, gone to an open tender. At this stage, it would not be appropriate for me to say anything further on where we are with the scheme, but I am happy to write to the Member to update him at the appropriate time on where the scheme lies. As Members know, it is our intention to have a single advocacy service that is able to provide useful support to victims and witnesses of domestic abuse and sexual crime. We are progressing on that basis.

Mrs Barton: Will the Minister give a timeline for when the advocacy support services for domestic violence is expected to be launched?

Mrs Long: I cannot, but I will be happy to do so in writing to the Member.

Miss Woods: We have much to do regarding awareness, not least in education, of domestic abuse, coercive control and what a healthy relationship is. What additional budget and resource has the Department allocated to implement fully the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act once it receives Royal Assent this year?

Mrs Long: The Member will be aware, as a member of the Justice Committee, that the draft budgets have been circulated to Committees for consideration. As she will also be aware, there is no additional funding for any Department in the current year.

We are in a flat cash situation, and the same is true for the Department of Justice as is true for other Departments. If she scrutinises the information sent to the Department of Justice, she will see the allocations set out therein. However, it is our intention to continue to work through those issues with the Department of Finance and to make such representations as we can so that any money carried over from this year into future years will be able to be utilised against this and a number of other priorities.

3.00 pm

Organised Crime

3. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister of Justice to outline her post-Brexit priorities in relation to cross-border cooperation in tackling organised crime. (AQO 1658/17-22)

4. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the work of the cross-border joint agency task force in tackling organised crime. (AQO 1659/17-22)

Mrs Long: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I intend to group questions 3 and 4.

One of my key priorities is ensuring that we do all we can to protect individuals, communities and businesses in Northern Ireland from organised crime in all its forms. Effective collaboration between Governments and law enforcement agencies is key to successfully disrupting and preventing organised criminality. I remain committed, in partnership with my colleague Helen McEntee TD, Minister for Justice, to enabling and supporting law enforcement agencies, north and south of the border, to continue to work collectively and proactively to combat organised crime. Cooperation between the Police Service of Northern Ireland and an Garda Síochána and other law enforcement partners is already well established and working effectively.

Now that we have left the EU, a key priority is to ensure continued access to available resources and measures for effective cross-border and international collaboration to pursue organised criminals, including operational collaboration through the joint agency task force (JATF), joint investigation teams, where appropriate, and Europol. We have a good record of working in partnership with our colleagues in the South, including through the operational joint agency task force. This was established following the Fresh Start Agreement as part of a concerted and enhanced effort to tackle organised crime and cross-jurisdictional crime. It comprises a strategic oversight group, chaired by the PSNI Deputy Chief Constable and an Garda Síochána Deputy Commissioner, to determine on an ongoing basis the priority areas in cross-border organised crime. In accordance with the provisions of the intergovernmental agreement (IGA), reports on the work of the joint task force are presented on a six-monthly basis to the meeting of the respective Justice Ministers under the IGA framework on cooperation on criminal justice matters. Following the IGA meeting in November 2020, I made an oral statement to the Assembly that included a substantive update on the work of the JATF.

Mr Catney: I thank the Minister for that very comprehensive answer, and I welcome the cooperation between North and South. Minister, do you foresee any challenges to cross-border cooperation, specifically in the context of the post-Brexit environment?

Mrs Long: The outcome for justice in the trade and cooperation agreement (TCA) that was agreed by the UK and the EU on 24 December 2020 replicates most of the key EU justice measures that the UK had access to as an EU member state. The one key area not included in the TCA is continued access to the Schengen information system, more commonly known as SIS II. The TCA does, however, allow the UK to negotiate a similar arrangement with member states on a bilateral basis through the

protocol. We will look to the UK to agree bilateral arrangements, including with Ireland, once the new arrangements have bedded in and a proper gap analysis has taken place.

It is important to recognise that there is also the wider issue of data adequacy. Of course, the decision on that is due to be taken within the first six months of the agreement being signed. Without that, there will, of course, be implications for the live sharing of data and information between police services. However, at this point, because of the derogation for the first six months, that is not yet operational, and there are some planned ways of working through that, should it fall without a proper data adequacy agreement being in place. However, my understanding is that the likelihood of such a data adequacy agreement being agreed is high.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. Has the Minister engaged with her counterpart in the South to ascertain the veracity of allegations and revelations made in the BBC 'Panorama' programme, 'Boxing and the Mob'? Has she, alongside the PSNI and the gardai, assessed the reach of organised crime here? Her party colleague Stephen Farry raised the issue at Westminster.

Mrs Long: To date, I have not had the opportunity to raise that issue with Minister McEntee. We have not met since the programme aired, nor would it be appropriate for me to speculate on things that are in the media as opposed to assessments that are provided to me by the PSNI. We have a good relationship and work closely together where there are issues. In the priority areas, we have advanced issues on financial crime, excise fraud, human trafficking and drug crime, amongst others. Much of what the Member referred to will be picked up by the work of the JATF and the organised crime task force more broadly.

Ms Dillon: Given the Executive commitment to tackling criminal gangs, including those masquerading as loyalist paramilitaries, do you, Minister, agree that the First Minister's meeting with the Loyalist Communities Council (LCC) —

Some Members: *[Laughter.]*

Ms Dillon: — which purports to represent loyalist communities, although it looks more like it intimidates them — was inappropriate and does not give the kind of leadership that we would expect from a leader of unionism or this House?

Some Members: *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Long: Far be it for me to opine on how other parties conduct their business; it is not a matter for me, as Justice Minister, in that regard. However, it is a matter for me, as Justice Minister, when all Ministers in the Executive have signed up to the tackling paramilitarism programme. That programme requires us all to ensure that, where we wish to engage with at-risk communities or to hear the voices of those who may be vulnerable to paramilitary influence, we do so through the appropriate legal mechanisms and do not give any credence or validity to members of paramilitary organisations, irrespective of the community from which they emerge. Giving a platform to people who are still in proscribed organisations or who claim to be — it is not for me to know the individuals and their membership, but they claim to be representatives of proscribed

organisations — is a matter of concern and sends out a worrying message to those in many parts of our community who still live under the coercive control of those same paramilitary organisations. I appeal to all Members, including those who seem to find the question amusing, to work with the Department of Justice and right across the community to ensure that no paramilitary organisations have any influence whatsoever in the business of the House or of running our communities outside.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before we move on to the next question, I ask Members to refrain from making commentary or laughing from a seated position. It is not appropriate during plenary sittings.

Mr Nesbitt: With the Chief Constable warning that his police numbers could drop 800 below the 7,500 that was committed to in 'New Decade, New Approach', does the Minister have concerns that that will impact negatively on cross-border cooperation in tackling organised crime?

Mrs Long: It is very clear that, if there is a drop in police numbers, it will have an impact on policing. There is no alternative; in fact, most of the statutory duties that are performed by my Department are heavily reliant on us having the personnel available to provide them. As I stated to the Executive and the Committee, there is very little wiggle room for the Department of Justice when it comes to our budget other than to see personnel reduced. I do not believe that it will impact in the sense that I do not believe that it will be a lower priority for the PSNI, but there will, undoubtedly, be challenges if we find a reduction in the number of officers who are available to the Chief Constable.

Members will be aware, of course, that it is a matter for the Chief Constable himself to decide what his priorities are when he receives his funding from the Department of Justice. If he is so minded, he can put that in to officers or other issues that need to be addressed. I am aware from my conversations with him that he, too, faces a very challenging environment over the next number of years. We will work with him to try to secure the additional finances required in order that such reductions in numbers will not be necessitated. The one thing over which I have no control is the budget that is finally allocated. When we get that budget allocated, we have no alternative but to live within our means.

Mr Allister: I want to ask the Minister about the role of the National Crime Agency in respect of the cross-border task force.

Can she expand a little on how extensive it is? Since that agency does not have a stand-alone budget, all expenditure eats into the budgets of each constituent part. How far is that an inhibitor of involvement in the cross-border agency?

Mrs Long: The work and the intelligence that the National Crime Agency can provide in tackling cross-border crime — not just, I have to say, at the Irish border but more widely — is hugely important. It is important because many of the mechanisms and streams of organised crime exist across those borders and throughout the rest of the UK and their supply chains are spread throughout these islands. It is hugely important that the National Crime Agency works closely with the PSNI, the JATF and the paramilitary crime and organised crime task forces to

ensure that there is a joined-up approach on all those issues.

The Member asked about its budget. It is a national agency, and therefore, to some degree, its budget is outside of my control and jurisdiction. Of course, where the PSNI asks for the agency to undertake particular duties, that is a different matter.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member is not in her place to ask question 5.

Sentencing Review: Update

6. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the sentencing review. (AQO 1661/17-22)

Mrs Long: I have recently agreed a number of recommendations flowing from the sentencing review. Work on completing recommendations on the remaining areas of the consultation is at a very advanced stage. An oral briefing to report on the final recommendations is scheduled for the Justice Committee on 15 April 2021.

On sentencing for offences causing death by dangerous driving and in advance of making any public announcements, I recently met the Dolan and McCarragher families, who have maintained an ongoing interest in the review. That meeting was widely reported in the press. I provided a written update to the Justice Committee on 17 February on the decisions that I have reached on sentencing in the case of causing death by dangerous driving. I anticipate that a number of legislative changes will flow from the review that, I consider, are best dealt with in a single sentencing Bill. I intend to continue the preparatory work for that Bill to be introduced early in the next mandate.

Mr O'Dowd: Thank you for your answer, Minister. I understand that, as part of the review, there are proposals to increase the maximum tariff of 14 years for driving under the influence of drink or drugs. Given that the 14-year sentence has rarely been used, how can the Minister assure victims of such crimes that justice will be served?

Mrs Long: The proposal that has been agreed is that we will increase the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving from 14 years to 20 years. As to how that will impact on sentencing, as the Member will be aware, every sentence will be set in the courts, starting with that maximum framework. The courts will then look at the severity of the offence in question and any mitigating factors or, indeed, aggravating factors that need to be taken into account in sentencing. While the Member is correct that the current 14-year sentence is rarely used, the fact that all sentences that are given out are based on the 14-year maximum means that, if it is increased to 20 years, the proportional length of sentencing, even if it is not up to the maximum, will extend beyond what it is currently, once the changes have been made.

It is important to note that that is not the only change that is proposed. We are also agreed that we will have a discretionary life sentence as the maximum sentence available where an offender has a previous conviction for the same offence; that there will be parity in the maximum sentence, as is currently the case, whether it is death or serious injury that has been caused; that we will increase the sentence for causing death while driving while disqualified to a four-year maximum; that the

minimum period of mandatory disqualification for those offences should be four years, unless the judge considers that there are exceptional circumstances; that a repeat offender within a 10-year period for a second or further conviction would be subject to a mandatory minimum disqualification of six years; and that a disqualification should not be capable of being reduced below two thirds of the disqualification period ordered by the sentencing court or the mandatory minimum period for the offence, whichever is greater.

A repeat offender for any of the offences will be disallowed from applying for a reduction of the disqualification imposed before the minimum period and before the disqualification has been served. Disqualifications will, in future, take effect from the date of an offender's release from prison rather than running concurrently with their sentence. I believe that, with all those measures in place, the sentencing structure and framework will be much more robust than was the case in the past.

3.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): There is time for a brief question from Doug Beattie.

Mr Beattie: Minister, will the Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Bill affect the review?

Mrs Long: No, it will not, because the issues in the Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Bill are being dealt with specifically as Westminster issues. No LCM was able to be agreed as part of the work of the Assembly. Therefore, our sentencing structures and sentencing review will continue unaffected by that, because we were not consulting on those matters that are not devolved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes the period for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme

T1. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her Department's administration of the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme. (AQT 1051/17-22)

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his question and for his long-standing commitment to the issue and, indeed, the wider issue of support for victims in our community. Work has been ongoing in the Department to put in place the necessary administration arrangements to enable the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme to open for applications this month as planned. That includes the development of an application form and an IT system for online applications. Twenty-six members have been appointed and sworn in to the victims' payments board, and Mr Justice McAlinden has been formally appointed as the president of the board, with effect from today.

Capita has been appointed to design a medical assessment service that will assess the relevant level of disablement for applicants, where necessary. The scheme could therefore open this month as planned in order to allow preparatory work on application forms by those who wish to apply. However, the president and the victims' payments board are ultimately responsible for deciding the precise timescale for the launch of the scheme.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her answer. She has almost pre-empted my supplementary, because I wanted to ask her about the timescale for the application process. When can potential applicants submit an application form?

Mrs Long: The president has advised that, in advance of making an application, he would prefer that applicants have access to full guidance on how the medical assessments will be carried out. He has consulted the main groups representing victims of the Troubles, including the WAVE Trauma Centre, Relatives for Justice, South East Fermanagh Foundation, the Ely Centre, the Commission for Victims and Survivors and the Victims and Survivors Service. On the basis of that engagement, Mr Justice McAlinden has concluded that the scheme should not open for applications until the guidance for carrying out the medical assessments has been fully designed and agreed by the victims' payments board. I understand that it will take a number of weeks for guidance to be completed on the process for carrying out assessments.

My officials will continue to engage with the representatives of the main groups that provide support to victims and survivors, and they will be kept updated on progress with the development of the medical assessment guidance. They will also have an important input to the development of that guidance. Mr Justice McAlinden has also indicated that he will keep representatives of the main groups informed of progress on developments, and I am sure that that will include an indication of when the scheme will open for applications.

While it will be important to take due diligence in developing the medical assessment guidance, I trust that the scheme will open for applications at the earliest possible opportunity. Victims have waited a long time for the scheme, and I am keen to ensure that they have access to it as soon as possible. I fully appreciate that some victims and survivors may be concerned that the scheme will not open for applications as they had hoped, but it is important that we take into account the views of the groups that represent and deal directly with victims and survivors and which have indicated their preference not to have a two-stage process but to delay opening so that a single-stage process can be facilitated.

Domestic Abuse: Tariffs

T2. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Justice for her views on a session at a conference last week that focused on violence against women and girls, with a female judge and a female barrister agreeing that the tariffs for domestic abuse need to be used to their maximum in order to give a clear message that domestic abuse is not tolerated in our society. (AQT 1052/17-22)

Mrs Long: My views on that are that there is nobody better than a judge to make such a case. That is because, ultimately, the tariffs that are given for any case in court are down to the judiciary, not the Minister of Justice. The maximum tariffs are placed in the legislation, but it is up to judges to decide whether or not they use them. Therefore, I hope that the member of the judiciary who spoke passionately in that regard will also convey that to her fellow judges.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answer. She is absolutely right, but we do need our judges to take the matter of domestic abuse seriously. Does the Minister

believe that the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021, which has a maximum tariff of 14 years — although I stand to be corrected — will go some way to assisting with this?

Mrs Long: As I said in answer to an earlier question, it is for the judiciary to decide on whether or not they use maximum tariffs. However, I think that, by setting the tariffs high on these particular cases, it should send out a clear message to the judiciary from this Chamber as to the seriousness with which we treat domestic abuse. I know that training will be provided for the judiciary, through the normal mechanisms, on dealing with the new offence, and, hopefully, that is something that will also be explored during the opportunity that they will have to reflect on the new offence and, indeed, the tariffs that are attached to it.

Charlotte's Law: Update

T3. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her engagement, which started last August, with relevant key stakeholders and families after the debate on Charlotte's law. (AQT 1053/17-22)

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his question. I have met with the families, as have my officials on an ongoing basis for a number of months. We have looked a number of proposals that the families are supportive of, but we are also looking at a number of other proposals that are not part of the Helen's law framework, to which the Member refers, that we believe may be leverage points within the justice system that may be used to further encourage people to disclose where the remains of individuals are held.

I think that it is hugely important and, having met with the families, I am absolutely convinced of it. It is not just a huge injustice on families that they have been robbed of a loved one, but to be further deprived of the opportunity to be able to go to their graveside and to be able to mark their passing in some tangible way is not just an injustice but is an insult and a form of torture against the individuals who are grieving. It is very hard for people to come to terms with their grief in those circumstances. Therefore, we are actively working with the families and with my colleagues in the Department to find a way forward that will deliver in reality what is sometimes promised but not delivered by some of the other mechanisms that are around. It is something that we are looking at very carefully. I hope to be in a position to move forward on this in the near future.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for her answer. It is quite positive. I note that her Twitter feed the other day had something about the sixteenth anniversary of the murder of Lisa Dorrian. I believe that she is very genuine on that, just as I am. Can I take from her answer that she is committed to definitely doing something — 100% — about this?

Mrs Long: As the Member will appreciate, I am not going to announce decisions here in the context of questions. However, I am absolutely genuine; I have spoken to both families, who have met and worked with us, about what it is that they want to achieve and what it is that we will be able to deliver for them. It is important that we are honest about the limitations of what we can do, but, at the same time, that we try to be ambitious with regard to what we do. Therefore, I will announce, in due course, our intentions in this regard, but there is a potential opportunity to do something here.

It has to be recognised that some of those who are involved in these crimes, who have disappeared these individuals' bodies and deprived their families of an opportunity to be able to grieve, will not be swayed by anything that we do with regard to legislation or practice. We need to acknowledge that at the outset, because there are some who are still in denial that they even committed those crimes despite the fact that they are serving sentences for them. It is also the case that, in some instances, no one has ever been brought to justice. For example, in the case of Lisa Dorrian, the Member's constituent and the case to which he refers, no one has even been brought to justice. The changes that we make to the justice system will, unfortunately, not benefit that family until such times as someone can be brought to justice.

Given the platform that I have today, the most important thing that I can say to those who are involved, who know where Lisa Dorrian's body is and who know what happened in her final hours is that you should reflect on your conscience, tell the family the truth, report it to the police and allow that family to grieve the loss of Lisa without further obstruction and the further torment of not knowing where her remains lie. What you have done is completely wrong and completely unacceptable, but you can help now by telling the truth and allowing the family to grieve.

Civil Justice

T4. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Justice what work her Department is undertaking to improve civil justice. (AQT 1054/17-22)

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his question. Modernisation of an area as wide in scope as the civil justice system is a significant undertaking, and Members will appreciate that it will take considerable time. Reform is also not for my Department alone. While the Department of Justice is responsible for the operation of the justice system, responsibility for substantive civil and family policy rests with the Ministers of Health and Finance. The Department has, however, made good progress in a number of areas. Those include provision in the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 to protect victims of abuse from being directly cross-examined by the alleged perpetrator with the protection of special measures; the launch of a pilot scheme to test a streamlined approach to appointing experts in public law proceedings; development of an action plan to encourage the early resolution of family law disputes; and the launch of a consultation on County Court jurisdiction.

We are, of course, limited by what we will be able to achieve in what is a ridiculously short mandate. I plan to focus on areas where the most immediate benefits for citizens can be realised. Work on a possible work programme for the rest of the mandate is ongoing, but I hope to be able to provide further detail to the Assembly in the weeks ahead.

The Gillen review made a significant number of wide-ranging recommendations. Many fall outside the remit of the Department or would have significant financial, operational and cross-cutting implications, so time will be required to consider the proposals in detail. However, I am determined, in what is left of the mandate, to make further progress.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she be working to embed efficient and affordable dispute resolution in civil justice, including in the small claims courts?

Mrs Long: Yes, and the Member is correct that the small claims court plays a significant role in quick resolution in the courts.

The Department recently launched a public consultation on increasing the general civil jurisdiction of the County Court, including small claims. A key aim of the consultation is to deliver an effective justice system where citizens have appropriate access to justice, with cases resolved quickly and proportionately, relative to their value and complexity. The Department is seeking the public's view on a number of proposals, including increasing the jurisdiction of the County Court from £30,000 to £60,000 or £100,000; increasing the jurisdiction of district court judges to £20,000 or £35,000; and increasing the jurisdiction of the small claims court from £3,000 to £5,000. The small claims court provides speedy resolution for citizens, which is key. It is a success of the justice system, offering the sort of affordable and efficient dispute resolution that citizens require, so I want to build on that.

The Department is consulting on increasing a limit that was last uplifted over a decade ago. It is important not only that the financial jurisdiction remains current but that we retain the advantages of the small claims system. As Members will be aware, many people who use the small claims court do so as litigants in person. Therefore, it is important that we do not raise the threshold for cases in the small claims court such that those who are defendants may decide to, or may be more likely to, equip themselves with significant legal teams. As Members will know, an inequality of arms in that way could present real challenges for litigants in person.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): We will be able to fit in a very quick question from Mr Dickson.

3.30 pm

Damages (Return on Investment) Bill: Urgency

T5. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the need for urgency in respect of the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill. (AQT 1055/17-22)

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his question. The urgent passage of the Bill, which was introduced earlier this afternoon, is required to allow a new stable personal injury discount rate to be set that will end the ongoing delays in personal injury claims and allow those claimants who have suffered serious life-changing injuries to receive the full compensation to which they are entitled as soon as possible.

The current discount rate was set in 2001. Since then, financial investment markets have changed significantly. The rate as it is currently set assumes more of a return than a personal injury claimant is likely to make on their lump sum compensation. The risk to claimants is that, if they settle now, they will be under-compensated. However, if a new rate were set under the current law, the rate would reduce so much that it would be likely to overcompensate victims, with the result that most defendants would not settle. Therefore, while many personal injury cases can

be settled by parties without a court hearing, the current delays to the settlement of cases are as a result of uncertainty on the discount rate.

In order to resolve the uncertainty, I want to legislate for a new framework for calculating that rate that achieves 100% compensation. That is my legal duty. I hope that we can work with the Committee, having proposed a short Committee Stage, to allow scrutiny of the Bill to be completed as expeditiously as possible, ideally so that it can complete its passage through the House before the summer.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes the period for topical questions. Members may take their ease while we make changes at the Table.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Port Inspection Facilities

Mr Speaker: Mr Declan McAleer has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary question.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to set out the legal basis of his unilateral decision to halt the construction of port inspection facilities required by the withdrawal agreement.

Mr Lyons (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): On Friday, I instructed officials to halt work that is related to the programme for permanent builds at the ports, as well as work on Official Controls Regulation (OCR) charging. That was done on the basis of DAERA having been appointed by the Executive to lead on those matters.

There are a number of reasonable arguments for taking that approach. The first is that there is a lack of clarity on a range of legal issues that need to be resolved in respect of the implementation of the protocol and, indeed, the functioning of the internal UK single market. I am also concerned that we do not have the required certainty to plan, given a number of factors outside the control of my Department. They include the role of the ongoing discussions, including those at the Joint Committee, and the lack of certainty that that presents, the uncertainty around grace periods, and the undeliverable and unworkable requirements for retail consignments if a solution is not achieved. I took the decision on OCR charges because of my particular concerns about section 46 of the Internal Market Act and the requirements that it places upon me.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for his answer, but does he accept that the vast majority of people will see this as another DUP stunt, a very dangerous one that will serve the purpose of inflaming tension within loyalism? Unfortunately, from the past, we know where that can lead us.

Mr Lyons: My concern is for the people of Northern Ireland. My concern is about public money being spent. My concern is making sure that we have what we need in place so that we can serve the constituents whom we all represent. Given all the uncertainty around the legal position and the practical barriers that we have at this time, it is entirely proportionate and reasonable to take this approach. I hope that people will put their views on Brexit to the side for the moment and see what is actually best for the people whom we represent.

Mr Irwin: Given the lack of certainty because of ongoing discussions at the Joint Committee, the lack of a ratified EU/UK trade deal by the European Parliament and the uncertainty about the future of the current grace period, how can your Department plan with any certainty when it comes to infrastructure and the recruitment of staff?

Mr Lyons: That is the difficulty that we are presented with, and, as I have said, that is one of the reasons why I instructed my officials to put a halt to that work. An awful lot of things are outstanding at the moment, and my question to others is this: how do you propose that we continue when we do not have that certainty? I hope that there is a recognition that we need changes and a recognition of the damage that the protocol is doing. That is very clear to most of us, and, in my role, I see the impact that it has had. How on earth are we to plan for the future when there are so many uncertainties? That is why it was a very reasonable step to take on Friday.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, if this was a reasonable step to take, why did you take it late on a Friday afternoon, and why has no official statement been issued by your Department? Furthermore, specifically, was a ministerial direction sought or issued, and is this order live? Is your permanent secretary seeking further legal advice on whether he should proceed with your instruction?

Mr Lyons: I confirm that I had given an instruction to officials. The timing of the announcement has been raised with me a number of times, as though it is somehow inappropriate to do things at certain times of the day or on certain days of the week. That is not the case. After concerns were raised with me, I had been looking at the matter. Considering the circumstances that we find ourselves in, I do not think it unreasonable in any way for me to want to make sure that appropriate action is taken.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister will be aware that Europe thinks that Northern Ireland has the best of both worlds. Will the Minister agree that it would be an act of great friendship and neighbourliness to lobby to extend that position to our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland? We could then return to the trading arrangements in the UK and between the UK and Ireland that applied last year and a decade ago. There would be no checks at our ports and airports for goods that may or may not end up in the EU; there would be checks at the Republic's ports and airports for goods that are definitely heading to continental Europe. By doing so, the EU would take back control of its inspections, we would solve all unionist objections, and the Republic would benefit. It would be a win, win, win.

Mr Lyons: The Member highlights a very important point, which is that the checks that are taking place are being done in such a way that it causes friction between one part of the United Kingdom and another. That is one of my great frustrations with what is taking place. Goods could be coming from Great Britain into Northern Ireland that are at no risk whatsoever of entering the EU single market, yet that fettering of trade is taking place.

The Member mentioned some solutions, as he sees them. We need to have greater discussion about potential solutions and alternatives. Others have shouted those down at every opportunity. People have stuck to the protocol, thinking that it is the solution to the problems that we face. It is not; it is adding to the problems that we face. It would be good if everyone around the Chamber

could acknowledge that problems exist and recognise that article 14 of the protocol allows us to find alternatives. The protocol does not have to be set in stone forever or to be there always. Let us recognise the problems that are there, not pretend that they do not exist, and find alternative solutions to the issues that we face.

Mr Blair: What discussions or consultations took place between the Minister and the business or sector representative groups relating directly to the decision that he took to cease the construction of necessary infrastructure at the ports? Does the Minister believe that he has any support whatsoever from those sectors on the decision that he took?

Mr Lyons: I can certainly express to the Member that I have had a number of representations from businesses as a constituency Member. Representatives of businesses that operate in Northern Ireland came to see me or corresponded with me because of the number of problems that they face as a result of the protocol. In fact, Members from this side of the House have been in contact with me as well and have expressed the problems that they and the companies in their constituencies face. It is disappointing that other Members across the House refuse to even recognise that problems exist and that we need an alternative to what is going on.

I have had so many representations. So many people are concerned about what we face now and are very fearful about what will come after 1 April. That is why we all need to work together to find solutions.

Ms Bailey: I want to go back to a quote from the First Minister, just a few weeks ago, on 'The Andrew Marr Show', when she described Brexit with the protocol in place as:

"a gateway of opportunity for the whole of the UK and for Northern Ireland".

What has changed in those few short weeks that has led the Minister to take such action? It is not Brexit or the protocol. Does the Minister believe that the actions and decisions that he took on Friday were cross-cutting across Executive Departments?

Mr Lyons: Unfortunately, we are in the position where we are not able to enjoy the benefits of Brexit to the same extent as others in the rest of the UK. We now face the problem — the growing problem — of being cut off from our biggest market, where we do so much of our trade. I know that people do not like hearing that, but that is the case. We do more trade with GB than anywhere else. We need to face up to that reality.

It is not simply the case that the protocol needs to be tweaked or changed in some meaningless way. We need fundamental change, and, in my opinion, we need the protocol to go. My Department was given responsibility for the area. Given the uncertainty that we face coming towards the end of the grace periods, I think that it was a proportionate and responsible step to take. We need further clarity, and we do not have that.

3.45 pm

Mr Allister: I welcome the Minister's move and trust that it was based on a principle of opposition to the protocol

and will therefore be carried through with other actions to unstitch the protocol.

Has the Minister heard any suggestion from those who demand rigorous implementation how, under the protocol, he can meet his statutory obligations under section 46 of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 to facilitate the free flow of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and to strengthen the smooth operation of the internal market? How can that be done under the protocol? Can he explain to the House what it means to have stalled the charges and what benefit that will bring to business?

Mr Lyons: No, I have not heard anything from any other side of the House about how I can make sure that I fulfil my duties under section 46 of the Internal Market Act. As the Member will know, that places on me a legal duty to have a special regard for three things: first, Northern Ireland's place in the internal market of the United Kingdom; secondly, Northern Ireland's place in the customs union of the United Kingdom; and, thirdly, as he pointed out, to facilitate the free flow of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. In the House of Commons, Minister Walker, as the Minister introducing this, said that it was fundamental: that is what "special regard" means. It is therefore right that I do all that I can to make sure that I have that special regard and take on board the concerns that are being expressed. That is one of the reasons that it was appropriate to halt the work on OCR charging. I can think of nothing that would fetter the free flow of trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland more than charging people to bring their products and goods into Northern Ireland.

Mr M Bradley: The Minister mentioned charging. Will he outline his views on what impact charging for sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) checks will have on business and consumers in Northern Ireland if left as is?

Mr Lyons: Every time that goods are brought into Northern Ireland from Great Britain — remember that GB is our largest market and that a huge volume of trade is done between Great Britain and Northern Ireland — it will have a significant impact on businesses here. Every time something is brought over and every time the ports are used, there is additional cost for businesses and consumers. The other outworking of that is that we end up in a position — this was highlighted in one of our local papers last week — where 64% of retailers in GB are reconsidering whether they want to continue to bring items from Great Britain into Northern Ireland. That would impact heavily on trade here and put a further burden on costs and on consumer choice. In that regard, I need to make sure that I fulfil my duties under section 46 of the Internal Market Act, and that will require close consideration of those matters.

Mr McGuigan: Minister, leaving aside the legality of the decision and the fact that it was made without discussion with your Executive colleagues and has resulted in further unnecessary worry and uncertainty for retail business and trade in the North for those who want to see the protocol work, you will be aware that Ian Friary, my party colleague on Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, was visited yesterday by the PSNI, who told him of a threat to his life after disgraceful sectarian graffiti appeared in Ahoghill village linking him to the Irish protocol. We have seen your decision, the decisions made by your predecessor, other decisions made on unionist-dominated councils and public

utterances and comments made by unionist politicians. Do you bear any responsibility for the heightened tension that has seen a rise in threats to elected representatives in recent days and weeks?

Mr Lyons: First, no matter who people are, whether they are in public life or not, it is wrong for them to be targeted in that way because of their views or because of what they may have said.

That is completely wrong, and I have no problem in wholeheartedly condemning it. As someone who has faced concerning actions taking place at my office in the last number of days and weeks, along with the type of correspondence that we sometimes get in our inboxes, I have no hesitation whatever in condemning any such behaviour. However, I fail to see how what I did on Friday could have contributed to that in any way.

We face a time of uncertainty. We do not know what is expected or required of us at the ports. I have decided to get that to stop. I do not quite see how those two things can be linked. Let us be under no doubt: this is a time of heightened tensions, particularly in the unionist community. I recognise that and see it. That is why we should all work together to find solutions that work for people in Northern Ireland and do not cut us off constitutionally and economically from the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr McGlone: The Minister will be aware of contractual liabilities and commitments in relation to the project and, indeed, others. Has the project been cancelled, or has it been delayed? Has the Minister taken any advice on the legal or financial liabilities associated with cancellation or delay of the project? There is a contract, and the Department is bound by it.

Mr Lyons: At this stage, I have sought further clarity. We do not know what is expected or required of us. However, I want to make sure that we keep value for money and the public purse at the top of the agenda and do all that we can to protect the public purse.

Mrs Barton: The Minister spoke about uncertainty in forward planning. We are coming to a busy time of the year for moving agricultural stock back and forth between GB and Northern Ireland. What reassurances can he give that there will be no hold-ups in that?

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for her work on the matter. She has raised it with me before. There is a concern that the protocol will have an impact on the movement of livestock, and the consequences are far-reaching. That is why we need to find a better solution than what we have at the moment. I will do all that I can to push the EU and the UK until we find ourselves in a better position than we are in.

Mr Dickson: Business thrives on certainty. A few moments ago, the Minister told the House that he had had discussions with businesses and business organisations. Will he name the business organisations in Northern Ireland that told him that the best course of action that he could take would be to stop the building and stop the recruitment of employees?

Mr Lyons: I have had conversations with businesses, and, of course, it would be inappropriate for me to name them without their permission. However, I am convinced that this was the right course of action for me to take. The

Member is absolutely right that businesses want certainty, and that is something that we do not have at the moment *[Interruption.]* Mr O'Toole and Mr Dickson might not like the answers that I have given — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Lyons: Those are the actions that I have taken because I believe that it is in the best interests of Northern Ireland to get the certainty that we require. Here is part of the problem: we have protocol zealots who want rigorous implementation at all costs. It does not matter whether there is an alternative that is better for Northern Ireland or whether we can find an easier way of doing things that impacts less on the people of Northern Ireland. Their concern is for the protocol and the protocol alone.

Mr Harvey: Will the Minister outline what role his Department has in ensuring the free flow of goods between GB and NI?

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for his question. I refer to my answer to Mr Allister. Under section 46 of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, there is a requirement on me to have special regard to Northern Ireland's place in the internal market and the customs union and to facilitate that trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. That responsibility is on me. However, it is not only on me; it is also a responsibility on the other devolved Administrations — Ministers in Scotland and in Wales — and, indeed, on all UK Ministers. I have been in correspondence with George Eustice and my counterparts in Wales and Scotland to ask what action they are taking to ensure that they fulfil their obligations under section 46 of the Internal Market Act.

The responsibility is not just on us in the UK. In the protocol, the EU and the UK have said that the measures that they take should impact on the lives of people in Northern Ireland as little as possible. That is why it is so important that they take actions, having seen the consequences and the outworkings of the protocol, to make sure that we have free and unfettered trade. If there is a diversion of trade, that is a problem, and it shows that the protocol is not working because, of course, a diversion of trade is a reason under article 16 for unilateral action to be taken.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for coming to the House today. Like others in the House and the communities that we represent, I express my frustration around the Minister's stunt on Friday evening. I am not sure who he took his legal advice from. Was it Sammy, Arlene, Jacob or Gregory? It is a smokescreen; it is a farce. You did not halt any building, as building has not commenced. You did not halt the protocol, as there is recognition from the UK and the EU that the protocol is going nowhere. Will the Minister acknowledge the harm and confusion that he has caused? Will he agree that this is a Brexit protocol and a direct consequence of Brexit? Will the Minister acknowledge that the only thing that he has stopped is the publication of his Executive's plan for the opening up of the economy and the return of life to some sort of normality in the weeks and months ahead?

Mr Lyons: No, I do not agree with any of the points that the Member has made. In this country, all too often, we get ourselves het up and wound up very quickly. No action that I took on Friday has, in any way, held up or contributed to a slowing down of the pathway to recovery document's

publication. As I have said a number of times, the steps that I have taken are a result of the practical barriers and legal uncertainties that currently exist and have been entirely reasonable. I ask people whether their opposition to what I have done is based on common sense and practicality or on opposition to anything that they do not like about Brexit and the protocol?

Mr Beggs: The Northern Ireland protocol has disrupted trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Does the Minister agree that it is much better to remove the protocol or, at the very least, install SPS agreements to remove much of that friction? Is he curious why some who claim to want such changes insist on building structures that may not be needed?

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for his question. I agree: the protocol is completely unworkable. It is contradictory. It does not set out what those who drafted it intended it to do. That is why it needs to go.

The Member hit the nail on the head. We want to see that free flow and ease of trade as much as we can between different parts of the United Kingdom, and I would be interested to explore possibilities on agreements that would limit the amount of friction that may exist. As the Joint Committee has said that it will meet again to discuss some of those issues, I think that it is entirely sensible and only right that we wait and see what comes out of discussions rather than do work that might never be needed or required.

Mr Speaker: Will Members please take their ease for a moment or two?

4.00 pm

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair)

Executive Committee Business

Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2020-21 and Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates: Vote on Account 2021-22

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £22,220,328,000, 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 £25,124,542,000, 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 columns 2(c) and 3(c) of table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland spring Supplementary Estimates 2020-21 that was laid before the Assembly on 23 February 2021. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £10,081,611,000, 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 2022 and that resources, not exceeding £11,194,733,000, 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 2022, as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of table 1 in the Northern Ireland Estimates: Vote on Account 2021-22 that was laid before the Assembly on 23 February 2021. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I will outline some work that the Committee has undertaken throughout 2020-21 on the DAERA budget. I will start by

referring to the additional agri-food COVID-19 funding that DAERA bid for and was successful in obtaining.

DAERA secured an additional £41.7 million of COVID funding from the Executive. Of that funding, £25 million was to provide market interventions in the agri-food sector, £15.2 million was to assist councils with higher waste disposal and collection costs and £1.5 million was provided to the fisheries sector. A further £2 million was received from the Department of Health towards the cost of Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) for COVID testing.

Of the £25 million to support the agri-food sector, the scheme that used up the bulk of the money, approximately £19 million, was paid to 11,300 farm businesses in the dairy, beef, sheep and potato sectors. Work is ongoing to assess and process remaining claims from about 20 growers in the potato and ornamental horticulture sectors. There is also a scheme for the pig and poultry sector.

At the Committee meeting on 25 February, the Committee considered an SL1 to enable those payments. That included a financial support package worth £2.2 million for pig producers who were specifically affected by the temporary closure of Cranswick Country Foods in Ballymena.

Other COVID-19 funding that was allocated over the past year included an initial £145,000 to environmental NGOs. That was allocated in September.

COVID-19 support has also been provided to the sea fish catching sector. At the close of the scheme, 171 payments had been made to vessel owners, totalling £1.32 million. In the autumn of 2020, a further scheme was announced because of continuing depressed markets and prices for landings. The first element involved the temporary cessation of activity by trawlers and dredgers, and that was supported through the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and had total project costs of £1.3 million. Payments totalling £1.1 million to £5 million have been made to 66 vessel owners.

There was also a scheme tailored to the needs of the smaller vessels that fish for crab and lobster. It offered fixed-cost support to vessel owners. The AERA Committee has not yet received the secondary legislation that enables the scheme to be paid. In the aquaculture scheme, the vast bulk of the money — around £125,000 — has been paid.

We also understand that there will be a scheme for the Lough Neagh eel fishermen and fisherwomen. That has raised serious concerns in Committee, as the need for funding was identified in late summer 2020, but as yet nothing has been launched. The AERA Minister is still considering the scheme's eligibility criteria.

Some £3.8 million of COVID-19 funding has been allocated towards waste. Most of that was to help local authorities to cope with the closure of public amenity sites during lockdown and the resultant increase in fly-tipping. A further bid of £11.4 million for local authorities for July through to March was approved in September. To date, 70% of that spend, totalling £2.66 million, from the first tranche of funding has been made to councils.

The next item of major financial concern to the Committee in 2021 is the financial impact to DAERA of preparing for and delivering EU exit. Last week, we were informed that, during January 2021, our points of entry processed 5,807

common health entry documents (CHEDs) for products of animal origin. That is no mean task, and it is amazing that so much has been delivered in such a short time.

The Committee has also considered the funding required for new inspection facilities to be built at Larne, Belfast and Warrenpoint harbours. The contractors have been asked to deliver, design and build the required facilities and the contingency arrangements. It is estimated that, to operate 24/7 in Larne and Belfast, there will need to be 25 vets, 75 portal inspectors and 12 admin staff to undertake the required work. In addition to that, local authorities estimate that they will require some 30 additional environmental health officers, 18 plant officers and three fish officers. The Committee has been informed that most of those local authority staff are in place. All this has to be paid for. In 2021, it cost some £45 million, which includes £5 million of contingencies costs, which comes from the British Treasury.

There is yet another issue with EU exit: future funding to replace current EU funding. I will cover our concerns about the potential shortfalls in that funding in the Budget Bill debate tomorrow.

The final aspect to which I wish to draw attention is that DAERA has made no bids in the January monitoring round. The Committee was informed that DAERA engaged extensively across the Department to determine whether further COVID-19 funding could be used. We heard that DAERA has concerns that it could be sure that there is a demonstrable and evidence-based need, and that any additional funding could be allocated to recipients by 31 March. On that basis, the Department has not yet identified any potential bids. The Committee is not content with that position, particularly as it did not address non-COVID bids.

That is all that I want to say in my capacity as Chairperson of the AERA Committee. I will focus on some issues in my capacity as Sinn Féin spokesperson for agriculture and rural affairs. A couple of things have been a source of contention and concern for us. One of them is the Lough Neagh scheme. It is incredible that it has not been delivered. It is being funded from the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund. Other schemes that are funded out of the same pot have had their money delivered, but that has not happened for the Lough Neagh fishermen and fisherwomen. That is grossly unfair and is a source of ongoing contention.

The ports contract was spoken about in the discussion on the question for urgent oral answer. It is fair to point out that DAERA appointed the contractors for the design and build scheme on 7 October, so there is an issue. Mr McGlone — Patsy — raised that a while ago. He talked about there being liabilities now that there is slippage and the implications for the contractors who were awarded that scheme. It should be pointed out that, despite the issues that have been raised, some 5,800 certificates were processed through the ports during January and February. That is a £45 million contract. It is a huge contract.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr McAleer: I will conclude there and pick up on more issues tomorrow.

Mr Frew: We are here to debate the spring Supplementary Estimates. What a funny year it has been for all of us.

It has been a very challenging year for all departmental officials. I put on record my thanks to the officials who came to the Committee. As the Chairperson alluded to, they have kept us informed every step of the way and given us a lot of detail during the year. They have been grappling with the financial figures, and they have been grappling with us. I pay tribute to all of them.

Looking at the spring Supplementary Estimates, we have the opportunity to look back on the financial year. Throughout the year, I have been looking for a joined-up Executive — a cohesive, joined-up, collective decision-making body that will help us to fight this crisis — and I have been shocked and disappointed in equal measure. When I asked the Finance Minister about a strategy to get us out of the health and economic aspects of this situation, he always said that it was about bids coming to him. He said that he would assess those bids and make a decision. A Finance Minister having to wait for bids from other Departments does not strike me as strategic. There is a fundamental weakness in that.

The Department for the Economy made 88 bids, 81 of which were COVID bids. That is the highest number of bids submitted. The Department of Education made 56 bids: 42 COVID bids and 14 non-COVID bids. That was the highest number of non-COVID bids submitted by any Department. Even the Department for Infrastructure made 40 bids, 34 of which were COVID bids. The Department of Finance submitted only one bid. The Health Department submitted 13 bids. However, it seems that less is more in the Health Department's case: its bids totalled more than £1 billion, which is substantially higher than any other Department. What does that tell us? It tells us that some Departments thought strategically and were willing, able and capable of bidding for finance. Of course, some Departments were very successful. The Department of Finance, with its one bid, received that money; Health received 95% of what it asked for; TEO received 93%; and Communities received 89%, despite the fact that it could not deliver the Kickstart programme.

Some Departments were less successful. The Department for the Economy was 36% successful, Infrastructure was 33% successful, DAERA was 31% successful, the Department of Education was less than 50% successful, and the Department of Justice was less than 50% successful. There seems to be a trend. All of these Departments were willing to bring forward bids. I will pick out the Department for the Economy and the Department of Education. It seems that the Finance Minister refused those bids. There may be reasons for that, and the Minister might outline them today, but that does not strike me as a strategic way of doing government in the Executive.

Today, I heard some Chairpersons criticise some of the Departments that I have named. One was the Chairperson of the Economy Committee. Remember, Economy was the Department with the most bids. From that, we see that Sinn Féin criticises other Departments, as is its right. However, when Sinn Féin looks at the Budget, it does not look at itself. As I said, the Department for Communities could not even bring forward the Kickstart programme that would have helped get young people into jobs.

I can remember, a number of months back, asking the Communities Minister why the wider UK scheme had not been adopted, and the answer that I got was, "We

are preparing a better scheme". We have no scheme; no scheme whatsoever.

4.15 pm

I have heard the Members opposite blaming Tory austerity once more. When is it ever going to end? Of course, yes, those were hard times, but you cannot spend money that you do not have. In fact, the party opposite cannot even spend the money that it does have. It is very important that we consider that. They talk about austerity, but you have to remember that, through the DUP confidence-and-supply agreements, our party brought back, in that two- or three-year period, the same monetary value that we lost in austerity.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for taking my intervention. I would like to challenge him on his statement about the party opposite not being able to spend money. I am sure that, like the rest of the MLAs in the House, he has had plenty of engagement with ExcludedNI, and maybe his own Minister will want to consider the money that was given back to the centre that could have dealt with some of those people.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Frew: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will certainly take the extra minute. You have to remember that the Department for the Economy delivered over 40 financial support schemes, worth about half a billion pounds. Of course people have been excluded, and every single MLA should be fighting for those people and for those sectors, but do you know something? You get to a point in a Department where your capacity is filled, whereas there are some Departments in this place that have not put their shoulder to the wheel one bit.

I will give credit to the LPS. The one scheme that it has administered has been very good, and that is a body that is designed to bring rates in, not to push money out. I am on record as supporting that and supporting that organisation, but the Department of Finance and other Departments, such as the Department for Communities, could have done much more, but they have not, and they have failed the people. What did people out there who are crying out for support want? They wanted a joined-up Executive. They wanted an Executive that would come together and strategise a way out of this, both health-wise and economy-wise. That has not taken place.

I regret that that has not taken place. I refer to the Kickstart failure by the Department for Communities, whose Minister is from the Member's party. Where is the Kickstart programme? Where are those jobs for young people, who were to be supported? It is non-existent. You could not even deliver a scheme. You could not even put a scheme on the ground, yet there was a ready-made scheme in the wider UK context that could have been adopted and used. The party opposite has failed the people in that regard, and it is simply not good enough. We must do better, and, in this year of crisis, it has proven that, when the sovereign Government throw money at us, we do not have the ability or the capacity to spend it, yet we want more fiscal powers.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Frew: Why do we want those powers when we cannot spend the money that we are given?

Mr O'Toole: I support the two Supply resolutions, but, in doing so, I say that we have quite a lot to discuss. In speaking about this year's Supplementary Estimates and the consequential Vote on Account, it is impossible to ignore the unique year that we have just been through. Basically all Members have referred to it. When we debated the spring Supplementary Estimates last year, we were reflecting on updated spending Estimates for a period in which there were no Executive Ministers to take spending decisions and no Assembly to formally legally approve the spending. Whilst welcoming the fact that we were back here to actually scrutinise spending, Member after Member last year highlighted the fact that we needed to improve our long-term budgeting and our scrutiny. You would need to be an especially positive thinker — we are, I suppose, all trying to be positive thinkers at the moment — to argue that our budgeting processes have noticeably improved since these institutions returned. On scrutiny, literally anything would be an improvement on what we did for the previous three years, which was zero.

First, it is important to acknowledge that this has been the most unprecedented of years. It would be deeply unfair to look at the volume of in-year spending adjustments in financial year 2020-21 and simply, in a narrow way, complain about the scale of changes. Clearly, the unprecedented and unpredictable nature of the pandemic meant that large in-year adjustments were inevitable, with new Barnett consequentials being made available and new developments emerging in the pandemic. New realities were emerging all the time that all Ministers, including the Finance Minister, had to react to.

It is also important to put on record once again, as we have done in the Chamber before, my and my party's appreciation of the Herculean efforts that have been made by officials in the Finance Department and across Departments as they have reacted to the bewildering and, I am sure, often terrifying developments with fast-paced and novel policy interventions. That cannot be stated often enough. Lots of officials, especially those in Land and Property Services, really put their shoulder to the wheel to come up with novel ideas and deliver them in very short order. However, I am afraid that that does not mean that the past year has been a success in budgeting terms. Even when we account for the pandemic, financial year 2020-21 has been an object lesson in poor planning and absence of strategy. I find myself, unusually for the week and year that is in it, agreeing with some of what the Member who spoke previously said; it is a nice, pleasant change for me to agree with a Member opposite this year. I do not agree with everything that he said, of course, but we have seen really striking — occasionally shocking — lack of strategy. That is especially the case when we reflect on the fact that, in the absence of an agreed Programme for Government, the Budget process has become the sole tool for strategic planning and priority-setting by the Executive. That is a really critical point.

If you look at the draft Budget document for 2021-22, you see that it still refers to "draft Programme for Government" outcomes from 2016. My God — 2016. I wish that we were back in early 2016. It was before we all had Brexit in our lives, whether you love it, loathe it or are somewhere in between. Some officials are still operating — because

nothing exists to replace them — draft Programme for Government outcomes that were never agreed but which still exist in some weird ethereal, hypothetical universe, and the officials need a strategy to work to. That is, clearly, crazy. They have been doing that for the past year, outwith the COVID allocations, in relation to main allocations of spending. Clearly, that is not viable. I am afraid that it is not good enough simply to say, “Well, if it wasn’t for COVID, we’d have agreed something more strategic. We’d have agreed a plan”. I am afraid that, very often, COVID has been an explanation for some of the way in which we have needed to develop schemes and assign money in a hurried way, but it cannot be an alibi for the complete lack of strategy. One example, of course, is the failure by the Executive Office to appoint a head of the Civil Service. We have not seen any real priority-setting or strategy from the Executive in any meaningful way. I am afraid that, to an extent, it falls on the shoulders of the Finance Minister — he might not like that, and I can understand why — for not just seeking out allocations to make or writing letters asking for bids but seeking to use the budgetary process in a more strategic way that joins up priority-setting for the whole Executive in the absence of an agreed Programme for Government. Given the recent fondness in the past couple of days for the Chinese Government that has been exhibited by some Sinn Féin MPs, one would think that a five-year plan would be in order. I would quite like a five-month plan; it would be worthwhile.

The spring Supplementary Estimates reflect and regularise changes in allocations that were made via the monitoring round process. It is no surprise that we see large increases and movements in those corrections because, of course, we have had such a unique year. From the position at Main Estimates, we have an increased allocation of around £2.5 billion. The largest adjustments are in predictable places, especially the Health Department and the Department for the Economy. However, the Department for the Economy is a study in the particularly poor management of resources over the past year. As has been pointed out more than once in the past year, the Department has naively announced entire initiatives and spending programmes on the basis of completely flawed assumptions. Last summer, it spent its time thinking about getting North American tourists back to Northern Ireland; that seemed to be the priority in the Department. It announced a plan to get people back shopping in the high street in January. I am afraid that, looking back, it is almost darkly comic how completely flawed those assumptions were.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I will soon draw my remarks to a close. We will have a longer opportunity tomorrow to talk about the Budget process for 2021-22 and what we are going to do there. It is critical that, as we look back over the past year, we reflect on what has been, I am afraid, a missed opportunity to set any real strategic priorities. Yes, officials have done a great job in helping us to get through COVID, but, over the past year, we have singularly failed to agree a set of strategic priorities and deliver them. Much good work has been done by Ministers and officials to get us through COVID —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member’s time is up.

Mr O’Toole: — but I am afraid that we could have done much better. I hope that we will do much better.

Mr Muir: On behalf of the Alliance party, I support both motions and thank the Minister for bringing them before the Assembly. I pay tribute to the Minister’s officials, and indeed all officials at all grades across all Departments, for their work over the past 12 months.

As elected representatives, we scrutinise Departments on behalf of our constituents. This year, those Departments have given out more money and supported more livelihoods than ever before. When the stakes are so high, there will, of course, be plenty of criticism. As politicians, it is our job to call it out when people and businesses are excluded from schemes, when money is too slow to get out the door, and when our constituents cannot get updates on their applications. However, it is also our job to recognise the sheer scale of the challenges facing civil servants this year and the stress that they have had to work under. Many have put in countless additional hours to get money out the door to people who desperately need it. It is a thankless task, but it should not be. So, on behalf of the Alliance Party, I thank them for their work over the past 12 months and for everything that will be done in the year ahead as, hopefully, we emerge from the pandemic.

The Supplementary Estimates and Vote on Account are motions for scrutiny and debate rather than mere procedures. We know that the Supply resolutions need to be approved and that the Vote on Account needs to be passed so that Departments can spend money. To do otherwise would be unthinkable. However, given the unprecedented levels of spending that we have seen over the last 12 months, there are two additional areas in which the Assembly must play its full role in scrutinising public finances.

The first is to ensure that value for money is being secured. With so much money available, and a limited amount of time in which to spend it, there is pressure on officials just to get money out the door. It is right that we push Departments to release money to those who need it as soon as possible. We must get money out the door, and there should be no return of funds to Westminster. However, that money needs to be spent efficiently and transparently to ensure good use of public funds. I would be most grateful if the Finance Minister could outline what spending is planned to ensure that money is not handed back and that public funds are spent wisely. For example, is he considering a one-off top-up grant to Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) grant recipients to enable them to cover the many costs — such as National Insurance and pension costs payable for furloughed employees and adaptations made to enable safe reopening — that current recurring grant payments do not cover? I note with disappointment the Economy Minister’s response to me today that she does not consider it feasible to give top-up payments to Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) grant recipients. Hopefully, the Minister of Finance can take action where others fail.

The second reason that additional scrutiny is required is that the current demands are stretching the capacity of the Civil Service when we know that it was not in good shape to start with. The Minister of Finance must ensure that a radical plan is put in place to improve the capacity and capability of the Civil Service, acting on the recent Audit Office report. It must become a dynamic, authoritative institution where people want to work and progress their careers.

I turn now to the recovery in the year ahead. As a member of the Infrastructure Committee, I am acutely aware of the need to invest in our infrastructure as part of that recovery. Now is the time to bring forward projects that will help us to build a green recovery. The challenges facing our public transport network and water system have been magnified. We also need to invest in the backlog of works required on our roads network, while rebalancing our priorities towards active and sustainable travel.

Furthermore, building an economic recovery is essential to provide support to our local businesses. The Alliance Party welcomes the rates relief in the next financial year promised to the sectors most affected by COVID-19, but we need to go further. Now is the time for a root-and-branch independent review of the non-domestic rates system, with a particular view to support our high streets and move away from a system that focuses on bricks and mortar.

4.30 pm

Finally, while today's Vote on Account ensures that Departments will receive the money that they require, it is shameful that hundreds of victims still have not received a penny of their victims' pension. The Secretary of State must bring forward funds without any more delay.

There will be more time to debate the Budget tomorrow, but, today, we must focus on the motions before us, which I support. In closing, I would like to get confirmation from the Finance Minister about whether he has received any ministerial direction from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in light of his announcement on Friday.

Mrs Cameron: I welcome the opportunity to speak today on the spring Supplementary Estimates. Northern Ireland's Budget and public resources have been stretched to their limits through the COVID-19 pandemic. Huge levels of public spending have been required to respond directly to the health crisis and its many consequences for our society, not least for our economy. Vast sums of finance have been administered to support businesses in Northern Ireland over the past year. Undoubtedly, more support will be needed over the coming months as our economy recovers. On that point, I very much welcome the Economy Minister's announcement last week as she published the 'Economic Recovery Action Plan', which sets out a range of decisive actions to kick-start economic recovery in Northern Ireland and build a more competitive, inclusive and greener economy.

The pandemic has shone a light on many aspects of our health service that have long been in need of significant investment and transformation. The spring Supplementary Estimates suggest a total cash requirement of £22 billion across Departments. In January, the Department of Health alone recorded having received well in excess of £867 million in resource funding to address COVID pressures. The additional moneys allocated to Northern Ireland, on top of the block grant and the New Decade, New Approach commitments, have further shown just how important our membership of the United Kingdom truly is. It is obvious that that level of public funding would not have been available without it. The financial benefits of the Union are invaluable to all our public services and to the Northern Ireland economy.

We, as a party, recognise the difficult financial environment in which all our Departments are operating, and we understand that there needs to be budgetary flexibility as the direct and indirect challenges created by the pandemic develop and change. Significant headroom is provided in the spring Supplementary Estimates to allow for unallocated spending to be absorbed by Departments on the basis of future Executive decisions before the end of the financial year.

The parties opposite often speak about the need for new Stormont fiscal powers, and of course we need to look at ways of raising revenue. However, it is clear that the Departments need to be much better at using the resources that they have already been given. The saga with the review of welfare mitigations and the recent underspend of hundreds of millions of pounds are just some examples. How can we, as public representatives, explain to our constituents that cancer surgeries have been cancelled when, at the same time, they hear on the news that £90 million in health funding has been returned unspent to the Department of Finance? Ministers from all Departments must put every effort into ensuring that those funds are spent efficiently and not handed back to the Treasury at a time when the need for support in our communities is at an all-time high.

In-year monitoring rounds and one-year Budgets have become stopgaps and temporary fixes, and that culture needs to change. That is important, particularly in respect of areas such as health transformation and implementation of the commitments in New Decade, New Approach. It is deeply worrying, for example, that, on the face of it, only £50 million of the extra £492 million added to the draft Health budget for next year is recurring.

As society begins to emerge from COVID-19, the Executive's focus needs to turn to the key commitments in New Decade, New Approach, none of which is more important than those for our health service. New Decade, New Approach promised to create more stable services and sustainable staffing, to deliver an extra 900 nursing and midwifery undergraduate places over three years and to increase the number of funded IVF cycles to three. Those must be progressed earnestly and factored into departmental annual budgets. As well as the work that is necessary to achieve safe staffing levels, capital investment in our health service to improve dated facilities and increase capacity to meet demand in Northern Ireland in 2021 is vital.

At the heart of my constituency is Antrim Area Hospital, which has treated a significant proportion of Northern Ireland's COVID patients. Many elements of Antrim hospital's infrastructure are now inadequate for the huge demand that it experiences. That applies to inpatient bed capacity, operating theatres, the ICU and the maternity ward. I welcome the fact that the Department of Health has recognised some of that so far in its draft 10-year capital plan. I urge the Minister of Health to commit to much-needed significant investment at the Antrim site.

We should be under no illusions about the monumental task of tackling waiting lists in Northern Ireland. From elective surgeries to the massive backlog of autism assessments, the work to sufficiently recover, even just to pre-pandemic levels, will take time and not insignificant funding. On autism support, the PAC report that was

published very recently clearly shows that children with special educational needs and their families:

“had been failed for many years”.

Current data reflect that children with autism represent a significant and rising proportion of pupils across the school estate. We cannot continue to pay lip service to that; there must be more joined-up thinking between Departments, particularly between Health, Communities and Education, in order to improve and increase the levels of support that are provided to the autism community. No one should be left behind any longer.

To conclude, following the pandemic, valuable lessons about prioritising funds and maximising the budgets that are available to the benefit of our communities should be learned in all Departments. We have previously argued that the Budget process should start between April and June for the next financial year, with a draft Budget being consulted on in the autumn, in order to allow for a full debate at the turn of the year. That would afford greater detailed scrutiny in advance. The move towards a multi-year Budget must be prioritised. That is not just in the interest of more strategic spending decisions but to allow for more effective scrutiny in the Assembly and Committees. The public of Northern Ireland expect the efficient and transparent use of our resources. Let us ensure that every effort is afforded to use those funds wisely to help our society to recover.

Mr Irwin: This has been far from a normal year. As we know, given the massive and severe impacts of COVID-19 across the United Kingdom, of which Northern Ireland is an integral part, the pressures on finances have been immense and extreme. It must be said that the Treasury has taken action to provide unprecedented assistance to business, employers, employees and the general population in order to try to stave off the worst effects of the lockdown measures. Northern Ireland has certainly benefited to a significant degree in that regard. I know that many businesses in the Province have been grateful for that assistance. It is only right that, with such severe restrictions on our everyday life, financial aid continues to be forthcoming until such times as business can return to a level of normality.

As I said last year, our agri-food industry has not stopped for breath during the onslaught of COVID-19. Even with the associated restrictions and risks to health, our farmers, processors, suppliers and retailers have worked non-stop throughout the period and have ensured that consumers can access food. Despite the initial panic, purchases have kept up with demand without disruption. That is commendable, and, indeed, it demonstrates the resolve and resilience of our farming and food industry. That is why last week in the Chamber I asked the Health Minister to consider that group of people, among others, for vaccination priority, given the importance of their work. I really feel that their efforts are taken for granted, and that should not be the case. I encourage Minister Swann to consider that.

I know that Edwin Poots has been back to work and that he is continuing his recuperation before resuming his ministerial duties. I wish him well on that journey, and I pay tribute to Minister Lyons for his work in stepping in to cover for Edwin in his period of recovery.

There are significant pressures on finances right across the board in our Departments, and it certainly looks like that pressure will continue unabated for the foreseeable short-term future. We will remain in lockdown for some weeks to come, so, on that point, I urge the Executive to provide a degree of clarity to people, especially those who are in business, about a likely timetable. I hope and pray that the situation changes and that our Province can return to a level of normality in the very near future. Of course, as citizens, we all have our part to play in that through responsible actions and an adherence to the advice.

DAERA's remit, as published, is for sustainability at the heart of a:

“living, working, active landscape valued by everyone”.

That sums up the Department's remit precisely. Indeed, the word “sustainability” is key, especially as we move away from EU payments and work in earnest to create our own system and support for the industry. Sustainability must be at the heart of the Department's efforts. The Committee has been involved in a number of discussions in recent months on many issues facing agriculture and the environment, not least the impacts of the protocol and the difficulties that that is presenting not only for businesses but for the Department itself.

I think of a recent example involving the supply of trees. An order for many thousands of trees was cancelled due to the onerous procedures and new rules, based on a very damaging protocol. I presume that that will have an impact on the Department's own plans for planting. I urge a response to those concerns as soon as possible.

There are many more significant issues arising for business, and I believe that the Department will require resources to deal with the unfolding difficulties, more so after the so-called grace period comes to a close. Minister Poots, prior to his urgent surgery, was ensuring that the voices of those at the sharp end of those onerous and costly checks were being listened to. Minister Lyons, as his replacement, has also been conscious of the realities of the protocol. Make no mistake: the voices calling for an end to the protocol are growing ever louder.

The Department's spend on diseases and livestock, and compensation — for instance, for TB — continues to place a significant drain on DAERA resources. The recent focus seems to have shifted from the real issues around TB and the £40 million a year cost of that disease. Testing, herd closures and compensation are a huge upset to many farm families, and the impacts are widespread and costly. There is also an understandable issue with an attempt to cut the level of compensation, especially without any clear and recognisable path to TB eradication in which farmers have any confidence. Farmers are doing their part in that regard, but a clear pathway to eradication must be forthcoming. There must be renewed focus on that because the wheel has slowed down in rolling out a workable and adequate strategy to drive down that disease. There is a huge cost implication associated with continuing to drift in that regard to the financial resources of farmers and the Department.

In their focus on farming in the current era and in the future, I encourage the Minister and his officials to redouble their efforts on the launch of the second tranche of tier 2 of the farm business improvement scheme. I know from a recent letter to me from Minister Lyons that he is

actively looking at that but states that any scheme would be subject to funding availability, given the necessity of that programme to help farmers to further respond to environmental change and the level of support proposed. I urge the Minister to work hard to ensure that any future direction on ammonia reduction and mitigation are factored into the scheme to further assist farm businesses in adapting. Planning is vital to the scheme, and the manufacturing industry must be able to respond to the potential level of demand that will stem from that measure. I urge clarity on that and for the AERA Minister to put Northern Ireland farmers and, indeed, our manufacturing base on their best forward footing.

On a wider perspective, the start-stop approach of the Budget must change to a much longer-term strategy, with an emphasis on forward planning. We must limit the return of unspent money to the Treasury and maximise spend in a coordinated manner.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Irwin: An end-of-year rush has proved to be ineffective, and it causes spending in a chaotic manner instead of the strategic benefit of prioritising a managed spend.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Minister, for coming to the Chamber and for all the times that you came to the Committee. I thank your officials for coming to the Committee and giving us as much information as possible. I know that it was difficult at times.

A pigeon visited the Committee last week. I am tempted to say, Minister, that this is a turkey of a Budget because there is a lot of gobbledygook, but I will not do that *[Laughter.]*

4.45 pm

The huge changes to the Estimates over the past year have been not only because of the large amounts of extra funding for COVID-related matters but because of the unprecedented position that all Departments found themselves in. This year has shown us the deep need to regularise our Budget process and create more transparency in how Departments bid for funding, which criteria they use to determine whether a bid is necessary and how the Department of Finance then decides which bids to grant and which are unsuccessful.

This year, Departments submitted 263 bids, the bulk of which were for COVID-related matters. Of those, 141 were unsuccessful, and a further 56 were only partly successful. That equates to a shortfall of nearly £1 billion — £966.4 million — between what was requested and what was granted. Four Departments, Finance, Health, the Executive Office and Communities, were allocated more than 89% of the funding that they requested. However, Economy, Infrastructure and DAERA were allocated less than 36% of the funding that they requested.

I know that those figures include multiple bids for the same thing over many monitoring rounds. However, there needs to be a clear understanding of what makes a successful bid and what factors into the decision-making on financing one project and not another. That is not a judgement on decisions that have been made. More clarity on that area would allow us, as Members, to understand better the thinking of Departments. It would also provide cover for

the Department of Finance by allowing it to stand over the decisions that have been made.

Over £1 billion of headroom has been built into the spring Supplementary Estimates by the Department of Finance to give the Executive the ability to spend funding that has not yet been allocated. There are clear differences in the amount of headroom that is provided to each Department, which is understandable. Departments need the ability to use any Budget allocation that may come forward. However, there is a lack of information on what a lot of that headroom could be used for. That needs to be cleared up in order to allow further scrutiny of the use of any extra allocation.

The Executive Office has indicated that it has the provision of £13 million for victims and survivors. I would like some clarity on what that provision is for. Does it provide pensions for victims? If not, where is the funding that is required for those pensions? Victims have waited too long for that support. They should not have to wait any longer.

I welcome allocations of funding that will support projects in my area, Lagan Valley. I am sure that all Members will be pleased to know about them and share in my gratitude. Part of the £4.5 million for the flood alleviation scheme will go towards the area of Lisburn along Prince William Road that has been impacted greatly by flooding for a long time. Since my days on the council, I have fought for works to be carried out to resolve the issue. I am absolutely delighted that this work has now begun. There is also work to develop cycle paths at Blaris and other places in my constituency. Particularly during the pandemic, we have seen the benefits of active travel. I hope that more paths will be developed in the near future and that they may be connected with greenways and, eventually, the canal. That will transform our ability to utilise active travel and bring us into line with not only the Republic but many of our European neighbours.

My final point is on the end-of-year surge in spending. I do not want to labour the point. However, going into the last three months of the current financial year, Departments had, on average, more than half of their capital budget remaining. Eight of the nine Departments forecast that their highest expenditure would occur in March. There has been a lot of discussion in the Chamber about the potential for funding to be lost and having to be returned to Westminster. Members are rightly concerned about that. However, another issue is the quality of year-end spending, given that such spending is greatly increased. There is the potential to fund projects that have been rushed through in order to spend remaining budgets. Without clear planning and procedures in place for managing and monitoring budgets, there is huge potential for a lack of value for money in what funding goes towards in such huge end-of-year spikes. Departments must work on creating a better distribution of funding throughout the year, while the Department of Finance and the Committee must continue their work to provide greater flexibility in carry-over budgets from one year to the next. Ultimately, there should be a move to multi-year budgets.

When I was in business, I could not have operated, as we try to do here, with vast amounts of money unless I had projected years ahead. In fact, we tried to work off five-year budgets to do that. That was a small step. I asked about that the first time that I spoke on this subject one year ago, and it still has not been delivered.

Minister, I know that you want to get there, and it would be tremendous if we were able to deliver that next year. It is not a big ask.

Mr Storey: I rise in support of the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account. I share the Finance Minister's pain, because I sat in his place in 2016-17 and had to go through this process, so I will try to shorten that pain for him, if I possibly can. Those are the famous last words of every Assembly Member when they stand up in the House.

The year that we have left behind will, for us all, be a year that we do not want to see repeated. It has been the most challenging year for us all, as individuals, as families, as communities and as a society. We should pause to remember those families whose lives have been forever changed as a result of the pandemic. For them, no budgetary allocations or spring Estimates will ever change what has happened in their lives as a result of losing loved ones, and that is the same for the many others who have been affected by the pandemic.

As others have said, we should pay tribute to our Civil Service. I am not always a cheerleader for the decisions that are made, but that is maybe more a reflection on the politicians than it is on those who have to enact those decisions. Our civil servants have had to work in the most extreme, difficult and challenging circumstances, and, of course, they have been put under huge pressure to get money out. I say this whether or not I will be back in the Chamber after the next election — that decision will be made by others — but, when there is an inquiry into COVID and the spending on it, I hope that it will not be the civil servants who are made the scapegoats but that those who made the decisions on spending that money will be held accountable for that. Be assured that, when that inquiry comes, problems will be highlighted.

As other Members have said, the structures that we have are totally and absolutely past the point of needing to be reformed. That was an issue when I and others were Finance Minister. Of course, at the heart of that is a five-party mandatory coalition. What other business could be run by sitting in the boardroom with all your competitors? It would not work. The Member who preceded me said that, when he was in business, he had a multi-year plan or would have to plan ahead. We have a system that forces us into government with people who want to spend, spend, spend and have no accountability as to where it comes from. We have seen that in recent days. On one hand, Members opposite are blaming the Treasury, the Chancellor and austerity, but the £4.4 billion would not have come from a new Ireland.

If anybody wants some midnight reading, there is the economic policy published by Sinn Féin. You would have to read it in the dark, and it would not make any less sense if you did. It tells us that the subvention could be reduced because we would not have to spend money on the military or the security forces. It tells us that that would be the subvention wiped out and we would not have to worry about where the money was coming from. It is the politics and the economics of the primary school.

The other reason that we in the House need to take into account is that the system is dependent on what the bids are. I heard what the Finance Minister said and will, no doubt, say again later: it is everybody else's fault. "Bring

me bids", he says. On one occasion, the Finance Minister rightly said to the Minister for Infrastructure, when she was dragging her feet about producing an outcome for the coach operators, "Bring forward a bid". Ultimately, however, the decisions on allocations rest with the Finance Minister. My colleague from North Antrim, Paul Frew, rightly highlighted the discrepancies between the total amount of the bids and the allocations made. I agree with the Member who spoke previously that we need to see what that is based on. All that we get is a bid and an allocation: we do not get a rationale for it. We do not get a rationale from the Department of Finance for why one bid was more acceptable than another.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: Yes.

Mr Frew: When we look through the figures, we even see that sometimes bids are partly successful. We have no justification or rationale for why that is the case or how much of it was successful. Was it 50% or 75% of the bid?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Storey: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. We need to have a better understanding of that and of the rationale behind why bids are successful.

I bring Members back to the fact that a huge amount of money was spent this past year on the Department of Health and rightly so. It is right to spend money on our health service, but I remind Members that, in 2016, a former Health Minister introduced the Bengoa report, which committed us to transformation. That was in October 2016. Come January 2017, the party opposite decided to pull down the shutters and walk out the door. It did not care about the health service.

When we look at the figures and are planning for the future, there will have to be a radical change in what we see as priorities. If health is a priority, it will have to be funded. If we put in NDNA that we need 7,500 police officers, it is 7,500 police officers that we will have to get. It cannot be partial or one service over another. It has to be what we said we would do. We have to deliver. If we do not deliver, the people will have every right to question whether this place is fit for purpose to meet their needs.

Mr Sheehan: Speaking of delivery, as the previous Member did, I recall the start of 2020 being very positive. We hoped that 'New Decade, New Approach' represented a new departure for British Government responsibility to the people here. There were numerous pledges in that agreement to invest in public services and a commitment to multi-year Budgets to allow Ministers to plan effectively for the future. Of course, we did not get delivery. Surprise, surprise: the British Government reneged on another deal.

The British Government's bad faith and the pandemic have combined to present us with a difficult financial situation. All of that came on top of a decade of relentless Tory austerity that has ravaged our public services.

5.00 pm

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. He talks about bad faith and ravaging. Will he take the opportunity in the House to condemn the economic policies of his party and the Provisional IRA who bombed the heart out

of the economy of Northern Ireland for 40 years? Take the opportunity. Can he clarify whether Óglaigh na hÉireann is still what he supports, as he claims that he was involved in that organisation? Clearly, he has to make a choice.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Sheehan: I thank the Member for his intervention. I will just say to the Member, and I know that he is a believer in creationism, but, let us get away from ancient history. We are living in a new dispensation. There has been a peace process here for over 20 years. Come on; catch up. Get into the 20th century, never mind the 21st. Come on. Let us start working together for the people here.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Where was he for the three years when he and his colleagues walked out of this place, pulled this place down, pulled the shutters down and blamed everybody else, including the British Government? Where was he then with his rationale about working together? It is a bit late now.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I encourage everyone to come back to the debate, please.

Mr Sheehan: A final word on that: that had nothing to do with RHI. However, in any event, our education and children bore the brunt of Tory party policy. It appears that they are likely to go down the same route again. I am grateful that we have a Finance Minister who works on behalf of the most vulnerable in society. Significant sums have been allocated to the Department of Education. I note that Mr Storey pointed out that it is the responsibility of the Finance Minister to allocate the funding, and he has done that for the most vulnerable. I commend the Minister of Finance for his allocations, in particular, more than £10 million to support children with special educational needs and a further £30.6 million for holiday hunger. This issue got a lot of publicity across the water when Marcus Rashford, the Manchester United footballer, embarrassed the Tories into ponying up for school meals for children during the holidays.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sheehan: I will give way one more time, but that is it.

Mrs D Kelly: I appreciate the Member giving way, but does he recall that the colleagues of the Members opposite at Westminster voted against the extension of free school meals?

Mr Sheehan: I thank the Member for that intervention. I did not really want to remind them of that, but there you go.

Marcus got a gong for the good work that he did in embarrassing the Tory Government into stumping up for free school meals. I do not know whether “Sir Conor Murphy” has a good ring to it, but he certainly *[Interruption]* —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order, order.

Mr Sheehan: — deserves the praise of everybody in the House, and particularly that of the most vulnerable in society, for what he has done. Lest we forget, he also made a pay award to teachers.

Even before the pandemic, the education system was on the brink of financial crisis. Starved of investment for 10 years — Mervyn, you should know this because you

were the Chair of the Education Committee — the system was dealing with a £400 million shortfall. In NDNA, the British Government committed to investing in our schools to ensure that they would have access to sustainable core budgets. Unfortunately, with the resources that they now provide, that will not happen. This is particularly concerning in the context of COVID, because there will be consequences for children having missed so much time at school, in lost learning and emotional and mental health issues.

Giving evidence to the Education Committee a few weeks ago, the mental health champion, Professor Siobhan O’Neill, agreed with the assessment that there is a tsunami of emotional and mental health issues coming at us down the tracks. Our children have been badly affected by the pandemic because they have missed school and social interactions and so on. Many children will have fallen behind in their school work. In most cases, it will be disadvantaged kids who will be affected by that. I have called on the Education Minister to make a substantial and ambitious bid for some of the £300 million in COVID funding — this is one positive thing — that the Executive are allowed to carry over.

Moving ahead, we need a comprehensive, coordinated and integrated strategy to deal with lost learning and emotional and mental well-being as kids go back to school. It has to be extensive; I acknowledge the £11.2 million Engage programme that the Minister put in place after the first lockdown, but that is not enough to deal with the problems that are going to be coming down the tracks shortly.

I am calling on the Minister of Education to put in place a substantial bid and to make sure that he has a plan and a strategy in place to deal with the issues that children will be facing in schools. He does not have a lot of time to do it, but he needs to involve teachers and their unions, children, the community and voluntary sector, sporting organisations —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Sheehan: — and so on. He needs to make that bid and he needs to do it quickly.

Ms Bradshaw: There is an element of familiarity for me, in my capacity as my party’s Health spokesperson, in that we are discussing a motion that we have no real option but to agree. We have never had a year in which the Estimates have diverged so significantly from the original Budget, with 19% extra resource expenditure and 11% extra capital, even discounting the specific COVID-19 spending. That is why it is so frustrating that we have little time to scrutinise it fully, but we are where we are.

When I was in the Chamber to debate the Vote on Account 10 months ago, I mentioned that the current crisis had shown that Health spending concerns all Departments because health is all-encompassing. The impact of the pandemic has been felt across every section of society and every public service. The requirement for assistance is also felt across all sectors, from the need to provide extra public spending to plug gaps, to the need to support the community and voluntary sector to provide vital services at a time when it is most difficult to do so, and to the need to support businesses and those who work in the private sector who cannot, for whatever reason, earn a living at

present. That is a reminder that spending must be about practical outcomes, not bureaucratic silos.

A little like when we discuss coronavirus regulations, the timing for discussing the Estimates and budgets is not ideal because of changes that are about to come. We are still uncertain about what lies ahead in the UK Budget. Increasing corporation tax across the UK would, for example, raise the question of whether we wish to accept increased income from such an increase through Barnett consequentials, or ignore it and maintain a lower rate here. That has a potential impact even on how we might wish to spend the headroom money that is allowed for in the Estimates. At all times, we have to consider what lies ahead. Hopefully, we will begin a recovery period in the second half of the forthcoming financial year.

Notwithstanding what I have said about the spending impacts on Health, even with COVID-19 spending, Health is under-represented. The Department's £1.04 billion allocation may be the highest of all the Executive Departments, but it is actually a lower share of the total that is usually allocated in the Budget process. That is, perhaps, understandable in these specific circumstances, but the fact is that that cannot remain the case. If anything, as we rebuild and reform health and social care, any budgetary uplifts to Health will have to be allocated as a proportion of the total. We need not just to address the appalling backlog in waiting lists, diagnostics and treatment but to increase spending on investment and reform. That should have happened a long time ago — the Bengoa report, published a few years back, was mentioned — and we have a lot of space to recover.

There are also some aspects of healthcare that were pledged in the Westminster legislation or in 'New Decade, New Approach' that have still not been provided for, from the three cycles of IVF to back pay for workers in various parts of the healthcare sector. Those are not just pledges that were made on paper; they have real-world impacts in areas that are a matter of urgency to many people who cannot wait for them to be addressed.

Some of the extra funding in these Estimates is very welcome. For example, there should now be no shortage of PPE, given the £175 billion allocation. I put on record some of the key concerns for Department of Health spending heading into the next financial year. For example, long COVID is already a growing pressure on well-being and post-viral services. They will need to be commissioned properly and properly funded in the coming months. Waiting list pressures, as I said, will inevitably need more than the current £1.1 billion Budget allocation. Mental health and well-being, which were also raised in the Chamber this afternoon, accounts for between 7% and 8% of all health spending. Northern Ireland has higher rates of poor mental health than the rest of the UK, and we cannot just rely on Barnett consequentials and remaining confidence-and-supply funding to deliver a comprehensive strategy for that. We need every Member to commit to ensuring that it is properly funded. In particular, I will highlight that we have committed no extra funding, either this year or next, for children's mental health.

I want to turn to an issue that has been live in recent weeks and that is very relevant to the decisions that we have to make in this financial year, namely, the £500 special recognition payment. The Finance Minister pledged last week that that £500 payment will not create complications

in tax pensions and credits. It is important to ensure that all key workers, who have been placed under huge pressures and who provided vital services during the pandemic, qualify for that payment. That includes those in the community and voluntary sector. The money is clearly there in the headroom allocation to pay for that.

Our job here today is to safeguard the finances for Northern Ireland and, most of all, for the people of Northern Ireland. We trust that, in voting through these allocations, we are very much helping to do the latter, and we must give them the benefit of doubt despite the rush.

Ms Dillon: I am not going to go over the position that we are in, because other Members highlighted that we are in the middle, or hopefully coming out, of a global pandemic and the very difficult year that we have had. I want to attach myself to Mervyn Storey's comments about the families who have lost loved ones during the pandemic. Our thoughts are with them. Money and finances are one thing, and we need to deal with those and ensure that we recover properly in everything from mental health, education, our health and the justice system. However, for those who have lost loved ones, no amount of money will bring those people back. Our thoughts are with those people, and, no doubt, we will have to put services in place to support them on the other side of this. I have no doubt that they have not had the support that they would ordinarily through the proper processes for wakes and funerals. There is no doubt that we will have to look at investing support and have some type of remembrance for those people who died during this time.

I support both motions as Sinn Féin's justice spokesperson. The wider criminal justice system has come under immense pressure during the COVID-19 pandemic, with restrictions and social-distancing requirements putting new and additional pressures on front-line services. The loss of the £350 million NDNA funding that the Executive received in 2020-21 means that the 2021-22 Budget will largely represent a standstill position. In real terms, it will represent a cut for most Departments, including the Department of Justice. The Department's budget overview and equality screening outline the potential impact of living within its budget baseline without pressures being met, including the potential reductions in police officer and prison officer numbers and an impact on a range of different services and plans, such as a hate crime review, problem-solving justice and supporting victims of domestic and sexual abuse.

5.15 pm

In some senses, DOJ is different from other Departments in that a lot of the additional COVID funding was not spent on services or schemes but, rather, represents a loss of income that is not expected to be in place going forward, given the business recovery across courts. However, it is disappointing that an easement of £1.2 million in ring-fenced COVID-19 funding was surrendered, particularly considering the increased backlog of cases awaiting a court hearing.

There is additional money to be spent before the end of the financial year, and, when inescapable pressures have been identified in the draft Budget and the current backlog of cases in the court system has significantly increased in comparison with pre-pandemic levels, more could be done to identify how that could have been addressed as part of

the spring Supplementary Estimates. Speeding up justice is a priority for the justice system, and it is vital that the challenges that we face around case times and backlogs are addressed.

DOJ has identified inescapable pressures of £55.7 million, much of which falls to the PSNI. NDNA contained a commitment to increase the number of police officers to 7,500, as was outlined by Mr Storey. Additional funding was granted in 2021 that allowed some increase to the number of police officers, but, with the British Government still not providing the resources required to fulfil that commitment, we could end up in a farcical situation in which police officer numbers are reduced. Last year, when we had no Brexit, the British Government gave us £16.5 million in funding for additional police officers for Brexit, and, this year, when Brexit has happened — we have seen the fallout of that around security and, in particular, loyalist threats — there is a reduction in funding from the British Government for the PSNI.

I have shared my concerns with DOJ officials and share them here again today about the potential impact of such cuts on front-line services and concerns around neighbourhood policing. However, I appreciate that the Chief Constable has outlined that neighbourhood policing will be a priority. I welcome that and have been given the same reassurances by the Department, to which the Chief Constable has also made that point. Neighbourhood and local policing teams have a key role in preventing crime and improving outcomes in many types of crime, including drug dealing, domestic abuse, paramilitary violence, antisocial behaviour, rural crime, child sexual exploitation and many more types of crime.

The cost of delivering the full range of priorities set out in NDNA is far in excess of the funding package provided by the British Government. In October, the Assembly passed a motion that called on the British Government to provide adequate funding to take forward the NDNA priorities, including the commitment to enhanced local police numbers. It is disappointing that they have not yet done so.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. I concur with all her comments about additional police. However, we need to remember that NDNA states:

“The Executive will increase police numbers”.

The onus is on the Executive. There is a failure by the Minister of Justice to bring forward a business case on the issue. She keeps batting it back and forward. Let us also remember that, 20 years ago, Patten said that there should be 7,500 police officers.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Dillon: I welcome the Member's intervention. However, I have seen time and time again — it was outlined by my colleague Pat Sheehan — that, when the British Government make commitments, they do not stand by them and do not fund them. They have done the same, as we have seen, with the legacy issue, which I will come to in a few minutes.

The Probation Board's budget represents approximately 1.8% of the Department of Justice's budget for 2021-22. However, its importance in the justice system has a much higher value than that. The upcoming resource for the

Probation Board and the difficulties that it will pose are significant, as was outlined to us in Committee, particularly given that a number of commitments and programmes are being rolled out on better engagement with victims. The Probation Board has told us that the budget that it will get means that not only will it not have better engagement with victims but it will have worse engagement than it already has. If we were to speak to some victims, they would tell us that it could not be much worse than it is. That is unsustainable for the Probation Board.

We also have a circumstance whereby social workers in the Probation Board are paid less than those in the health service and other services. Again, that is unsustainable. We need to look at how we can work together to equalise pay. Is there a way in which the Department of Justice and the Department of Health can work together on social workers' pay?

As I said, the funding of legacy is a real issue. The real issue is the failure of the British Government, who have failed to bring forward not only the funding for agreed commitments but the legislation on the Historical Investigations Unit (HIU), which creates a knock-on effect in the PSNI budget.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Ms Dillon: Yes. It falls to DOJ to administer the pension, but it is only the administration. The British Government are failing to fund the legislation that they imposed upon us.

Mr D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. I recognise that many Members who spoke previously have outlined its purpose. They expressed regret that we are not given sufficient time to explore many of the Budget lines, make the comments that we would otherwise seek to make and interrogate the figures a lot more.

I will follow on from the comments by Ms Dillon and Mr Storey on police numbers. Mr Storey is quite right. The figure of 7,500 was set by Patten. That is not a new or magical figure. It was confirmed in New Decade, New Approach, and all parties in the Executive agreed to it. It is most regrettable that 300 or 400 policing jobs might be lost or not replaced this year, particularly when neighbourhood policing is now across all our constituencies and is broadly welcomed by the community. The figure of 7,500 was set in a time of peace, when there were no dissident republicans, and loyalist paramilitaries were expected to have largely been stood down. Yet we have had recent reports from the Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) that loyalist paramilitaries are still actively recruiting in large numbers. We have seen the impact of that recently in our streets, particularly in east Belfast. I ask that urgent consideration be given in future monitoring rounds to the policing situation. Policing must be put on a proper and sustainable footing.

I agree that the British Government have reneged on victims' payments. The Minister of Finance has had a number of meetings with the Treasury on New Decade, New Approach commitments, and he might be able to update us on whether there has been any advance. I understand that, when the First and deputy First Ministers, or joint First Ministers, met with the Secretary of State last week, no progress was made. We are close to a

critical date. According to the court judgment, the time for payments runs out in only two weeks' time. I would like to know how the Minister of Finance will address that in the coming weeks and months. It is the responsibility of the Executive Office to observe that court judgment.

I turn my attention to infrastructure, on which I am the SDLP's spokesperson. On numerous occasions, we have heard the British Prime Minister talk about turbocharging the economy through infrastructure. However, some of the ideas that he has come up with are nonsensical. They include bridges, tunnels and roundabouts — in a debate earlier today, somebody said that he wanted a roundabout under the Isle of Man. We all know his record of delivery: the garden bridge in London was abandoned after the expenditure of much public money. The vanity projects of this particular individual have caused losses to the public purse.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for taking an intervention. Does she agree that it would be better if the British Government were to give us money to address the underinvestment in our infrastructure over many years?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member for her intervention. That is a point that my Minister and party have made. Indeed, many parties have made that point while holding the Infrastructure portfolio. We have had to live a hand-to-mouth existence through monitoring rounds, rather than receiving proper investment in both capital and resource. I welcome the fact that we have had additional capital funding, but it is most regrettable that the draft resource budget is extremely challenging. If further funding is not secured, a really difficult year lies ahead. It will also be difficult to deliver a capital programme of that scale without a corresponding increase to the resource budget. The draft resource outcome for the Department from the 2021-22 Budget is £420.7 million. That is an increase of £2.8 million, which is a 0.7% increase on the 2020-21 opening resource allocation of £417.9 million, proportionately less of an increase than all other Departments, and less than the average departmental increase of over 6%.

We all know of and have raised concerns about issues to do with roads maintenance, particularly of rural roads. Numerous audit reports have underscored the vast underspend in infrastructure that we have had, particularly in roads, for many years. However, it is not only our roads that are at risk but our waste water treatment. In an earlier contribution by Martina Anderson, during questions to the Minister on her ministerial statement, she highlighted the waste water treatment that needed to be invested in to allow our towns, cities and housing developments to grow and expand. That should be a key priority in the allocation of funding by the Finance Minister.

We face unprecedented challenges around not only COVID and Brexit but climate change. Those matters should be given consideration, and all parties have signed up to commitments to deal with those challenges in a coherent fashion. Obviously, it is a global challenge, and we have our role to play, but that costs money. Many communities are seeing street lights, potholes and road safety in their areas not being funded, and they are on extremely long waiting lists. About two years ago, I met

the divisional road manager in my constituency and asked about traffic-calming measures. We were told that they had over 600 applications but only enough funding for one per year. Surely, the Finance Minister could ensure that Departments that are having to return large sums of money at the end of this financial year are challenged to better deliver on their commitments. Given that businesses and bidders need to be put in place in order to deliver on spend, that money, if available, needs to be in the earlier monitoring rounds. It is a matter of deep regret that the £11 million that was bid for by the Infrastructure Minister in June of last year was refused by the Finance Minister. It has made an already difficult situation much worse.

Ms Bunting (The Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee): As the House is aware, the Audit Committee scrutinises and agrees the budgets and Estimates of the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) and lays the Estimates before the Assembly. The Committee also has an equally important role in scrutinising the budget for the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission. In recognition of the independence of those bodies, the Committee carries out those functions in place of the Department of Finance.

In-year monitoring is an important feature of the Budget process, and it should be acknowledged at the outset that, due to the impact of COVID-19, it has proven difficult at times for bodies to make robust and accurate forecasts of expenditure requirements. That is borne out by the nature of the easements that were declared by those three independent bodies during the year.

I will deal, first, with the Audit Office. COVID-19 and the uncertainties that existed around the implications of Brexit on the audit of the European agricultural funds had a delaying effect on the Audit Office's planned intensive recruitment schedule. As a consequence, an easement of £300,000 was declared in June 2020. Further easements of £400,000 and £100,000 were declared in October 2020 and January 2021 respectively. Again, those were as a result of COVID. There were savings because of recruitment delays, but there were also considerable savings in travel and subsistence, training and running costs.

5.30 pm

I turn now to the Public Services Ombudsman. In June and October 2020, NIPSO did not see a basis for making alterations to its budgetary position, although it should be noted that, in response to the Department of Finance's separate assessment exercise, it did contribute £60,000 of its 2020-21 budget to central COVID-19 countermeasures. In January 2021, NIPSO surrendered £100,000 because of the delay in the commencement of its complaints and standards authority role. It is hoped, however, that that facet of its work will begin in the coming financial year, and the Audit Committee is content that NIPSO's resource plans for the 2021-22 year are appropriate for taking that forward.

Finally, I will deal with the Assembly Commission. In June 2020, the Commission surrendered £1.745 million. That, in the main, was because of the impact that the pandemic had on the Commission's plans for staff recruitment in the 2020-21 financial year. In October 2020, the Commission identified a net pressure of £2.295 million. A pressure of £4.146 million was identified as a result of the publication

of the Assembly Members' salaries and expenses determination, and the Commission subsequently received an allocation for that.

Easements for the period were also identified, including £977,000 from staff salaries owing to recruitment being slower than anticipated, again because of the pandemic. The continuing closure of Parliament Buildings, the absence of external Committee activity and the consequent reduction in the full range of usual activity meant that admin costs were reduced by £345,000, and an easement for that amount was declared. There was also a reduction in planned revenue expenditure on a number of large-scale projects requiring external consultancy expertise, such as the Parliament Buildings security system and the corporate systems review project.

In January 2021, a further £906,000 was surrendered because of easements identified in staff salaries, admin costs, Members' costs and constituency office costs. COVID again played a significant role in the easements identified for staff and admin costs. The reduction for constituency office costs, however, arises from an estimation that the anticipated recruitment of staff that was facilitated by the determination would not all take place in this financial year. The Commission carried out unforeseen work during the year to deliver homeworking, and that has meant that a small number of anticipated capital projects will now be undertaken in the 2021-22 financial year. That resulted in a surrender of capital DEL totalling £123,000.

The Audit Committee is acutely aware that effective financial management processes are essential if significant overspends and underspends are to be avoided. As I have already mentioned, the past year has been a difficult one for forecasting expenditure. We are, however, moving into a new year, in which there should be slightly less uncertainty, and working practices and procedures have already adapted to comply with the restrictions. It is hoped that that will be evidenced by more accurate forecasting.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. In the light of the amount of money that has been surrendered, particularly by the Commission, will the Audit Committee have the opportunity to see how the Commission has been able to operate in the COVID environment? What working practices could be improved so that the financial burden is not as much in 2021-22?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Bunting: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Member will be aware that the only role that the Audit Committee has in that regard is to scrutinise the budgets. Ultimately, decisions are for the Commission, but, yes, there is a responsibility on everybody to ensure that public money is spent in the most effective and efficient way possible and that savings are found, where it is possible to find them.

The Committee has carried out its assessment of the expenditure required by the three independent bodies for the 2021-22 financial year in a rigorous manner, and Members will continue to apply that rigour throughout the entire Budget process. I trust that that will give the Member some assurance. Taking into consideration the wider public expenditure position, the Committee has emphasised to the independent bodies that, for the 2021-22 year, they will have to live within their opening baseline

positions, absorb significant pressures and identify surrenders at the earliest opportunity.

Mr McGuigan: In the year that we are in, it is quite right that the clear priorities for the Executive have been to save lives, keep people safe, protect the NHS and attempt to thwart the spread of coronavirus. In the midst of a global pandemic, that was never going to be straightforward for the North's finances.

I am conscious that this is a debate on the Supplementary Estimates, which, in a usual year, would be a debate about money that has already been spent. This year is slightly different, so I will make a few general points about our fiscal situation. Due to COVID, there are very good reasons for the number and value of the in-year reallocations that have taken place. Given the late announcements from the British Treasury, there are, again, reasons why, at this late stage, considerable amounts of money have been left by the Executive to spend. The Estimates that we are debating contain levels of headroom that will ensure that Departments have the flexibility needed to get that money spent. The Finance Minister explained in his opening remarks the rationale for that. He has repeatedly called on his Executive colleagues to come forward with bids for funding to get that money spent prior to 31 March.

I am regularly contacted — I am sure that everybody else is the same in this difficult year — by concerned businesses and members of the public who are struggling as a result of the pandemic and have not yet received any support. It is vital that all is done to ensure that that money is allocated in the short time ahead in a way that helps those who need it most.

I have listened during the debate to other Members talk about the need for multi-year Budgets and strategic planning. I totally agree; I would be surprised if anyone disagreed. However, it needs to be continually pointed out that we do not have multi-year Budgets, and nor will we have the ability for such in the forthcoming Budget, because of decisions that have been taken by the British Treasury. We have also heard that the British Treasury has refused to allow upwards of £200 million of COVID money to be carried over in to next year. That decision not to show flexibility has, undoubtedly, caused problems for Departments trying to manage their budgets as that money arrived late without notice.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful for the Member's giving way. I take his point about the Treasury; there have been really late allocations this year. I am not going to argue about that, even though I used to work there; there is no question about how bad it has been. However, it seems a bit passive to say that it is all the fault of the Treasury, as though we have no agency here to set priorities. We could have set better priorities this year and delivered them. I put that to the Member to reflect on.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McGuigan: Thank you.

The Executive have priorities — we have a Programme for Government — but, as everybody has pointed out, this is a year like no other. In a lot of cases, it has been about firefighting, getting money out and reallocating money. The

important point is that the money that the Executive have should be spent in a fair and equitable manner.

I follow on from the point about continually attacking the Treasury. Any time that I speak on the Budget under the current arrangements, my key point is that we are almost entirely dependent on the British Government to pay for public services through the block grant. I have listened to a few Members during the debate, particularly the Committee Chairs, talk about the impact of Tory austerity over decades on our public services. I was particularly struck by the comments of the Health Committee Chair, detailing the impact of a decade of austerity on our NHS during the pandemic and on waiting lists for other vital health services that affect the lives, and the quality of the lives, of our citizens. Relying on a British Government, especially a right-wing Tory Government, will never be good for citizens on this island.

In the short term, the Executive need greater financial flexibility in public spending and financial tools to do a better job for the people whom we represent. I welcome the Finance Minister's recent announcement that he is setting up a fiscal commission to explore that very possibility.

In conclusion, today — 1 March — is the 40th anniversary of when Bobby Sands began his hunger strike. Despite the passing of time, Bobby Sands was 100% correct when he wrote in his diary entry 40 years ago today as he started his fast that only when the Irish people, as a unit, can:

“control their own affairs and determine their own destinies as a sovereign people, free in mind and body, separate and distinct ... economically”

will we prosper on this island.

Mr McNulty: I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate on Budget matters. As Members of the Legislative Assembly, we have three key responsibilities: shaping public policy, shaping public spending and representing constituents' concerns. In my engagement with various Departments, public bodies, arm's-length bodies and those who depend on the public sector for work, I have heard a real frustration about the way that we manage our finances and plan our spend. Government spending here has been too focused on the short term and too last minute. It does not facilitate better, longer-term strategic thinking, long-term planning or value for money.

I want to touch on five areas of spend, the first being hospital waiting lists. We are all too aware of the need to tackle the long waiting lists for surgery across the different specialities. I fully appreciate that we have just come through a worldwide pandemic. In addition to the obvious health pressures associated with coronavirus, it has added to our problem of massive waiting lists. We have people waiting years for routine surgeries. They are waiting far too long for first appointments with a specialist and, then, waiting even longer for surgery. New Decade, New Approach promised action; it promised finance for surgery. What is being done to address the pending epidemic of growing waiting lists and delayed operations and screening — the epidemic after the pandemic? Where is the action? Where is that finance? People on waiting lists are dying. People and families just want action.

The second issue that I want to touch on is Education Restart, the restart of physical education and children

and young people's emotional health and well-being. Our children and young people have been forgotten about in this pandemic. For very sound reasons, we turned our attention to the elderly and vulnerable; they were at greater risk from coronavirus. However, that has been at the cost of our children's education, their access to physical education and sport, and their emotional health and well-being. The Restart programme does not go far enough. It is a piecemeal approach supplemented by the 'Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework', costed at £6.5 million. Bluntly, that does not go far enough. If we do not tackle the necessary emotional and educational catch-up under one strategic banner, too many children will be left behind and forgotten about.

Thirdly, as a constituency MLA, one the biggest issues that I am contacted about is the state of our rural roads. Time and again, Ministers have told us of the need for long-term strategic investment in structural and rural road maintenance. In fact, the current Finance Minister said in 2009 that better roads were vital to the North's economic prosperity. You will appreciate my concern at learning from the Infrastructure Minister, who bid for an additional £17.5 million through in-year monitoring last year, that he allocated just £2 million. I want to see the Department for Infrastructure properly resourced and rural roads maintained.

Fourthly, as a member of the Education Committee, I am anxious and deeply frustrated that children with special educational needs are constantly let down. Families and young people have to wait months for special assessment. When they get that assessment, there is no money for the one-to-one support that they need. They just seem to be cast aside and dropped off at every turn. Their families are fed up with the lip service that is paid to them and their children. These children are our most vulnerable and needy citizens. They cannot be forgotten about. It is imperative that educators have the finance necessary to give them the support that they need.

Finally, I draw the Minister's attention to support for the GAA. The £20 million set aside initially for the redevelopment of Casement Park was welcome, but we need much more than that. We need certainty that the Finance Minister, the Communities Minister and the Executive are committed to delivery of the project. We need certainty that the money is there to meet the projected costs. Casement Park can be the phoenix from the ashes of this pandemic. I urge the Minister to support that vision.

Once more, I take this opportunity to press the Minister on the need to support sporting social clubs. Like many licensed premises in sport, tourism and hospitality, sporting social clubs have had their doors shut for almost a year now. Some facilities have had weekly support, but GAA clubs have been cut adrift by the Minister's guidelines, and some face real difficulty. Can the Minister go back and review this policy? It is not hard to clarify the clubs concerned — there are many in the constituency that we share and, indeed, across the North. That lack of support is in danger of driving many sporting clubs to the wall.

5.45 pm

I could go on, but I know that others wish to speak. However, I will add one final thing. This place has been awash with money to deal with the pandemic, but I fear

that much of it will go unspent and that the Minister will go down in history as the Minister who handed back millions to London when families, workers and businesses were on their knees. It will not be a question then of blaming the Brits or Tory austerity if you have handed back millions to the Tory pot. Let us take the opportunity to invest now in the front line, in communities and in those who need it.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motions. No doubt, this year proved to be a highly challenging period for setting the Budget. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that the financial circumstances this year have been unique, to say the least. Primarily, we are living through a public health crisis, with COVID-19 having a devastating impact on many families and communities as the virus spreads. On top of that, it has also become a severe economic and social crisis, with nearly every aspect of society being impacted in some way. Throughout the period, the Executive have had to act quickly to provide funding to deal with it. However, the pandemic continues to exact a heavy toll on our economy. It goes without saying that the North was in a financially precarious position, even before the first COVID case reached this island, due to the years of scathing Tory austerity that stripped away our vital public services. Those same services, mind you, continue in their heroic efforts to respond to these extraordinary times.

From an infrastructure standpoint, you need not look far to see the damage of the lack of sustainable funding. The central resource issue for the Department for Infrastructure arises from the cut to its resource budget, which has been evident from 2015, as the block grant suffered cuts at the behest of austerity. During that time, roads maintenance suffered from inadequate baseline funding, resulting in a skeleton maintenance service. Our water and waste water services suffered inadequate funding, and the provision of public transport was sustained only by Translink's reliance on its reserves. For example, its reserves have reduced from £56 million in 2015 to a projected £24 million by March 2020.

As I said in previous speeches concerning the Budget, if public transport had been better funded throughout the years, it might have been in a stronger position to respond to the pandemic. Meanwhile, funds that have gone to Translink could have been spent on other high-priority issues during COVID. However, it was in a dire financial position even before the pandemic began. COVID has once again demonstrated the undeniable need to prioritise properly funding our vital public services, and, no doubt, it has reasserted the need to break away from the failed economic policies of the past.

It is in the context of that strenuous financial position that I commend the work of the Finance Minister in delivering what he has during his tenure. Last year, the Department for Infrastructure saw its resource budget rise by 8.6% while receiving a capital allocation of £558 million. That was the largest ever made to the Department. Meanwhile, throughout the year, the Department was a large recipient of funding for COVID pressures, receiving around £200 million for those pressures. Around half of that went to Translink. That is a strong demonstration of the Finance Minister's recognition of the importance of public services such as public transport.

The next financial year's Budget is a standstill one, as it largely reflects the Budget that was in place last year when our block grant was, in real terms, £360 million below pre-austerity levels. I say all that without mentioning the woeful yet predictable lack of follow-through from the British Government on the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach'. Despite that, in the draft Budget, the Department for Infrastructure received an allocation that is £135 million higher than this year's opening position. I urge that to be prioritised for the improved delivery of services and the decarbonisation of the transport network.

That should include essential projects such as the flagship capital projects, including the A6, investment in waste water infrastructure, greenways and cycle lanes, the improvement of our rural roads and road safety, not least through the delivery of the vital A1 safety improvements.

It must be said that significant challenges will persist for all Departments because, for as long as we continue to be wedded to austerity policies, the North as a whole will be limited in its ability to deliver an expansive Budget that is fit for the people of the Six Counties. In keeping with that sentiment, I want Members to remember where the true structural problems lie when scrutinising our budgets and to look towards real solutions and alternatives, such as employing our domestic powers so that we can have better control over our own destinies.

Mr Allister: I want to address two or three issues of a fairly general nature. First, I am really surprised at the scale of the headroom that has been built in: £1 billion. Surely the starting principle in respect of Budgets is that, at this stage in the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Budget Bill, you write them to the last monitoring position. As I have always understood it, that is the correct due process so that you do not create a false perception that you have money that you do not actually have. As I understand this £1 billion of headroom, it is not that there is £1 billion unallocated; there is the possibility of money being allocated, but the Minister wants to keep his options open as to which Department it should go, and he therefore builds in a headroom to each and every one of them. At some point, a choice will be made as to which Departments the surplus of £200 million or £300 million might go. However, to build a headroom of what amounts to £1 billion, which, as I understand it, we do not have, seems to me not to be a manner in which to proceed. It makes something of a mockery of financial legislation. Financial legislation and Budgets should set a limit for each Department to spend against, and each Department must then give account to its resource accounts as to how that money is spent. However, giving each Department this scale of overspend means that next year, when they should be doing Excess Votes for the money that they spent that they did not have, they will not have to do Excess Votes. Therefore, they will not have to apply explanations. This £1 billion of headroom is an artificial creation and is really about causing Departments to escape from the normal process of accountability through Excess Votes. That is not being accountable to the House. Therefore, I seriously question why we are building in headroom to that extent.

The second matter that I want to address is the vexed issue of our provision for victims. At last week's Finance Committee, we had the spectacle of being told that £430 million that was in the provisions was for the victims'

pension, before being told later by letter, “No, the officials misspoke”, as it was not there. Surely there should be a provision in the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Budget Bill for the victims’ pension. As I understand it, there are international accounting standards, and international accounting standard 37 is quite clear that you need to make a provision once a past event has led to a liability — that is ticked on the victims’ issue — once the legislation has been passed to authorise the payments — that is ticked — and once the liability has been reliably estimated.

Last week, the Minister told us that actuaries had given us the figures, so there is an established liability. The Court of Appeal said that it has to be paid, and legislation authorising it has been passed. A liability is reliably established, so why are we not putting a provision in these documents for the payment? Is the Minister hoping that it may be swallowed up in the headroom and that there will not even have to be an Excess Vote next year as it will all just slip under the radar?

The proper way to do this, I respectfully suggest, is for the Minister to amend his Budget Bill to put in such a provision. That would be the correct financial way to proceed: to table an amendment to his Bill to put in a provision for the payment of the pension. The Department keeps telling us that it will be paid. If it is to be paid, make provision for it in the Bill. Why would that not be done? That seems to be the essential and proper course of action, so I would like to hear from the Minister where we now stand on the provision of the victims’ pension. We are assured that it will be paid. However, if it is to be paid, why are we not putting a provision in the Bill to cover it? That would seem the logical and natural thing to do.

Finally, I want to mention the ubiquitous black boxes that have excited me from time to time in these debates. Just before this debate started, at 1.18 pm, we got an email telling us that there was an amendment to the spring Supplementary Estimates to give some further explanation. That is good. I welcome the fact that there is now a more fulsome explanation of why we are aligned to £50 million of expenditure on the sole authority of the Budget Bill.

The whole idea of Budget arrangements is that legislation provides for spending, and you then hold people accountable. Where you do not have legislation authorising expenditure, there is a provision for sole authority of the Budget Bill, but the guidance says that it should not exceed £1.5 million in any one incident.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Allister: Here, we have an accumulation of £50 million, including £40 million on welfare and £7 million on an overspend on the social investment fund, and no immediate legislation.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member’s time is up.

Mr Allister: I do not think that that is acceptable.

Mr Carroll: The Vote on Account is required to allow the Budget to proceed and money to be allocated accordingly. However, these Estimates and the Budget that is likely to come reflect an unfair and unambitious Budget at a time of

severe economic uncertainty and societal upheaval in the midst of huge turmoil.

People have sacrificed a lot. They have lost jobs and income, and, tragically, too many have lost their lives. The response from the Executive is that we will have a standstill Budget, as it is being described. On further digging, given that many services have been paused or halted, that is not an accurate description of what this Budget will represent.

With a society emerging from a pandemic, a standstill Budget is, in real terms, one that fails to support ordinary people and, in many cases, exacerbates the deep problems faced before, throughout and after the pandemic. Going along as normal while ruling out a systemic and fundamental policy shift is shocking but true to form for the Executive.

The documentation provided before the debate includes many figures and numbers, and I want to ask for clarity on them. Some require explanation and further scrutiny. Table 1, the summary of estimates for health resource, shows a proposed reduction of £588 million in the amount that the Department of Health said that it needed and the amount that it is now able to spend. You can use whatever technical language you want to explain that, but, at a time when we have increasing waiting lists for elective surgery, a growing mental health crisis and huge demand because of COVID, the Health Minister saying that he cannot spend about half a billion pounds leaves a lot of questions to be answered.

Why is that money — and further money — not being set aside to pay to train more counsellors and ensure that every GP surgery has an in-house mental health service? Shockingly, in my constituency, 50% of GPs do not have those facilities in place. I join others who are scratching their heads, furious about that move and asking questions about it. Old ways of doing things must be discarded. Every single penny and pound must be used to protect people and support their health, especially those who have been impacted by the pandemic and its consequences.

6.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

When one looks further through the Estimates, one cannot help but be convinced that the requirement to increase public spending across every single Department and, in particular, those areas that are designed specifically to help those who rely on public services, the welfare system etc is not really there. In the budgetary Estimates, there appears to be a reduction in the provision for the child maintenance service. Why is that? Further digging shows a significant reduction to the discretionary support scheme. That is my reading of it; I am happy to be corrected. How can that be sufficient, given the massive increase in the number of universal credit claimants and the number of people who have struggled to get access to proper financial support in order to self-isolate during the pandemic? The current system is well below what is required.

We also see a reduction in housing benefit. We need an explanation as to why that is the case, given the financial pressures that people face during the current period to be able to afford their rent at all. There also appears to

be a reduction in the money that is set aside for JSA and income support. I would appreciate some clarity on that as well. The Estimates state that housing grants to the Housing Executive are to increase. That is to be welcomed, but only if they are to be used to roll out public housing rather than being a cash injection to roll out a scheme to privatise and rip up the Housing Executive as a public institution.

I am also very concerned that, in the Estimates for Education, there is a reduction in the provision for the Youth Service and other children's services, which appears, from my reading, to be around £200,000. We will need to see greater provision in the Youth Service as we come out of lockdown. How does that figure sit with the need to meet that demand? There is also a reduction to the net cash requirement of almost £40 million for the pensions of people who are covered by the teachers' superannuation scheme. It does not say why that is the case. I would appreciate an answer on that, if possible.

There also appears to be a reduction for hospital, paramedic and ambulance services. Again, I ask why that is the case. The NIAS needs greater assistance, so why is there a reduction in its funding? It is also very concerning that, when the net provision is compared with the new net provision for trusts, there is a gap of £676 million. Despite the pressures that trusts and services are under, the fact that we heard, only this morning, the chief executives of the trusts say that the health budget is nowhere near sufficient to meet the needs of people here, and the fact that everyone clapped for the NHS, the Executive continue to underfund the health service. There has been a reduction in the figure for the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency, with no explanation as to why. Given the many dental health issues that there are, I question that and ask for an explanation.

My final question relates to "A-6: Provisions" under the TEO headline. There is a substantial increase, but what it is for does not appear anywhere in the documentation. I would appreciate an answer and clarity on that.

We need clarity on those questions. It is quite a frustrating process, I am sure, for everybody, but especially for a sole MLA from a small party — perhaps purposefully so, to blunt the Executive from the real criticism of the impact of their financial decisions. We need answers to all those questions today. Ultimately, what we need is a fundamental shift in the political and economic narrative. The rich have done very well throughout the crisis. They have been immunised from the pandemic. It is now time for the Executive and Finance Minister to not just state it publicly and loudly but to fight to shift that imbalance. Otherwise, we will continue to have Budgets and policy decisions that fail the vast majority of people here.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Today's debate has covered many aspects relating to public expenditure and perhaps a few topics that are not as closely related to the matter in hand. Nevertheless, I will endeavour to address as many of the points raised during the debate as I can in the time allotted.

First, I once again thank the Finance Committee for its agreement to take this important legislation through by accelerated passage. That agreement secures the timely transition of the legislation through the Assembly, thereby avoiding any legal uncertainty over the funding of public

services for the remainder of 2020-21 and the early months of 2021-22.

I listened with interest to the debate, and I will turn to some of the issues that were raised and some of the questions that were asked. The Chair of the Finance Committee asked for what he called an "epilogue" or a final rundown. It has always been my intention to give a final summation of all the allocations, at the end of the process, rather than bring oral statements to the Assembly on a weekly basis. We have been making allocations fairly regularly, hence the need for quite a lot of headroom. Of course, in doing that, as I have said publicly and in my opening remarks, I would like to try to deal with as many of those who have not yet received support as possible, but that is within the restrictions of the framework under which my Department can make allocations.

The Chair of the Economy Committee asked about additional bids, and I have listed some of them. I am waiting on one final bid from TEO for travel agents, and we hope to be able to secure some support for them. She also asked about the furlough scheme and whether there will be an announcement. Of course, the furlough scheme runs until the end of April, but everyone will recognise that emergence from the pandemic and the economic impact of lockdown will last long beyond that. We have pressed Treasury on many occasions over the last year for the furlough scheme to continue, certainly specifically focused at least on those parts of business and industry that will struggle to open up in the time ahead.

The Chair of the Health Committee, not surprisingly, asked about health funding issues. As I stated in January, the spending review has not delivered the level of support required. Most people will be aware that we had been planning all year for a multi-year Budget and had hoped for a better Budget outcome, but we ended up with an annual Budget with, effectively, a standstill budget position for most Departments that, in effect, is a reduction in their budget in the time ahead. While the draft Budget provides almost £6.5 billion of resource funding to the Health Department, a single-year settlement does not provide that Department with the platform to rebuild the health service that all of us want. That requires a sustainable multi-year budget to enable effective planning. The Health Minister is aware of that, and he and the Executive remain committed to ultimately working towards that goal.

I will go through some of the issues. There were some questions that I found somewhat amusing. First, there was a deliberate misunderstanding. I am surprised at the former Finance Minister, who knows about these things. I am not so surprised at some of the Finance Committee members. He will know, of course, that I recommend to the Executive what bids are met and the Executive then decide. This was raised by a number of Members, but, from memory, I cannot remember a single division or any amendment to a financial allocations paper that I brought to the Executive this year, so I could argue, with some degree of validity, that I had unanimous support for all the allocations that were made this year. Of course, the Executive ultimately decide on those.

It is one thing to present the statistics and say that a certain number of bids were made, but the important figure is how much money was given as a consequence of those allocations. Mr Frew highlighted that the Department for the Economy was successful in only 31% of its bids, but it

received £644 million of COVID funding — a 79% increase from its 2020-21 opening budget. Some Departments were more selective. Some Departments submitted multiple bids.

I come back to the issue of infrastructure. I do not wish to get involved in this barney, but the SDLP Members appear to want to focus on the Infrastructure bid and why Roads did not bid for any money in the latter end of the year. However, some Departments made bids.

Some of the early funding was COVID-related. That was the case in June. Bids were invited for that, and Departments made a whole range of bids for everything, including for things that were non-COVID allocations. Rather than quoting the statistics of how many bids you made for multiple small schemes, it is more important to look at the money that you got. That is of more interest.

Mr Frew mentioned the confidence-and-supply agreement and made the rather bizarre claim that the moneys from that replaced and, in effect, cancelled out all the years of austerity Budgets. I do not have the two sets of figures to hand, but I can guarantee him that there is a massive difference between the impact of nine or 10 years of austerity Budgets and the confidence and supply money. Confidence-and-supply money was not designed to address austerity. It consisted of a package of ring-fenced, one-off funding allocations for a number of specific projects. It could not go into anyone's baseline as part of the overall spend and therefore could not begin to address austerity. As I said, I found the figures that he came up with quite bizarre.

Matthew O'Toole complained about the lack of strategic planning. I share his frustration. I wish that there was a Programme for Government in place and that we had a multi-annual Budget to go along with it. I wished for both those things, but we are in the middle of a pandemic, and we did not get either. I am sure that he will understand, as will his Minister on the Executive, that we have been trying our best to deal with the pandemic itself. On strategic planning, particularly for spending and finance, he knows that we got allocations of COVID funding from Treasury throughout the year that were unannounced in advance. The announcements came with no forewarning. We welcomed those allocations, and I would not be so churlish as not to welcome that additional money, but we were told in the summertime that that was the guarantee that we had ahead, yet we received several tranches of allocations after that. We were told that we could carry over the one that we got pre-Christmas, yet, in January, we were told that we could not, and we have another allocation coming.

I accept that everybody understandably wants to see financial planning so that they can measure over the years what we intend to do, what the priorities are and what finances are allocated against those priorities, but no one can say that this year was anything but extraordinary in its ability not to look ahead, to know what we were getting and to try to spend out the money that we had. Andrew Muir raised the point about spending out our money, while Mr O'Toole's colleague Mr McNulty, who is away, was very exercised by it and was afraid that I would go down in history as not spending out our money. I can say that, first, we pressed Departments to come forward with bids to allow us to do that. We also have contingency plans that I intend to bring to the Executive this Thursday to make sure that we spend out the available money. It is not the best way in which to do it, however. It is better to get support out to

business and others on the ground to try to assist with the economic recovery than to hand money back. Of course, the money is welcome, but scrambling to get money out is not the best way in which to spend it out. It does not have the strategic direction that others wish to see.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for giving way. He will not know until Wednesday, but does he anticipate any further allocations from the UK Budget? Is that part of the reason that there is the additional headroom that Mr Allister talked about?

Mr Murphy: No. We do not anticipate further allocations that will be able to go into our baseline for next year. Additional moneys coming across to us as Barnett consequential or as indicative spend are a possibility, and, of course, we wait to see what the UK Budget will look like. I sincerely hope that the announcements on Wednesday do not herald a return to austerity policies, but I do not anticipate getting anything that we can add to our baseline. The inclusion of headroom is to do with spending out our existing COVID money rather than anticipating more money being added to our baseline.

Andrew Muir also asked about the situation in the ports. My view at the time was that the Minister did not have the legal authority to take those decisions, and any legal advice that I have seen since confirms that view. The protocol is only one set of issues, because there are a huge number of other issues that flow from Brexit. The sooner that we get back to the Executive dealing with all the issues that flow from Brexit sensibly around the table, like adults, the better that it will be for us all. In an atmosphere in which others are increasingly trying to agitate and turn it into community tension, every action or word that we say in that regard needs to be very carefully minded to make sure that we do not contribute to any of that.

Mr Muir: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: Yes, briefly. I am running short of time.

Mr Muir: You are OK. Will the Minister confirm that decisions such as those that were made last Friday would require a ministerial direction that would have to be reported to him and the Executive?

6.15 pm

Mr Murphy: The letter from the Minister of Agriculture was very short. There are quite a lot of details behind it as to what processes took place. I have no doubt that the Executive will discuss it again tomorrow. The Committee will want to look at it as well to see what instructions were given. The statement made it clear that instructions were given to stop work. I remain firmly of the view that the Minister did not have the authority to do that because it was an Executive policy matter and required cross-Executive support. Any issues of concern, whether in the port or with the protocol arrangements or any arrangements relating to Brexit, should be brought to the Executive for discussion so that we can take a collective view, particularly given the circumstances and the atmosphere that some people are trying to create.

A number of Members asked about pensions, payments and funding for victims. An honest mistake was made in the Committee the other day. It was a verbal mistake; it was not a written one. It was one figure in a document

of over 300 pages. The mistake was corrected within 24 hours, and the Committee was made aware of it. I hope that people do not set the same standards for themselves that they seem to set for officials who come to the Committee to answer very detailed questions, because there would be very few MLAs left sitting here if that was the case.

As I pointed out at the Finance Committee, including a provision in the departmental Estimates and accounts does not predetermine who will fund the cost of the payment. The inclusion of this figure is necessary under accounting rules, which state:

“A provision is a liability of uncertain timing or amount.”

It should be recognised when certain criteria are fulfilled. It is an accounting concept. The absence of a victims’ payment provision from the Estimate will have no impact on TEO’s legal power to make payments to victims in 2021-22. The Executive fully recognise the obligation to make payments to victims. The dispute is about how they are funded.

I listened closely to Mr Allister, but I am not sure that he came off the fence to say who should pay for this. As he said on previous occasions, “Somebody should do something about this.” The question, of course, is: who designed the scheme and who legislated for it? Was it the policy that parties agreed in the Stormont House Agreement? Clearly, it was not. Has the departure from what was agreed at Stormont House added significantly to the cost of the scheme? Clearly, it has. Have we accurate figures? No, we do not. We have an estimate from the Government Actuary’s Department of anything between £600 million, £800 million and £1.2 billion, which is not an accurate figure to go on. We wish to bottom that out.

The cost of provision is something that still has questions attached to it. There are estimates for it that are probably as good as we might get in the time ahead, but the clear question is for those who added to the scope and the remit and, therefore, the cost of the scheme: how do they intend to meet that which they have added?

Mr Allister: I am obliged to the Minister for giving way. Surely, in budgetary terms, there needs to be a provision. There needs to be an ambit in the Budget to pay it. Why is the Minister not putting that in? How is it to be paid if there is no ambit in the Budget to pay it?

Mr Murphy: We have arrangements and discussions ongoing with the Government, and we wish to see that quickly resolved. As the Member knows, we have been pressing the Government since last September for a meeting to resolve this. We got one only last week. The provision in it does not predetermine who pays it. Our interest is getting to the point of determining who pays for this scheme.

Other issues were raised.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: I was going to come to your piece in a minute, so I am happy to wait. Do you have more that you want to add? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for giving way. The Minister mentioned:

“those who added to the scope and the remit”

of the pensions. Does he agree that those who were responsible for creating victims should also be made to pay? Given the fact that the IRA got a £25 million pension scheme for its members from the raid on the Northern Bank, is it now time for the IRA, and the republicans who were responsible for creating victims, to come up with money to ensure that, if they are genuine about moving forward, they pay for their past?

Mr Murphy: If the Member can find somewhere to send the bill, I wish him luck with that endeavour.

Let us go back to the real world, where we are trying to deal with the issues. Mr Catney asked about multi-year Budgets and the flexibility required to carry money over. He rightly said that that was not a big ask, but, unfortunately, it is not up to us to deliver on that.

Members raised issues from a justice and policing perspective about NDNA and PSNI recruitment. I accept that the Executive took responsibility for the delivery of NDNA, but in our discussions with the Government at that time, they took responsibility for providing funding for it. They withdrew that commitment within 24 or 48 hours of the NDNA agreement being reached. As soon as they got Boris Johnson out the door, they quickly withdrew all the financial commitments. There is a much bigger range of issues, including the funding for increasing policing that we want to see, that have been difficult to address because we do not have the funding for them. Allied to that, we ended up with a flat cash Budget for this year that means, in effect, for the Department of Justice and other Departments a cut in their budgets for this year. As, I think, Linda Dillon pointed out, we could end up in the bizarre circumstance where we lose police personnel in the time ahead. Clearly, that is not what was committed to and certainly not what is deliverable in the time ahead, although we want to do that.

I want to return to road maintenance. Pardon the pun, but I have been down this road as a former Minister for Regional Development. It is a difficult thing because it has been under-resourced for many years; I acknowledge that. The road structure that we have would require vast sums of money to bring it up to standard, particularly our rural roads, which were poorly built and have been poorly maintained over the years. We have got into a circumstance where they are partially patched, which does nothing for their structure in the long term. Clearly, that requires a substantial budget, but the Department for Infrastructure got a resource budget of just under £418 million and a capital budget of £558 million, £422 million of which was not ring-fenced and could be allocated as the Department saw fit.

Interestingly, Mr McNulty cobbled together two bids. There was a COVID-related funding bid in the June monitoring round. It was vastly oversubscribed by Departments, so, clearly, a lot of Departments were not going to get what they had asked for. The Department for Infrastructure bid for road maintenance and street lighting repairs, but, because of the need to prioritise COVID funding, it was not possible to fund that. The Department got £35.5 million of the available funding in that round, which was about 21% of the funding. Mr McNulty then added on the bid again, because there was another bid for the same thing — street lighting — in October. No further bids were made for road maintenance in October or January, and, as I said, having been the Minister responsible for Roads Service for over

four years, I knew that there was a well-established pattern whereby Roads would bid for money at that time of the year because it had the possibility of spending out. That is why I was surprised that no bid for funding came in at that stage. There is absolutely no doubt, as I know from my constituency, that there is a need there, but no further bids came in for road maintenance. That is the Minister's decision, and, of course, she can explain and answer for that. I had not particularly wished to get into this, but I find myself answering press releases and statements saying that I refused to give money to roads. There were opportunities and a substantial amount of resource money has been available since January, but no bids came in for that.

I will turn to some of the other questions that were asked. Philip McGuigan referred to the strategic plan, and the same answer applies, given the year that is in it. Despite the desire for strategic planning, it was impossible to do that.

Mr McNulty asked about the promised finance for Health, but he just has to join the dots. We get the Budget that we get. It comes from Treasury, and it decides how much money we have. That is why we will have a worse budgetary situation next year than we have had this year. At this stage of their experience as representatives in the Chamber, Members should, at least, understand the basics of how our funding works. Mr McNulty asked about long-term certainty about Casement Park. Again, he should understand how budgets work. Capital projects get the year's money that they need, and they have got that in full. They got the money that they needed in full for this year, and the money for next year is committed to Casement. That is a flagship scheme for the Executive, and there is a clear commitment from the Executive to the project. To say, "Well, we have the money for next year, but we will stop building after that" is a bit ludicrous. I often wonder why someone who purports to support the project asks questions on it and then creates uncertainties about it. He also mentioned support for the social clubs. The scheme that the Department for Communities operates for sports and social clubs was designed with the sports organising bodies, so the GAA's Ulster council designed the scheme to support its clubs. If there are issues with that, he should take them up with it. Again, he is very exercised about the possibility of me underspending, and I have to say that I have plans, clearly, to do that.

We have dealt with the issues. I am sorry: Gerry Carroll asked a series of detailed questions at the end, and I do not have the time or the ability to get through my paperwork to give him the answers. I assure the Member that I will ask officials to take note of the questions and get back to him.

I will draw my remarks to a close. The approval of the Supply motions today and the associated departmental expenditure plans laid out in the 2020-21 spring Supplementary Estimates and the 2021-22 Vote on Account is a crucial stage of the existing public expenditure cycle. Failure to pass the Supply motions at this juncture would put at risk the smooth continuation of public services and the vital support that our citizens, hospital, schools and businesses require to respond to the COVID pandemic for the remainder of this financial year and into the next financial year. I therefore commend the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2020-21 and the Vote

on Account for 2021-22 to the Assembly and ask Members to support the motions.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Minister. Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that it is the established practice that the votes on the motions require cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £22,220,328,000, 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 £25,124,542,000, 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 columns 2(c) and 3(c) of table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland spring Supplementary Estimates 2020-21 that was laid before the Assembly on 23 February 2021.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £10,081,611,000, 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 2022 and that resources, not exceeding £11,194,733,000, 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 2022, as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of table 1 in the Northern Ireland Estimates: Vote on Account 2021-22 that was laid before the Assembly on 23 February 2021. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Budget Bill: First Stage

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to introduce the Budget Bill, which is a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the years ending 31 March 2021 and 2022; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources for those years; to revise the limits on the use of certain accruing resources in the year ending 31 March 2021; and to authorise the Department of Finance to borrow on the credit of the sum appropriated for the year ending 31 March 2022.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: I inform Members that I have received a letter from the Committee for Finance informing me that the Committee is satisfied that the consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill has been appropriate, as required under Standing Order 42(2).

Adjourned at 6.29 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 2 March 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I inform the Assembly that the Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill has received Royal Assent. The Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 became law on 1 March 2021. It is chapter 1.

Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I inform the Assembly that the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill has received Royal Assent. The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 became law on 1 March. It is chapter 2.

Notice taken that 10 Members were not present.

House counted, and, there being fewer than 10 Members present, the Deputy Speaker ordered the Division Bells to be rung.

Upon 10 Members being present —

Assembly Business

Assembly Commission Budget 2021-22

Mr Blair: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the position of the Audit Committee on its scrutiny of the Assembly Commission's budget for 2021-22, as set out in its letter to the Minister of Finance on 14 December 2020 and laid before the Assembly on 22 February 2021; and agrees the Assembly Commission's budget for 2021-22.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed to allocate one hour for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Blair: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. In proposing this motion, the Assembly Commission wishes to highlight the methodology used to set its budget. The Commission notes that it involves the development of a draft budget by the Commission, scrutiny of that draft budget by the Audit Committee and input from the Department of Finance to help to inform the Committee's scrutiny. The motion and subsequent vote enable the Assembly to determine the resource that the Commission needs to enable the Assembly to carry out its legislative functions. The Audit Committee's consideration of the draft budget resulted in the letter, referred to in the motion, that was sent from that Committee to the Minister of Finance. I record the Commission's indebtedness to the Committee for the diligent manner in which it carried out its important scrutiny.

I turn to the figures in the Commission's draft budget for 2021-22. The total presented for resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) is £49.333 million. That figure is split between non-ring-fenced resource DEL of £45.833 million and £3.5 million for ring-fenced resource DEL. There is also a budget proposal of £1.684 million for capital expenditure.

The first category in the Commission's budget is income. Next year, the Commission expects to receive income of £630,000. Just over £580,000 of that total relates to the recovery of the cost of ministerial salaries from Departments. The remaining amount is largely made up of the recoupment of the cost of salaries for the very small number of staff who are expected to be seconded to other public-sector entities for part of the year.

The second category covers salaries and expenses paid to Members. This category of expenditure is made up of a number of distinct subcategories. They include Members' salaries; constituency office running costs, including Members' support staff costs; Members' travel costs; and other costs associated with Members. The level of salary paid to Members, Ministers, Committee Chairs and members of the Assembly Commission was set by the Independent Financial Review Panel (IFRP), and the total cost forecast is £6·676 million. Members should note that the level of consumer price index (CPI) inflation was less than 1% at September 2020, meaning that no increase in Members' salaries is provided for in the 2021-22 financial year.

The amounts that Members can recover to meet the cost of running a constituency office include the cost of Member support staff, office rent and rates, office utilities and other office running costs. These were set by the Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) (Amendment) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2020, published by the Commission in August last year, and this subcategory is expected to total £10·461 million. The penultimate subcategory covers payments to Members in respect of the travel allowance set out in the determination. These are forecast to be £294,000 in 2021-22. The final subcategory covers what are referred to as "other costs". These include winding-up expenses, should a Member choose to resign her or his seat in the Assembly, and any ill-health retirements that might occur. These costs are estimated at £75,000 for the incoming year.

The third major category in the Commission's budget covers the salary payments for secretariat staff and the administrative costs that are incurred to deliver the full range of services needed by the Assembly. The first of these, secretariat staff salary costs, is forecast to be £22·026 million for the next year. This reflects similar secretariat staffing levels to those agreed by the Assembly for the current year. Members should note that the Commission has launched a Youth Assembly, and appropriate staff and other resources are already in place to deliver this exciting initiative next year. This category of expenditure also includes the Commission's administration costs, and these are forecast to be £6·131 million in 2021-22, which is the same as the amount agreed by the Assembly for the current year. Administration costs cover a wide range of expenditure items, including Committee expenses; building rates; utility costs, including electricity and gas; repairs and maintenance costs, third-party support for the business-critical IT systems that we use; and the cost of recurring contracts for things like broadcasting, catering and research subscriptions. They also include Member development costs and the cost of drafting private Members' Bills.

The next category is payments to parties under the financial assistance for political parties scheme 2016, or FAPP, as it is universally known. Those costs are forecast to be £800,000 next year, which is £70,000 higher than the current year. Members will be aware of the work that is being undertaken by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee to review the statement of entitlements for an official Opposition to potentially include additional funding for parties that form the Opposition. Without prejudice to that review, the Commission is also considering the amounts payable under the FAPP scheme for 2021-22.

The penultimate category is slightly more technical. It covers depreciation and impairment charges. For the next year, depreciation charges are forecast to be £3·5 million. That is mostly made up of the depreciation charge on the value of Parliament Buildings. We also have depreciation charges for such things as PCs and printers, but they are very small compared with the depreciation charge for Parliament Buildings. That makes up the total of £49·333 million for resource DEL expenditure for next year.

The Commission anticipates that it will need to make capital investments of £1·684 million in 2021-22. In its letter to the Finance Minister, the Audit Committee noted that the Commission's capital budget includes items that are badly needed to rectify underinvestment in the preceding three years. The capital plan for 2021-22 includes investment in the broadcasting infrastructure in the Building, Building security measures and a range of IT-enabled projects that are intended to ensure that our information and communication technology infrastructure is up to date and robust.

On behalf of the Commission, I take this opportunity to record my sincere thanks to the Assembly secretariat staff for the considerable effort that they have made to facilitate the work of the Assembly in a safe but effective manner throughout what has been an extremely challenging year. The Commission also thanks everyone who counts Parliament Buildings as their place of work. That includes Members, Members' staff, staff employed by political parties, and our contractors and suppliers. Their professionalism, adherence to the measures that the Commission has put in place and forbearance in the face of challenging circumstances has meant that we have enjoyed a safe and secure working environment in the Building. We thank them.

I commend the Commission's budget proposals for 2021-22 to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Daniel McCrossan. He has up to five minutes in which to speak.

Mr McCrossan (The Chairperson of the Audit Committee): Normally, the Audit Committee would produce a report outlining its deliberations on the draft budget for the Assembly Commission, Audit Office and the Public Services Ombudsman, but, because of the tight time frame for the 2021-22 Budget process, a letter was sent to the Minister of Finance instead. That is referenced in the motion. Before I give detail on the Committee's scrutiny of the Commission's budget, I will outline the background of the Committee's approach. The Committee followed the approach of the previous Audit Committee. To reflect the constitutional independence of the Assembly from the Executive, a methodology was introduced in 2016, similar to that adopted by the Audit Committee for agreeing the annual Estimates for the Audit Office and the Public Services Ombudsman. The intention is that that additional Committee function will be codified before the end of the mandate.

The Committee began its scrutiny of the Commission's indicative budget in October 2020 on the understanding that an in-depth review of every category of expenditure would be carried out to reach the final figures. The indicative budget that was presented for 2021-22 was largely the same as the original budget for 2020-21. That was primarily based on the hope that many of the

plans that were in place for 2020-21, such as outreach and engagement activities, would be progressed in 2021-22. However, at the time, members noted that the figures would need to be amended to take account of the expenditure that could arise from the outworkings of the Assembly Members' salary and expenses determination, which the Commission published in the summer. As Members will be aware, the Commission has a legal requirement to meet all costs associated with Members, including salaries, allowances, expenses, Members' staffing costs and pension contributions. Those budget elements are determination-driven and are not under the control of the Commission.

During the October evidence session with Commission officials, members focused mainly on the indicative capital budget for 2021-22. Issues discussed included electronic access control to the Building, the security management system, the audio system in the Chamber, updates to the telephone and television systems in Parliament Buildings and the potential financial impact of roof repairs to Parliament Buildings. The Commission's review of expenditure was subsequently carried out, and it resulted in an increased expenditure of close to half a million pounds in resource DEL and nearly £300,000 in capital DEL.

10.45 am

Officials attended a Committee meeting in December to update members on the scope of the review and the revised figures. The increase in resource DEL was predicted mainly due to MLA constituency costs and party allowances increasing, and it also included an increase for secretariat staff salaries to reflect pay progression and recruitment. In the light of the Chancellor's pay freeze announcement as part of the spending review, it does not include an additional pay uplift for staff salaries.

The increase in capital DEL was, in the main, down to broadcasting infrastructure improvements, remote working solutions and the replacement of TV systems in the Building. Members heard that most of the capital works planned are needed to address underinvestment in previous years in the fabric of the Building and viewed them as being necessary in order to face the challenge of a fully functioning Assembly, especially in difficult times such as these. Indeed, the Committee pressed the Commission to ensure that works are progressed as quickly as possible. The Committee, however, received correspondence from the Minister of Finance asking that the Assembly Commission engage with Enterprise Shared Services (ESS) to determine whether there is a more cost-effective solution to the capital requirements. That matter has not been fully dealt with but is something to which Committee will return.

The Committee sought further information from the Commission on the cost of the remedial work required for the roof of Parliament Buildings but was advised that the matter was still under investigation. No further information could therefore be provided at that stage. There is no cost given for the remedial work in the budget, but, given the potential impact of any repairs on the Commission's future budget and the Committee's role in looking at value for money, details of the cost, when known, have been requested.

In coming to its conclusion, the Committee was mindful of the wider public expenditure position, and, as set out in its

letter to the Finance Minister, it agreed that the Executive's draft Budget document should make provision for the Assembly Commission to have a resource DEL budget of £49.333 million and a capital DEL budget of £1.684 million, with the resource DEL broken down into £45.833 million of non-ring-fenced DEL and £3.5 million of ring-fenced DEL.

Mr Allister: As MLAs, we should always be mindful of the very privileged position in which the Assembly Commission operates. Uniquely within these institutions, it has that most favoured of positions, in that the money that it asks for, the Department must provide. That therefore intensifies the need to ensure that there is neither squander nor abuse of that money.

The upcoming Commission budget coincides, of course, with the year of the centenary of Northern Ireland. Given the status of the Commission as the oversight body for how this place functions and presents itself, it is therefore a matter of grave disappointment to me that there is not a single line in the budget that is specific to celebrating that centenary. That is very remiss. There are on those on the Commission who talk loudly about respect, but, when it comes to those who wish to celebrate the centenary, seeking some respect, they get from that party, namely Sinn Féin, the exercising of a veto in order to deliver disrespect. That is quite shameful. We are almost at the end of the first quarter of this year of centenary, yet have we heard a squeak from the Commission about celebrating the centenary? No. Rather, we have had foot-dragging on propositions and a determination, it would seem, by some to make sure that it is disrespect rather than respect that attends the centenary. That is a measure of some on the Commission and of the folly of the arrangement of what they call consensus but which, when it comes to the conduct of these things, really means veto.

We also see it when it comes to the question of the illumination of the Building. Next Thursday is the annual international day of remembrance of the innocent victims of terrorism. One of the victims' groups — the South East Fermanagh Foundation (SEFF) — and I have, again, made a request for the illumination of this Building on 11 March to mark that significant day. Last year, the Commission snubbed innocent victims; it refused illumination. This year, it is dragging its feet; it has not even, almost within a week of the occasion, issued a decision. That is wholly shameful and disrespectful. It is another illustration of the abuse of veto in the Commission. I call on the Commission, given its disgraceful conduct last year, to at least not compound it, but show some respect to a most deserving cohort of people: innocent victims of terrorism.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I remind the Member that we are discussing the budgetary aspects of the Commission.

Mr Allister: Yes, and we are discussing in that, therefore, the work of the Commission. It is important that that is borne in mind.

The Commission brought a Bill to the House some time ago, but we have heard nothing about the Second Reading of that Bill. When is that coming to the House? We are entitled to know.

Mr Carroll: I will not speak for long. The main discussion on the Budget will be later, so I will speak in detail to that. I raise one point in relation to the Assembly Commission budget. People have struggled left, right and centre in the

pandemic in the past year. Workers have lost their jobs. Many have lost wages through being furloughed. Small businesses have fallen through the cracks; many are still unable to get any support or financial assistance. It is clear that the politicians in the Executive could not find money to support people in that situation, yet they can increase money for office staff and expenses.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. I hope that he agrees that there is a long outstanding issue of pay and benefits for Assembly staff. Members' staff have been treated very badly. Have the Member's staff taken up the changes to the determination? If so, the Member could be accused of having double standards.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for his intervention. As I said —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute if he requires it.

Mr Carroll: As I said last year to the Member, one of the first things that the Assembly did when it reconvened was look after its staff and offices by increasing expenses.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: No, I will not give way; you will have plenty of time to speak.

History will not be kind to those who argued for and will pass a Budget today that will tighten the belts of workers, people on benefits and public services, but at the same time look after their own offices and staff. This motion will allow for that while many workers are struggling and have lost wages. It is a shame that people cannot see the double standards at play today and in the past year. I put on record my opposition to this part of the budget. However, as with many cases in the House, I will probably be unable to force a Division because of the rules in place.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Mr John O'Dowd is winding on the motion. The Member has up to 10 minutes.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank Members for their contributions to the debate. As my colleague John Blair noted in his introductory remarks, the Assembly Commission is mindful of the fact that the Assembly should debate the Commission's budget in plenary. That is important because the resources that are made available to the Commission will be used to provide services to the Assembly and all its Members.

In the current circumstances, when we are likely to face significant financial pressures and, in fact, in all circumstances, the Commission is mindful that when it provides the services that are required by the Assembly, it does so in a way that delivers value for money. The point is regularly made that the Commission must provide the Assembly and every Member who is elected to the House with all the services that are required to carry out the Assembly's legislative scrutiny and representative functions. That will remain the Commission's overarching objective as we approach the end of the Assembly mandate.

The Commission considers the Budget for next year as being sufficient without being excessive. It does not include unnecessary sums that cannot be justified, nor is it threadbare to the extent that the services required by Members will not be able to be provided. It strikes a balance for the final year of the mandate, with

the anticipation of a heavy legislative programme in circumstances that are likely to remain challenging for everyone in Parliament Buildings. This Budget should enable the Commission to meet the necessary costs that arise in-year in relation to staff costs, Building running costs, the costs of the delivery of effective constituency services for our community, and the ongoing cost of investing in infrastructure to ensure that it continues to meet Assembly needs.

I will respond now to some of the issues raised by Members. Of course, the Budget is scrutinised by the Audit Committee, of which I understand that Mr Allister is a member. The Budget will be brought before the House today, and Members will have an opportunity to vote for or against it. The Commission has adopted the same principles for the upcoming centenary as we have for the decade of centenaries. Indeed, we agreed a paper on it quite recently. The same principles have been applied to all the significant centenaries over the last period.

Mr Carroll is a classic example of, "Do as I say, not as I do". The Commission has provided proper terms and conditions and wages to workers. I do not delineate between workers. If someone works for an Assembly Member, that should not mean that they have fewer rights and entitlements and a lower salary than someone else. You chose to vote against that legislation. In fact — dare I say it? — you followed the path of wee Jim Allister instead of big Jim Larkin. You talk the talk, but you need to walk the walk. When it comes to improving workers' rights, the Assembly Commission has walked the walk.

Mr Carroll: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Go ahead.

Mr Carroll: The Member talks about supporting workers' rights and, indeed, Jim Larkin is a good reference point. Will the Member and his party support my trade union freedom Bill, which aims to increase the rights of workers across society in the North?

Mr O'Dowd: The principle of the Bill sounds fine, but I am speaking as a member of the Commission. The party will engage with you on your Bill.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will.

Mrs D Kelly: Is the Member not astonished that Mr Carroll did not take the opportunity to affirm his support for his own constituency staff, who are highly skilled and work on complex issues and, yet, because of the previous determination, were left on below-standard wages and with no rights or entitlement to pay if they were taken ill?

Mr O'Dowd: I am disappointed, not astounded. Rhetoric is cheap; action costs. The Commission, across all its political hues, has decided that it will pay staff properly. Indeed, in relation even to Assembly —

Dr Aiken: Thanks very much indeed for giving way. I must declare that I am a member of Unite. My staff, who are union members, have, in the past, expressed their concerns about the fact that they lack support. Speaking on behalf of my staff and other trade union members, I can say that they, too, are delighted that our staff are being paid what they are worth.

Mr O'Dowd: Indeed.

Moving on, I do not believe that lighting is an issue for Budget deliberations. I am sure that the Member will be able to submit questions or other communications on lighting policy to the Commission.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will.

Mr Allister: The Member must surely appreciate the urgency of this matter, given that we are just over a week away from the event. The Commission has had this request for months. Surely it would be compassionate to those who represent innocent victims to give a positive response to that request at this stage.

The Member says, "Rhetoric is cheap". Indeed it is. Let us have some action.

11.00 am

Mr O'Dowd: I understand that Commission members received communication from the secretariat about a lighting paper and the request that the Member refers to. It is now up to Commission members to respond. I am reluctant to go into detail on it because I do not believe that it is necessarily a budgetary matter.

In conclusion, Commission members considered the requirements for the 2021-22 budget. While recognising that a significant element of its budget is non-discretionary, the prevailing circumstances were also considered. The Commission is grateful to the Audit Committee for its work on scrutinising and affirming the 2021-22 budget total of £49·333 million for resource DEL and £1·684 million for capital DEL. I commend those amounts to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the position of the Audit Committee on its scrutiny of the Assembly Commission's budget for 2021-22, as set out in its letter to the Minister of Finance on 14 December 2020 and laid before the Assembly on 22 February 2021; and agrees the Assembly Commission's budget for 2021-22.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask Members to take their ease before we move to the next item of business.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair)

Executive Committee Business

Standing Order 42(5): Suspension

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members will recall that the Speaker announced a ruling in September 2020 that requires a Minister who is seeking to shorten the passage of a Bill, which is separate to the accelerated passage procedure for Committee considerations, to provide an explanatory statement when introducing the Bill. The Speaker wishes to advise Members that he received correspondence from the Minister that explains why he considers that a short passage for this Bill is necessary, and yesterday he shared that correspondence with all Members.

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 Bill 2021.

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, we face an unprecedented public expenditure situation as a result of the COVID-19 emergency. If the Bill is not passed, there is a very real risk that Departments could run out of cash in the very near future. That would be unthinkable at any time, but it is particularly so 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.

While it is unusual, a suspension of this Standing Order was also required in May 2020 to allow the passage of the further Vote on Account for the Budget (No. 2) Bill. Members should be aware that it is not the end of the story when the Bill completes its passage through the Assembly as there are a number of steps to be completed before Royal Assent is secured, hence, the urgency involved.

Mr O'Toole: In speaking briefly on the suspension of the Standing Order, it is my desire — I am sure that the Chair will also put this on the record — simply to point out that the Committee had a serious discussion about the suspension of Standing Orders this year. It is true that the Committee felt that it had not had as much discussion about a range of budgetary matters as it might otherwise have had. However, we are in a very particular year. As the Minister said, this is the most extraordinary year with regard to public spending allocations. It would have been unthinkable to have provided even the faintest shadow of doubt about agreeing a Budget Bill. That is why the Committee made the decision that it did. However, during

the Budget Bill debate that is to follow, I am sure that Committee members will have a longer opportunity to put on the record some of our concerns and broader thoughts around Budget making.

Mr Carroll: I put on record my opposition to the suspension of this Standing Order. Once again, I am probably unlikely to divide the House. This is probably the second of many times today that I will say this, but we need as much debate and scrutiny time as possible for everything in the House, including the Budget Bill. We need maximum time for scrutiny, for questions to be asked and answered and for new ideas to be looked at, developed and worked into it. Therefore, I put on record my opposition to this change to Standing Orders.

Mr Murphy: I appreciate the support of the Committee on the issue. I also appreciate the Committee's strong desire for the maximum amount of available scrutiny. I respect Mr Carroll's point, as I understand that Members would wish to have more time to look through these matters. We are, as I said, in extraordinary circumstances, and it is not the way in which we would normally want to do business. 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 am a long-standing Member and have been a member of many Assembly Committees. I fully understand the desire to ensure that proper processes facilitate the ability to scrutinise, question, debate and discuss important matters. However, we are, as I said, in exceptional circumstances that require exceptional steps. Therefore, 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 accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 42(5) be suspended in respect of the passage of the Budget Bill 2021.

Budget Bill: Second Stage

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 17/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): In accordance with convention, the Business Committee has not allocated a time limit for the debate.

Mr Murphy: Today's Second Stage debate follows yesterday's approval by the Assembly of the Supply resolutions for the expenditure plans of Departments and other public bodies as detailed in the 2020-21 spring Supplementary Estimates and the 2021-22 Vote on Account.

As Members will, undoubtedly, be aware, accelerated passage of the Bill is necessary in order to ensure Royal Assent by the end of March. If that is not received in time, Departments and other public bodies may not be able to access cash, which would threaten the effective delivery of public services not just in the closing weeks of the current financial year but in the early months of the 2021-22 financial year. That would, undoubtedly, affect the delivery of essential public services and our response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I am grateful to the Finance Committee for confirming that, in line with Standing Order 42, the Bill can proceed under accelerated passage.

We all recognise that the situation this year has been extremely challenging, requiring increased levels of flexibility to ensure that we give our citizens, hospitals, schools and businesses the best chance of recovery. While the Executive have had to work outside the normal process this year, the Finance Committee and Assembly still had the opportunity to scrutinise the financial position reflected in the Bill. The 2020-21 Budget was debated in the House, and statements were made to the Assembly on each change to the financial position. Members had the opportunity to debate the further Vote on Account in May and the Main Estimates in October. There has also been significant engagement with the Finance Committee throughout the 2020-21 financial year. I appreciate that this year has been extraordinary in terms of the volume and pace of allocations made, but I have been open with the Committee about the challenges faced and the decisions that the Executive and I have taken through the year. The work of the Committee in that respect is vital, and its importance should not be underestimated.

Standing Order 32 directs that the Second Stage debate:

"shall be confined to the general principles of the Bill."

I shall endeavour to keep to that direction. The main purpose of the Bill is to authorise the cash and use of resources on services on the basis of the Executive's final spending plans for the 2020-21 year and for Departments and other public bodies as set out in the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2020-21. The Bill also provides authorisation for the cash and use of resources in the early months of the 2021-22 financial year as a Vote on Account, pending the Assembly's consideration of the Main Estimates and the Budget (No. 2) Bill in June.

Copies of the Budget Bill and the explanatory and financial memorandum have been made available to Members today. The 2020-21 spring Supplementary Estimates and

the 2021-22 Vote on Account were laid in the Assembly on 23 February.

The Bill will authorise the issue of a further £22,220,328,000 from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund and the further use of resources totalling £25,124,542,000 by Departments and certain other bodies listed in schedules 1 and 2 to the Bill in the year ending 31 March 2021; that is this financial year. The cash and resources are to be spent and used on services listed in column 1 of each schedule. Those amounts supersede the amounts that were previously authorised by the Assembly through the Main Estimates.

11.15 am

For the current financial year, the Bill also sets a limit for each Department on the use of accruing resources, which are current and capital receipts totalling £2,829,984,000. The accruing resources are to be spent and used on the services listed in column 1 of schedule 2. Therefore, the total resources and accruing resources now provided in the Bill bring the total resources for use by Departments in 2020-21 to just under £28 billion. In addition, the Bill will authorise the issue of a further £10,081,611,000 from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund and the further use of resources totalling £11,194,733,000 by Departments and certain other bodies listed in schedules 3 and 4 to the Bill in the year ending 31 March 2022. The cash and resources are to be spent and used on the services listed in column 1 of schedules 3 and 4.

As I have explained, the Vote on Account does not constitute the setting of a Budget for 2021-22 but merely allows Departments to continue to operate and to provide services in the early months of that year, pending the consideration of the Executive's Budget for that year through the Main Estimates and the Budget (No. 2) Bill in June.

One point that I want to draw to the House's attention is that, while the vast majority of expenditure by all Departments is done on the authority of statutory powers that are provided through legislation passed by the Assembly, there are occasionally some, usually small, functions that may, from time to time, be done on the sole authority of the Budget Act. When a Department makes use of the sole authority of the Budget Act, it will highlight that fact by placing a note in a black box symbol in the corresponding Estimate. The Estimates document now also sets out why the sole authority is being relied on. Additional information has also been provided to the Finance Committee, and, at its request, a supplementary page to the Estimates document has been provided to Members.

Because the Main Estimates for 2021-22 will not be available until June, I want to make the Assembly aware that, until Royal Assent is received for the Welfare Supplementary Payments (Loss of Universal Credit or Housing Benefit) Bill and until the Welfare Supplementary Payments (Extension) Regulations (NI) 2021 have been approved by a resolution of the Assembly, the Department for Communities seeks approval to incur spend under the sole authority of this Budget Bill at an estimated cost of up to £32 million.

Clause 5 of the Bill provides for the temporary borrowing by my Department of £5,040,806,000, which

is approximately half the sum authorised by clause 4 for issue out of the Consolidated Fund. I stress to the House that clause 5 does not provide for the issue of any additional cash out of the Consolidated Fund, nor does it convey any additional spending power. However, it enables my Department to run an effective and efficient cash management regime and to ensure minimum drawdown of the block grant on a daily basis, which is important when contemplating the daily borrowing by our Departments.

The numbers in the Budget Bill are significant, and I am sure that Members will agree that it is not an easy task to translate those figures into the delivery of public services on the ground. The reality is that this legislation is required for every public service, whether it is for a schoolteacher or a nurse, for the building of a new road or for the training required for gaining a new job. All public services need the legislation to operate in each financial year. Whilst it may appear dry and seemingly detached from day-to-day life, it is, in fact, crucial legislation that underpins our public services.

On that note, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will conclude. I will be 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): I thank the Minister for his remarks. With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, before I make my remarks on the Second Stage of the Budget Bill on behalf of the Committee for Finance, I would like to briefly comment on the question of accelerated passage.

The Committee for Finance is in a unique position in respect of the requirement for it to provide confirmation to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, on the public expenditure proposals covered by the Budget Bill. When we were considering the matter, it was evident that the majority of Committee members did not feel that they had been appropriately consulted in respect of the relevant public expenditure proposals. Why, then, did I, as Chairperson of the Committee, write to you in order to indicate the contrary? The answer lies with the use of section 6 of the Financial Provisions (Northern Ireland) Order 1998. That legislation provides the cover for the Department to make cash advances from the Consolidated Fund.

Members noted with concern that, despite the very significant additional cash that has been available throughout the year, the cash-advance facility had reportedly been almost exhausted by February 2021. Consequently, it was understood that, if accelerated passage had been denied to the Budget Bill, Departments would literally have run out of money before the end of March, thus endangering essential services, possibly including COVID-19 supports. Members had not been warned of that and learned of it, with some alarm, only at the very recent Committee meeting. Members felt that, faced with the possibility of essential services stopping, they had no option other than to accede to the Minister's request for accelerated passage.

The Assembly may find it notable that, whereas some advances had been repaid in 2021, others were not, thus leading to the facility becoming almost exhausted. As one can imagine, that is a highly unsatisfactory outcome, which, to some degree, replicates the experience of this time last year, despite the extra £3.3 billion that was made available from our Exchequer. I anticipate therefore that

some Members might seek to remedy the situation either through the good offices of the Committee on Procedures or through a suitable legislative vehicle.

I will turn now to the substance of the Bill. The proposed legislation provides legal cover for expenditure in 2021 and, insofar as it refers to the Vote on Account, also provides legal cover for some spending in 2021-22. For the present financial year, I advised the House yesterday of the unique situation in which the Executive have found themselves. A global pandemic found its way to Northern Ireland. Many people lost their lives. Sadly, many continue to do so. Many others have suffered emotional and financial loss as a consequence of the pandemic.

The Executive received from our Government very substantial additional support, which was most welcome. That enabled the provision of numerous support schemes for hard-pressed individuals, families and businesses. In that regard, there is much to be welcomed in the Executive's financial response to the crisis. There were, however, also issues with Land and Property Services (LPS) effectively retooling itself from a collection agency to a distribution agency. Additionally, uptake of some schemes was much lower than expected, and some important sectors and individuals have, with some justification, felt overlooked. That having been said, the Minister gave us some hope yesterday that that situation might yet be addressed for some.

The upshot of all the additional money, new support schemes and underspending on other, non-pandemic-related services has been a little bit complex, to say the least. We have had multiple allocations outside of the usual in-year monitoring rounds. We have had three — not two — Budget Bills and a significant reconciliation between the Main Estimates and the spring Supplementary Estimates, including around £1 billion of headroom being included in the latter. Unspent resources apparently amount to hundreds of millions of pounds, which has necessitated a special carry-over arrangement with HM Treasury. The Committee still awaits clarity on the unspent resources for the current financial year. I have no doubt that the Minister will furnish us with those details as soon as they are available.

With all of that going on, it is not surprising that the Committee did not feel appropriately consulted. To be clear, the Department and Minister have engaged cooperatively and have genuinely sought to explain. Most of the difficulties were probably not of the Department's making. Instead, they were often the product of circumstances or difficulties at the Executive. Nonetheless, if Standing Orders are to be fulfilled in a manner that ensures transparency in Budget scrutiny, a new approach is definitely required. That may involve a new Budget memorandum of understanding between the Assembly and the Executive and a very clear role for an independent fiscal council. I suspect, however, that, in order to manage what appears to be a perennially uncertain process, new legislation will be required.

As I indicated previously, the Vote on Account provides legal cover for spending in 2021-22, which can include new services. Although no such new services are footnoted in the Vote on Account, I will, as is usual, now make remarks on the draft Budget for 2021-22. The Committee gratefully received feedback from all the Statutory Committees that, despite the short timescale, have done their best to

interrogate departmental submissions. The Chairpersons of those Committees will undoubtedly and — I am sure, looking around me — eloquently refer to the pressures that their Departments face. I will, therefore, merely give the House the key points.

It is surprising that Infrastructure has received far less capital in the draft Budget than it sought, and that, consequently, it may be unable to fund in full the capital aspects of Northern Ireland Water's draft determination. Some of us had assumed that capital would be used to jump-start economic activity in 2021-22, and that, coupled with a large number of related and currently unfunded Department for the Economy resource bids, is most worrying.

I will now turn to other resource issues. The Department for Communities shortfall in its draft resource budget is projected to be significant. The absence of COVID support schemes and labour interventions for that Department may lead to substantial delays in the receipt of benefits when furlough ends and an unavoidable increase in AME spending on social security. That appears to look like a false economy.

Turning to the Department of Justice, there is an alarming possibility of a cut to PSNI numbers instead of the promised increase. The funding is yet to be determined for the victims' pension scheme that will be administered by the Department of Justice, and the Minister of Finance has advised that the actual estimate may be anywhere between £600 million and £1.2 billion over the lifetime of the scheme. All Members agree that the continuing absence of clarity on that issue is not acceptable.

For Agriculture, there are concerns regarding a number of relatively modest but very important and unfunded bids, including those relating to pillar 2 replacement funding and bovine tuberculosis eradication. For Health, there is the absence of funding to support the post-pandemic catch-up necessary for hospital waiting lists as well as concerns about delayed transformation programmes. For Education, there are concerns about special educational needs and the school restart programme.

Much of the feedback from the Committees refers to unfunded bids and an over-reliance on in-year monitoring. It seems that, every year, the Budget process is different, and it seems that, every year, there is a different reason for that. It also seems that this year will be the same as all the others, despite COVID and the increase in funding from our Exchequer.

The Committee hopes that the independent fiscal council, coupled with a new memorandum of understanding between the Executive and the Assembly, possibly backed up by legislation, may offer us a way out of a process that I cannot believe that anyone finds satisfactory. Whether it be for 2020-21 or 2021-22, there has to be a better way to do Budget scrutiny. The Minister, as a former Finance Committee Chairperson who denied accelerated passage for a Budget (No. 2) Bill in 2012, is, indeed, sincere in wanting to find such a way forward. In the meantime, and on behalf of the Committee, I commend the Second Stage of the Budget Bill to the House in the hope that, next time, we will all be able to do much better.

Mr Frew: I rise to discuss and debate the Budget Bill. Of course, the Minister is absolutely right that a very important Bill comes before the Assembly today. I agree

with everything that the Chairperson said about the Finance Committee's experience over the past year. I place on record that I welcome, thank and respect the officials who have come before the Committee over the past year. They are very informed, at the top of their game. They have grappled not only with the challenges of the health pandemic and the economic crisis but with members of the Committee as well. At times, of course, those sessions can be robust, but that is good and healthy in a democratic society. I welcome the officials' expertise at all times when they come before the Committee because they really help us.

Of course, the Committee is there not only to scrutinise but to support and advise. As Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, I take that role very seriously.

11.30 am

I will turn to the Budget. I agree with the Chair that there has to be a better way of scrutinising a Budget Bill. Having said that, we are a devolved Assembly and not a sovereign Government. We get Barnett consequentials, the block grant and all that that entails. You struggle to think of a more effective and efficient way until you stumble upon one, so whilst we are in this environment, we will do the best we can, as a Committee and as an Assembly.

The Assembly has a vital role, and I am glad that the Chairpersons of all the Committees have a part to play in the debate, as, of course, do ordinary Committee members, if they so wish. It is vital to get that message on record and to get their concerns and fears on record, and I hope that the Finance Minister will listen to those fears and concerns, not only today and through the various stages of the Bill but throughout the year, because there will be information flow today that could well be of some use come the monitoring rounds. That is vital because, as the Chairperson said, it seems that we rely heavily on monitoring rounds, even with a one-year Budget, to move money about, not least in the year of crisis that we have just come through. That is not necessarily a negative, because you do not want Departments to cling on to money that they may not spend. There is a real danger of handing money back to Treasury when it could be spent here in an efficient and effective way when our people are crying out for it and crying out for support. It is important that we spend as much money here as we possibly can for the benefit of our people.

There are some aspects that I wish to go into in detail. This issue seems to recur every time we speak on a Budget debate or a financial motion. There is a real fear that, if we are not standing still, we seem to be going backwards on many issues that were important to our people and to the Assembly last year, the year before that and the year before that. Some of those issues and problems are big beasts. They are massive to grapple with and will take a massive amount of funding.

I am sure that the Chairperson of the Infrastructure Committee will go into this in detail, but I have a real concern — not for the future but for the present day — about NI Water and infrastructure and capacity, especially in respect of waste water. It is a massive issue, but, for a lot of our constituents and our population, it is under the ground and under the radar, and they do not yet see the potential blockage — pardon the pun — that we will all face.

It is not only about the fact that NI Water is not funded efficiently and effectively — of course, as an organisation, NI Water badly needs reform — but it is about the stopping and blocking up of every construction and every development in our system. It is not just waste water plants but includes housing developments and businesses, and I can see the evidence of that, very much so, in my constituency of North Antrim, where I know of developers not being able to select a certain site because of the waste water issue. That is dynamite for our people when we are looking to attract jobs, investment, employment, business and profit but are being stopped in our tracks because of an infrastructure issue that needs to be dealt with not today, not next week and not next year, but three years ago, five years ago and 10 years ago.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. He makes a very valid point and draws direct attention to the exact issue facing the Department for Infrastructure. Does he agree that the Department for Infrastructure is massively underfunded and that the Minister of Finance should have provided for the bids made by Minister Mallon this year rather than running around at the last minute with a wheelbarrow full of cash saying, "Take it now"?

Mr Frew: Yes. I thank the Member for his intervention. I raised that point yesterday. It is not that I want to see an axe grind between the particular Minister and her party and the Finance Minister, because the Minister and her party can defend themselves. However, it is clear that the Department for Infrastructure made 40 bids last year. Of those bids, 34 were COVID-related and 33% were successful. Having looked at the figures and data, I know that the Infrastructure Department made multiple bids over and over again, which explains some of that. I am not for one moment saying that there should have been a 100% success rate for that Department, because there is a role for it to play and it all has to be attested, but those figures are striking. I see that the Member wants me to give way again.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. I want to point out some of the detail. The outcome for the Department from the 2021-22 Budget was £420.7 million. That is an increase of £2.8 million, which is a 0.7% increase on the 2020-21 opening resource allocation of £417 million. That is proportionally less of an increase than for any other Department and less than the average departmental increase of 6%. That identifies a key issue that needs to be resolved, and the Finance Minister has the wallet to do it.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his intervention. That is a point well made, and I am sure that the Finance Minister will tackle and grapple with that in his response.

A Member: Give me strength. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Frew: It is important, and I am sure that, in our constituencies, we are all experiencing and finding issues with NI Water and waste water systems.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: Yes, I will.

Mr Allister: Does the Member also agree that that is because of a lack of joined-up government? If you take the small village of Armoyn in our constituency as an example, you see that the Housing Executive and planning have approved a modest number of new social housing units,

yet they cannot be built because the infrastructure is not there. Is there not a need for a joined-up overview of development that links to infrastructural needs across the Province?

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his intervention. He made that point well. We have experienced it all in North Antrim, and Armoy is not the only place where it happens. Some people may not be aware that there is now a blockage on investment where they live. If some of those residents looked to open up a business or factory, they would soon find that they would be completely impeded.

It normally affects housing, which is massive for people, but it also affects jobs, employment and prosperity. It affects all those things. It is a massive issue that we need to get to grips with. I believe that it will take the Executive as a whole to sort it out. It cannot be left to one Department in a silo, a number of Departments in silos or a Finance Minister on his own. It will take a holistic approach, and I am not sure that any work, or as much as should have been, has been done on it this year. That might be because of the pandemic and the crisis that we have been in, but that is only an excuse.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way briefly?

Mr Frew: That is not a reason not to do those things. I will give way to the Member again.

Mr McCrossan: The Member's party has had some influence over the last few years with the British Government. Given the huge problems with infrastructure deficits that we face here in Northern Ireland, surely the Minister and leader of the DUP could persuade Boris Johnson to divert the funds for his beloved tunnel to tackle some of the deficits across Northern Ireland that badly need to be addressed.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his intervention. Again, he made a valid point about how we can progress infrastructure. Of course, he will know about the DUP's confidence-and-supply arrangement, and I am sure that he will applaud and thank us for that. It brought in a lot of money for infrastructure across the Province, even for internet access. His constituency will benefit greatly from that, and I will take another intervention from the Member if he wants to thank the DUP for that work.

There has to be a balance and cost-effectiveness in every piece of progress that we make on infrastructure.

When I hear about a tunnel or a bridge linking Northern Ireland to GB or Scotland, I do not think only of the physical infrastructure. I think of the opportunities that it brings for trade, mobility and energy supply interconnection.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, may I draw you back to the Bill rather than talking about tunnels etc?

Mr Frew: I will try not to go down a blind tunnel, Mr Deputy Speaker. Members can see where there could be opportunities with the interconnection of our energy supply, which, again, is vital infrastructure. We need to resolve issues with the System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI) so that it is truly independent.

That brings me to another point about multi-year Budgets. It will be very hard for an Executive, as holistic as they could be, to spend money effectively and efficiently if we do not reach the point of multi-year Budgets. It is vital to

get to that point. I do not blame the Department of Finance or the Finance Minister for the issue because it is not his problem. He can work only with what he has been given. It is an issue for our sovereign Government. We should get to the point, sooner rather than later, where we have multi-year Budgets. We can then look at long-term projects, because, let us be clear, when you build a hospital or a school with massive infrastructure or new roads, it takes longer than a year. Therefore, that has to be planned very carefully. It still feels as if we are going backwards.

In New Decade, New Approach and in Patten, 7,500 police officers were promised. Those are peacetime figures, but we are falling short. Even in this Budget, we are told that we could lose police officers; numbers could go down. That is totally and utterly unacceptable. That in itself will add to pressures elsewhere.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for giving way, and I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board. I want to put on record that the current police complement is 7,005 officers. The Chief Constable has warned that, on current budgetary terms, he may lose 300 officers. Compared with the commitment in New Decade, New Approach of 7,500 officers, that is a net loss of 800 — over 10%. I hope that the Member agrees that that is not tolerable.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is not tolerable at all. It is simply not acceptable, in this day and age with the society that we have, the crime rates as they are, the terrorist threat as it is, to have that number of officers. Nobody who has looked at and studied the police has ever come to that total or established that figure. That is why it is important. If the Executive get to the point of shedding a number of police officers, we have a massive fundamental question about whether we are protecting our people and making sure that they are safe. That is a fundamental aspect of government no matter where you are in the world.

Where is Bengoa's health transformation? What progress has been made? What progress is in the Budget Bill? Where can we see that transformation? Do not get me wrong: health has been in the grip of the pandemic, at the cutting edge, at the tip of the spear and on the front line of this crisis, but we still have to transform the service, even in the midst of a crisis. Do you know something? There will be a crisis next year and the year after that. We will always find an excuse not to transform our health service. It is vital that we grapple with that now because every week that we waste affects our people, not just in death but in the value of living. That is very important.

I will mention the victims' payment scheme and my grave concerns that it is not in the Budget. There is a legal duty on the Executive to cater for and fund pensions for victims of terrorism. It is comparable to the provision in the TEO budget for historical institutional abuse issues. I will tell you why: they, too, are innocent victims who have had injury and pain brought upon them through no fault of their own. If we can make provision for victims of historical institutional abuse, surely we can make provision for victims' pensions.

11.45 am

I know that there is a debate and argument to be had with none other than the Secretary of State, Mr Lewis, who

continues to claim that the pension will cost £28 million in its first year. We know that the Government Actuary's Department has estimated that the first year will cost between £70 million and £145 million. The total cost of the scheme could be £1.2 billion. That money must come, and I agree with the Executive that it must come from the British Government. However, we cannot wait any longer to remunerate the victims for the pain that they have suffered and will continue to suffer. They have been affected so badly that they have not been able to work in the way that we have been able to work. These innocent victims of terrorism have not been able to progress their life in the way that they should have been allowed to do.

The party and the Minister opposite — I will support him 100% — will push to get that money in whatever way that they can. However, the truth in all of this is that, while we shout for the British Government to pay up, we have to remember who the victim-makers were. Some 60% of those victims were created by republican terrorists, not least the Provisional IRA, to which the party opposite is linked. Right across society, all those bombs and assassinations had a massive impact on people's lives.

Every party in the House has stated that the religious orders and the institutions that were involved in the historical abuse cases should pay up. If they were to do so, would it be so outwith the bounds of reality to ask the victim-makers — Sinn Féin, the political party of the Provisional IRA — to pay some of the burden of the victims' pension? This is a massive issue. Victims need to be remunerated and compensated for the pain that they have suffered through terrorism.

I see nothing in the spring Supplementary Estimates about such provision or the creation of any headroom. I see nothing in the Budget Bill to give those victims succour as they go forward with the remaining part of their life. The Assembly should not tolerate that. We should no longer tolerate failure in that regard; we should get this money to the victims.

One of the massive issues in the near future will be lockdown damages. There is absolutely no doubt about the impact that lockdown has had on businesses, communities and people. It is important that we recognise that. We will not get daily statistics, as we do with the COVID pandemic, on how people have suffered economically, mentally and physically during lockdown. Nonetheless, the pain and suffering are there. I see very little in the Budget Bill to reflect the reality of what lockdown has done to our people. Many parties in the House, mainly the party opposite, will blame Tory austerity for all the ills that occur over this period. There is no doubt that cutting our cloth to suit our Budget was always going to be painful, but think of the damage and potential damage from lockdown. Will the party opposite, including the Finance Minister, take its share of the blame and bear its share of the burden of the impact of lockdown that the Executive have imposed on our people and businesses?

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He talks about lockdown and COVID as if they were two different things. He almost literally said that they were two different things: he said that there were daily COVID statistics but no daily statistics on the impact of lockdown. There are different views on how we handled lockdown and restrictions at different times. I will not go into those or have an argument about whether we should

have eased restrictions at certain points. Does he accept that lockdown was a product of COVID and that there was no other way of dealing with the pandemic when the case numbers got so high in our community, as has been the case throughout the world? Sadly, I see that the Isle of Man, where all restrictions had been lifted, has, unfortunately, gone back into lockdown.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I will allow the Member to briefly comment on that, but, again, I remind everyone that this debate is on the Budget Bill.

Mr Frew: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. In the Budget Bill, I see no way of supporting people who have suffered due to the lockdown. The Member made a good point on lockdown in his intervention. He suggests that it was the only way to deal with the pandemic. There are many ways to deal with a health pandemic, and there have been many ways used over the last 100 years to deal with pandemics. However, lockdown was not in that book and was not a factor over the last 100 years. There are other ways of dealing with pandemics. I am not saying that lockdown was the wrong way, but, again, let us see the science and the data.

The only time that the Executive published the data on lockdown, they were cut to pieces because it showed that there was no logic to some of the decisions on the lockdown. I want to see proof in the Bill of how we are going to support people. How are we going to support hairdressers who were deprived of earning a living? How are we going to support the single mum of two children who, if it had not been for the help of an aunt, would not have had enough food for her children to eat? That is the reality of today.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. What about support for the families who have lost loved ones as a result of the rapid spread of infection throughout our communities, which, some would say, was due to the Executive's insufficient, slow and protracted action and decision-making that has been far from good?

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his intervention. Again, we await with anticipation information on the speed of the actions that the Executive will announce today on how we are going to get out of this crisis and on the pathway to recovery. Let us see how fast the Executive can operate to support those people.

The Member is right to point out that this has been an awful year for illness due to a virus that we knew very little about this time last year. We knew of COVID, of course, because it is not new, but we knew nothing about COVID-19, and we had to learn quickly. There have been actions taken and mistakes made, and I am not going to be too hard on people who have taken action and made decisions, even if, at some point, they were the wrong ones. That is just the job that we are in, and we have to make sure that we make decisions to try to save people's lives.

It has been a horrendous year when some people have died before their time. I get that — I really do — but there is no point then in putting further pressure on our population and industry when the science and the data are not being published for us all to see. Let us face it: there has been a fundamental weakness, because MLAs only get to hear about what is happening on the news at the same time as the rest of our population. We are not privy to the

Executive's actions or to what the data suggests. As I said, the only time that the Executive published the data, they were torn to pieces because some of the decisions had no logic.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member take a brief intervention?

Mr Frew: No, I will make progress, because I risk the wrath of the Deputy Speaker. I have tested his patience for long enough, so I will move on.

Throughout our Departments, it is vital that, maybe for the first time, there is a collegiate approach to Budget-making and that we remove the silos. We are doing this Budget in a vacuum, because we do not have an up-to-date Programme for Government. Really and truly, those two should run line by line, because they are parallel processes that complement each other. You cannot really do one efficiently, effectively and sufficiently without the other, so to set a Budget, even a flat Budget, without a Programme for Government that outlines your priorities is not the most effective and efficient way to do things. We really should have been in a position to publish a new Programme for Government to complement the Budget.

It would have made much more sense, and the Assembly would have been able to scrutinise the Executive's priorities better.

As I have outlined, there are massive concerns around infrastructure and the transformation of the health service, but what about education? The education of our young people has been destroyed this year. They will never make that time up. You cannot be educated at home in the same way in which you can be educated at school. Parents are not teachers, so they cannot provide the same service, especially if they are working eight hours a day from home. It is impossible.

As I said, those children will never make that time up, and I am not even sure that we should be telling them that they are going to make it up. The Executive have to do something about it now. They have to try to rescue the situation for those year groups that have struggled this year, for those year groups that will struggle next year and for those year groups that are looking at pending exams. How will we support them? How will we help them? How will we assist them? I do not see how we will do that in this Budget Bill.

The Member was right to interject about the Department for Infrastructure, but the Department of Education is the same. Education made 56 bids, of which 42 were COVID bids and 14 non-COVID bids, which was the highest number of non-COVID bids submitted by any Department in this place in the past year. Less than 50% were successful. That is no way in which to treat our children. Let us therefore see the evidence in the Budget Bill of support for our children. They are the future of this country, and have we not let them down so badly in the past year? They will never get that year back. In fact, it is more than a year. Who knows what is ahead of us? I do not, however, see any evidence that we will support children with this Bill.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for giving way. I feel that it would be irresponsible of me to let that comment go unchecked. We have to have higher confidence in our teaching and non-teaching staff and in our children and young people in Northern Ireland that they will do everything that they can to sustain their learning. The

Member's colleague holds the post of Education Minister and has invested in the Engage programme. I will critique that programme, but to say in the Chamber that there has been no investment made, no work done and support provided for our children and young people to maintain their learning is irresponsible.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his intervention. At no time, did I utter those words. The Member has to be careful when he makes an interjection that what he says is factual. In his intervention, he did not mention the real, deep impacts that children have suffered this year, not just in education terms but in societal terms, mental health terms and mobility terms: all those aspects. He did not mention all that children gain from being in school with their peers, being taught by teachers, with a principal to guide them. He did not mention other staff, the caretaker and the dinner ladies. All those people are part of a family, and children have been separated from that family for too long. Let us therefore see what the Executive produce today on opening up our schools and allowing —.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: No, I will not, because I think that the Member was irresponsible the last time that he made an intervention, when he tried to put words in my mouth. I will allow anyone to make an intervention in the House, but we need to keep it real, folks.

I went through some of the Departments for which I feel that there is grave weakness in the Budget Bill. That weakness needs to be resolved, if not through the Bill, through monitoring rounds and by getting to grips with the issues and problems that our society faces in the coming weeks and months. They are mighty. They are grave. We need the Executive to step up and support our people like they have never supported our people before so that we can get out of this and find a road to recovery. That should be sooner rather than later.

12.00 noon

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I will outline the Committee's position on some aspects of the DAERA budget.

I start with our concerns about timing. The Committee requested that DAERA officials provide oral evidence on 4 February. However, at the last minute, DAERA was unable to provide the briefing papers and the evidence session was moved to 11 February. Even then, the relevant papers were provided late, leaving Committee members little time to consider and digest the information provided. The lateness of the evidence session left the Committee with no time to follow up on queries. For example, the written briefing did not cover the budget allocations by DAERA to its arm's-length bodies, and the tight timing meant that the Committee has been unable to cover that aspect. We have requested information in writing and are waiting for it to be provided.

I will outline the Committee's consideration of the DAERA budget proposals. The draft budget proposals provide for £544.2 million of resource DEL and £95.5 million capital DEL. While that includes replacement by Treasury of the funding previously provided by the EU for farm payments, there is still a shortfall arising from the replacement of pillar 2 funding that I will cover later.

In general, the Committee is aware that, in the spending review outcome for here, everyday expenditure is standing still and there is no additional block funding for DAERA.

The Committee heard that DAERA will press the Finance Department for additional resource DEL and capital DEL funding. That is to take forward the important work on the green growth strategy and the bovine TB eradication strategy in particular. The Committee has indicated support for the additional funding.

DAERA has been able to secure additional funding from Treasury for its work on EU exit, as well as water reform and climate change initiatives. The Committee welcomes that additional funding.

Overall, on resource DEL, the Committee is aware that DAERA faces a shortfall of £33.9 million, most of which arises from the shortfall in replacement EU funding. The Committee is aware that the impact of EU exit on DAERA's remit has been wide and far-reaching, particularly in connection with food supply and the agri-food industry. DAERA now has new responsibilities and functions allocated to it, as powers return from the EU. It also needs to implement and deliver on the compliance checks now required as part of the protocol and EU exit.

The Committee questioned officials on aspects of the EU exit. We note that sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) checks at ports and the international airport are funded through a separate exercise with Treasury and that the details of that funding were not included in the budget documents. The Committee has requested an additional written briefing on that aspect. It is also aware that the relevant local authorities have staff working alongside DAERA officials at the ports of Larne, Warrenpoint and Belfast. We have asked for clarity on the relationship between local authority and DAERA staff, how many DAERA and local authority staff are employed at each point of entry and details of the role, remit and financing of those staff.

I turn to the replacement of EU funding by Treasury, as promised in the manifesto commitment. The Committee has registered concerns regarding the shortfall of about £14.4 million in 2021-22 against pillar 1, pillar 2 and common market organisation (CMO) funding. It has been netted off because it has been carried over from the EU funding sources. The Committee is disappointed by that approach by Treasury.

There is another shortfall of £5.1 million that was obtained by the EU fund for disease eradication. That fund had been used in previous years towards the costs of bovine TB eradication. It is not being replaced by the Treasury and therefore represents a shortfall in its budgetary requirements. The budget for bovine TB has, over the last few years, varied between £36 million and £40 million per year, so to lose £5 million is a substantial shortfall. The Committee questioned officials on that point, and they responded that, in recent years, the incidence rate of bovine TB was downward, meaning that less funding was required, although it is a statutory responsibility and therefore must be funded. Additionally, the Committee heard that it was the intention of DAERA to manage shortfalls either through internal reallocations or the monitoring round process.

The Committee is concerned about the lack of information and clarity on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF). It was assumed that it would be the replacement funding for the

previous EU structural funds invested in rural development. In October, the Chancellor announced that £220 million would be allocated in the 2021-22 year to help areas to prepare for the introduction of the Shared Prosperity Fund, which is part of a wider investment framework and not devolved to each Administration. The Committee is concerned that there is no detail on the method of allocating the Shared Prosperity Fund between the four Administrations. It is also concerned that it appears that the funding will be administered centrally by Whitehall and that there are no guarantees that the funding allocated to here will be ring-fenced for rural development.

I turn now to another priority of the Committee — the tackling rural poverty and social isolation programme (TRPSI). TRPSI funding is used for a range of initiatives in rural areas to support a range of community-based projects, from developing youth entrepreneurship to assisting farmers and supporting positive mental and physical health. Given the positive outcomes that TRPSI has had for rural communities and the impact that it has had during COVID, the Committee considers that the programme should be a priority for DAERA. The DAERA budget document provided information on the funding allocated to TRPSI and noted that, in 2018-19 and 2019-2020, TRPSI was funded under the confidence-and-supply allocations. In 2020-21, it was funded by the Executive, but the funding was not baselined. Although £1.8 million funding has not been formally allocated at the draft budget stage, it is part of anticipated confidence-and-supply funding that will be allocated to DAERA for 2021-22. The Committee expressed concerns that the TRPSI revenue DEL funding had not been allocated and was not baselined. It registered that it is also a concern for DAERA and that discussions are ongoing on that matter.

The next matter that I want to draw attention to is the bovine TB eradication strategy. I have mentioned the shortfall in funding due to the EU funding not being replaced by the Treasury. The Committee has recently been briefed on bovine TB and is aware of the work of the TB strategic partnership and the Department on a new bovine TB eradication strategy. The Committee has been made aware that the new eradication strategy would cost more in the short to medium term but that, longer term, it should result in a reduction in costs to the taxpayer and farmers. The Committee is also conscious that the current incidence rates, although falling, could become a barrier to trade and agrees with the DAERA assessment that work towards eradication is essential. The Committee is aware that DAERA is in discussions with the Finance Department to secure the additional funding that is required and wishes it to be known that it supports that position.

I turn now to funding for the DAERA arm's-length bodies, such as the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), the Loughs Agency and the Fishery Harbour Authority. The Committee noted its disappointment that there was no mention of funding for ALBs, other than some reference to capital DEL for AFBI. The Committee has requested a written briefing on that aspect of the DAERA budget and hopes to be in a position to report on it during the Budget Bill debate.

Woodland creation is another area that the Committee is concerned about. It noted that £3.4 million of the £95.5 million capital DEL was allocated to woodland creation via the rural development programme (RDP) forestry

programme. It is to help landowners plant native woodland, and it is a green growth foundation programme. The Committee has recently examined the difficulties being experienced in the importation of trees and saplings from Britain. I will not go into the technical difficulties, but the Committee has written to the British Government on behalf of the horticulture sector and garden centres on those and other matters. The Committee emphasises that the EU and the British Government should use every means possible to sort out the issues.

The Committee also noted that £15.6 million of capital DEL is to be allocated to the green growth foundation programmes. Those programmes are not yet fully developed, but they will be schemes and projects that will fall under a carbon-neutral programme, with the aim of working towards a target of zero by 2050. The Committee is disappointed that no further information on those schemes was made available.

Climate change is a priority for the AERA Committee. 'New Decade, New Approach' makes a significant commitment to tackling climate change and the introduction of legislation and targets to reduce carbon emissions. The Committee tabled a motion for debate by the Assembly in July 2020 calling for the Minister to bring forward climate change legislation urgently. The Committee was briefed by DAERA on its climate change discussion document before that document went out for consultation. That consultation has closed. The Committee was to be briefed again on 18 February on the initial outcome of that consultation and on the plans and timescale for climate change legislation. That briefing did not happen because the papers for it were not cleared in time by the private office. The Committee has written in strong terms to DAERA on the matter of non-provision of papers.

When questioned about the budget allocation to the climate change priority, DAERA staff referred again to the capital allocation of £15.6 million for the green growth foundation programme. They stated that proposals were being developed and that the Committee would be briefed in due course. That is not satisfactory to the Committee. Climate change is a priority, and, when we ask about the budget for it, we are constantly referred to the green growth strategy, which is still in development and about which there is little detail. Furthermore, reference was made to the funding allocated to existing programmes funded by the EU, but those were developed years ago as part of the rural development programme. They are not new, and there is a lack of specifics from DAERA on what is a Committee priority, which is worrying.

Finally, I want to draw attention to the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP). As well as its reference to climate change, the 'NDNA' document refers to the establishment of an independent environmental protection agency (IEPA). The Committee is also aware of the UK Government's Environment Bill and its provisions for an Office for Environmental Protection. The OEP will have a role and remit that extends to this jurisdiction. On 31 December 2020, the environmental oversight role of the European Commission ceased. It was originally envisaged that the OEP would be established on 1 January and take on that role, but it is not now expected to become fully operational until late 2021. The Committee has expressed concerns that that delay in the creation of the OEP will leave a governance gap in environmental oversight.

When questioned about that, DAERA officials referred to the Department's consultation on environmental plans, principles and governance, which was due to close on 26 February. It is also envisaged that a robust economic appraisal would be required, as significant resource would be needed for the UKG Environment Bill.

The Committee also noted a recent announcement by DAERA on 16 February about the establishment of a new body, the Interim Environmental Governance Secretariat (IEGS), on a temporary basis. That is in connection with the governance gap in the environmental oversight role previously carried out by the European Commission. Its key role in the North will be the management of complaints. It will operate until later in the year, when the proposed OEP is expected to be established. The Committee is disappointed that that was not mentioned by officials when answering questions on the OEP on 11 February, and we have now requested a written briefing on it.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): Today, I would like to reflect on the opportunities for the Executive Office to make a difference in people's lives in the year to come. I would like to talk about the hopes that we have as a Committee to see the good work undertaken through Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) to continue to foster hope and good relations in our divided society. I would like to talk about the dedication of officials and community workers alike, which will be continued into the future. I would like to say how delighted the Committee is that support will continue for victims and survivors of the conflict or, indeed, about those further developments for our minority ethnic communities. I would like to detail how strategic investment will be undertaken in the future, and I would like to talk about the work that arm's-length bodies will do with the money that they are to receive in the coming year. But I cannot. I cannot, because I do not know and the Committee does not know what the Department will spend its money on.

It is true that we can see in the draft budget that the Department is to receive £118 million in 2021-22, and we know from an oral briefing last Wednesday that £58 million will go on the baseline funding for the Department; £46 million on historical institutional abuse (HIA) payments; nearly £7 million for the implementation for victims' pensions; £4 million as match funding for EU programmes; and nearly £3 million in EU exiting funds. In addition, the Department will receive £15 million for capital projects such as Ebrington, Urban Villages and the Maze/Long Kesh development. However, the Committee did not receive any written papers on this at all. I will leave that to fill the air a bit: a scrutiny Committee that was given nothing to scrutinise. It begs this obvious question: what do they have to hide?

The Committee did not have sight of the submission by the Department to the Department of Finance about its financial needs, so maybe the Finance Minister can tell us when he saw it and, given that we have not seen it, what is in this elusive and secret paper.

The Committee did not have input to departmental spending priorities for the coming year.

12.15 pm

Financial scrutiny is one of the most fundamental tasks that a Committee undertakes in holding the Executive accountable to the public. Financial accountability is a bedrock principle of democratic governance. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) sets out 10 principles for budgetary governance. One of those is to:

“Provide for an inclusive, participative and realistic debate on budgetary choices.”

In this case, we had no debate on the budgetary choices and nothing inclusive, participative, realistic or otherwise. Principles that are set down by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) state that the Executive are to:

“transmit Bills and other documents for parliamentary action for timely distribution to Members.”

The Committee has still not seen what the Department is specifically spending its money on, and here we are with a Budget Bill being debated in the House.

Another CPA principle is that:

“Opportunities shall be given for public input into the legislative and Committee process, including the budget”.

How can the public provide input if the Committee is not being sufficiently informed to do so? The Inter-Parliamentary Union refers to:

“Mechanisms to ensure effective parliamentary engagement in the ... budget process in all its stages”

but the Committee was presented with a *fait accompli*. The Committee wants to do its job. We want to ensure that the practice of good financial governance is alive and well in this legislature. We want to demonstrate to the public that the Executive are being held to account. We want to contribute to the process of discussing and developing the financial priorities of our Executive Office. We want to be a conduit for the views of the public — young and old people; women and men; disabled people; people of any social, religious or ethnic identity — in the development of policy and legislation. That is our job.

The Committee is all too aware of the challenges with bringing forward a Budget in the current circumstances, particularly with the financial pressures on the Department. We have heard that the shared future funding that was derived from the Fresh Start Agreement is to run out this financial year.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Chair of the Committee for giving way. As he knows, the role of the Committee is to assist and advise Ministers, but how can you do that if you are not given the information with which to assist and advise?

The Department has form. Mr Lyttle will recall the day when we were in receipt of about 100 pages of financial information five minutes before the start of a Committee meeting. Mr Lyttle, as Deputy Chair, and I, as Chair, decided that we would withdraw rather than take the risk, six months later, of being told, “But sure you were given those papers at a Committee meeting”. The Department has form, and the Chair has my sympathy.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for his intervention. That is what we are slowly learning: Fresh Start; New Decade, New Approach — yes.

The Committee, as I said, is all too aware of the challenges in bringing forward the Budget. As I said, the shared future funding that was derived from the Fresh Start Agreement is to run out this financial year. From where will the money come for the excellent community relations programmes that we have heard about in Committee? It is not an easy question to answer, but the Committee must be part of that conversation.

I cannot speak about future spending without referring to the pension for people injured in the conflict. The Committee has consistently called for that to be paid, and quickly. The Department now has a duty to do so, but clearly that cannot be provided for in the current Budget. We look forward to working with the Executive to investigate ways in which that commitment can be honoured. As a Committee, we want to work with the Department on so many fronts. However, our work is being frustrated by a Department that will not provide us with papers on time, will not provide us with financial information about departmental spending and is making a mockery of the Committee structure and process.

I wish to make some remarks in my capacity as an SDLP MLA for South Down.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for granting me the intervention. As the Deputy Chairperson of a Committee, I am alarmed to hear of the experiences of the Chairperson and his Committee. Did he write to the Executive Office asking for an explanation as to why the Committee did not receive any papers? I am genuinely interested.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am tempted to say, “Do not make me laugh”. When we write, we do not get answers to our letters or, sometimes, they take so long that, by the time that we actually get a response, the question and the issue that we raised have expired. We did communicate and are communicating with the Department. We mentioned it to the officials but, as I referenced earlier, only last Wednesday, they came to the Committee without any papers. We await the response.

I am, of course, conscious that we continue to live under the shadow of COVID-19. The Budget must be viewed through the lens of how we emerge from COVID and the devastating impact that it has had on all of our lives. The last year that we have lived through has often felt like a lifetime. It has taught those of us who have our eyes open some unassailable facts about life here. The first is that, when we need to, we can act quickly. Finance can be found quickly for the places where it is needed most. It can be delivered to the front line and make a difference. Recently, I met council officers, who told me that the speed and agility of the funding processes in the past year helped them to make a difference in people’s lives in respect of COVID. We must continue with the type of funding model that responds to people’s needs quickly.

If we want the North to work, the Assembly and Executive must act quickly. That is what will define our future. The Sinn Féin Members on my right love harking to the past and trotting out lines about 10 years of austerity. The irony is that they are the ones who hold the purse strings. They are the ones who are capable of releasing funds from the Executive to be the catalyst for change in the

North. Do not hark on about austerity while you preside over Departments that are handing back tens of millions of pounds unspent at the end of the year. It is up to the Finance Minister to show us the colour of his money. Should he continue to ensure that the funds that we have are unspent, that will be a clear indication of his failure as a Finance Minister. Maybe it is politically advantageous for the Finance Minister to ensure that the North is seen as not working. Regardless, with this Budget, we must act, and act now, to deliver for people.

Across my South Down constituency, there are many places in which additional funding could be transformative and help the North to work. South Down has earned the privilege of holding the jewel in our tourism crown, with Newcastle being a go-to location. This will only be enhanced this year and in the future as we emerge from COVID. I urge people to try to stay away from Newcastle while the COVID restrictions are in place and to leave it to those who live within a 10-mile radius. South Down is a destination for tourists. We must see funding, including from Tourism NI, which can sell the tourist products that we have, through to funding for tourism infrastructure on the ground.

One of our assets, which has been discussed recently, is the infamous rock pool. One of the last surviving saltwater pools across these islands, it is beloved by countless people. However, it is in need of investment for repairs and renovations. It recently suffered from being used by a DUP councillor as a means of getting cheap headlines, but that might have more to do with next year's Assembly election than anything else. The rock pool has a devoted following crying out for Executive support. I urge the Finance Minister and his officials to invest in the people of Newcastle and support our rock pool.

As we emerge from COVID and schools return to face-to-face learning, we will have to decide how we deliver this. Given that area planning will continue, as envisaged by all parties in the House, further consideration will need to be given to funding those communities who make the move as planned and suggested. Therefore, I urge the Finance Minister that, in instances where we see schools being brought together to make their contribution to reform, they must receive the capital investment that they need as part of that reform process. If communities are going to go the extra mile, the Executive must walk with them.

We have been told that we do not have the required finances in the Budget to address hospital waiting lists. In South Down, we are all too familiar with a lack of finance impacting health. Yes — before Members say it — it is time for me to talk about the Downe Hospital. As long as we continue with the status quo of services and funding being stripped away from the Downe Hospital, we will find trust and confidence from people in South Down stripping away from the Government. Further investment in the Downe Hospital and its services is what is needed, not excuses and not services being stripped away at the drop of a hat. COVID is now being used as the most recent excuse to remove services from the Downe Hospital. I urge the Finance Minister to do the right thing and provide the transformative funding that is required for the health service to be able to deliver change and additional services to units such as the Downe.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. He must show me where that rock pool is, because I am down in

the Mourne quite a bit. On the point about health, he raises a massive issue. Of course, last year, 95% of health bids were successful, yet we have not been able to move forward with transformation, which, to me, is crucial, even in a time of crisis. That shows that something is going wrong with the spend that Health is getting.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for his intervention. I think that everybody accepts that there needs to be transformation in the health service. That will require upfront investment. People are prepared and ready to be part of the conversation, but it seems as though that has been going on forever. People want to see transformation take place, and that would undoubtedly see additional services delivered to the Downe Hospital.

Mr O'Toole: As someone who originates from his part of the world, I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He talked about the rock pool. There has been a lot of talk in the Chamber recently about the negatives of the Irish Sea and the Irish Sea border. For anybody who does not know what the rock pool is, it is basically the Irish Sea in a pool by the side of the promenade in Newcastle. Perhaps some DUP Members — in fact, all MLAs — could do with a good long dunk in that chilly rock pool full of the Irish Sea. That might serve us all quite well and clear our heads. Does the Member agree?

Mr McGrath: I absolutely —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. I urge Members not to have excessive debate about a local constituency issue.

Mr McGrath: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. Of course, if we are going to have a discussion, be it with Boris or whoever, about infrastructure in the Irish Sea that needs to be supported, we need to include the rock pool in Newcastle. That is what I want to see.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: Yes.

Dr Aiken: I am just glad that he does not want to put a bridge over the top of it, like you want to do at Narrow Water.

Mr McGrath: As the Member will be aware, the rock pool is a great tourist facility. The bridge that he mentions will facilitate additional footfall, additional visitors and an additional presence and will therefore support the economy in South Down. I would be delighted to see that bridge.

Politics should bring out the best in us. It is the art of the possible, yet somehow we still have many people in the North living in various forms of poverty. As long as one person here continues to live in poverty, I feel like we are failing. Regardless of what the Sinn Féin MP for South Down thinks — the one who abandoned the Infrastructure portfolio a few years ago — we should not take the approach of President Xi in China. President Xi may be committed to ending poverty, but he continues with an abhorrent policy of surveillance, arbitrary detention, forced indoctrination, conversion therapy and a string of other human rights abuses. That is quite the new ally for the republican movement. Regardless of that new stance by some, we need an anti-poverty strategy to be published and, more importantly, funded here.

I therefore implore the Finance and Communities Ministers to deliver that. To go another year once again ignoring the reality that thousands in our community face each day as a result of poverty is an abject denial of the basic function of any Government, which is to look out for those who need help the most.

12.30 pm

I am under no illusion that the action or inaction that results from the Chamber will be definitive. For too long, the two parties that head up our Government, Sinn Féin and the DUP, have chosen the path of complacency. They cannot seem to let a day pass in the Chamber without missing the purpose of this place, instead playing to their respective galleries. It is more difficult but ultimately more rewarding to fight for what is right for all our futures. I urge all in the House to set a new course as we emerge from COVID and seek the highest ideals in order to deliver maximum results. If we do that and choose self-determination, nobody — not even the most far right Tory — can take away that which is delivered. If we at long last get it right, if we create the conditions for putting the money in the right place, if we create dignified and sure employment, and if we are willing to do that together, the North will work, and work for all people, regardless of their background, religion or ethnicity. It will simply work for everyone.

Mr Lyttle (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I welcome the opportunity to speak to the Budget Bill's Second Stage as the Chairperson of the Education Committee. I apologise again for my absence from yesterday's Supply resolution debate.

The COVID pandemic has claimed life and livelihood, and it has severely disrupted the education of children and young people. Unlike the DUP MLA for North Antrim, I have faith in the innovation of our teaching staff and in the resilience of our young people to overcome that challenge, if they are adequately resourced to do so.

The pandemic and the unreformed Budget process have made it challenging to assess whether that resource allocation is adequate to help them overcome the challenge. As we have rehearsed today — as, it seems, we rehearse every year in the Chamber — the timings that we work to represent an inadequate budgetary process for proper transparency and scrutiny under any circumstances. As, however, the Chairpersons of the Executive Office Committee and the Finance Committee have said, that is particularly so during a time of this type of challenge and at a time when the education and well-being of children and young people is under such challenge.

Despite that, the Education Committee has done its best in recent weeks to examine the information that we have been provided with by the Department. The additional Budget allocations from the UK Government to help us respond to the challenge that education faces are absolutely essential, but they too have complicated the budgetary process. It has been challenging for the Education Committee to establish precisely what the Department of Education has received and how exactly it has been spent. Again, however, despite what the DUP MLA for North Antrim said, there have been significant allocations made across the education system by his DUP colleague the Education Minister. It feels strange to have to defend the DUP Education Minister from his DUP colleague today, although that appears to be what

I am doing. We have had allocations for free school meals during holiday periods to address holiday hunger. We have had allocations to address period product provision and allocations to the Engage programme, although, regrettably, that has not yet been extended to special schools and preschools. We have also had an allocation for the long-overdue emotional health and well-being framework. Those are all issues that the Education Committee has championed for investment. The measures have often been delivered later than is necessary, however, and they have perhaps not gone far enough for the people who need them. It is fair to say that the Education Committee has played a constructive role in platforming the challenges faced by education and the areas in need of investment. We engaged with a wide range of key stakeholders, particularly in the area of special educational needs. We also engaged with teachers, parents and pupils on a wide range of issues, including those that I mentioned.

One of the very few positives from the pandemic is the increasing awareness and appreciation of the importance of schools and the vital role that teachers and non-teaching staff play in empowering the well-being of children. We believe that teachers should be properly remunerated for the job that they do and that families should be adequately supported not only with early years investment but with a comprehensive and well-resourced childcare strategy. Schools must be supported to engage with the educational, physical and emotional development and well-being of pupils and be resourced to provide a unique pathway to support and protect vulnerable children in having equal access to educational opportunity.

The position for teaching and non-teaching pay pressures, contractual costs that will be incurred regardless of whether or not they are funded, remains unclear at this point. When the Committee received its briefing in January, teachers' pay negotiations for 2019 and 2020 remained at an early stage. That pressure was not submitted as a bid in the January monitoring round. However, we understand that the management side of the teachers' negotiating committee recently made an offer in confidence to the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council for 2019-2020 pay awards. The Committee looks forward to an early resolution of that for clarity for all educational stakeholders and hopes that the deal will represent the regard in which teachers ought to be held.

Early in the first lockdown, members of the Education Committee warned about the risks to vulnerable children and their families. We were shocked by the evidence that we received from voluntary organisations and parents regarding the extent of the disruption, and, in a number of cases, the cessation of support during later lockdowns. The Education Committee is adamant that that cannot happen again, and members seek confirmation that adequate resources will be put in place for safe and sustainable childcare, early years and education provision for all children. That means resources to rapidly deliver additional staff cover, additional accommodation space, ventilation, school testing and a special school vaccination programme, now long overdue.

The Committee endorses the view that a holistic approach to Restart is necessary, with a comprehensive and well-supported programme of activities and opportunities to support children to recover.

I noted the language used by the DUP MLA for North Antrim earlier in the debate. The record will correct me if necessary, but it was highly irresponsible language, saying that our education had been destroyed and that children will never make it up. That is language that the Education Minister himself has guided our education sector not to use, so I ask my colleague to reflect on that language and to support investment in recovery for children and young people. That will include educational, emotional and physical recovery. Far too many pupils were not accessing the recommended amount of physical activity before this pandemic. That must be addressed in Education Restart.

Before I move to capital investment, I would like to reference — which, to be fair to my North Antrim colleague, he referenced as well — the issue of multi-year settlement. The single-year budgetary approach is creating real challenge, particularly in the education sector. Indeed, it brings instability and uncertainty for many external organisations that play a vital role in the provision of education services, such as the sports programme delivered by the IFA and GAA, which is responsible for facilitating so much physical activity for pupils. It is clear that we need to move to multi-year settlements as a matter of urgency to ensure stability for that type of programme, which provides vital physical activity for children and young people.

I will move on to capital spending. The Education Department had spent 59% of its entire £143 million budget by December 2020 and anticipated a full spend by the end of the financial year. The Committee for Education received briefings from BlendED NI, the Goliath Trust and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) on remote learning and digital inequality issues as well as the inadequacy of the C2k system, which is in much need of reform. The Committee hopes that the next capital programme will go quite some way to addressing the significant digital poverty issues that have been exposed by the pandemic and which must be addressed.

There are many other issues that are linked to the Budget that I would like to explore. For now, however, in his response, I ask the Minister to clarify the Department of Education's baseline. It appears that if we extract the New Decade, New Approach money and compare 2020-21 with 2021-22, following the spending review, the baseline has improved by around £200 million. That said, the Department has identified remaining pressures of around £300 million. Perhaps, the Minister will clarify the extent to which Education is, in fact, better or worse off.

I will now add a few comments as an Alliance Party MLA. I have said it before, and I will keep saying it: the former Education Authority CEO stated clearly that without radical investment in and radical reform of our education system, it would be unaffordable, socially immobile and unfit for the 21st century, despite the efforts of our innovative and dedicated education sector staff.

We also know that the cost of separation of education in Northern Ireland is estimated by a Department of Finance-commissioned study to be up to £100 million a year. Yet, area planning, as has been mentioned by other Members, and the rationalisation of the education system are moving at a snail's pace.

This Budget, however we assess it, does not amount to radical investment in education, so the opportunity that is presented by the independent review of education

for radical reform must be grasped by the Education Minister if we are to deliver a more integrated, affordable, socially mobile and fit-for-purpose 21st century system. Most importantly, we must deliver quality educational opportunities and outcomes for all children and young people in Northern Ireland with this Budget.

Miss McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): I will pass on the Education Committee Chairperson's high praise for the Education Minister, which I am sure he will appreciate; long may it last. *[Laughter.]* I welcome the opportunity to outline the Committee for Infrastructure's consideration and views in today's debate. I would like to quickly outline the Committee's consideration of the 2020-21 Budget and then move on to how the 2021-22 Budget allocation impacts on the Department for Infrastructure and its ability to carry out its functions over the coming year.

The Department for Infrastructure is one of the Northern Ireland Assembly's largest spending Departments, so the Committee for Infrastructure takes its scrutiny of the Department's budget extremely seriously. The Committee, therefore, regrets that, because of the circumstances that we find ourselves in and because of the lateness of the Chancellor's spending review, the process for budget scrutiny this year has been significantly curtailed. This year's process has not afforded the Committee the time for a more detailed engagement on the budget allocation and the Department's proposals on how it will best spend its allocation.

The Committee for Infrastructure received a briefing from departmental officials on the draft 2021-22 Budget on 3 February 2021. The Committee also requested written briefings from the Department's arm's-length bodies — Translink, the Drainage Council, Waterways Ireland and Northern Ireland Water — on their expectations for the Budget and their allocations.

In considering the January monitoring round, the Department advised the Committee that one resource bid for increased holiday carry-forward was submitted and would be met centrally by the Treasury for the whole of the Civil Service. The Department also advised that it had made the Department of Finance aware of some additional COVID pressures in its January monitoring submission. Those were pressures of £1.9 million for lost parking income in Roads and a small amount of PPE costs in the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA).

12.45 pm

The Department for Infrastructure also highlighted to Finance that the DVA used £10 million of its reserves in order to supplement lost income as a consequence of COVID-19 and that, unless that was reinstated, future capital investment might be hampered. To that end, the Department has been successful in securing an additional £12 million to address those pressures, which is, indeed, welcome.

The Department has also advised that, since the January monitoring round bids were submitted, two further bids were made to the Department of Finance to help to maintain the financial stability of Translink and DVA and that it has received an additional £50 million for Translink and £10 million for DVA. That will help to replenish their depleted reserves and provide a degree of financial

resilience as we head into another year in which we can expect further impacts as a consequence of COVID-19.

During the briefing on 3 February, the officials outlined that the Department has received a draft resource budget of £420.7 million and a capital budget of £693.2 million, including the £70 million reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing. The Department advised the Committee that the resource budget is an increase of £2.8 million, or 0.7%, on the 2020-21 opening allocation. That 0.7% increase in the resource budget is proportionately less than the average resource increase of other Departments, which is over 6%. The Department advised the Committee that that was a disappointing outcome. The £2.8 million increase that it has received has been allocated to pressures that have been identified by Northern Ireland Water.

The Department advised the Committee that it estimated its total pressures for 2021-22 to be £103 million. It has identified its pressures for next year to be £59 million of COVID pressures, £3.6 million of EU-related pressures and £40.5 million of other pressures. When the Committee questioned what the £103 million that it has sought was for, officials advised that, although the COVID pressure is largely unknown for the coming year, the Department has made the prediction based on research that indicated that it could take several years to get back to a normal level of passenger transport and that that will clearly impact on income. Officials also outlined that, for Northern Ireland Water, the longer people work from home, the more water is used in residential settings, which does not create income for Northern Ireland Water, and the water usage by businesses, which it does charge for, is reduced significantly.

The Committee asked the officials to outline what the impact would be on the Department's work. Officials advised that it would mean that work would need to be prioritised and that the Department's core work, which includes public services such as gully cleaning, street lighting outages, grass cutting, bridge repairs and road markings, all of which are visible and impact on the lives of our constituents, may not be carried out. The officials highlighted that that comes in the wake of a number of years when there was already a limited service in those areas, which is something that we are all very aware of.

The Committee for Infrastructure noted that the increase in the capital budget for the coming financial year is £692 million. That is a £135 million, or 40%, uplift on the opening position for the current year. However, the Department has advised that that still does not meet its estimated capital requirement for next year. It estimates that it needs £888 million to carry out its functions and that £562 million of the budget will be needed for flagship, inescapable or pre-committed expenditure.

The officials advised the Committee that the estimated capital requirement was higher than in 2020-21 due to several large projects having increased spending in 2021-22. In addition, a draft determination by the Utility Regulator sets the capital requirement for Northern Ireland Water at £222 million. The Department has advised that it requires £562 million simply to meet its existing commitments without any further allocations above its top priorities. Those commitments relate to a number of flagship and inescapable projects and to areas of its business that are contractually pre-committed.

In our scrutiny, members were keen to understand the disparity between the increase in capital of 40% and in resource of 0.7%. Officials advised that such a disparity was a disappointment, which means that the Department's resources to deliver on an extensive programme of capital projects would be under severe pressure as both are inextricably linked.

In considering this disparity, the Committee supports the Department's call for an increase in resource moneys. The Committee has taken many opportunities with the Department and Minister Mallon to emphasise the failure to draw down and utilise the unspent end-of-year finances. The Committee has called on the Department to think creatively and urgently about how to draw down funds into a range of its ongoing funding schemes and has urged it to get road maintenance schemes up and running quickly to take advantage of monitoring rounds. However, the Committee accepts that that takes an adequate resource budget.

To that end, to avoid an underspend in the coming year, the Committee supports an increased resource budget for the Department for Infrastructure to ensure that the resources exist to enable it to manage its capital programme effectively. However, it also recommends that, in the Department itself, there is a more strategic process to ensure that shovel-ready projects are always in place to take the fullest advantage of any future occasions when the Executive find themselves in the position of having an underspend. The Committee does not accept that core aspects of the Department's work should be conditional on excess money during monitoring rounds. However, given the reality of one-year budgets, there should be forward planning so that the Department can avail itself of additional funds.

The Committee had to scrutinise the Department's finances at pace. That is not appropriate or sustainable. In future, the Committee expects to have more time to consider the budget in detail, to look at more of the figures behind the broad headings and to tease out with officials how money flows around the Department and where our Committee can offer best advice.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call the Chairperson of the Health Committee, Colm Gildernew. I advise that I may have to interrupt him as we approach lunchtime.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I welcome the opportunity to speak today on behalf of the Health Committee. I will outline the Committee's consideration of current financial pressures and raise some of the Committee's concerns about the Department of Health's budget.

The Second Stage of last year's Budget Bill was debated on 25 February 2020, and little did we know at that point of the impact that COVID-19 would have not only on the budget of the Department of Health but on wider society. The Department of Health's dashboard and NISRA figures up to 19 February show that over 2,057 deaths and 112,000 cases later, we are debating the Budget Bill again with our finances and budgets in an unprecedented set of circumstances. Our thoughts are very much with those families who have lost loved ones over the past year and those who are continuing to feel the effects of COVID-19.

Each time I get up to speak on behalf of the Committee, I rightly pay tribute to those front-line health and social

care workers who have gone above and beyond what is expected. We hope that the successful roll-out of the vaccination programme and reduction in the transmission rates will allow our front-line staff some well-earned respite. I also thank the Minister and officials in the Department of Health, the board, the trusts and those in back-office roles for all their work over the past year.

I will now outline some of the Committee's concerns about the budget process and the budget for the incoming year. Over the past year, the Committee has understood the need for the Department's budget to be flexible as it had to be reactive to pressures as they arose. However, the recent publication of waiting lists has underlined the very clear problems that the Department faces in recovering from COVID and in delivering the full range of much-needed services to patients and the wider population. It is not good that we have over 320,000 people waiting for their first outpatient appointment, with over 50% waiting for over a year.

The Committee is due to be briefed on waiting lists at its meeting next week, and it will be good to hear the Department's plans to recover and address this issue. Waiting lists will require significant resources and highlight the need for the Department to drive forward with its transformation programme. The Committee has concerns that the current funding situation outlined by the Department will not allow the transformation programme to be taken forward with any real scale of ambition.

That only underlines the need for a fully resourced multi-year budget that will allow prioritisation and implementation of projects over a multi-year period. Indeed, a joint submission from the Chairs of all the health trusts and HSC bodies raised concerns about the proposed health budget as it was non-recurrent and prevented long-term planning and prioritisation. I urge the Executive to use the next year to plan and consult on a multi-year Budget, which would allow the health system to recover and make inroads into those increasing waiting lists.

At a recent briefing, the Committee asked questions about the costs of agency staff in the health and social care system. Just this week, the Department responded in writing. It outlined that the cost of agency staff for 2020-21 is expected to be £273 million, with forecast costs for 2021-22 of between £275 million and £300 million. The Committee appreciates that there will always be a need for a level of agency staff to deal with various pressures across the system. However, this is a significant expenditure when we are considering workforce planning and the need for additional staffing and resource in the system. Surely a large proportion of that spend could be allocated to workforce planning.

COVID recovery will be a key factor in the prioritisation of the delivery of services. We are aware of the significant pressures in relation to waiting lists and the need to restart services. There will, no doubt, be additional pressures throughout the year during the recovery from COVID, such as dealing with the impact and reality of long COVID. However, there will also be a need for significant resource to support an increased demand for current mental health programmes and to develop and implement new programmes to support people.

The Committee is here not only to scrutinise the work of the Department but to advise and assist the Minister. We look forward to working with the Department over

the coming months and advising it on its work to deliver services to those in need.

If I may, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will say a few words as Sinn Féin health spokesperson. Our health and social care system is in crisis. It has been in crisis for years, and it will be in crisis for many more years until it is properly funded. Austerity has consequences. The COVID pandemic did not cause the crisis in our health service; it simply exacerbated and exposed the stresses created by the political choice of Tory Governments not to fund it properly. As the pandemic took hold here in the North, we found ourselves facing this challenge with equipment shortages and staff shortages. We did not even have the basic PPE when it was needed. We asked already overworked and underpaid healthcare workers to face the dangers while ill-equipped and unprotected, and they did it. We are forever indebted to every single one of them.

One year later, we have unprecedented challenges, among which are waiting lists for elective procedures and life-saving red-flag surgeries. During the height of the third wave of the pandemic, trusts across the North were forced to cancel life-saving cancer surgeries for hundreds of patients. Tragically, we are now playing catch-up, but it may already be too late for some people. All the challenges that we face across the health and social care sector are intensified by our inability to plan because of the budgetary process. Planning requires confidence that there will be money to fulfil those plans. That is why we must have multi-year budgets. We must have confidence that we can fulfil the health and social care needs of our population over the long term and that we will have the funding to do that.

The health and social care sector faces many challenges. One of the longest-lasting and most consequential challenges is that of health inequalities. We live in a society where life expectancy and healthy living are largely determined by postcode. Prior to the onset of the pandemic, I started to look at the problem of oral health here in the North. The inequalities are immense and absolutely shocking. Across the North, particularly in our more deprived communities, large numbers of children are suffering needlessly from the largely preventable disease of tooth decay, with many requiring hospitalisation, a general anaesthetic and multiple extractions. The figures are shocking, with more than 70% of under-15s having tooth decay. In one year alone, more than 5,000 of our children required 23,000 teeth to be extracted at a cost of around £9 million to the healthcare budget. The truth is that we are operating under a strategy that is outdated and increasingly irrelevant. Yet, when the Department was asked to develop a new oral health strategy, it told us that the outdated strategy, which is not working, was enough. Oral health is just one example of where profound inequalities exist in our society today, but the important point is that those inequalities can and must be addressed once and for all.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. This debate will continue at 2.45 pm, after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Paula Bradley.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 1.00 pm.

2.00 pm

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Before we commence Question Time, I wish to inform Members that I have received a request from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to make a statement to set out how the Executive will approach relaxations as the first step towards a wider recovery process. Being aware of the significant interest from MLAs, the general public and the media on that issue, I have agreed to allow the FM and the DFM to update the Assembly as soon as possible. Therefore, I have agreed, courtesy of the Minister of Finance, to interrupt the debate on the Second Stage of the Budget Bill at 3.45 pm.

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Avian Influenza

1. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on levels of avian influenza. (AQO 1671/17-22)

Mr Lyons (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Two cases of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) H5N8 were confirmed on commercial poultry holdings in Northern Ireland in January 2021. The Chief Veterinary Officer confirmed the first case in Clough, County Antrim, on 6 January. The second case was confirmed near Lisburn on 11 January. Disease control zones were imposed around both premises to limit the spread of disease. The movement of poultry and captive birds, carcasses, eggs, used poultry litter and manure were restricted and required licences to be moved in or out of the zones. My Department worked closely with the industry, and, following the successful completion of disease-control activities and surveillance in the zones, those restrictions have now been lifted.

Those notifiable avian disease outbreaks in poultry are the first in Northern Ireland since 1998 and the first ever to involve a highly pathogenic strain of the virus. A further 16 suspected cases of notifiable avian influenza have been reported in Northern Ireland since 4 January. Suspected premises were restricted whilst a veterinary investigation was conducted at each site. Following testing at the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, all those suspected cases were negated.

Since October 2020, eight positive cases of HPAI H5N8 have been confirmed in wild birds across six different locations in Northern Ireland.

The risk of a notifiable avian influenza incursion in poultry flocks in Northern Ireland is still at the highest that it has ever been, and the avian influenza prevention zone will remain in place until that risk reduces. Veterinary officials will keep those conditions under regular review in collaboration with industry stakeholders. The need for excellent biosecurity to prevent further incursions will continue to be highlighted by my Department as a crucial way to protect the national flock.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answer up to now. Given what he reported, it looks like things do not come in ones, and the situation is serious. The Minister mentioned October and the number of cases that have been identified in different species since then. What level of cooperation is in place across Ireland to try to contain the situation in North/South terms?

Mr Lyons: We are on the same island, so cooperation on the issue is important. I know, because I brought it through the Executive a few weeks ago, that there is a requirement to notify when cases of COVID-19 are found in animals. It has become a notifiable disease. At that time, it was my understanding that there is a process in place whereby, if

suspected cases are discovered in either jurisdiction, the authorities north and south of the border can work together to do all that we can to stop further spread and make sure that the authorities, North and South, are aware. I am sure that a similar process is in place for this issue. We want to make sure that the sector is strong and remains strong. It is important to have procedures in place to deal with those issues when they arise. Of course, we hope that they will not.

Mr Humphrey: Minister, you mentioned risk in your response to the first question. With spring now hopefully having sprung and birds migrating on a much larger scale, do we run the risk of those migratory birds bringing in the disease from other jurisdictions? Are extra measures being put in place to deal with that?

Mr Lyons: At different times of the year, there will be different implications. The Member is absolutely right to mention the movement of birds, because wild birds are suspected to be the cause of the outbreak in this case. It is the most rational explanation. We need to do everything that we can to stop that happening and take into consideration the time of the year and how birds move about. Additionally, we will take measures to prevent such outbreaks. As I said, avian influenza is a notifiable disease, and disease control zones were immediately put in place around the infected premises. The Department is also engaging with stakeholders to keep them informed of the developments and to amplify the message of enhanced biosecurity to keep those birds safe.

Mr Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Agri-food Industry: COVID-19 Support

2. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on his Department's £25 million COVID-19 financial support package for the agri-food industry. (AQO 1672/17-22)

Mr Lyons: The past year has presented many difficulties for the agriculture industry. I am pleased that my Department has been able to provide some financial support to offset the losses caused by market disturbance across a number of sectors impacted on by COVID-19. To date, the Agricultural Commodities (Coronavirus) (Income Support) Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2020 has made payments of almost £19.2 million to approximately 11,300 businesses in the beef, dairy, sheep and potato sectors. Work is ongoing to assess and process remaining claims from about 20 applicants.

My Department has also announced financial support worth £4.2 million for the pig and poultry sectors. Some £2.2 million has been allocated to pig producers impacted on when Cranswick Country Foods was temporarily closed for two weeks at the end of August, and £2 million has been allocated to poultry producers that were specifically affected by the downturn in the market for hatching eggs. New legislation will be required to enable my Department to make payments to pig and poultry farmers. I plan to bring that to the Assembly in the coming days to enable the schemes to open and farmers to receive their payments by the end of March.

Mr Buckley: I place on record my thanks to the Minister for his work since taking up post to support those in our farming community and to his predecessor, who rightly

focused on and prioritised COVID-19 support for farmers impacted on by COVID-19.

Minister, you elaborated on this point, but perhaps you can go further in updating us on whether you have considered supporting the reduction in the price received for cull sows as a result of COVID-19?

Mr Lyons: I echo the Member's comments, not just about the job that I have been doing but about the job that Minister Poots did.

As a result of that work, we have the most extensive support for agriculture anywhere in the UK or Ireland, and that is to be welcomed. It shows the commitment that we have to agriculture in Northern Ireland and that we recognise its importance and that we do everything that we can to support our agriculture industry.

Minister Poots and his officials have met industry stakeholders regularly and have met representatives from the pig sector to discuss their concerns regarding cull sow prices. My officials continue to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on the market and are reviewing evidence to determine the loss incurred. However, there are other factors impacting on the market, and I will consider the issue carefully.

Mr McGlone: We have had numerous updates to the Committee regarding COVID support for Lough Neagh fishermen, the most recent of which was that it had been cleared by the Departmental Solicitor's Office (DSO), and the Department of Finance had been consulted and had come back to give it the green light. Can the Minister provide an update on when those payments will be approved? It seems to be an interminable time since they were first mooted by the Department.

Mr Lyons: This is an issue of concern, and I understand what the Member says about the length of time. I certainly hope that that can be progressed as soon as possible, but I do not have a definitive timescale for him. I recognise the work that he and many others have done on this and its importance. As soon as we can provide that information, we will.

Mr Gildernew: Minister, I appreciate that you have given some information on pigs and poultry. I welcome that, given the concentration of those sectors in south Tyrone. As well as the financial envelope, can you outline any additional information about the scheme and touch on organic milk producers and whether they are included in the hardship funds?

Mr Lyons: Yes, absolutely. The organic milk scheme, in particular, is an issue that I have been involved in. I recognise the issues with it, the differential loss that has been suffered and the need to provide support. I hope that an announcement will be made soon so that we can get that support to where it is needed.

Mr Blair: What considerations have been given to providing Northern Ireland wool producers with urgent financial assistance? They too have seen a fall in revenue as a result of COVID-19 and will continue to see its effects as we move towards recovery.

Mr Lyons: I am aware of the impact that COVID-19 has had on the global market for wool, although I am pleased to hear that wool markets have reopened and that local

wool from the 2019 and 2020 clip is being marketed, albeit at a much reduced market price.

On 15 February, I met representatives of Ulster Wool, British Wool, the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) and the National Sheep Association for an update on the impact that COVID-19 has had on global wool markets and the consequences for local sheep farmers and Ulster Wool. Representatives of British Wool detailed the figures that they had on the financial impact that COVID-19 has had. Those figures are now being submitted in writing to my Department and are being carefully considered.

With markets for lamb remaining strong this year throughout the summer and autumn, the reduced wool price will have a relatively small impact on total profitability, but we want to help where we can. In the longer term, I intend to work closely with stakeholders from the sheep industry and Ulster Wool on recovery and to see what we can do to develop a strategy for sustainable wool production. Meetings have taken place with my officials, Invest NI and industry stakeholders who use wool as part of their business to discuss options for a long-term strategy to increase wool utilisation.

2.15 pm

Mrs Barton: Minister, thank you for your answers so far. As you will be aware, the agricultural shows, which have been used to showcase much of our good agricultural produce in Northern Ireland, had to be cancelled last year and therefore did not have the opportunity to collect gate receipts that are used to pay for various running expenses during the year. Minister, would you have discussions with members of the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society with a view to giving them some financial support?

Mr Lyons: I am more than happy to have those meetings and conversations. I agree with the Member: our agricultural shows are really important, not just for the agricultural community but for the wider rural community. I am sure that many urban dwellers have also experienced and enjoyed what our agricultural shows have to offer. I fully recognise the difficulties that were caused as a result of COVID last year, and unfortunately that is also impacting on their ability to plan for this year too. That is a concern for me, and I am more than happy to look at ways in which we, as a Department, can offer our support. If a meeting would help to facilitate that, I will, of course, find time for it.

Illegal Dumping

3. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what progress is being made on addressing illegal dumping. (AQO 1673/17-22)

Mr Lyons: Responsibility for dealing with illegal dumping is shared between local councils, which deal with low-level waste offences, and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), which deals with large-scale waste criminality and hazardous waste. For large-scale, serious and/or organised waste offending, my officials continue to work locally and nationally with a range of law enforcement agencies, Departments and district councils to gather evidence, detect offenders and, where possible, report such criminality to the Public Prosecution Service.

My officials also continue to develop inter-agency working on the fly-tipping protocol, which is in the process of

being agreed with local councils. That will facilitate quick and efficient responses to smaller cases of reported illegal dumping; consolidate responsibilities for the NIEA and Councils; and maximise the effectiveness of our collaborative efforts to deal with illegal dumping.

Throughout the last year, my Department has been proactive in delivering a multimedia communications strategy that is aimed at combating illegal dumping, fly-tipping and littering. That was delivered via radio, social media and a flyer to 800,000 households in Northern Ireland, and it has led to increased awareness of the impact of illegal dumping amongst the general public, generating more reports for my officers to investigate and more opportunities to target offenders.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, you will be aware that dumping across Northern Ireland is happening on an industrial scale. Last year, there was dumping on an industrial scale on the Crumlin Road at Edenderry Industrial Estate, which led to my having to contact the Environment Agency and Belfast City Council. Information from the Environment Agency was slow to come — the response to requests for new information was nil — and Belfast City Council was slow, which was hugely frustrating for the people living beside the site, having to deal with rats, flies and all sorts of noxious smells. Will the Minister assure me, the House and the people of Northern Ireland that he is working more collaboratively with local government, particularly in the city of Belfast, to ensure that the issue is addressed once and for all across government, both regional and local?

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for raising that issue, because it impacts so much on the people that we represent. In recent days and weeks, I have had a number of complaints on such issues. It is not just the fact that illegal dumping is unsightly; it is all the other issues that come with that. It is right that we do all that we can to target that. My officials have been working closely with district councils to progress powers for the Environment Agency and for council officials. The agreed position is that the NIEA is responsible for the investigation of large-scale waste criminality and the removal of hazardous wastes, such as asbestos, and other fly-tipped waste that is over 20 cubic metres in volume. District councils take responsibility for deposits that are under 20 cubic metres, which might be more commonly understood as fly-tipping and the casual dumping of household waste by individuals. While there are different responsibilities between councils and the NIEA, it is absolutely right that there is collaboration; it should never be a case of passing the buck. Getting the job done so that we can deliver for the people whom we represent is the priority.

Mr McAleer: I am sure that all Members will agree that illegal dumping and waste is the scourge of the countryside, and I commend the councils and local communities that have taken control of our roads and byways and have been engaged in litter picking, particularly in the last year, during the lockdown.

The Minister will be familiar with the fact that illegal waste and dumping knows no borders or boundaries. Has he been engaged with his counterparts in the South of Ireland to try to take measures to tackle it?

Mr Lyons: The Member will be aware that I have been in office for only a short time, so I have not had that

opportunity to engage on the issue that he raises, but if there is a cross-border element to waste, it is important that the authorities on both sides of the border work together to try to deal with it. So, although I have had not had that direct engagement, it is absolutely the right thing that it happens where necessary.

Mr Catney: What recent analysis has your Department done of the materials that are being illegally dumped?

Mr Lyons: I think that the Member is asking what general analysis has been carried out on dumping. Unfortunately, I do not have that information here with me today, but I will be more than happy to see what, if any, analysis the Department has carried out on types of waste or where it originated from. I am sorry that I do not have further detail for the Member, but if he has a more specific query that he wants to bring to the attention of my Department, I will be more than happy to look at that and to furnish him with any information that we have.

Mr Chambers: There has been a substantial amount of illegal dumping in the countryside since lockdown. Frequently, if the owner of the land cannot be identified, there is often an issue between the councils and the Environment Agency about who should be responsible for its removal, to such an extent that the illegally dumped material is never removed. I know that, in an earlier answer, you referred to the fact that there should be no buck-passing, but, in such cases, who does the final responsibility actually lie with?

Mr Lyons: As I outlined, that depends on the type and nature of the waste and the dumping that has occurred. It is so frustrating for individuals and for us, as elected representatives, and I think that that is why he is raising it. We have examples in our constituencies, and, at times, there can be disagreements about who is responsible and who needs to come forward to deal with it. I hope that we can get that clarification and that people take responsibility in their own areas.

The most important thing is that the people who are doing it take responsibility, and, where we are able to find out who has been practising and partaking in that illegal behaviour, that they are punished as they should be. The Member will be aware that the legislation has provision for fines of up to £50,000 and a term of imprisonment not exceeding six months. It is very important that the responsibility, first and foremost, lies with the people who are involved in dumping when they should not be.

Waste Water: Coronavirus Monitoring

5. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the monitoring of waste water containing the novel coronavirus responsible for COVID-19. (AQO 1675/17-22)

Mr Lyons: My officials have been working with DEFRA, other devolved Administrations and the Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) to inform the development of a Northern Ireland programme for SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus surveillance in waste water. In November 2020, DAERA agreed to co-fund a research project with SFI to establish that waste water surveillance and reporting. In Northern Ireland, a team at Queen's University Belfast is leading that work, with collaborative partners in University College Dublin. They commenced their research in December

2020, with an initial scope of work that included sampling two waste water treatment sites in Northern Ireland, with plans to extend to a further six sites: eight sites in total. DAERA agreed a funding extension of the initial research grant award in January, which will enable the capability being established through the programme to process a greater number of samples in the coming months.

DAERA officials are engaging with their counterparts in the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency and the Department for Infrastructure to develop an effective cross-departmental approach to long-term waste water surveillance.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you very much, Minister. That is very helpful. I am pleased to hear that Queen's University in my constituency is involved in this and that there will be cross-departmental working. To what degree will the public be made aware of any of the findings of the research?

Mr Lyons: The Member will be aware that we are still at the early stages of the research. We have no data or results to share yet. It is right that the research should be publicised and made available to the general public so that they can see the benefits of doing this.

Perhaps the Member is referring specifically to those who will be affected when this is rolled out. Of course, it is right that, if the work is being done and issues are detected, the whole point will be to tell the local public so that they can take precautions as necessary.

Mr Beggs: Minister, you referred to ongoing monitoring. Has that activity and research determined that there is a need for additional protection for staff who work in waste water treatment works, or is there a need for additional treatment to protect the public against any resulting risks?

Mr Lyons: There is no doubt that the staff involved in this take all proper precautions. They always will, due to the nature of the work that they do. I am not aware of any particular impact on the public or extra treatment that might need to be carried out. If there is, I am more than happy to furnish the Member with that information. It is right that we highlight the importance of the issue. It is innovative and very positive to see this collaboration as we try to do more to deal with the pandemic.

Animal Welfare

6. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what resources are available to local councils to address animal welfare concerns. (AQO 1676/17-22)

Mr Lyons: My Department fully funds the companion animal welfare service, which is delivered by councils. Some £1.25 million has been allocated to the delivery of the service from April 2020 to March 2021. As part of the service, councils take a range of actions to address animal welfare concerns in companion animals. For example, they provide advice, issue improvement notices, take animals in need into their possession and initiate prosecutions where appropriate.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you very much for your answer, Minister. My office has been contacted by a number of constituents about puppy smuggling. What steps is the Minister taking to tackle puppy smuggling? The problem is increasing across Northern Ireland.

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for raising the issue. I have also noticed an increase in the number of people who are contacting me about the matter. It is an issue of growing concern.

My Department has established a multi-agency forum with representatives from the councils, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Harbour Police and departmental portal staff. The forum aims to ensure that the illegal breeding and movement of dogs and pups is addressed on a more joined-up basis. The Police Service of Northern Ireland is actively investigating individuals involved in illegal movements and has been involved in reactive seizures of animals.

My Department is also raising awareness of the matter through its online presence. Messaging includes general advice on how to spot an illegal puppy farm, putting a stop to illegal puppy farming and who to contact on suspicion of a puppy farm.

2.30 pm

Miss Woods: Mr Bradley must have seen my questions on puppy smuggling. The Minister mentioned the multi-agency forum and its aims. What engagement has there been to stop illegal cross-border puppy smuggling, given that we do not have Lucy's law in place in Northern Ireland?

Mr Buckley: Mr Newton is bringing it in.

Mr Lyons: Someone behind me has just said that Robin Newton is bringing that in. I am committed to ensuring that the welfare of pets, including pups and kittens, in Northern Ireland remains protected. I am aware that changes to the legislation in England mean that pups and kittens cannot be sold to third-party dealers. There is considerable merit in having similar protections for pups and kittens that are sold in Northern Ireland. I will support legislation on that issue.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Mullaghglass Landfill: Smell

T1. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the work being undertaken by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and the owner of Mullaghglass landfill to eliminate the smells that emanate from that site, something about which he has written to him and to a number of elected representatives in the Lagan Valley area. (AQT 1061/17-22)

Mr Lyons: I recognise that there is huge concern in the wider west Belfast/Lisburn area about this. People are contacting me via not only the Department but my constituency office and, in various ways, online. I recognise how important an issue it is, and I am aware of the large number of representations that elected representatives such as Mr Butler have made. There are a number of potential odour sources in the area, including Mullaghglass landfill, which is regulated by the NIEA, and there may be others. The NIEA has been working with the local council's environmental health officers to investigate residents' complaints and, through undertaking a number of odour checks, they have confirmed the continuing presence of odours in the areas surrounding Mullaghglass

landfill site. I have instructed NIEA staff to work with the local councils to increase their efforts to ensure that all regulated sites have in place all necessary measures to reduce the off-site odours that are impacting on the wider community.

Mr Butler: I am thinking of landfill sites in the wider context — not just Mullaghglass — and their environmental impact. What is being done to protect our environment and modernise how we deal with such waste?

Mr Lyons: It is a priority for us to ensure that we move away as much as possible from putting our waste into landfill. We want to see an increase in recycling, albeit that we have done a good job on that over the past number of years here in Northern Ireland. We are doing well in our recycling take-up. However, we also need to look at the various technologies that come online to deal with the issue. It is important to take a holistic approach.

Ministerial Decisions: Executive Agreement

T2. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given that his instruction to DAERA officials last Friday was, under the terms of the ministerial code, both cross-cutting and controversial, whether he accepts that only the Executive can take such a decision. (AQT 1062/17-22)

Mr Lyons: I have received advice on the issue. There is the opinion that issues that are cross-cutting in this way, as the Member described, should come to the Executive. It is my opinion that DAERA had been given the responsibility for the issue, but I know that others take a different view. However, if it is the case that issues relating to the protocol need to come to the Executive, many other things will require the support of the Executive before my Department can proceed to carry them out.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for his response. The Minister said that he was putting a halt to the construction of facilities. Those contracts were awarded by his Department. Is he seriously interfering in contracts and procurement to score political points?

Mr Lyons: I think that it is interesting that, in all the questions that I have received from Members on the other side of the House, they have never even prefaced their comments with any concern about the people of Northern Ireland. They have never expressed any concern about the damage that the protocol is doing to people in Northern Ireland. They have never even acknowledged concerns that there may be issues in getting goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. They do not acknowledge that we do far more trade with Great Britain than we do with anywhere else. It is absolutely my concern also that public money is being spent properly, and I think that it is entirely appropriate that, as discussions are ongoing with the Joint Committee and as a result of the uncertainty that is out there in front of us, we are not racing ahead in a way that would be considered unreasonable and inappropriate.

Garden Centres: Reopening Arrangements

T3. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he is supportive of garden centres reopening in a safe and appropriate way, given the health benefits to the public of working in

their garden and, indeed, the need for the businesses to be open at this time owing to their very limited window of business activity. (AQT 1063/17-22)

Mr Lyons: I agree with the Member for a number of reasons. We can look across to other parts of the UK where garden centres are completely open, and I think that even to have opened garden centres on a click-and-collect basis would have been good. It would support businesses that obviously need to have the plants and other materials sold because of the planting season and the nature that we find ourselves in at the minute. These places are normally in open spaces, where people can space out as they queue to pick up whatever they have ordered online or by telephone. While we have a stay-at-home message, it is entirely appropriate that we try to help people to stay at home as much as possible, and that can be via making sure that they can be out in their gardens enjoying them. For all those reasons, yes, I agree that we should find a way to allow them to be open.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for that answer. Minister, you will recognise, and, indeed, it is well established, that working in the garden can make a very positive contribution to the health of individuals, their mental health in particular. Minister, have you discussed this matter with the Minister of Health?

Mr Lyons: The Minister for the Economy brought a paper to the Executive, and that included the possibility of opening garden centres. The Executive did not agree to open them on a click-and-collect basis. I argued, at that time, that I thought that it would have been appropriate for garden centres to open, because of the impacts that it could have not only on the businesses themselves but on the health and mental health of all our constituents. Subsequently, I have also put that in writing to the Minister of Health to outline the reasons why I believe that it should be allowed. I take very seriously our responsibilities as an Executive to deal with the pandemic and to try to keep the R number under 1, but it is our responsibility and our duty to look at these issues as a whole; to look at the impact on COVID, on health and mental health and on businesses and the economy. Taking all those things in the round, I think that it would be appropriate to allow click and collect for that, and I will continue to advocate for that.

Protocol Port Checks: Changes

T4. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after stating that she finds it interesting that the Minister and his colleagues are now interested in the impact on the people in the North, given that they were not so interested in that impact when they were pushing through a hard Brexit, whether he can confirm her understanding that there have been no changes to the arrangements at the port since last Friday. (AQT 1064/17-22)

Mr Lyons: It is the case that the work on the checks in regard to the protocol continues.

Ms Kimmins: Can the Minister, therefore, confirm that his decision was based on advice from departmental officials?

Mr Lyons: When I made the decision last week, I based it on a number of factors that came to me from within the Department. I hope that the Member has had the opportunity to listen to the explanation that I gave in the

Assembly yesterday. There are a number of reasons that I took the decision that I took. One, of course, was the responsibilities that I have under section 46 of the Internal Market Act, which requires me to have a special regard for Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market and customs territory and for the free flow of trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. In addition, there are legal uncertainties and practical barriers to some of the things that we might be expected to do. After taking all of that into account, that is why I took the decision that I did.

Protocol: Risks to Retailers

T5. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the risks that were identified at a meeting that his predecessor held with some retailers in January. (AQT 1065/17-22)

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for raising that issue. It is important that we highlight what was said at the meeting. Its minutes are now public. A number of concerns were expressed about rules not changing for export health certificates. There were concerns over food service, hospitality, and the disruption to supply to schools, hospitals and prisons. Issues were raised about the official control regulations (OCR). It was stated that there is a need for clarity at the end of the easement period; otherwise, there will be a sudden and rapid reduction in range. There was also a difficulty with seeing how frozen and fresh food could comply. That is what took place, and that is what was said to Minister Poots at the meeting. He then accurately reflected what was in the minutes, after which other parties accused him of scaremongering on steroids. They were clearly wrong, and they owe Minister Poots an apology.

Mr Clarke: You said what I wanted you to say in your answer. You highlighted the fact that the Members opposite and some people in the media criticised Minister Poots. Going beyond Members, will you therefore call on the media to apologise for some of their commentary on Minister Poots's assertions at that time?

Mr Lyons: Absolutely. Everybody who called into question the accuracy of his comments needs to reflect on the fact that what they said has now been refuted very clearly. It is appropriate that people recognise the accuracy of what Minister Poots said at that time. Of course, a lot of people out there do not want to recognise that there will be issues. Instead, they want to put their head in the sand and think that a simple tinkering with the protocol is all that is needed. We face fundamental questions, concerns and challenges, and we need to wake up to them.

Protocol: Full Implications for NI

T6. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given that we all know the saying, "There are none so blind as those who will not see", which is applicable to some of the warnings that have been issued in relation to the protocol and goods in the internal market, to spell out the full implications for Northern Ireland of the rigorous implementation of the protocol. (AQT 1066/17-22)

Mr Lyons: I apologise to the Member, but I have only two minutes in which to answer that question. It will not be possible for me in that time to express the impact that it will have on Northern Ireland.

Where should I start? Perhaps with the red tape and the additional bureaucracy that it will cause. Perhaps I should mention the reduction in choice that there could be for consumers. Perhaps I should touch on the issues that hauliers will have and on the issues that have already presented themselves and will only get worse. We also have to take into consideration the barriers that will be placed on the UK internal market and all the difficulties that will come from that. We have to think of the businesses that say that they feel that they will not be able to trade with Northern Ireland because of the extra cost and complexity involved. We have restrictions on the livestock that can come into and go out of Northern Ireland. What about the difficulties in bringing guide dogs in to be trained and the impact that that will have on our citizens? In addition, we have seen issues with the importation of machinery.

That is only a short summary of the issues that we face. It is worse when you take them as a whole. That is why it is so, so, so important that we get an alternative to the protocol. No amount of tinkering will make it work. It needs to go.

2.45 pm

Ms Bunting: I am grateful to the Minister for his answer. In light of that, what discussions has he had with the DEFRA Secretary of State to highlight and reinforce that this cannot continue for Northern Ireland?

Mr Lyons: In my time in office, I have sent a number of letters to the Secretary of State outlining my concerns. I actually had a phone call with him last night. I highlighted the impacts that the protocol is having on Northern Ireland, the impacts that the end of the grace periods will have, and the horrendous situation that we will be in if OCR charging comes in. The Secretary of State represents a Cornish constituency. I asked him, "How would you feel if a border had been put in place between Cornwall and Devon or between Cornwall and the rest of the UK? How would you feel about needing common health entry certificates if you wanted to get produce into Cornwall? How would you feel about the extra paperwork? How would you feel if delivery companies said that they were not delivering to Cornwall?".

Those are the issues and concerns that people in Northern Ireland face. We are part of the United Kingdom, and it is intolerable that we face these problems. It would be intolerable for the Secretary of State to face them as well. That is why action needs to be taken

Mr Speaker: Time is up. Thank you for that. Members, please take your ease for a moment or two.

Assembly Business

Mr Clarke: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Standing Order 19(5) relates to questions being answered in a timely manner. I have been tabling questions to the Health Minister since September of last year, many of which have related to Muckamore. The Muckamore issues and investigations are well rehearsed. I have asked questions about the fact that some of the cameras have not been working and about the complaints that some of the families have submitted. It is unreasonable that, after five months, those questions remain unanswered. Indeed, I tabled a subsequent question to ask when they would be answered and have failed to get an answer to that as well.

Mr Speaker, through your office, will you liaise with the Minister's Department to get answers to those questions, please?

Mr Speaker: The Member is aware that I have very limited authority to address the matter of unanswered questions. However, I am content to allow Members to raise those matters and have them put on the record by way of points of order. I take every opportunity that I can to encourage the Executive to facilitate and respect the scrutiny role of the Assembly and its Members. There are other measures that you should consider: everything from submitting topical questions or questions for oral answer, to tabling a motion, to taking the matter to the Committee on Procedures. As I said, I have limited authority, as the Member is well aware, but it is important to put it on the record. I support your doing so.

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

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Second Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 17/17-22] be agreed. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The first Member on my speaking list is the Chair of the Communities Committee, Ms Paula —

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): Bradley.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: — Bradley. It was gone. Sorry, Paula [*Laughter.*]

Ms P Bradley: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I did not think that I was that forgettable [*Laughter.*] I will never speak to you again.

Almost a year ago in the House, I assured the Minister of Finance that the Committee for Communities would work closely with the Department to achieve all that it could, whatever its budget allocation. However, now that we have had two briefing sessions with officials, on 28 January and 4 February, it is not an overstatement to say that the Committee is dismayed at the allocations for Communities in the draft Budget for 2021-22; in fact, in some cases, the current allocations are so low when compared with the bids that the Committee wondered whether it was the reality or just a worst-case scenario being presented to it to garner support. Sadly, as the briefing continued, it became clear that it was the reality, and the Committee is fully supportive of the Minister as she continues to lobby for additional funding to support the most vulnerable in our society. Any flexibility from Treasury to carry over the significant amount of money that came from it at the end of last year will have no trouble finding a home in Communities. It is worth highlighting that the Assembly's Research and Information Service recently drew our attention to the fact that non-ring-fenced resource DEL for Communities has decreased by over £33 million between 2016-17 and 2020-21; in fact, according to the presentation, over that time, Communities is the only Department to have seen such a total reduction in non-ring-fenced resource DEL.

Before I go into detail, I will take the opportunity to comment on the Budget process. The Communities Committee, like others, wishes to express its dissatisfaction with the nature of the 2020-21 Budget process. Granted there were delays due to the Chancellor's spending review being late, but the Executive also failed to consider the draft Budget in a timely manner and so lost the Committees valuable scrutiny time and opportunity. The Committee understands that the impact of COVID-19 has meant that the plan to provide a full multi-year Budget has had to be reconsidered, so here we are again facing a single-year Budget that makes planning for services and programmes so much more difficult and therefore the scrutiny role of the Committee equally difficult. With only a one-year Budget, it is difficult to align the Budget beyond short-term priorities. However, for

COVID recovery, we really need to align spend to medium-term strategic recovery priorities as well.

I will move on to highlight the Committee's concern at the overall draft Budget position for 2021-22 before going into some of the key details for Communities. Overall, the proposed budget of £824 million is effectively £1.5 million less than the budget for 2020-21. As a clear example of the pressures, a basic bid for £18 million for baseline funding for pay and inflationary pressures has not been met. Members expressed significant concern that the overall funding in the draft Budget for Communities to deliver on its NDNA commitments falls significantly short across all areas. Overall, the Department's bids for £149.1 million of COVID-19 funding have not been met. Those bids were for a range of crucial activities help to ease the economic impacts of COVID-19 and support recovery.

At last week's meeting, the Committee was somewhat heartened to hear that, in producing the draft Budget, the Executive had agreed to retain some COVID funding to allow Departments time to refine their pressures. Despite that, the Committee believes that the draft Budget allocation will have huge detrimental impacts on welfare benefit delivery, employment support, support for homelessness, Supporting People, the arts, heritage and sport sectors, community support programmes and support for councils.

The Department bid for almost £330 million of net capital and was allocated almost £225 million. That represents an increase of over £10 million on last year's allocation and will, at least, allow the Department to meet its statutory obligations. The Committee asked officials the hard questions about what efficiencies could be made going forward and was advised that an urgent exercise was being done to look at what could be stopped, paused or done differently in all areas. With the best will in the world, it is unlikely that any creative efficiencies that the Department can come up with will be sufficient to meet the drastic shortfall in funding for Communities.

The Committee's concern is being compounded by the continued uncertainty about the Shared Prosperity Fund. We heard at our last meeting that Whitehall's engagement and information on that fund has been severely lacking and there has been a failure to engage on the £220 million pilot programme that was promised in the spending review.

I will take a few minutes to highlight some of the Committee's concerns about the resource allocations for Communities. It is hard to know where to start because there is so much need in our communities, even before COVID.

The Committee acknowledges the welcome COVID funding of over £271 million received by the Department during 2020-21, with over £85 million of that allocated to councils. The Committee has scrutinised closely the COVID funding programmes for councils, charities, sports and the arts over the past year, so members were shocked to learn that the draft Budget meant that the Department was starting 2021-22 with zero for COVID-specific schemes and that many bids had not been met for those schemes at this point.

On welfare delivery, at the last count, the universal credit caseload had increased by almost 130% during the past 10 months and is expected to increase further as the furlough scheme ends, yet a bid for £149 million

of COVID funding has not been met in the draft Budget. That will have a significant impact on the plans to recruit 900 additional staff to pay working-age benefits. Never mind the five-week wait: we could soon be looking at a six- or seven-week wait for people who are receiving their first claims for universal credit. Many more families could be left without proper advice as no recurring funding is provided in the draft Budget for independent advice work to support welfare reform change. The Committee was met with frustration from organisations as money from discretionary support schemes was handed back unspent. It consistently asked the Department to consider redirecting money where the Budget process allowed.

The Committee has highlighted on a number of occasions the delays to labour market interventions, particularly the delay to the Job Start scheme for young people. It has expressed concern that Northern Ireland is well behind Great Britain in introducing such a scheme, and, as there is no funding for labour market interventions in the draft Budget, that causes huge uncertainty. The Committee is equally concerned about the knock-on effects on the Department's annually managed expenditure spend, as it will not be able to help people to move into work and to reduce their dependence on benefit in the next financial year.

The Committee has been consistently concerned by the inadequate funding for the Supporting People programme, which supports people to live independently in our community. Although it remains a protected area in the Budget, there has been no real-terms increase in recent years, which, of course, means a substantial decrease in real terms.

On 'New Decade, New Approach' — where do I even begin on 'New Decade, New Approach'? — the Department made bids totalling £139 million, and bids totalling £96 million were not met. Only the bid for existing welfare mitigations has been met in the draft Budget. How will any new welfare mitigations be delivered? Where is the money to support amending the special rules for terminal illness and the removal of the welfare reform two-child policy?

At its meeting on 18 February, the Committee considered the three elements of the Department's proposals on welfare mitigations work. There will soon be a Bill, which will go through by accelerated passage, to provide for the extension of the social sector size criteria mitigation scheme; a statutory rule that will extend the remaining welfare mitigation schemes; and two further statutory rules that will amend the existing mitigation schemes by closing the loopholes in those schemes.

Accelerated passage was agreed by the Executive over a year ago as the end of March 2020 was fast approaching. March 2021 is now upon us. Over the past year, the Committee repeatedly asked the Department to engage with stakeholders and the Committee on the proposed legislation and the review of welfare mitigations. Yet as recently as last week's meeting, it was still not possible for the Committee to be given a definitive list of the organisations with which the Department intends to engage.

3.00 pm

Despite being exceptionally busy with the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill, the Committee made time to hold its own informal stakeholder event on 26 January to discuss the review of welfare mitigations, universal credit and the terminal illness rules. Members are very concerned about the pace of action on those issues and their impact on vulnerable people and families.

Prior to Christmas, the Committee was pleased to hear from the Minister about long-awaited plans to reform the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. However, the bid for £3.4 million for housing transformation was not met. That impacts on the ability to bring about the Housing Executive's revitalisation programme.

Bids for strategies for the Irish language, Ulster Scots, disability, gender equality, sexual orientation and anti-poverty were also not met. What sort of signal does that send to those groups waiting for a strategy and action in those important areas?

I will move to capital allocations. As I stated, the Department's capital bid is in a somewhat better position as almost £330 million of net capital allocation represents a £10.7 million increase when compared with the Department's 2020-21 allocation. The Committee is reassured that that allocation will allow the Department to meet its statutory obligations, such as housing disabled adaptations and renovation grants, and its social housebuilding target of 1,900 units in 2022.

The Committee fully supports the aims for any additional funding for use in prioritised projects in regeneration, housing, culture, the arts, sports, libraries and other sectors, although I suspect that it will be stretched very thinly, judging by the many necessary projects.

The Committee is pleased to see £38.8 million of financial transactions capital in the draft budget to support the co-ownership housing scheme in 2021-22. The Committee continues to keep a watching brief on the regional stadia and subregional stadia programmes, and was told at its meeting this week that the current cost estimate for Casement Park is now £112 million. The allocation of public funding remains at £62.5 million, with additional committed GAA partnership funding of £15 million. That is still subject to change depending on the conclusion of all matters associated with the planning application. The Committee is concerned that there will be similar cost increases for subregional stadia as there are no final plans for that either.

The Committee is concerned at the impacts that the draft budget will have on section 75 categories. It will impact on young people in particular, given that there will be limitations on labour market interventions. It is likely to impact on people with a disability, who will now be even further from the labour market. It will impact on people with dependants, as households on benefits such as universal credit are likely to experience delays in payments. The lack of funding for the advice sector will also impact on people most in need of financial support.

However, the Committee was somewhat reassured by confirmation at last week's meeting that the Minister has given an assurance that those services will continue next year as an essential element of the Department's budget. The Committee therefore waits, with some unease, on the

outcome of the Department's draft budget equality impact assessment public consultation, which closed only last week.

I will finish by reiterating what I said in a previous Budget speech last October, because it warrants restating: we should not show a lack of ambition in our planning. Regrettably, however, our ambition for our population continues to be tempered by our finances and the ongoing COVID crisis. Thankfully, the Programme for Government draft outcomes framework is now out for consultation, because, without a Programme for Government, we will not be able to scrutinise properly the link between budget bids and allocations and outcomes.

Without that, we stand accused of reacting, rather than planning, and of leaving the most vulnerable in our communities without access to the support, advice and basic financial assistance that they need.

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): As I have said in previous Budget-related debates over the past year, we are in very strange budgetary times, which has had an impact on the Department for the Economy's budgeting.

The Committee was briefed by departmental officials at its meeting on 10 February 2021 on the Department's allocation in the draft 2021-22 Budget. As I indicated in yesterday's debate on the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account, over the past year, the Committee has engaged regularly with officials on budgeting in relation to COVID and EU exit. The Department has seen vast budget inflows and outflows, making scrutiny extremely difficult for the Committee.

The Committee registered some concern that the Department's modelling for COVID response schemes has lacked accuracy, leading to considerable underspends on early schemes, including over £50 million being returned to the centre last year. The Committee appreciates the greater flexibility to move funds between COVID relief efforts, which was announced by the Finance Minister. However, the Department for the Economy has continued to make significant returns to the centre as well as making significant bids for urgent in-year funding.

The Committee welcomes the Minister for the Economy's publication of an economic recovery action plan, which draws heavily on the Committee's micro-inquiries into energy, skills and rebuilding the economy. The Committee's intention in undertaking those inquiries was to inform the Department's development of policy, and it is always gratifying to see the Committee's work featuring so prominently in such a major piece of departmental policy. As I highlighted yesterday, the economic recovery action plan requires considerable in-year funding beyond the draft Budget allocation of almost £300 million. I urge the Economy Minister to engage with the Finance Minister and other Executive colleagues to ensure that that necessary funding is forthcoming.

I turn to the draft Budget for 2021-22. It is timely that I do that and that I indicate the unsatisfactory nature of the Budget process from the perspective of Committee scrutiny. Although the Committee has seen the high-level funding allocations, members would greatly appreciate having much greater granularity in the detail that is provided to the Committee, down, say, to the level of £1 million and above.

The Department's non-ring-fenced resource DEL baseline remains at £805.4 million for 2021-22, despite the significant pressures placed on its budget because of COVID and Brexit. The Department has indicated that it has already made substantial advance bids for funding in the 2021-22 financial year. However, the Committee has expressed some concerns about that kind of budgeting.

The Department has been allocated a further £15.8 million of non-baseline funding for EU exit, EU match funding and its share of the Executive's change in A-level policy funding. In addition, the Department has been allocated £12.2 million for operating the protocol. The Committee noted those funds and has requested that the Department provide details on how the protocol-related funding will be spent.

The non-ring-fenced resource DEL baseline budget will be allocated across seven business areas. Committee members expressed concern that the allocations for economic and business development and for InterTradelreland were static, considering the role of those business areas in providing funding and other support to businesses as a result of COVID and EU exit. Officials confirmed that they had anticipated that the Department's advance bids for funds in 2021-22 would allow additional resources to be applied in those business areas to supplement the baseline budgets. Officials highlighted that the Department would face £17.8 million of unfunded inescapable resource pressures. In addition, existing COVID relief schemes will mean an unfunded pressure of £31.7 million in 2021-22. Those deficits do not address further requirements to provide support to businesses and other stakeholder groups as a result of COVID and EU exit.

Committee members are concerned that so many vital streams of work do not yet have identified funding streams. The Department's dependence on additional funding allocations from the Executive and the Treasury does not represent good budgeting. The Department has made an advance bid for £147 million for COVID relief in 2021-22 to cover a high street voucher scheme and a holiday-at-home voucher scheme.

Those schemes are key to the Department's plan to help the economy to recover by stimulating spending. Again, members are concerned about whether funding will be forthcoming and whether those schemes will provide value for money as part of an economic stimulus package.

Advance bids of £167 million for economic recovery funding in 2021-22 were made in October 2020. The Department acknowledged the difficulties around timing with respect to recovery spending; applying funds too early risks their being wasted or underspent, while applying them too late risks their being ineffective or coming too late to support business recovery.

Skills development will be a vital part of building recovery. The Committee has undertaken considerable work on that. The Committee, therefore, supports the Department in its belief that skills will be key to economic recovery and greater prosperity going forward. Members, again, expressed concern when officials highlighted that the Department would require £460 million of additional funding to bring spending back to 2010-11 levels in real terms.

To that end, the Committee has written to the First Minister and deputy First Minister to highlight the need

for investment in skills and to advocate that the Executive look favourably on skills-related bids that the Department makes going forward. Similarly, the Committee has written to the Economy Minister to urge her to prepare the necessary bids for submission to the Executive once additional funds have been identified.

The Department indicated that its draft capital allocation of £89.8 million represents 70% of its capital spending plans. However, officials suggested that they were broadly content with that allocation and, again, believe that they will be able to make successful bids for additional funding in-year. The Committee welcomed the allocations for aspects of New Decade, New Approach and city deals and will continue to monitor progress on those commitments.

The Committee is aware of the heavy toll that pressurised working on COVID relief has taken on departmental staff, which is exacerbated by the number of vacancies in the Department. The Committee is concerned that many aspects of the Department's work in key COVID and EU exit response areas are unfunded going into the new financial year, as well as the Department's reliance on advance bids for funding being met in-year. The issues that have been highlighted around the deficit in funding for skills have the potential to derail any economic recovery or development if they are not addressed. With the demands on the Executive's funding, the Committee worries that the Department's needs will not be met.

I will now make some remarks as Sinn Féin's economy spokesperson. Yesterday, as part of my contribution, I reflected my view that groups of businesses and workers still need specific support packages with the funding that is available to spend before the end of the financial year. I will not rehearse all that, other than to say that it is my strong view that, having responsibility for businesses, the Economy Minister, in particular, must look at flexibilities that could be introduced in existing schemes to provide that much-needed support.

As we look forward to the incoming financial year, we know that this is a difficult Budget and that there are constraints on what the Executive would like to do to deliver on the type of recovery that we want and need. That, of course, is not helped by a single-year Budget and the resulting inability to plan spending over the next few years. It is also exacerbated by the way in which funding for COVID support has come to the Executive over the past year — a bit here and a bit there — making it impossible to plan properly how to spend it. It looks like that for the incoming year, too.

The Budget for the forthcoming financial year is still in draft form. Tomorrow, the British Chancellor will announce further allocations. Those allocations will be welcome. However, they show the lack of strategic thinking from the British Government last November, when it was clear that we faced a second wave of restrictions. They have been reactive, rather than proactive, during this crisis. One has only to look at the furlough scheme, which was mooted to cease at the end of October and, subject to a last-minute reprieve, was extended until the end of January and then to the end of April. Hopefully, a further extension will now be forthcoming. EU states, like France, gave certainty months ago that their job support schemes would continue into next year. That would give businesses the confidence to be able to plan going forward. Hopefully, we will see a longer-term stimulus coming from the British Government,

because, let us be clear: that is exactly what is needed to reboot the economy when it is safe to reopen.

That brings me to the publication, last week, of the Economy Minister's economic recovery action plan. It was good to see a plan for economic recovery. I do not think that any of us would disagree with the plan's priority areas of skills, a greener economy, trade and investment.

It was a missed opportunity, however, to set out an Executive vision of an overarching strategy for economic recovery that had cross-departmental buy-in and that clearly set out the response to the new trading arrangements post-Brexit. It is really important that we look to those new trading arrangements and deal with the difficulties that have resulted from implementing a major change in trading. We must politically and diplomatically work with businesses to do that and then support them to respond to the new reality and the opportunities that it presents, including the reorientation of supply chains locally and across the island. We can rebuild and strengthen the all-island economy through cooperation that benefits North and South.

3.15 pm

It was disappointing that the economic recovery action plan did not include the New Decade, New Approach commitments on workers' rights. We have heard many times in the Chamber, and in commentary over the past year, about the need to recognise our essential workers. Upholding and strengthening their rights, as was agreed by all parties before the restoration of the institutions, will send out a strong signal. I know that the Economy Minister has previously spoken about wanting to have a skills fund and an economic recovery fund. I wonder whether the Finance Minister in his response can reflect on any discussions that he has had with the Economy Minister about funding her economic recovery plan.

Going forward, the Committee wants attention to be paid to particular areas to enable economic recovery, and there is likely broad support for that. One such area is the need to support our young people who have been badly hit by the pandemic. Young people are more likely to have been furloughed. Recent Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) statistics show that there are 26,000 more unemployed 16- to 24-year-olds than at the same time last year. We therefore need to ensure that there is a strategy to provide opportunities for young people, and it is an area in which there is a need for the cross-departmental approach to economic recovery that I talked about earlier.

We also need to support our small businesses, self-employed people and entrepreneurs, who have been badly hit by the pandemic. They are important employers in their own right in all our communities. We need to support them to get back to doing business when it is safe and to rebuild their confidence and capacity, and that will require both practical and financial intervention to help them respond to the new working normal. There is a particular role for Invest NI in that, and its remit needs to support SMEs and microbusinesses as well as those seeking to export. I will continue to raise that matter with Invest NI and the Department for the Economy.

Finally, we need to have a real focus on a green recovery, and, again, that requires taking a real cross-departmental

approach. I was glad to see the focus on a green recovery in the Economy Minister's strategy. A clear commitment to a green new deal would have sent out a very positive signal, however. Again, that was a New Decade, New Approach commitment covering infrastructure, skills and job creation. A green new deal can be a major driver for the type of jobs-led recovery that we want to see: infrastructure development to support decarbonisation; training opportunities for our young people; investment in R&D to help with job creation in expanding fields such as renewable energy; and a retrofitting programme to help tackle fuel poverty. Obviously, paying for all those things will be a huge challenge. I have already spoken about how difficult a Budget we face. One reason that Sinn Féin advocates the devolution of greater fiscal and borrowing powers is to give the Executive the ability to plan for the type of recovery that we in the North need: a recovery that is responsive to our local economy and citizens. That is something that everyone here should be able to get on board with, in order that we can have the conversation about what we invest in and how we pay for it.

Mr O'Toole: I listened with interest to what the previous contributor said, and, indeed, to what several Members who spoke previously said. Debating Budgets, whether Budget Bills, draft Budgets or spring Supplementary Estimates, can feel a little bit like living in a Beckett play, as we tend to say the same things over and over again. Whether it is about our local pet projects or the need for more longer-term budgeting, more strategy or a more joined-up approach across the Executive and better behaviour from the Treasury, the same things tend to get said again and again, but, unfortunately, they never seem to happen. The stage directions seem to mean that we stay put and repeat the same lines again and again.

Nevertheless, I will play my part today and repeat some of my lines about the need for longer-term budgeting and a more strategic approach. They are vital, and we can do something about them. I hope that, despite what I have just said, the next couple of years — indeed, the next few months — might bring some glimmer of hope for a better approach to budgeting and spending money in this place.

Yesterday, we debated the spring Supplementary Estimates during which I, and others, decried the lack of a coherent plan from the Executive and, indeed, the lack of real proactivity from the Department and the Minister of Finance during the financial year 2020-21 in delivering that joined-up approach.

Today, as we examine the latest Budget Bill, I will focus on the financial year to come and outline what we should be delivering on and where we should be prioritising. I will offer some thoughts on how we might finally wrestle free from the debilitating cycle of short-term budgeting and improvised, unstrategic policy. The past year has shown us, more starkly than ever, what the absence of an agreed Programme for Government means. As I said yesterday, we have not had a Programme for Government since 2016 — before Brexit. It seems like a dream period now, but, before Brexit, it did exist. I waved about a copy of the draft Budget, which referred to the 2016 still draft Programme for Government outcomes that some Departments are still working to in the absence of any other agreed outcomes or priorities. In the absence of those agreed outcomes or priorities, our budgeting process, by default, becomes the de facto Programme for Government.

I recognise and understand and, to an extent, sympathise that neither the Finance Minister nor the Department may want to take on that strategic coordinating role in the de facto sense, but I am afraid that they have to, and we should all recognise that. The Minister said in the Chamber yesterday that the means by which the devolved institutions receive their funding is a huge determinant of how we do government here, and he is right. How we receive the block grant and how we are funded, not just the quantum or the cash amount or the legal means by which the Treasury sends money to the Consolidated Fund to be drawn down by Departments — the actual structure by which that money is spent determines how we do government here. That is clear from how we debate monitoring rounds and legislation.

We end up, by default, debating the priorities of the Executive, and we have to ask ourselves whether that is a good thing. I do not mean the principle of drawing down money from the Treasury, because that is the system that we have. I am not saying that we should not take money from the block grant and the Consolidated Fund, but we need to ask hard questions about whether that model is leading to bad outcomes for policy delivery here.

I agree with the Finance Minister that the Budget process, where we receive allocations, occasionally in a very unplanned, uncoordinated and peremptory way from the Treasury, leads to negative outcomes. Members opposite will point out that we have received significant support from the UK Treasury — we are taxpayers here, too — over the past year. That is true. No one would deny that that financial support has been critical to supporting public services and businesses. However, it is also true that the way in which that money has been disbursed has not necessarily led to good policy outcomes. I am sure that the Finance Minister would agree. However, the corollary of that is that the Finance Department and the Finance Minister have a huge role to play in setting and executing strategic policy goals for the whole Executive and, by extension, for all the people of this region.

It is not enough for our Finance Department to act as an inbox for departmental bids — a pigeonhole for cash — or, as is often the case, cynicism from the Treasury in London. Our Budget process needs to act as a driver in the absence of a Programme for Government — a critical and dominant driver in setting priorities and delivering policy — but it is simply not doing that at the minute. Yes, COVID has made this year unique, but, even when you strip out the COVID effect, it has, in many ways, been a typical year in terms of improvisation and haggling over allocations.

That is one of the striking factors about this past year. It has been, to use a phrase, same, same but very different. It has been unique and unprecedented in the sense that we have had an unprecedented global pandemic that has shaped how Governments everywhere have had to deliver public services. It has completely shut down our economy in large part, and the Executive, like Administrations everywhere, have had to react to that, but, at the same time, it has reinforced many of the habitual budgeting behaviours that exist in this place.

I am afraid that it starts upstream, as it were, in London, with the haphazard and occasionally slightly thoughtless way in which money is allocated via Barnett. That information is then communicated to officials in the Minister's Department and flows through to the way that

we budget here. The Finance Department canvasses bids from other Departments that are worried about retaining their baseline budgets, whether they will be able to spend allocations that come in late in the financial year, what that will mean for their baseline for the next year and, truthfully, what that will mean for the political position of their Minister and his or her party — all civil servants have to think about that, too. All those strange behaviours that are reinforced by our Budget process are not conducive to policy outcomes for the people whom we serve. That is the blunt and hard truth of it. As we go forward, we need to properly acknowledge that and think about how we can change it. I will come to it in a little while, but I think that there are ways to do that and light at the end of that tunnel. It may not be a very bright light, but there is some light.

As I said, COVID has made it an unbelievably strange and unique year, but it has been typical in the ways that I have described and, in a sense, has reinforced some of the bad behaviours — not necessarily “bad” in the sense of being malign or malicious but “bad” in the sense of not being particularly conducive to good policy outcomes. It has also shown the absolute necessity for priorities for this place in the short and long term. Today, we will debate a road map, set of principles, pathway or whatever it is out of the current restrictions. That is something that people throughout society and the economy have been yearning for so that they have some sort of framework to understand where they are going in the short term. They also want something else that we have signally failed to deliver to them over many years: a pathway through the medium term. Whatever — it is always worth saying it in caveat in this place — your constitutional preference, there are clear medium- and long-term things that need to be resolved in this jurisdiction. As I said, we hope to see a road map out of lockdown today, but we need something much more ambitious for this place in the short and medium term as we emerge from the pandemic or, at least, from its most acute phase.

As we emerge, we will enter a new phase in our economic life. We are at a crossroads in more ways than one. What are those crossroads? First and most obviously, we are coming out of a pandemic that will affect the way that we all live and work in ways that we have not predicted yet. We know that it will lead to much greater working from home and to disruption in significant areas of the economy and, sadly, that it has already shut down large areas of retail and hospitality in towns and cities here and everywhere. Our economy and the way that we work will have to adapt to that.

Also, as we know, for good or ill, the pandemic coincided with the UK’s departure from the European Union, which has been a subject of much contention over the past five years and over the past couple of months in particular in this place. No doubt it will continue to cause contention with regard to the trading relationships between the UK and Europe, Northern Ireland’s trading relationship with Great Britain and, indeed, Northern Ireland’s position vis-à-vis the European single market. To come to my point, Northern Ireland is now at the crossroads of the European single market and the UK market. That means that we have something that we have never had before: a potential competitive advantage. In the past, two of the things that have led to us not having the kind of economic performance that our people need are the fact that we are geographically marginal and the fact that we are, in

some ways, a hybrid society with, shall we say, contention around national identification and a dual quality, whereby we look both east and south. Those two qualities, which have been hang-ups in the past, might be positive benefits. Because of the protocol, we have access to both markets, so, in my party’s view, we need to maximise the benefits from that while acknowledging and dealing with the real consequences that flow from the disruption to trade on the Irish Sea, absolutely, but also to services on an all-island basis.

We would like to see proper budgeting for the potential opportunities in being at the crossroads of those two markets. We would like to see Invest NI, as Caoimhe Archibald mentioned, InterTradeIreland, IDA Ireland and the Department for International Trade work to an agreed set of priorities for inward investment and trade opportunities in Northern Ireland that are based on our crossroads status or our dual market access.

3.30 pm

As we leave the acute phase of COVID, we will have to deal with another key priority, which is the devastating effect that COVID and the associated lockdowns have had on our young people. My party has published a list of priorities that it wants to see in the long-term recovery for our economy and society. One of them, as I said, is taking advantage of our new unique dual market access. Another is creating a new deal for young people. From primary schoolchildren all the way up to graduates in their 20s, young people have been hit by the consequences of COVID. We know what the problems are; many were evident before COVID but have been reinforced by it. To be fair to the Education Minister, he is doing some of that work already. We want a proper skills strategy and a strategy that looks at the causes and effects of the brain drain. Uniquely in these islands, we export a very high volume of talented young people who never come back. We want to see action on that.

Finally, the third clear priority that is critical and a long-term priority that we should attach budget lines to is reform of our public services. We have seen in the pandemic the extraordinary effort and commitment of our health service in particular in dealing with the situation, but we know that our health service remains in a permanent rolling crisis. We know that waiting lists are absolutely unacceptable. They are devastating families and individuals. We need a proper commitment to overhaul our health service in a way that properly invests in transformation. Those are three potential priority areas that we think are critical.

I want to briefly talk about how we do budgeting, the fiscal council that has been mooted and the fiscal commission. Work on the three broad areas that I just talked about — a new deal for young people; taking advantage of being at the crossroads of two markets; and reforming and overhauling our public services — is possible only if we have a much better and coherent long-term approach to budgeting. As I said at the beginning of my speech, debating budgeting here feels at times like a Beckett play. We all say that we are committed to multi-year budgets, but no one ever does anything about it. It is a bit like what Mark Twain said about the weather:

“Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it.”

Hopefully, we can do something about it. I believe the Minister when he says that he is committed. I know that he wants to bring papers on the fiscal council and the fiscal commission to the Executive and the Assembly. It is critical that we do something about it, because whatever your view of the big challenges that face us, how we dealt with COVID, Brexit and the protocol or our constitutional future, it is clear that there are long-term structural issues that we need to attack in this society and region. In order to do that, we need to attach long-term Budget lines and spending to them. It is all well and good constantly coming up with reform plans every few years, but, if we do not have the political commitment and the finance attached to them, they will not work.

I hope that, by the time that we come back to debate the next Budget Bill, we will have detail not only on a fiscal council that will properly hold the Executive to account on the sustainability of spending and their commitment to transformation but detail on a one-off fiscal commission that looks in the long term at how we do budgeting and policy delivery in this place and at how our potential new powers can be linked to enable us to do that work better.

Finally, before I conclude, which I am sure people will be delighted about, it is critical that we have the power of economic forecasting attached to both those bodies. It is really important that we, as MLAs, and the broader public in Northern Ireland understand not just why we have individual Budget lines or what we are doing on education policy or skills, for example, but how that feeds into our broader economic forecast over years.

I will conclude my remarks on the Budget Bill. We will be back here, no doubt, in the next few months, and I will repeat my lines, like a character in a Beckett play, calling for longer-term budgeting and multi-year Budgets — or maybe not; maybe we will have some progress.

Mr Nesbitt: Mr O'Toole says that we use Budget debates to rehearse our pet loves, pet hates or pet projects, but I will resist the temptation not to do the same again.

I will start by repeating what I said this morning in an intervention on Mr Frew: police numbers are close to crisis. On 8 February, the number was 7,005. The Chief Constable warned that he may need to shed 300 officers because of a budget deficit. That would leave him a net 800 below the 7,500 in 'New Decade, New Approach' and in Chris Patten's recommendations, published all those years ago in September 1999 when he chaired the Independent Commission on Policing. I draw the attention of the House to recommendation 44, because this is the impact of losing 500 or 800 officers:

"Policing with the community should be the core function of the police service and the core function of every police station."

Frankly, that cannot be done if the numbers drop so far below the 7,500 that Mr Patten recommended. He also said that there should be a part-time reserve of 2,500 so that, at any given time, the Chief Constable should be able to deploy up to 10,000 officers. He is well short of that.

My second point — I have only three — is about payments to victims and survivors of the conflict who are suffering severe permanent disability. It took those people years, but they have won the argument. Those payments are in statute. We have not just a moral obligation but a legal

obligation to pay them. Yet, we have not made payments because of an ongoing and deeply unedifying squabble about which pot of money they come out of. I understand that, for politicians, it is important to have a debate about the pot of money from which those payments come, but let us look at it from the point of view of victims and survivors. Whatever pot of money it comes from, it is the public purse. Victims and survivors have been told in law that the payment is theirs. They deserve it.

I invite Members to think about the issue from the point of view of victims and survivors. Take yourself back to the early 1970s. Every day, the Troubles are at their most vicious. A young wife, pregnant with her second child, is changing her first child's nappy, when her husband comes in to say goodbye because he is going to work. She is so busy changing the nappy that he kisses her on the top of her head and says, "I'll see you later, love". He never saw her again. He was dead within the hour, murdered at his workplace. Skip forward to the point where that young woman is going for compensation. She made a terrible mistake, a natural mistake. She got dressed, did her make-up and made herself look as well as she could; in her own words, "I got myself all dolled up". The judge looked at her, told her that she was a fine-looking young woman and would have no difficulty in getting another husband and adjusted her compensation accordingly. That is how we treated her.

Let us go up to the north-west. A lovely man from Derry — he calls it Derry so, out of respect to him, I will call it Derry — is on a bus one day going down the Strand Road. As he put it, "A young soldier in the sangar went berserk". The soldier discharged the entire magazine of his rifle. On the bus, the man sitting beside this man was killed. He himself suffered severe injuries in and around his groin, which led to multiple medical processes and operations.

He told me that he felt no ill will towards the soldier, which I thought was remarkably generous. He said, "He was a young fella, scared and a long way from home. He just lost it". The person with whom he was angry was the judge who awarded him the compensation, because, despite having no medical qualifications and the fact that there was a very thick medical file in front of him, the judge told this man to drop his trousers so that he could verify the injuries for himself.

A few years after the Omagh bomb, when I told that story in Omagh, I could see that a woman was getting visibly upset. When the meeting was over, everybody was having a cup of tea, and she came back into the room. She explained that she had been badly injured in the Omagh bomb and had physical scars. Before she went for her compensation, she explained to her legal representative that she was very nervous because she had never engaged with the criminal justice system. He said, "Look, don't worry about it. That's why I'm here". As they went into the office, he said, "Just one thing. At some point, somebody will put a bit of paper on the table. I want you to ignore it because that is the initial offer. It's all part of a game, and it'll be ridiculously low". The woman went in and answered questions, and then the judge invited her to take off her dress — he invited her to take off her dress — despite the fact that he had no medical qualifications and had a medical file in front of him. She was so humiliated that she lifted that bit of paper and settled. That is why we have a payment scheme for the severely, permanently disabled. In the name of God, can we not start operating it?

Thursday will be the forty-ninth anniversary of the last time that Jennifer McNern went for a walk. She had the misfortune to choose to walk to the Abercorn bar to have a drink with her sister. She lost her legs and has been in a wheelchair for 49 years, waiting for this payment. She took us to the High Court to get a judge to tell us to get on with it. Please, Minister, please: get on with it. I will leave it there.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Mr Nesbitt. I am pleased that you were able to finish before the next item of business. I was loath to interrupt you such was the import of your comments.

This debate will be paused to allow the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to make a statement on the Executive's pathway out of the COVID-19 restrictions. I ask Members to take their ease for a few minutes.

The debate stood suspended.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Ministerial Statement

Pathway out of the COVID-19 Restrictions

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the First Minister and deputy First Minister that they wish to make a statement setting out how the Executive will approach the relaxations as the first steps towards a wider recovery process. I have taken the unusual step of allowing today's business to be interrupted because I am aware of the significant interest from MLAs, the public and the media in this particular issue.

Before I call the Minister, I remind Members in the Chamber that, in light of social distancing being observed by the parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement has been relaxed. Members who are participating remotely must make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. Members who are present in the Chamber must also do that and may do so by rising in their place, as well as notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly.

I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions because a lot of Members will want to contribute this afternoon. This is not an opportunity for debate, and long introductions should not be engaged in. I also remind Members that, in accordance with long-established procedure, points of order are not normally taken during a statement or the question period afterwards.

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): Thank you for the opportunity and for allowing us to make the statement here today and to disrupt the business that was planned. As we all know, this year, we will turn a corner in the COVID-19 pandemic, but there is much more to do, and we are not out of the woods yet.

For some, this year has been the most difficult that they have experienced, and it was a sad milestone last week when we reached the first anniversary of our first COVID-19 case here.

Sadly, we have lost over 2,000 of our fellow citizens, while 112,000 of our people have tested positive. It is, however, time to look to the future with hope, and the conditions for doing that are starting to emerge.

The vaccination programme is a foundation block for building forward towards our recovery, but it cannot take the heavy lifting on its own, especially not at this time, and restrictions in some form will, unfortunately, be a fact of life for some time yet. We are incredibly proud of the vaccines work. The Department of Health has a first-class programme of delivery, and our citizens are responding exceptionally well to the offers of taking the jab. As of 28 February, there had been 558,597 vaccine doses administered here, made up of 525,400 first doses and 33,197 second doses. That is a crucial step forward. We also continue to see good adherence to the current restrictions, and we are very grateful for that too. Consequently, the R number has reduced to between 0.8 and 1.05, and the pressure on our health service has started to reduce.

We believe that now is the time to look forward in a hopeful way, recognising that there is still a huge risk from COVID-19, especially from the potential for new variants. We cannot afford to let the numbers go back up to the point at which the health service is overstretched again. Our colleagues, friends and family members who provide health and social care services deserve our duty of care and ongoing respect. Nor do we want to be in a cycle of opening and closing huge sections of business and society. We must do everything that we can to make this the last lockdown, with the underpinning insurance policy that the Executive will take the steps needed to protect the health service. Taking all those factors together, we can take some tentative preparatory steps towards the lifting of restrictions, but great care is still required. That is why the Executive have agreed today a careful, cautious and hopeful approach to existing restrictions, and we will publish that later today for everyone to see.

We want to outline our thinking in the Assembly first. From the very outset of the pandemic, we undertook to keep the Assembly and our MLA colleagues up to date not only on our decisions but on our rationales, and we are glad to do so again today. The Executive's approach will be a cautious one. We have developed a pathway out of restrictions that builds in time between key steps and relaxations. That leaves time for decisions to be properly informed by the health, community and economic data and to see the real-time impact of the prevalence of the virus. That time will be used carefully to look at the results of the regular modelling and to assess whether it is safe to take the next step.

This is a risk-based strategy and one that, we hope, will be understood in the current COVID-19 context. Our aim is to find a safe, secure, sustainable and understandable way forward for our citizens, sectors and businesses. We will be hopeful, optimistic and realistic in our pathway. We recognise that our citizens need hope and that they will understand that we need to move carefully through the coming months. Hope and care are equally important, and that requires a balanced approach. Our approach is built on some core considerations that I will set out now.

First and foremost, our approach is risk-based and will be driven by health, community and economic data and analysis. We will not be driven by hard dates. We recognise that everyone is looking for certainty, but we do not want to set potentially unachievable dates that will only disappoint. Our commitment is that we will keep restrictions in place only as long as they are needed and that, as and when we build headroom to open a sector, we will most certainly take that opportunity.

Secondly, we will continue to be open and transparent in our decision-making. We will keep everyone up to date and explain our thinking. Keeping restrictions in place will be done only if it is necessary and is proportionate to the threat that we face from COVID-19.

Thirdly, we will continue to look holistically at the challenges that we face. While our focus today is on the pathway out of restrictions, we are also working on our building forward recovery strategy. That is where we will draw together the key interventions and actions that are needed to jump-start economic and societal recovery. We are joining up the collective effort through the Executive's COVID-19 Task Force, and, alongside the protection and

recovery work streams, we are building an increased focus on adherence and strategic communications.

Finally, while we set our own course, we do not operate in a vacuum. We work closely with other jurisdictions, with the Irish Government, and with other Administrations on an east-west basis. We are willing to learn from what works best elsewhere and to share our experiences here. Our pathway includes conditions outlined by the World Health Organization.

The Executive will, of course, take our own decisions, and, in our pathway, we have set out the basis on which those decisions will be reached. An evidence base, necessity, proportionality and sustainability will be key to all decisions; we will be driven by health, economic and societal impacts and informed by key data sets in those sectors.

We will work towards the gradual and careful reopening of the nine sectors that are vital for our citizens and their families: home and community; education and young people; worship and ceremonies; sports and leisure activities; work; retail; hospitality; travel and tourism; and culture, heritage and entertainment. The pathway looks at each sector in detail. It sets out a step-by-step process, starting with where we are now and then the first cautious steps towards gradual easing, the further lifting of restrictions, and preparing for the future. It also illustrates our hope and aspirations for the practical real-life benefits that that will bring to our citizens. We are keen that everyone can find some comfort in the document and what we hope it means for them, while seeing the cautious steps that we will need to walk through.

In line with our commitments on transparency, the pathway also explains how we will take our decisions and the process for that. It sets out the pathway in the context of our plans for recovery. The pathway does not seek to take us back to where we were before the pandemic, and it recognises that there will be some adaptations in our lives. That will be the case across a number of sectors for some time to come. The Executive are, however, committed to getting education back as quickly as possible for the sake of children and young people and their education, well-being and future aspirations. We will do that for parents too, in partnership with our colleagues in the education system who are working so hard to adapt to the current pressures.

It is vital that all of that is grounded in the reality of the pandemic. COVID-19 continues to impact on every aspect of our lives. The new variants are a sharp reminder of the need for care. Our health responses have developed considerably over the past 12 months, and we owe a debt of gratitude to everyone who has worked in the health and social care sector.

The role that we all play this year will be important. That starts with sticking to the public health basics, which remain vital. We all benefit when we get that right. Washing our hands, keeping a safe distance from others, wearing our face coverings and reducing social contacts as much as we can make a real difference, and we cannot let those good habits go. Adhering to the remaining restrictions and engaging with our communications have played a key role in getting us to the point where we can start to think about lifting restrictions. We say thank you to everyone for that.

There are new variants, and they need to be guarded against. That is part of the reason why travel is so severely limited. We ask for patience and understanding on that point. COVID-19 is a successful virus because of its ability to transmit between people so easily. The new variants are even more so. Therefore the "Stay at home" message remains important. We know and understand that people go out for essential reasons, such as shopping, exercise, necessities and well-being, but we are concerned about crowded places, even outside. Therefore, we continue to ask everyone to take great care and to think about the risks. That is why we have set out very clearly in the pathway, for everyone to see, the approach that we are taking to decision-making.

Each week, Departments will meet as a collective to discuss the available information and to proactively consider what steps can be proposed to the Executive. After each step is taken, we will pause and reflect, look at the data and the impacts, engage with the key sectors, and enable them to reopen only if it is the right thing to do. That gives us the best chance of achieving sustainable steps and avoiding another lockdown.

In summary, we publish our documents today, and we ask everyone to take the time to read and digest them, to think about the need for caution in our approach, to continue to follow the public health advice, and, most certainly, to take the vaccine when it is offered. We all have hope for this year, and, together, we will get through this.

4.00 pm

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I thank the First Ministers for their statement. It is a bit disappointing, however, that MLAs got the statement only 30 minutes before this item of business on such a serious issue that is so profound and cuts right across all of society and that we have yet to be provided with the actual plan, even though some journalists have had versions of this from early this morning.

COVID has caused major problems for most in our community, ranging from annoyance and interruptions to matters of financial existence and, indeed, death for many and grief for many more beyond that. It is not an overstatement to say that no one in our community has not been impacted, and managing that has not been easy. The Executive Office has got some of it right and some of it wrong, but today has to be about looking forward and providing positivity and ambition, something for people to look forward to, as it has been a very long, dark and depressing winter.

I want to raise a note of concern because, as I understand it, the Executive Office pathway has nine streams, with five stages moving at different speeds, meaning that there are 45 variables moving at different paces for people to engage with. I can see that causing confusion for people and it not being that easy to follow. Can you give us a commitment today that you will front a substantial information campaign, as part of this, to update people about where we are in each pathway and where we will be going to next? People in various trades and businesses will need advance notice about when they will move from each stage to the next and what that means to them. Are you prepared to go on the airwaves and pledge to people today that this Executive Office plan will be explained at

each stage so that people can get the clarity that they need?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. To correct something that he said: this is not an Executive Office plan; it belongs to the entire Executive. It is for us all to work together to get us out of this current phase of dealing with the pandemic. It is for every Department to do the heavy lifting, it is for every Department to engage with the sectors for which they are responsible, and it is for every Executive Minister to work together, to be on the airwaves and to do everything that we can to communicate this to the public.

Obviously, you know that the Executive meeting went on into the afternoon, and that is why we were late in even asking the Speaker to give us the space in the Chamber today to make the statement. Nonetheless, we are here, and I am glad that we are here.

As part of the plan, there is a strong communication and engagement plan, because, when it comes to getting ready for recovery and being able to open things up, it is really important that we work with all the different sectors, whether that be sport, retail or close-contact services. No matter what it is, the Executive have committed, as part of our plan, to work with the sectors, and we have started that process today. As I delivered this statement on behalf of the Executive to MLAs today, there is a parallel process under way to engage with key sectors. That will not just be done today but has to be done the whole way through this recovery, because it will not happen overnight. There is a journey to be undertaken here.

I think that the plan is a good plan in that it is flexible enough to be able to allow us to move at pace where we can and to slow down a little where we need to, if we need to. I think that dealing with every sector in a separate way, through the nine different pathways, allows people to look at what is important for them and see where they fit into the plan. I hope that many people get some comfort from that.

We have not been date-led. We said that we would be led by the data and the specifics of how the vaccine is going, the situation in our hospitals and the pressure on the health service. We have said that we will be led by the transmission of the virus and the roll-out of all these things. With all those things in the mix, it is really important that we take decisions but that we tell people why we are taking those decisions and communicate that.

I hope that the communication plan that we have also agreed on today will allow us to be able to do the very things that the Member has set out.

Mr Speaker: Before I bring in the next Member to speak, I remind Members that you will not have the same latitude in asking your questions that the Chairperson of the Committee did, and appropriately so.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the deputy First Minister for her statement to the House after what has been an incredibly difficult year for many, not least those who are vulnerable and, indeed, those whose families have been bereaved and have been unable to process that grief in a normal fashion. Will the deputy First Minister make it clear that the indicators on which the Executive as a whole will take decisions on relaxations will include economic and

educational sectors and will not be just about the figures that are produced by the Department of Health?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for the question. We have set ourselves a range of principles by which we will take our decisions: health, the community and the economy. All three things are crucial. It is about the vaccination roll-out, capacity in the health service and the rate of transmission of the virus. Alongside that, it is about the mental health and physical well-being of all our people. This has been one of the most challenging years that many of us have been through. We recognise that, and we want to factor it in to our decision-making. It is about the education of our children and young people. The Executive have prioritised the issue of schools being opened safely. It is about the impacts on the more vulnerable, whom you referred to. Alongside that are the economic impacts, such as the impact on workers and businesses and the availability of economic support to assist businesses. Those three areas will be factored in to all our decision-making.

Mr Beattie: I genuinely thank the Minister for that really welcome statement. I join the Chair in being disappointed that I have been able to follow this on social media for some time. We really need to fix the leakage from the Executive.

You said something really important, which was that we will move at pace but will move slowly where we have to. That is the right thing to do in the various sectors. However, Boris Johnson made a clear commitment when he said that we will not go backwards. Will you be able to make the commitment today that, once we have gone forward to a phase, there will be no going back?

Mrs O'Neill: Leaks from the Executive are unfortunate. The media do not have the final version, so whatever was leaked was done in advance of the Executive's final considerations.

Today, we want to give people hope. We want people to know that there is something to grab onto and that we have a way forward. We should also be honest with the public and say that the virus is still among us, it is still spreading at too high a rate and there are new variants. What we are trying to achieve with the plan, if we do it in a gradual and considered way and work our way through it gradually and if we are cautious and take the right decisions at the right time, is to mitigate the risk of going backwards. Nobody wants to go backwards; we want to go forwards. We have deliberately stayed away from giving dates because that gives people false hope and builds up an expectation that they grab onto and then, unfortunately, they can be disappointed. We are trying to do this with the public and with the sectors, gradually easing our way through. We hope and think that the plan is the best way to avoid any slip back into stricter restrictions.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Minister for her statement. The publication of the pathway to recovery document will give our citizens some sense that there is an end in sight to the unprecedented crisis that we have all had to contend with over the past 12 months.

Given the experience of coming out of previous lockdowns, will the joint First Minister set out how the Executive will engage with each of the key sectors — sport, arts, culture, business and, of course, the community and voluntary sector — so that they can properly prepare for the steps that they need to take to aid the recovery?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for the question. She is right in saying that we have been through this before. This is our third reversal out of restrictions. We are trying to learn from experience and find a way to work in tandem with the sectors where we can. We understand absolutely that people need time to plan and adjust. We want to work with the sectors, which is why some discussions are already happening this afternoon. We intend, as part of our engagement plan, to engage with the key sectors — retail, business, hospitality, sport and the arts — and give as much notice as we can where measures are to be eased. We will do all that in a balanced way in terms of the health, economic, social and family impacts.

The Member may know that, in the past, junior Ministers led a lot of the work on engagement with the sectors. We envisage that that will happen again. It is really important that we put as much information as possible on our decision-making into the public domain. We hope that people can see that our plan sets out how we will make decisions and when we will make decisions and that we will work with the sectors. Hopefully, that gives some comfort to sectors that have been so detrimentally impacted by the pandemic.

Ms Armstrong: I want to say, "Thank you" to all in the Executive. Today, we have light at the end of the tunnel. Society has been struggling for over a year; at least we now have something. People will be looking desperately for a date for stage 2 that is listed in the document. I appreciate that we need to be led by the medical advice. It is mentioned that 16 March will be an Executive review date. Can we give the public something that they can aim for and say when they can look forward to section 2 in the document being released?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her positive comments. This is very much a day of hope. We are saying to people, "Be cautious, and be steady as you go", but we are also saying that there is a way out and this is where we are headed. We have nine pathways, each of which has five steps. You can move at different speeds across each one. We have set it out that we will review the process every four weeks. The first review date, which we had announced previously, is 16 March, when a paper will come forward from Health setting out, "Here is what we can do". I will caution and be upfront enough to say that we do not expect any sort of major change before Easter, but we hope that there will be room and flexibility on the other side of Easter. The dates for the Executive's comprehensive reviews are 16 March, 15 April, 13 May and 10 June. People will probably compute that to a time frame in their own heads. However, those are review points in time. It does not mean that we can do everything within each step in those periods; it will depend on all the other factors. However, it gives people a bit of an idea of what we are aiming for.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the deputy First Minister for the statement. Minister, maybe I am reading too much into this, but I hope that the order in which the nine sectors are put down will not be the order of the easements. Number 4 is sports and leisure. Have the Executive placed sufficient importance on sports and leisure when it comes to the mental and physical health of our greater population, especially our young people? We need that easement to happen sooner rather than later.

Mrs O'Neill: I could not agree more. This has been such a desperate year for everybody but, in particular, for children and young people, who have not been in school with their peers and their friends and have not been able to go to their sports clubs or do whatever it is that they are interested in. Our priority is to get children back out to the outdoors as quickly as possible. I am glad to say that, in the pathway document, the first step under sport looks at being able to give more flexibility to children and young people:

“Outdoor sports facilities re-open for training and organised group activities”.

That is young people getting together for their sports clubs or whatever it is that they are interested in. It mentions:

“Outdoor sport for children can resume with accompanying responsible adults allowed to attend”.

Those are the Saturday morning games that many children have been denied for the last year because of the pandemic. In that first phase, another area that we have looked at is the resumption of outdoor competitive sport. Given how important sport is to our physical and mental well-being, that is positive, particularly for children and young people, who can look at this and think, “We are in the first category, so hopefully that is not too far off”.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the joint First Minister for the statement and welcome the publication of the pathway report. There has been much debate, including in the Chamber today, of data versus dates. Does the joint First Minister agree that COVID does not have a calendar or a diary secretary and does not work to dates but does work to human behaviour? That is why it is correct that, in the plan, we operate to data.

Will the Minister elaborate on why it is important that we operate according to the “health, community and economic data”, as she outlined, rather than dealing simply with dates?

4.15 pm

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member. We think that this is the best way to be upfront and honest with people about what we are facing into. We are not out of the woods, and we have difficult weeks and months ahead. There are so many uncertainties with COVID-19 that, at times, it is hard to be definitive. As the Member recognises, we are judging our ability to move forward against the capacity in the health service, our vaccination programme remaining on track and our test, trace and protect strategy doing its job. Also, the Department of Health is to roll out additional testing in different settings. All those things allow us to have optimism. The data-not-dates approach means, essentially, that, each time that we take a step, we will take a step back in our decision-making. We will pause, reflect and look at the impact of the step taken. We will engage with the key sectors and plan what comes next. This approach enables us to move forward cautiously, on the basis of the evidence that we have in front of us and working in conjunction with the sectors.

Mr Givan: People will look at the document and ask this question: what does it mean for me and when? That will be the first reaction. People will then want to understand the parameters by which those decisions are being informed. Data is very important, but it is the analysis of that data

that leads to decisions, and that will be the test for the Executive.

Today's data shows that our transmission rates are where they were last September. We have a vaccination programme and are much further ahead than the Republic of Ireland. Scotland, Wales and England will have their children back to school before we do. Deputy First Minister, you say that the plan gives you flexibility to move more quickly. If that is the case, given all that I have outlined, is this not an opportunity to prove, as this party wants, that our children are prioritised by getting them back to school more quickly? The data provides the evidence for that decision to be made.

Mrs O'Neill: You can interpret the data in whatever way you wish, but our position is different from the position in the Twenty-six Counties, England, Scotland or Wales. Our rates per 100,000 are higher than elsewhere. It is really important that we take all those things into account. I remind the Member that his party is also in the Executive and agrees with the approach. We have all signed up to the plan.

Listen, this is not a day for division. This is a day to show a united front: that we want to get to the other end of this as quickly as possible and will pull out all the stops to do that, but that we must be very cautious in doing so. Remember what happened last September, October, November and December and where we ended up in January. Nobody wants to be there again. Health service staff do not want to be there again. Everybody needs to put their shoulder to the wheel. Every Minister in the Executive and every elected representative needs to be responsible.

There will be a temptation to move very quickly and for people to ask, “What about this sector, that sector and the other?” This is a planned way to do it. There is no room to be haphazard about it. It needs to be done gradually and in a sustainable way, because we do not want to go back into lockdown again. Let us take our time and move cautiously. Our priority is to get children back to school safely. That is what the document says, again, today. We have already announced two phases for schools. The document also says that, after Easter, we will commence the next phase, and that is where we should be. The Executive as a whole have prioritised getting children back to school, but it must be safe. There are so many variables right now that we have to be careful and very cautious. Today is a day of hope, and that is what I want the public at home to feel on seeing what we are doing here today.

Mr Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, joint First Minister, for the statement and for your answers to the questions today. I particularly welcome the document's acknowledgement of the willingness and recognition of the ability to learn from places that have done better in this and previous pandemics. I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge the very significant contribution made by the experts and academics who have given evidence to the Health Committee and in other fora.

Despite the enormous difficulties that we as a society have faced over the past 12 months, the strategy for recovery provides an opportunity to do things differently and, indeed, to strive to do things better moving forward, rather than simply returning to normality. As part of that building back after the pandemic, will the joint First Minister commit

to ensuring that equal consideration is given to social improvement as to economic recovery?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for the question. Absolutely, yes, I think that we have an opportunity to build. This is only the first step. In our pathway out of restrictions, the Executive have clearly set out that we have three layers of work to take forward. The first is this piece of work on lifting the restrictions, and that builds the foundation for the short- to medium-term recovery. Secondly, in the short- to medium-term recovery, it is about interventions that jump-start the longer-term economic, community and societal renewal. The third phase of that work is around the renewal, the Programme for Government outcomes and the longer-term aspirations.

There has been so much good over the last year, and so many people have adapted what they do, whether that be healthcare students and social workers stepping up to the front line, people who have retired coming back into the health service, business repurposing their businesses or the sports sector, right across the sporting codes, stepping up and helping communities. The work has been amazing, and I hope that we never lose that again.

In building for something better in the future, we have to have a clear focus on protecting jobs and livelihoods. It has to be about a more inclusive and caring society. It has to be about a whole of government and society approach. If there is one thing that the pandemic has certainly exposed, it is the fact that, over this year, the pandemic has disproportionately impacted on those who are more vulnerable in society: families who are living in poverty, living in crowded homes and working for low incomes. It has particularly hit women, who usually shoulder more of the caring responsibilities. Certainly for me, this has highlighted all those things. In building for the future, we need to think about how we build a different and better society. That has to be the outworking of the Executive's pathway for recovery. It is certainly where I will be focused.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the deputy First Minister for her statement today. It is disappointing, for a Member of the House, that the pathway document made its way on to the TEO's website before it was circulated to MLAs. The communications strategy with Members of the Assembly urgently needs to change. It is long past due.

It is welcome that we have finally got this document. Deputy First Minister, you are right that it has to be said that it offers some hope to people who have been at home for some time. There are many couples who are hoping to get married. In the last year, many delayed their ceremony because there was uncertainty over whether there would be a reception, which was because of the level of infection in communities. Now that we have this document, can you provide some clarification on when those who are planning to get married can do so with members of their family in attendance, be it 25, 50 or otherwise? If you could provide some clarification, it would be very welcome.

Mrs O'Neill: I have also spoken with many very disappointed brides this year. The pandemic has been so detrimental in so many ways to the really important times and milestones in people's lives. On worship and ceremonies, last week, the junior Ministers had a meeting with the faith leaders, and we believe that a recommendation will come to the Executive on how we can return services in places of worship, including

the ceremony part of weddings, back to where it was previously. You may remember that there was a risk assessment and mitigation. We expect to receive a paper on that, and I think that it is imminent. That will hopefully then give some assurance and clarity to couples who waiting to know whether they can have their wedding ceremony and its size. The reception end of things will obviously be a bit of a period away. If you look to the hospitality piece, you see that it will be a bit of time before you will be able to get back to larger numbers there. However, it is a hopeful day as well, and we hope to give people the clarity as quickly as we possibly can. We will not keep these restrictions in place for any longer than is necessary.

Mr Chambers: Deputy First Minister, you quoted in your statement the fact that over 2,000 people have died and over 112,000 people have tested positive.

That demonstrates the scale of the pandemic, and today is a day when the thoughts of all in the House will be with those people and their families.

We have something to be proud of with our vaccination programme, and it does offer hope. You acknowledged in your statement, deputy First Minister, that vaccinating on its own will not defeat the pandemic. You also acknowledged the good adherence to the current restrictions and reinforced the need for us all to continue to work together. We owe a huge debt to our medical and scientific experts.

Do you agree that there continues to be a huge responsibility placed on the shoulders of all public representatives who serve in this House and in other places not to say or do anything to undermine the corporate public health messages?

Mrs O'Neill: Thanks to the Member. I concur with him on the vaccination roll-out. It has been excellent, and all credit to the teams that have been working to get the vaccines rolled out. I was listening this morning to the reports about the proposed vaccination centre at the SSE Arena, which is another positive step.

The message here is consistent across the Executive. The message here is consistent for us all. This is a day of hope and optimism. This is a day to look to the future but a day to tread carefully. If we continue to communicate that message in the right way, it will help bring the public with us. It is understandable that people are tired of COVID. We have been going through this for a year. Everybody has been denied so much, be it family gatherings or birthdays. People have missed so many milestones, and they want to know when they can get there again. We will get there quicker if people work with us just until we get to the end of the current restrictions.

Mr Irwin: I thank the deputy First Minister for her statement. What encouragement can she give to business owners who are desperate to get their businesses open again? Many of them have been at 'Wits' End Corner'.

Mrs O'Neill: The pandemic has been detrimental to many of our businesses, particularly small businesses. So many are still on furlough. The consequences of the pandemic are enormous, and we are dealing with them every day. We have done our best to provide financial support to businesses to get them through the pandemic. Furlough has helped, but it is still challenging for businesses. That is

why we have committed in our plan to taking into account the health, community and economic implications. That is what will help inform our decisions. We have no desire to keep the doors of any business closed for longer than is necessary. Our priority is to save lives and do our best for the public, but that has to be done in staged way. This plan offers us the best opportunity to get to the other side of the restrictions as quickly as possible.

Ms Mullan: I also thank the Minister for the statement and welcome the hope that it provides.

The joint First Minister will appreciate the enormous contribution that sports and sporting bodies make to our health and well-being. Throughout the pandemic, children have been at home for months. Many parents are anxious to know when their children and young people will be able to return to sports. Minister, how can we assure parents that it is safe for children to return to sports and how can we support our sporting clubs to reopen?

Mrs O'Neill: Thank you to the Member. That is my first question via StarLeaf, so it is a new experience.

As I said in response to a question from Paula, children and young people need to be outdoors, exercising and back at their sport. That is what I get from the young people in my family, and I know that that is the concern of many parents. The pandemic has denied children so much over the past year, and we are determined to get things opened up as quickly as we possibly can in that area, because we know how important sport and leisure are to physical and mental health, even from just getting together. It is about team building, lifelong bonding and all of that.

4.30 pm

I am delighted that, in our discussion in the Executive about the first step for sports and leisure activities, we made a commitment to resume outdoor sport for children, which will be in the first phase. Hopefully, we can get there fairly quickly, all being well, with things continuing as they are and the public continuing to work with us. I will be pleased if we can get there, and it is important that we do so as quickly as possible.

Mr Lyttle: As has been mentioned, children and young people have paid a great price for the safety of others during the pandemic. As a youth sports coach, I welcome the scheduled return of outdoor youth sport, training and games without spectators at stage 2 of the sport and leisure pathway. I also note the commitment to publish a building forward recovery strategy. Will the Executive also publish a children and young people's recovery strategy, including educational, emotional and physical recovery for all children and young people?

Mrs O'Neill: The Executive have not discussed that, but it is a very good idea. We should be putting particular emphasis on children and young people. We have talked about them in the overarching plans, but when it comes to specifics for the year ahead, and for a couple of years ahead, we must do what we can to support children and young people in schools sports or community settings. I am more than happy to take that back to the Executive to see whether there is something more that we can do to progress it.

Dr Archibald: I, too, thank the Minister for the very welcome statement. As she said, it is important that we

give people hope for the way forward. As she will be aware, the pandemic has highlighted and, in some ways, reinforced social, economic and health inequalities across our communities. It has exposed some very difficult issues that need to be addressed in a strategic way. Will she set out how the Executive will address those issues as we move forward to recovery and try to build a different and better society?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said earlier, it is important that we try to build a better society on the other side of the pandemic. I pointed out that in rebuilding our community after the pandemic, we have to target those in need — people in housing need, people in poverty, and people who live in overcrowded homes. Homelessness has increased during the pandemic. The Department for Communities has done a lot of good work to support targeted groups, but there is an awful lot more to be done. When I reflect on the impact of the pandemic on women, for example, there is a huge issue there that needs to be addressed. Many women bear the majority of caring responsibilities, and we also know that there has been an alarming rise in domestic violence throughout the pandemic. There are a lot of things that we need to do to build a better society, and that has to be a major factor in our economic recovery and in the pathway that we are adopting.

Ms Hunter: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answers so far. Looking through the pathway, it is welcome that one of the strategic priorities is maintaining the health and well-being of all our citizens. Given the welcome pace of the vaccine programme, what plans do the Executive have to introduce an improved, full-scale and comprehensive track-and-trace system? What further steps have been considered to ensure that future outbreaks can be contained so that we do not have to reverse any elements of the plan?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her question. If she has seen the pathway, she will know that there have been major developments on the health front. Track, trace and isolate systems come under the Department of Health's remit, and it is for that Department to bring forward improvements. I agree that that is the best way to target the virus: track it, trace it, and isolate it. From the outset of the pandemic, the World Health Organization said that, to deal with the virus successfully, we needed a first-class test, trace and isolate system.

I welcome the fact that the pathway to recovery contains a commitment by the Department of Health about the work that will be done, and we need to be very focused on that.

Alongside that, there will be additional testing. There is talk of developing testing in schools; lateral flow tests that can be turned around quickly. All those things combined will give us the best possible chance to be able to lift all the restrictions. It will not be one thing; we should not put all our eggs in the vaccine basket because, clearly, whilst the vaccine is hugely effective, we do not have evidence that it stops the spread of the virus. Therefore, we need to have a combination of efforts and ensure that we implement every one of them faithfully in order to give us the best possible chance.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the next Member, I want to remind the House that a number of Members still want to contribute and ask questions. I ask everybody to be as succinct as possible.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an ráitis seo inniu. I thank the Minister for her statement. The publication of that pathway document will be welcomed by most people across our communities insofar as it signals a return to some sort of normality in our lives. Will the Minister detail the process that will determine movement between the different phases in the easing of restrictions?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. As I said, the Executive's recovery document outlines the five phases and how we plan to reduce and, ultimately, remove the current restrictions. We have to use a broad range of data and statistical indicators to inform decisions on the relaxation of restrictions or whether we need to return to strengthening them, which we are, obviously, trying to avoid. It is really important that, alongside all the factors that I have mentioned, such as the fact that we are making rapid progress with the vaccine, we suppress the virus. That has to be at the forefront of our considerations across all phases and beyond. If we move too quickly, we could end up with transmission rates that rise so quickly that the health service becomes overwhelmed again. We want to avoid that.

The other issue is that, with the emergence of the new variants, it is even more important for us to be cautious in our approach. I can say to the Member, however, that there will be linkages and interdependencies across the various pathways. That is critical, because taking action in one area may require action in another. Therefore, it is important that we sequence all those things and be as careful as we can but follow the pathway that we have set out and consider, at all times, the pathway as a whole.

Mr Nesbitt: The deputy First Minister referred to the impact of the pandemic on women. However, on 16 November 2020, I asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their reaction to the Women's Policy Group's feminist COVID recovery plan. That was more than three months ago. I have heard nothing.

Mrs O'Neill: I am more than happy to get back to the Member on that issue. I know that he raised it during Question Time. I am, absolutely, all for a feminist recovery plan. I am more than happy to ensure that, factored into all the decisions that we take as an Executive as a whole, we actually take on board the fact that the pandemic has been so detrimental, disproportionately, to women for a whole variety of reasons. I have actually had quite a number of engagements with the women's sector and Women in Business, for example, around how we can build a fairer recovery, particularly in relation to women. That is all incorporated into the work that we do every day.

Mr Catney: I thank the deputy First Minister for her statement. Additional certainty for businesses is, obviously, welcome. However, many will be disappointed that the statement and accompanying infographic will not allow them to make the important decisions that are needed to protect jobs. Will the Executive Office provide a more detailed breakdown for business owners?

Mrs O'Neill: I believe that I have set out clearly what our next steps will be. The document sets out the pathway and lets people see the five areas and steps that we will take. It also gives our commitment to work with sectors, including the business community, around where they fit in that and how we get ready for them to open, because this should

be about getting ready to open. We have committed very strongly to working with the sector to allow it to get to the point that it can open as quickly and safely as possible, but, most importantly, as sustainably as possible.

Dr Aiken: I thank the deputy First Minister for her comments and answers. Obviously, one of the most fundamental questions that we have is about public confidence in the Executive and the political messaging that is needed going forward to have it. Will the First and deputy First Ministers assure us and the people of Northern Ireland that they will maintain the message and have their political parties roll in behind it?

Mrs O'Neill: I am making this statement today on behalf of the entire Executive. I hope that all Ministers, elected representatives, Chairs of Committees and everybody else work together to deliver a collective message.

Miss Woods: I thank the deputy First Minister for making the statement. Yet again, Members were shown discourtesy by having to get information about the statement from the media. The document looks like a copy-and-paste job of what was published last May, and that plan was not worth the paper it was written on. I ask the deputy First Minister this: are the Executive finally ready to take politics out of our response to COVID-19? What input has the expert task force had in this recovery plan? What role will it play in moving forward to ensure that the plan is not going to be about competing political priorities?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member refers to not playing politics, and I encourage that to be the case with the statement today. This is an Executive statement. All the Ministers are working together. It is a collective effort. It is to give us a pathway out of the restrictions. I am very hopeful about the pathway. I believe that it is the right pathway to take us out of restrictions. I, certainly, have never played politics with the pandemic, and I would never do so. It is really important that all Ministers and all elected representatives work together as this is a very serious situation. It has been a very difficult year. However, people have reason to have optimism and to look to the future with some degree of confidence, but we need to take people out of the situation in a staged way.

If the Member has any ideas, I am more than happy to listen to any that she wishes to send to me. I am more than happy to listen to her approach and to how she thinks this plan could be improved.

Mr Allister: While other regions have been given hope and dates, we have been given a cliché-ridden algorithm for dither. It is not much of a satnav if it does not tell you the route or when you expect to get there.

High-sounding clichés about being data-driven are really about providing opportunities to cover Executive indecision and disagreement, but they do nothing to answer ordinary people's questions. When can we get our kids permanently back into school without that being on some hokey-cokey basis? When can we get our businesses open? When can we get our kids back to playing sport? When can families engage in recreation and use their caravans again? Those are the questions that people want to be answered. All we have today is, "Maybe". It is not good enough.

Mrs O'Neill: The Member has made his views known in his typical negative form. However, I will tell you when

kids will be back in school: when it is safe. I will tell you when businesses will be opened: when it is safe. I will tell you when children can get back to playing sport: when it is safe. I will tell you when families can get back together again: when it is safe. The most important thing is to deliver the pathway and work our way through it in the most sustainable way. The pathway needs to be sustainable. None of us wants to roll back; we want to only make progress.

The best way that the public can have confidence that we will keep only going forward is if we work our way through the pathway in the staged approach that has been set out. We do not want families to be apart for any longer than is necessary. We do not want businesses' doors to be closed for any longer than is necessary. We do not want friends to be kept apart. We do not want all the detrimental realities of life that we are facing because of the pandemic to continue for any longer than is necessary. However, I believe that the pathway gives us the best plan to take us out of the current period of restrictions.

Mr Carroll: With these announcements, more questions tend to arise. I hope that more time can be set aside to discuss and scrutinise this document. Minister, the section on work in the leaked document said that stage 2 will see:

"Relaxation of restrictions on workplace attendance",

whereas, serious restrictions remain on households and private life at stage 2 of "Home and Community".

To me, that repeats the mistakes of the past. There are huge restrictions on households and private life, yet people are being forced into unsafe workplace conditions. What assurances can the Minister give that there will not be a repeat of the mistakes of the past and that people will not be pushed into working conditions when it is not safe?

4.45 pm

Mrs O'Neill: I can certainly say that no one should be forced to go into an unsafe workplace. We have made that very clear the whole way through the pandemic. Employers need to be responsible, and they need to allow staff, where they can, to work from home. If staff need to go to work, there needs to be strong mitigation in place. I remember that, previously in the House, I encouraged the Member, who had concerns, to raise them with the relevant authority, whether it be a council or the HSE. If there are any issues with staff, it is incumbent on us all to do that.

The difficulty in all this is to get the right balance and to allow the maximum number of restrictions to be lifted with the least amount of risk. That is challenging. It is particularly challenging in the area of our family lives. We all miss our families. We in the Chamber are no different to anybody else in that regard. The challenge, certainly from the health point of view, is that the public health advice is always that, when we are together, we naturally let our guard down. That is just what you do; it is the nature of life. That is why those things perhaps take a little longer.

I welcome the fact that, from 8 March, people from two families can get together outside. That will be an improvement. I also welcome the fact that, if you look at the different steps in terms of home and community life, you can see that we will be able to move quickly to try to get that back to some sense of normality for people over

the course of the plan. As I said, none of us wants to see families apart for any longer. This has been one tough year. We want to remove the restrictions as quickly as possible, but we need to do it in a safe way, otherwise we will be back to square one.

Ms Sugden: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their statement. It is clear that the virus is responding to the vaccination programme, but I also expect that it is responding to the change in season. Autumn and winter will come again, and, due to variants, as the deputy First Minister said, there could be a spike towards the end of the year. I think that it was you, deputy First Minister — perhaps it was the First Minister — who said in November that we need to learn to live with the virus. How do we do that? We cannot keep finding ourselves in restrictions and lockdown, and we cannot keep shutting down our economy and our society.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for that question. That is one of the things that we factored in. It is about resilience into the future. We want to get to the point at which we can lift the restrictions, but we also have to be very much focused on how to make sure that things are resilient into the future, including what mitigations we put in place to pre-empt what could happen again in the autumn. You are right: the season change and a combination of factors are probably why we are in the position that we are in today. We know that the virus is seasonal. As we go through this, part of the plan for the future is determining what resilient measures we need to put in place to allow us to cope with that in the autumn. That is factored into the plan.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. Thank you all for your contributions. Members can take their ease for a moment or two.

Miss Woods: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Standing Order 18A dictates operations on oral ministerial statements. Standing Order 18A(2) holds:

"The Minister shall make a written copy of the statement available to members as early as possible and ... at least 30 minutes before delivering the statement in the Assembly."

Standing Order 18A(3) holds:

"The written copy, whether or not embargoed, shall not be given to members of the news media before it is made available to members."

Mr Speaker, can you advise whether there is anything that you can do, using the power of your office, to ensure that, in the future, Members receive the courtesy that should be afforded to them under Standing Orders when it comes to ministerial statements?

Mr Speaker: We did receive the ministerial statement today. Somebody leaked documents to the media, and that is a matter for the people who leaked those documents. You are in the political world and you are a big woman, so you will understand that, unfortunately, people leak confidential documents. That does a great disservice, in my view, to Members of the House. Your point has been made. As I said, the statement was received in accordance with the requirements. Whoever leaked the documents leaked the documents. I cannot comment on that.

Miss Woods: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Standing Order 18A(2) states that the statement should be:

“available to members as early as possible and ... at least 30 minutes before delivering the statement”.

The statement was received by my office, via email, at 3.23 pm. The statement was scheduled for and made at 3.45 pm, which was within 30 minutes of my office receiving it. Can your office look into that to ensure that, as required by Standing Orders, we get statements 30 minutes before they are made?

Mr Speaker: I will look into that. Thank you.

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Second Stage

Notice taken that 10 Members were not present.

House counted, and, there being fewer than 10 Members present, the Speaker ordered the Division Bells to be rung.

Upon 10 Members being present —

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 17/17-22] be agreed. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice):

I welcome the opportunity to speak as the Chairman of the Committee for Justice in the debate. Throughout the last year, the Committee has scrutinised the Department of Justice’s budget through regular oral and written briefings and updates, including on in-year monitoring rounds, bids for COVID-19 funding and the forecasting performance. The Department also provided briefings on its financial planning and the draft budget for the year ahead.

Like all Departments, the Department of Justice’s budget planning for 2020-21 took place before the COVID-19 crisis materialised. The pandemic continues to affect the delivery of services, with new ways of working having to be found and new procedures being put in place across the justice sector. Inevitably, this has had an impact on planning and expenditure, and a number of COVID-19 reprioritisation exercises were undertaken to try to assess requirements and align resources to manage emerging pressures and changing circumstances throughout the year.

Over the year, bids for COVID-19 funding totalling in the region of £63 million were submitted, and the Department received £31.5 million of the funding requested.

This included funding for the PSNI, the Prison Service, the Northern Ireland Temporary Resting Place and PPE. A number of the unsuccessful bids were funded by reduced requirements within the Department or costs that were originally anticipated and no longer required. Of the ring-fenced COVID-19 funding received by the Department, £4.6 million was returned at the January monitoring round, £4 million of which was for PPE for the police service, as costs were less than anticipated, and £500,000 of which was a result of an increase in expected courts income due to increased court activity in the latter part of the year.

The pandemic also impacted on capital expenditure, with £5.5 million being returned by the PSNI in October, mainly due to issues in the supply chain and reduced capacity to deliver due to the impact of COVID-19. The Department returned a further £3.4 million in January, which came from easements from delays in IT projects, the Northern Ireland temporary resting place and income from the disposal of police vehicles.

With regard to other funding, the Department was allocated EU exit funding of £4.5 million resource and £1.1 million capital for the PSNI in-year. That was for the funding of 308 officers and staff who are already employed and for whom funding was received last year. A reduced requirement of just over £300,000 of EU exit funding was

declared in January because of a delay in filling posts in the courts. The Department confirmed that it intends to fill those posts in 2021-22. The Department advised that, at the conclusion of the January monitoring round, it was in a break-even position for 2020-21 with regard to both resource and capital. Following the publication of the spring Supplementary Estimates last week, the Committee sought urgent clarity on the additional £40 million that has been included in annually managed expenditure (AME) for the Legal Services Agency. The Department has confirmed that this is to cover legal aid provisions and represents the total balance sheet value of all future liabilities for accounting purposes, not the actual in-year cash value of claims that are due to be paid out.

I turn to the Budget for the year ahead. Departmental officials provided an oral briefing in early November on the Department's submission to the Department of Finance future years' Budget information-gathering exercise. The Committee heard that the Department was facing inescapable resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) pressures of just over £55 million in the coming financial year. Officials advised that this will be difficult to absorb without impacting on front-line service delivery. In a subsequent written update, the Department pointed out that these pressures should be considered not in isolation but in the context of a baseline that has fallen by around 9% since 2011. Details were provided of a range of measures that have already been taken by spending areas to manage that decreasing budget, along with further measures that may be required across all spending areas in the future.

Following the statement on the 2021-22 draft Budget by the Minister of Finance on 18 January, the Committee wrote to the Department's non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) requesting their views on their proposed allocations for the year ahead. The views of the Policing Board on the PSNI's budget were also requested, given that the PSNI accounts for such a significant proportion of the Department's budget. These responses, which make for grim reading, helped to inform members' discussions with officials on the draft Budget allocation for the Department of Justice during an oral briefing on 4 February.

The Department's draft allocation for non-ring-fenced DEL was £1,124 million, which, on the face of it, appears to be a 5.1% uplift on the flat baseline budget. It has been pointed out, however, that the increase is not new funding but takes account of funding provided in previous years that was not included in the baseline, and so does not compare like with like. The Committee heard that the legacy allocation of £4.2 million, which represents an uplift of less than 0.5% on the baseline, could be considered to be the only new money. Essentially, the Department is looking at a flat cash budget for the year.

The draft allocation for capital for the Department was £96.4 million, an increase of £8.3 million from the previous year. The Department views this as a reasonable capital budget and believes it will be sufficient to meet inescapable requirements. The Committee has noted that it is significantly less than the £150 million of capital bids submitted in the information-gathering exercise and is awaiting further information from the Department on the key projects that will be delivered and those which will not now be taken forward in the new financial year.

5.00 pm

During the oral briefing on 4 February, officials advised that work was ongoing to assess the impact of the Budget, determine priorities and finalise allocations across the Department. Responses from spending areas were due to be provided to the Department by the following day. Officials, therefore, had not had sight of some of the information at that stage that had been provided to the Committee, and they undertook to update the Committee when information from the spending areas had been collated and considered by the Minister. In the absence of fuller information, the Committee was therefore unable to properly assess the Department's budgetary position in order to provide a detailed response to the Committee for Finance's deadline, which was a consequence of the limited time afforded to the wider consultation on the Budget. Instead, the Committee agreed to provide a summary of the key areas discussed with officials.

I wish to take the opportunity to highlight some of the key issues that are likely to feature in the Committee's ongoing scrutiny of the Department of Justice's priorities and budgets in the year ahead.

The Department faces pressures of almost £56 million on inescapable pressures and staffing. They cover a range of matters that includes pay, legal aid, staffing, victims and witnesses, and PSNI operational pressures. The Department has advised that there will be no additional funding available to manage those. At the time, officials were unable to indicate how they might be managed but advised that the aim would be to minimise front-line impact. However, they pointed out that it is possible that there will be an impact on staffing across a range of bodies, as around 70% of the Department's budget goes towards staff costs. The concerns around staffing were echoed by a number of the NDPBs in their responses to the Committee.

It would be fair to say that the information from the police and the Policing Board on the measures that may be required for the service to live within its budgetary allocation gave the Committee cause for considerable concern. Members throughout the House will be aware of the commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach' to increase the number of police officers to 7,500. To achieve that, a bid has been submitted for funding for 153 officers in this financial year. However, on the basis of the indicative draft Budget allocation, the PSNI has advised that it may be necessary to reduce the number of officers in the next financial year by up to 300, taking it down to 6,700. Therefore, even if the bid for the NDNA funding is successful, we are moving away from the target of 7,500 police officers, rather than towards it.

As was the case in 2020-21, EU exit funding for the police has fallen short of requirements. Additional funding was secured for that year through the in-year monitoring process, and the Committee understands that discussions are ongoing with HM Treasury to secure the balance of funding required for the forthcoming year.

The PSNI has advised that protecting neighbourhood policing and its existing level of resources will be its priority. That focus is to be welcomed, but it will inevitably create pressures in other areas of service delivery and capability, such as specialist functions, which may, in turn, have a knock-on effect in other parts of the justice

system. For example, in its consideration of the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill, the Committee has heard that delays in progressing criminal cases are often due to the time taken to extract digital information from various devices and systems. Any reduction in that type of specialist function will serve only to exacerbate delays in criminal cases, which are already too lengthy.

Concerns were raised with officials regarding the potential wider impact that any cut in the Probation Board's budget might have on the wider justice sector. Staffing costs account for 88% of that budget, and the Probation Board advised that the only way to meet pressures may be to reduce its headcount. Any reduction in staffing levels would have an impact on the rehabilitation of offenders and could, for example, result in a rise in crime and an increase in court appearances. Members also highlighted the potential knock-on effect of a reduction in funding for community and voluntary organisations that do important work in that area. The Committee heard that, in its earlier response to the information-gathering exercise, the Probation Board indicated a concern about its ability to fulfil its statutory functions and to provide a safe probation service. However, officials were unable to provide further comment because, at the time of the oral briefing, the Probation Board's updated response to the Department on its draft Budget allocation had not been received.

Officials advised that the draft Budget allocation to the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) did not include problem-solving justice funding, which will be allocated in-year. In addition, the Department will bid for Tackling Paramilitarism funding, under which the Probation Board's Aspire and ENGAGE programmes are funded.

Indeed, the Minister of Justice provided an update to her Executive colleagues just this afternoon to say that match funding has been provided by the UK Government for the Tackling Paramilitarism scheme. There seems to have been some progress made on phase 2 of the Executive's programme in that area, which I welcome.

The Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme has become known as the "victims' payment scheme", but it is important that it be called what it is, which is the "permanent disablement payment scheme". Although the scheme sits with the Executive Office, responsibility for its delivery rests with the Department of Justice. An allocation has been made to the Executive Office for the implementation arrangements for the scheme, which will allow the Justice Department to continue with that work, but funding for payments has not yet been agreed. The Committee has been keen to ensure that there is no undue delay in getting payments to victims and has been pushing for updates on progress to secure the funding for some time. Members will be aware that discussions took place very recently with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and the Committee will continue to monitor the issue.

On New Decade, New Approach, the bid that I mentioned for 153 additional police officers, which is in line with the three-year business plan to get us to the target of 7,500, is part of a £16.6 million bid for funding towards the NDNA commitments that fall to the Department of Justice. That was made part of the unique funding exercise in November. That bid also included funding for commitments relating to tackling paramilitarism; the implementation of the Gillen review of serious sexual offences; and speeding

up justice by reducing delay, which is an issue that has not been adequately tackled since the devolution of policing and justice back in 2010 or, indeed, before that. The Committee will be keen to see the outcome of that funding exercise, as it is important that those issues be progressed in a timely manner.

A range of other funding issues and concerns was raised. I will not go into them in detail today, but they include future COVID-19 requirements, legacy-related issues, European Union exit and tackling paramilitarism. The Committee is also aware that the Department is reviewing its priorities in the context of the Budget. The Committee will focus on all those issues as part of its scrutiny in the 2021-22 Budget cycle and its wider scrutiny of the Department, its agencies and NDPBs. In addition, the Committee has a heavy legislative programme and will want to ensure that there is adequate funding identified and committed to ensure that the legislation can be fully and properly implemented.

The Committee recognises that this is a challenging budget position for the Department of Justice.

Departmental officials have advised that some difficult decisions will have to be faced, considering the magnitude of the pressures that the Department faces. The Committee expects there to be ongoing engagement and to be kept fully informed to help ensure that the Department's budget is maximised and that key priority areas are funded to deliver effective outcomes across the justice sector.

To conclude my remarks in my capacity as Committee Chairman, I will say that the Committee noted its disappointment about the time that it was afforded to undertake proper scrutiny of the 2021-22 draft Budget. The Chair of the Finance Committee touched on that earlier. The Assembly and its Committees have an important scrutiny role, and it should not be compromised by delays at Executive level. I appreciate that the politics of Executive-level agreement can sometimes be frustrating for all of us.

Speaking in an individual capacity as an MLA for Lagan Valley, I will draw out a couple of points on the overall Budget picture. It is important that we consider the context in which the Chancellor will make a Budget statement, in which he will outline a lot of the challenges that the Treasury faces. We recognise that, as a result of the COVID-19 situation, the United Kingdom has borrowed £270 billion. That presents a challenge for the United Kingdom as a whole, and it is in that context that there could be implications for Stormont.

We depend significantly on the subvention and the Barnett consequential when it comes to taking decisions, and that informs our Executive's Budget. The deteriorating public finances at a UK-wide level raise concerns not just for this financial year but for future financial years. What will that mean for the Executive and for the citizens whom we represent?

As public finances are squeezed at a UK-wide level, I have concerns about what is coming down the tracks for the Executive. The Executive wanted to deliver for all our people, and being starved of the finances to do that creates, in and of itself, political tension. I appeal to the UK Government to recognise the politics of this place. We need continued financial support to make this place work. That does not mean that we duck difficult decisions.

We need to take on a job of work to do that, but financial pressures can create political tensions, and that does not make the work of moving this country forward any easier. Indeed, it makes it much more difficult.

In my view, the UK-wide position makes the UK as a whole more vulnerable. We are more susceptible to global challenges as we become financially dependent on other financial institutions and, indeed, other countries. That presents a threat to the position of the United Kingdom as a whole. Think about the value of sterling and how it will impact on our citizens. There are concerns about interest rates and what they could mean. When interest rates go up, that will impact on people's mortgage repayments. Our people will suffer as a result.

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

If income tax levels are frozen and do not increase in line with inflation, the lowest paid in our society, who currently do not pay tax up to the £12,500 limit, will be hit hardest, as well as those further up the various tax bands. That will limit the money that we have to spend to support economic activity in our own country. So, the UK-wide position is very relevant, and we need to be alert to it.

With the levelling-up funding, there is an issue with respecting devolution. When the UK Government announce funding schemes — the levelling-up funding is a new significant sum of money — we need to defend the role of devolved institutions in this place, in Scotland and in Wales. I put a question mark over the powers being retained in this area of funding if we are not to be given them and if London retains control of them. That raises a question for us to consider.

I have some sympathy, however, with the UK Government and the decisions that they are taking because we look at the way that the infrastructure project was greeted by some, even in this House. We want to see greater infrastructure links connecting us to Great Britain, and I, for one, will not dismiss the ambition to create a bridge or a tunnel because I think that great opportunities would come from it. We need greater strategic vision for our infrastructure projects. Important though they are — and I campaign on them — infrastructure cannot be just about fixing potholes and resurfacing country roads. We need to elevate our eyes to a much greater strategic ambition. On the one hand, I put a question mark over an approach that may not respect devolution, but I understand the potential concerns at a UK-wide level that a levelling-up funding scheme for strategic projects does not achieve that kind of aspiration.

There will be continued pressure with COVID spend for the next financial year. The road map to recovery has been published by the Executive, and we want to see this country reopen as quickly and as safely as possible, but we have to bear in mind the financial realities and what influence they will have. We do not have infinite funding. We have had huge amounts of funding from London for COVID-19 spend in this financial year. I have some sympathy for the Finance Minister and the Executive in that some of that money came very late, and that makes it difficult to get it back out.

5.15 pm

However, in the next financial year, what we can do to support businesses, if they are going to stay closed, will be heavily reliant on what other financial assistance we are going to get from the UK Government. If the furlough scheme is extended, as has been trailed, to the end of June, and the Executive are still going to have businesses closed, the position will be untenable. The Executive will be unable to afford to bankroll a furlough scheme. We cannot relax our restrictions in isolation to the financial reality of the support we have had from the UK Government. Furlough is one of the biggest support structures for our businesses. Had that not been there, imagine the devastation. Tens of thousands of people have been able to stay in employment, albeit some have had to take a reduction. However, if the furlough scheme ends and the Executive keep businesses closed, the position will not be tenable. That has to inform the decision-making process. When we look at the variables that have been announced today, around health, economy and community, it is very clear, in my view, what needs to happen if we do not have the financial support to bankroll the furlough scheme.

The rates holiday has been a lifeline for a lot of businesses in Northern Ireland. Going into the next financial year, rates will continue to be a significant pressure for businesses. I know that the Finance Minister is alert to the need to support businesses when it comes to the payment of rates. I pay tribute to my own council area, Lisburn and Castlereagh, which struck a 0% rates increase. In real terms, that is a cut when we look at inflation. I note that the Finance Minister's own patch, Newry and Mourne, was not able to reach the same position. It may be that we had more influence in helping our councillors get to the right place on that one. I commend the 0% rates increase in my council area.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. On the topic of rates, it is vital that the intervention continues, particularly with the uncertainty as to how long businesses will remain closed. Hopefully, the Minister will provide some clarification on that in his response. However, given how the pandemic has affected everyone's lives, right across Northern Ireland, does the Member agree that it would have been very good and positive for every council to take a similar approach to the Member's council, in striking a 0% rate? I am proud to say that my colleagues in Derry and Strabane did so last night.

Mr Givan: I was not alert to that one. Well done on getting that in. I must be careful because I am not sure what other councils have done and what my colleagues have been able to achieve in other council areas. However, it is important to get as low a rates increase as possible, in line with what the Executive are doing. I know that the Finance Minister has been corresponding with councils in respect of that.

However, this raises the issue of how fair the rates system is. Look at our town centres, and think of the impact on our retail and hospitality sectors. Providing support for rates will be very important. There is a gross unfairness, in my view, when it comes to levying rates, in the online activities of businesses. People refer to it as the "Amazon tax". If ever a global organisation has benefited from COVID-19, it is Amazon. Yet we seem to be unable to find a taxation system that properly ensures that Amazon contributes

to society. That is something that the UK Government need to do. I do not know whether our Executive are able to look it and find a way to levy an appropriate rates system on online transactions. However, continuing to place the burden on physical premises, at a time when we are moving to online and remote business, is an unfair allocation of the financial burden for our public services. It is something we need to tackle.

Finally, I want to mention a constituency case. I do so to provide an example at a time when we are trying to maximise financial resources.

Mr Catney: I thank the Member for giving way. I am off drink for Lent. If the Member does not hurry up, he is going to put me back on it. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Givan: I would hate for the Member to break his vows for Lent. I will get to this example of providing financial support to a community organisation, and the Member might want to make an intervention and commend the community group when he gets an opportunity.

Often, as elected representatives, we have groups coming to us because they are unable to provide their own financial wherewithal or resources to projects, and they expect government to provide 100% funding. Others are able to bring their own resources. Ballymacash Sports Academy, which is in the constituency that I share with Mr Catney, raised £112,000 through a community investment fund. Local businesses and individual communities bought in to a new model, which the academy was able to bring to funders. The Department for Communities was one funder, and we had the Minister, Deirdre Hargey, at the facility. It was able to provide support for the first phase of an over-£1 million project to deliver a new sports facility as well as support for the second phase, which it is in now. That community investment was able to unlock central government funding, and other sources of funding then came together. Now we are into the second phase and are asking the local authority to provide additional financial resource, and we will likely go back to the Department for Communities.

A model that Departments can look at is that kind of community buy-in. When organisations can provide their own financial support from the community, a project is more likely to succeed because the community is invested. I would like to see the Executive explore further what opportunity there is for all the Departments to capitalise on that kind of community investment support. I commend that organisation for the tremendous work that it has been doing in Ballymacash. I am sure that Mr Catney will break his Lent when its social club gets to open again. On that, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will conclude.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Knowing the Member for as long as I have, I am surprised that he did not go on for another 20 minutes to spite Mr Catney, but, mercifully, he did not.

Mr Sheehan: I am surprised that he did not go on for another two hours. *[Laughter.]* I was going to go down to the canteen to have my dinner.

Yesterday, I referenced the hope and expectation that the NDNA agreement brought last year, particularly in the British Government and their responsibilities to the people here. Pledges to invest in our public services and commitments to multi-year Budgets, which would provide

stability and allow Ministers to plan for the future, have disappeared like snow off a ditch. The British Government have reneged again on their promises and commitments. Quelle surprise.

The Finance Minister is in the unenviable position of delivering another Budget in the context of the global pandemic and all the difficulties that it provides, along with the previous 10 years of Tory austerity and, most likely, more to come. Once again, I put on record how grateful I am that we have a Finance Minister who works on behalf of our most vulnerable citizens, workers and families and who recognises the need to prioritise investment in children and young people and their futures, despite the limited resources that are available to him and his Department.

At critical junctures over the last 12 months, the Finance Minister has allocated significant sums to the Department of Education for its response to the pandemic. I commend the Minister for his allocations that supported children with special educational needs — £10 million was given to that — and funding for holiday hunger, which amounted to £30.6 million. I mentioned yesterday the campaign of the Manchester United footballer Marcus Rashford and how that pressurised the Tory Government into providing funding for meals outside the school terms.

Fair play to Marcus Rashford; he should be highly commended for the campaign that he ran. He was able to use his celebrity position to bring pressure to bear on the Tory Government. He comes from a less than affluent background and was able to empathise with young children from a similar background who were suffering because they usually depend on free school meals during term time, and they were left without in the holidays. As I mentioned yesterday, Marcus Rashford got a gong for that from the Queen. I am no great supporter of the honours system, but it has to be acknowledged and applauded that he got that.

Marcus Rashford's campaign received widespread media coverage for quite a long time, yet here we were well ahead of the curve. The Minister of Finance had already provided funding for holiday hunger, and it hardly got a mention. This concerns all of us in the Chamber and all parties, because the media are often very critical of what is done here, particularly in the Executive, and of what steps are taken to alleviate particular difficulties in society. Here was one case where, across the water, the fact that a footballer had embarrassed the Tories into providing funding for this issue got massive publicity. Here, when the Executive decided to provide for that and the Finance Minister allocated the funding, it hardly got a mention. I suppose that that is what we have come to expect from some elements of the media here.

Of course, we all know that disadvantaged kids will suffer disproportionately in all this. It is the kids who do not have access to proper IT devices who will fall behind in their learning, and there is greater incidence of mental health issues in disadvantaged communities, and children will also suffer in that respect.

I have to say that, without the global pandemic to contend with, our education system was already on the brink of a financial crisis. Starved of investment for 10 years as a result of Tory austerity, the system was facing up to a £400 million shortfall, and, in New Decade, New Approach, the British Government committed to investing in our

schools to ensure that they would once again have access to sustainable core budgets. Unfortunately, with the resources that they have provided, it will not be possible to achieve that, which is particularly concerning in the context of COVID and all the disruption that that has brought. Extended breaks in classroom learning have been difficult for young people and will no doubt have profound consequences. Our schools and teachers desperately need the necessary resources so that they are equipped to begin the process of rebuilding their pupils' mental health and well-being and of supporting their education recovery.

I also mentioned yesterday that Professor Siobhán O'Neill, the mental health champion, gave evidence to the Committee some weeks ago, and she agreed with the assessment that a tsunami is coming at us with the mental health and well-being of our children in schools. It has also been one of the strongest arguments for the reopening of schools that the mental health and well-being of young children is being damaged, and we need to get them back. They need that interaction with other children and the normal development that happens in schools.

5.30 pm

I have said in the Committee, and I say it here again, that, given the mental health and well-being difficulties that our children and young people are facing, the Education Minister needs to make a serious and ambitious bid for some of the COVID funding that can be carried over into next year. He needs to put in place a coherent and integrated cross-departmental strategy to deal with all of the well-being issues. He needs to involve the Health Department and, probably, the Department for Communities. He needs to bring on board the community and voluntary sector, which has a lot of expertise in not just the field of education but well-being and mental health.

In my constituency, the West Belfast Partnership Board is involved in many schemes that assist, in particular, children and young people who may be falling behind in their learning, including those sitting on borderline passes in important subjects such as maths and English. Many who have been involved in the Education Committee will be aware that, every Easter, in St Mary's University College, the partnership runs schools for children who are sitting on a borderline C/D in maths or English. There were difficulties last year because of the pandemic, of course, and there may be again this year. English and maths are important for getting into university and applying for jobs, so those were identified as important subjects. The pass rate among the kids who attend those Easter schools is well above 80%. Organisations such as that need to be involved in any sort of strategy that the Minister puts in place.

We need some sign from the Minister that he is even thinking about a strategy and that he will make a bid. There is £300 million sitting there, about £200 million of which is resource funding, so he cannot dither. Dithering has been a characteristic of his tenure in office so far. He needs to make a move now.

At a time when we are severely restricted in what we can do financially, we must prioritise the mental health and well-being of our children and young people. That must be the priority as schools reopen. I acknowledge the fact that the Minister, after the lockdown last spring, put in place the Engage programme to help kids who had missed out

on learning. However, the money that was allocated to that and the nature of the project will not cut the mustard in the face of all the problems that we will face in the time ahead. We need to equip our schools with the resources that they need to support our children, whether those are additional counselling services, well-being initiatives or other supports. Of course, sporting organisations, such as Ulster Rugby, the GAA, the IFA and so on, can also be part of the strategy.

The point has been made that some Ministers need to take greater responsibility for how they spend their budget in these difficult financial circumstances. It was disappointing, therefore, to read the Audit Office report on special educational needs, which found that, despite the hundreds of millions of pounds that the Department of Education and the Education Authority have spent on supporting some of our most vulnerable children, neither could demonstrate value for money. That is unacceptable.

The waiting times for children being assessed for statements of special educational needs are unacceptable. Those children and their parents are not getting the proper support that they need within the timescale that they should expect.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way and welcome his recent appointment to the Education Committee. There are many challenges. The Member has recognised the huge crisis that faces SEN children and their families. Does the Member agree that it was not so much about a lack of resource or financing as about a real lack of leadership? There was a deliberate attempt in the Education Authority (EA) to cover up its failures as opposed to facing down and addressing them to help those children. In fact, the system failed here.

Mr Sheehan: Absolutely. I agree wholeheartedly with that assessment. The Audit Office referenced hundreds of millions of pounds going into special educational needs but the children and their parents not getting value for money. That is a disgrace, and it needs to be resolved. It is a problem that has been there for a long time. Leadership is needed. The Minister needs to give leadership. The Education Authority also needs to stand up and take responsibility for the shortcomings that have been present in that organisation. Ministers need to be responsible and accountable for the large sums of money that they are allocated. In this case, the Education Minister must also provide an effective and strategic response.

I referred to the inadequate core budgets that many of our schools are trying to operate with. Many of those schools are doing so in substandard and crumbling buildings. That is particularly true for the Irish-medium sector, where many schools have remained in so-called temporary accommodation for over 20 years despite the sector growing rapidly in that time. Children deserve better than inadequately funded schools and Portakabin accommodation. The Irish-medium sector also needs to be adequately funded for the unique challenges that it faces, not just in general terms but in the context of the pandemic. When the sector asked for signage that was being provided to every other school, it was told that it would have to translate it itself. Only last week, I had complaints from stakeholders in the Irish-medium sector about documentation and other written material that had clearly been translated from English to Irish on Google Translate. It was just mumbo jumbo and made absolutely

no sense. If someone tells me that that is value for money in some way, I will tell them that they are talking through their hat, because that will have to be done again. It is totally unacceptable. It is an insult to the Irish-medium sector and an insult to the children who are in those schools. I speak as a parent of two children who are in the Irish-medium sector.

To conclude, I again express my thanks to the Finance Minister for the initiatives that he has taken forward over the past year. I look forward to what will be a challenging year. I hope that we get our priorities right and ensure that the most vulnerable in our society are taken care of.

Mr Muir: I speak on the Budget Bill as the Alliance Party's finance spokesperson. In many ways, the 2021-22 Budget outcome is disappointing for Northern Ireland.

However, until we have an Executive that are united in tackling Northern Ireland's underlying structural problems, the Departments will always struggle to meet their inescapable pressures. I am disappointed that the departmental expenditure limits for next year are essentially flat. The Budget does little to alleviate the financial stress that Departments have felt for many years and that has now been made so much more acute as a result of the historic economic downturn. Better news, however, is the nearly 7% increase in the conventional capital budget. However, I remain concerned about how effectively Departments can spend the capital funding that they receive, and I will come to that issue later.

Since the onset of the pandemic, the Alliance Party has consistently called for the Minister to take advantage of the ultra-low interest rates and to borrow additional funds. I therefore welcome plans to draw down £140 million of RRI borrowing. Worryingly, however, it remains unclear exactly how much EU funding Northern Ireland will lose this financial year because of Brexit. I ask the Minister of Finance to provide an update on that key issue.

I am also concerned that there is a lack of detail regarding how the Executive will respond to the long-term economic impact of the pandemic, particularly in reskilling and getting people back into employment. Over the past few days, two of Northern Ireland's biggest lenders — Ulster Bank and Bank of Ireland — have announced the closure of dozens of branches across Ireland. No doubt that has been accelerated by the pandemic, as more and more people move to digital banking. That is exactly the sort of scenario where the Executive need to ensure that a comprehensive plan is in place to offer retraining and reskilling —.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Muir, I am sorry to interrupt you. This is new for me to ask from the Chair, but are you prepared to give way to Mr McCrossan?

Mr Muir: I understand that I can do that, but I did not know whether you did interventions through StarLeaf. That is fine.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am happy to facilitate Mr McCrossan on this occasion.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you to Mr Muir. I have to say that being surrounded by eight of you is quite strange. Mr Muir, thanks for taking an intervention.

You are right about the banking situation: the closures have been accelerated by COVID-19, because we are

more dependent than ever on the online links to our accounts. However, there are rural communities, such as mine in west Tyrone, where many people will not have that luxury because broadband provision is so bad. Are the banks not just being opportunistic by using the situation to their advantage in order to abandon rural communities such as those in parts of west Tyrone, as opposed to putting the interests of the loyal communities whom they serve first? Does the Member agree?

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his intervention. I do agree. Ulster Bank and Bank of Ireland need to reconsider their decision to close the branches, because that will have a devastating impact not just on rural areas but on town and city centres. The Executive need to respond to that significant decision. They also need to have a comprehensive plan to offer retraining, reskilling and re-employment opportunities for those who have lost their jobs. The trend that we are seeing in banking, where certain jobs disappear and people in Northern Ireland lose out, will only increase as restrictions ease and support payments taper off, such as the inevitable ending of the furlough scheme.

I note with concern the Department for Communities' response to the Budget consultation that it may not have sufficient resources to deliver the support needed, if, as it expects, there is a further increase in unemployment, which will have a particularly acute impact on the long-term unemployed and minorities. That is an extremely worrying assessment from the Department for Communities, and I would be grateful if the Minister of Finance could provide us with his response.

The Alliance Party welcomes the Budget's commitment to freezing rates next year and the Minister's commitment to further rates relief for the businesses worst affected by the pandemic, but, as I outlined yesterday, we need to go further, with an independent review of the non-domestic rating system to take the burden off bricks-and-mortar businesses, alongside the fulfilment of the commitment to establish regional hubs for civil servants. Those are two simple but important ways in which we can look to support regional towns and cities across Northern Ireland as we strive to emerge from the pandemic.

There is still considerable uncertainty regarding our overall budgetary envelope for the forthcoming financial year. We wait to hear whether any additional funding via Barnett consequentials will be forthcoming following the UK Budget at Westminster tomorrow.

The fact that the UK Budget is tomorrow, with more Barnett consequentials perhaps likely, while we are today debating a Budget that has been drafted without any insight into what Her Majesty's Treasury's plans are, seriously impacts on budgetary planning in Northern Ireland.

5.45 pm

The Alliance Party continues to call for the introduction of multi-year Budgets so that Departments can plan their spending on a more long-term basis, yet, in spite of disappointing and short-term resource allocations for this year, the unwillingness of a number of Ministers to tackle the structural issues in Northern Ireland remains the primary reason that our finances are in a mess. Since the restoration of power-sharing, the largest parties in the Executive have continued to behave as if it were business

as usual. If you do as you have always done, you will get what you have always got. Although Departments are struggling to meet inescapable pressures, we are seemingly content to continue not to address the cost of division in our society, which is estimated to be at least half a billion pounds annually. Those are sectarian costs: costs for policing, segregated housing and the duplication of services, from hospitals to schools to leisure facilities. A united Executive could and should bring forward a strategy to tackle division head-on in order to bring down those costs. The main parties, however, are seemingly happy to sit on their hands and let things carry on as per usual. The cost of division is not just about the extra money that we spend to maintain a divided society but about how sectarianism hinders our ability to attract highly skilled talent into Northern Ireland; how it drives away some of the best and brightest to seek their future elsewhere; and how the threat of violence discourages business investment. We know what needs to be done to achieve structural change in Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office's recent report painted a bleak picture of talent management processes in our Civil Service. That is hindering our capacity to deliver on public service transformation. On health, although the focus this year has been on the immediate challenges of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, we can no longer afford to let the Bengoa report sit gathering dust on ministerial shelves. Our waiting lists are a national disgrace, and it is long past time for the Health Minister to enact the necessary reforms to change that. The list of overdue reforms to public service delivery is lengthy. On top of that, the Executive have failed to produce an investment strategy for economic development in Northern Ireland. We are still waiting for details of a fiscal council, which is a crucial institution for enhancing the scrutiny of public finances in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the Executive must bring forward proposals for an independent infrastructure commission, a body that could publish a 30-year investment strategy for Northern Ireland and hold the Executive to account for its delivery.

In conclusion, although the Budget outcome for Northern Ireland Departments as a whole is disappointing, and although a cloud of uncertainty continues to hang over the forthcoming financial year, there is much that a number of Ministers have failed to do, and are continuing to fail to do, to tackle the problems that we are facing. The Alliance Party will continue to fight for and champion policies that tackle sectarianism, that support public services and the economy and that improve the lives of all people in Northern Ireland.

Mr Newton: I rise as a mere Back-Bencher and as a member of the Communities and Education Committees to make some comments. Others who have spoken before me have taken a very global look at the matter of budgeting, budgeting strategy and budget allocations. They have talked about the time, or the lack of time, that we have had to scrutinise the Budget this year. I am not going to do that, because I would like to drill down a bit into the two Departments that I scrutinise through sitting on Committees. I pay tribute to my party colleague Paula Bradley, the Chair of the Committee for Communities, first, for the leadership that she has provided over the past year and, secondly, for her presentation today, in which she outlined the difficulties that the Communities Department will face over the incoming year.

I say that not to be in any way critical of any of the officials in the Department, because they have faced real challenges over the past year and have not been found wanting.

It has been a difficult year, and I believe that the year to come will be difficult. It does not matter who the Minister of Finance was at any stage in the past few years, but whoever it is will face real challenges. I do not think that it is right, though, as has been the case with a few Members, to blame everything on Tory austerity. It is important that we manage the Departments and the finances allocated to them in the most effective manner. Therefore, the Minister of a Department, whoever it may be and whatever the Department, is responsible for the governance of the Department, for the finance allocated to it, and for the effective use of the moneys allocated for its various projects. There is much that we can do to help ourselves. It is not always about Tory austerity policies.

I have mentioned this issue before, but, for the purposes of the debate, it is worth mentioning it again. It is important how money is managed in Departments, and guidelines are laid down for its allocation, management, effective use and monitoring to ensure that outcomes are provided in Departments by that investment. With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will read out a few sentences from a Treasury report, 'Improving Spending Control':

"Departments, devolved administrations, and their Arms Length Bodies will be expected to monitor and manage information about spending effectively, including improving the skills needed, in order to help them deliver their spending plans".

They will be required to share that information with the Treasury on a regular and consistent basis.

"Departments that demonstrate excellent financial management will be given greater freedoms to manage their own resources",

while those with bad management will be subject to more Treasury control.

The report continues:

"The exact requirements for each department will be agreed with the Treasury, but will, at a minimum, include accurate information on actual and planned spend"

that must be shared with the Treasury "on a monthly basis", and that expenditure information is frequently required, as:

"Departments should ensure that forecasts are based on their best information".

It is not often that I agree with Pat Sheehan, but I do have to agree with an expression that he used. Ministers do need to take accountability; Ministers do need to give leadership. I agree with him on that.

In the Finance Minister's document, in which he outlines his draft Budget, he tells us that the Department for Communities recently launched its Building Inclusive Communities 2020-2025 strategy, which sets out how the Department will work across government. It is true that the Department did launch the strategy, and departmental officials came to the Committee to outline it. However,

there were no specific and measurable targets, no long-term goals, and no points that one could have measured targets against in being achievable, realistic or time-based.

As a follow-up to that, I wrote to the Minister for Communities about the effectiveness of her plan, and I asked her when the measurable targets in her five-year 'Building Inclusive Communities' strategy document would be confirmed. The Minister was courteous enough to reply to me on 29 December. She said:

"Delivery of the Building Inclusive Communities 2020-25 strategy will be measured through the Department's business plans, which my officials are currently engaged in developing. My officials will attend the Communities Committee on 25 February 2021." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 134, pWA274].

However, the officials did not arrive at the Committee on 25 February.

We have a document, but we cannot use it to hold the Minister to account. I agree with Pat Sheehan that we need to see leadership.

I want to turn to another area. The Minister and the Department for Communities have responsibility for the administration of sport and promoting a culture of lifelong enjoyment and success in sport. That is their function and, generally speaking, they do that through arm's-length bodies. In 2011, £36.2 million was allocated by the Executive for the subregional stadia programme for soccer, on the basis of it being a priority spend in the next comprehensive spending review.

The Communities Minister's consultation started in November 2015 and concluded in February 2016. For some reason — I am not sure that anyone knows what it is — the Minister was not happy with that consultation, and a second consultation was undertaken. So, from 2011 to now, in March 2021, no money has been allocated for the subregional stadia programme for soccer, despite the fact that many clubs, which had hoped that their bids would be successful, engaged professionals to make drawings, engaged consultants to draw up strategies for their club and spent their money in the hope that the money that was allocated in 2011 would come to them, and they did all the necessary preparations. So, I agree with Pat that we need leadership from Ministers.

I want to turn to the other Committee on which I sit, which is the Education Committee. My colleague Paul Frew reminded me this morning that in making his bids for additional money the Education Minister was less than 50% successful. We regard education as a major priority, and we have talked about the need for a successful education system, yet the bids were less than 50% successful.

I want to pay tribute to our teachers who, over the past year, have done such a phenomenal job.

They have been innovative in how they have dealt with problems, reconstructed how they deliver the curriculum to children and engaged with parents to support them and provide them with packs and so on. They have done a phenomenal job. You have only to go on to the internet to look at some of the work that is being put out to see how school principals, boards of governors and teachers

have approached the difficulties. I also pay tribute to the Minister for his initiative, first of all, in addressing underachievement and secondly, in the review of our education system.

6.00 pm

There is no doubt that, as schools return, there is potential for teachers to experience aspects of school life that they have never faced before. I have not seen a survey for Northern Ireland, so I will refer to a survey of 3,000 teachers and head teachers in England. The educational researchers who carried out the study identified four particular areas where they anticipate problems. Ninety-eight per cent of teachers stated that their pupils are, on average, three months behind with the curriculum. So, 98% of those teachers believed that their pupils have lost, on average, three months' learning over the past year. Twenty-one per cent of teachers believed that boys are further behind than girls. We in Northern Ireland know all about boys' underachievement and their having to play catch-up at a later stage. The researchers also found that the learning gap between poorer pupils and those from better-off communities has widened by 46%. Fifty-three per cent of teachers in schools in deprived areas said that their pupils are at least four months behind with the curriculum compared with only 15% of teachers in schools in better-off, more affluent areas. If that information and study are correct, there is a big piece of work to be done in the months ahead.

I agree with Pat Sheehan in another area: the return journey to school is vital, although my emphasis is not the same as his. The return to school has to have an agreed route, and it must be recognised, which it is, I believe, around the Committee table, that, as the Education Minister, Assembly and Committee plot a way forward, it cannot be done by the Minister alone and there must be support for him and the leadership that, I believe, he will show as schools return. Bear in mind that, when he made bids for extra money, less than 50% of those bids were successful. The return to school will require additional funding above and beyond what is in his budget. It will require the Finance Minister to step up to the plate if we agree that it is important to find a route for our children to return successfully to school.

Indeed, the Health Minister will also be required to play a part in the return to school, and he will need financial support to do that.

However, the Health Minister has specialist experience on mental health issues at his disposal, and it is anticipated that work will need to be carried out with pupils. There are those who work in our communities, staff with specialist skills and contacts based in councils, presumably, who work with educationalists in the Youth Service and can do a joined-up exercise. Bear it in mind that we have outdoor facilities that are second to none and have not been used since last March when they were mothballed. A joined-up approach is needed if we are serious about working with our schools, principals and boards of governors to help our children to return.

We need to be aware of children's overall physical and mental health. We need to be assured that they can engage in play and leisure with their peers and take part in physical activities. It is not all about learning and achieving. It is about learning and achieving, but it is wider than that.

It is also about the economic potential for the children and their environmental well-being. That always needs to be based on a school/home partnership supported by the Assembly.

Reference was made to our special needs children. Around the Committee table, there is great empathy for the special schools leadership group. Not long after the Committee was formed, I had what I now regard as the privilege of being asked to attend an informal meeting of the special schools leadership group, which a number of other Committee members also attended. I came away from the meeting feeling quite disturbed as I tried to understand how they performed their role in educating children with special needs. It is not an exaggeration to say that they were operating on a shoestring. They were meeting very challenging conditions without the support that they deserved.

I am indebted to my colleague William Humphrey, who chaired the Public Accounts Committee, which called for an urgent overhaul of the system. It was taking a year for a child's needs to be identified. When senior officials from the Education Authority attended the Committee, I thought, "How can it be that we were operating with five different computer systems across Northern Ireland?", if my memory serves me right. We were trying to combine an IT system with a paper system. Because the Department of Education needed the cooperation of parents over the school holidays and cooperation with the health authorities, things nearly closed down over the holidays. For two months nothing happened to identify the special needs of the child. I am sure that every MLA has had parents in their office pleading because they cannot get an assessment of their children's needs. When you contacted the Education Authority — I hope that it will get better — you felt as if you were an inconvenience. I think that that matter will be put right. It is a matter that must be put right. We need to support the principals, teachers and staff in general in our special needs schools.

I will move on to another area of special needs. The Minister recognises that there is certainly a need for an additional school for special needs children. We have had representation from the principals of special schools, who have identified the need for another special school to address the needs of children. There is a greater number of pupils in the special schools than there ought to be. I am not saying that that is the case in all of them, but it is certainly the case in some. We had targeted the Belfast area for a special needs school, which was promised, I understand, 10 years ago but has not gone anywhere. The parents and pupils need our support and need that investment. The ethos must be that, whether in a mainstream school or a special needs school, every child has the opportunity to succeed.

Some famous quotations provide the right approach to education. It is not about the cost of education. In 1997, Tony Blair, as he was launching a manifesto, used the words "Education, education, education". That stuck, and it became a major factor in his success at that election. It is about education, education, education, but it is also about investment, investment, investment in education. It should not be seen as a cost. It was Benjamin Franklin who said that investment in education always pays the highest returns, and Mitt Romney said:

"Education is the investment our generation makes in the future."

I will make a few remarks about the overall concept, activity and mechanisms of budgeting. I agree with what others have said. In my days on Belfast City Council, when it came to setting the rate, I argued that we should never set a rate for a year. I said that we could agree the rate for one year but should know what it was likely to be the next year and the year after that. I suspect that, if we do not move to multi-year Budgets and multi-year prioritising, the Minister will face exactly the same challenges as he faces this year.

The parties opposite need to stop talking purely about Tory austerity. There is scope. If the £36.2 million were released for the building of soccer stadia and so on, imagine how many jobs that would create. How many people would be employed? What about the businesses that would exist around it? We would generate extremely good income for certain areas.

That is what we are supposed to be doing.

6.15 pm

Significant headroom is provided in the spring Supplementary Estimates to allow for unallocated spending to be absorbed by Departments on the basis of future Executive decisions. I hope that, if I am right, one of the areas that we will look at is "investment, investment, investment" in education and that we will support our teachers as all of us around the Chamber say that we want to.

Ms Dillon: My contribution will be short. Hopefully, I will not delay you for too long. Thank you very much for bringing me in by StarLeaf.

I will speak as Sinn Féin's spokesperson on justice. I will not go into an awful lot of detail. I spoke yesterday about some of the challenges for policing and the Probation Board in particular, and for staff numbers in the Prison Service. Those were all talked about yesterday, and I do not intend to go into them again.

One of the issues that I want to pick up that comes under justice, although it is certainly cross-Executive, is the permanent disablement payment scheme. I thank Mike Nesbitt for his contribution on that. He really brought it down to where it should be: the humanity and the humanising of the subject. That is where we all need to be on it. Whilst we can bat back and forth about where the money is for that in the Budget, the reality is that it is a massive cost and the money is not in the Budget. The Finance Minister — all the Executive, actually — have been very clear about that. However, that is an issue for us politically to battle with the NIO and the British Government. It is not [*Inaudible*] who are out there waiting on payments to have that battle.

A number of Members said that those individuals do not care where the money comes from. That is not true. In fact, that could not be further from the truth. The victims and survivors that I have met through the victims' forum and all the different groups and organisations that represent victims have all been very clear that they care about where the money comes from. They do not want to see it taken from the Departments of Education, Health or Communities or the organisations that are helping

them and their families at this time. As I said, that is not a battle for them to have. We need to take the nonsense and hypocrisy out of the issue, address it as a united Executive and Assembly and bring our case to the NIO and the Secretary of State. They widened the scope and increased the cost of the scheme. Therefore, they have to take responsibility for it. We need to get real and stop the grandstanding and the nonsense. It is unfair to the victims to put them in a position where we are saying to them, "You do not care where the money comes from". That is simply not true.

The Department of Justice has a responsibility to administer the scheme, and the Justice Minister has united with the Finance Minister and the Executive Office to meet the British Secretary of State to discuss it. I hope that we will get a positive response. Last week at the Committee, I asked for an update from the Justice Minister on where we are on this issue. Hopefully, we will see movement and be able to progress that issue and to give some assurance to the victims that they will get paid whenever their applications are processed.

We have had an uplift in the budget for the Office of the Police Ombudsman for historical and legacy investigations. However, in the wider context, the Budget is severely impacted by the fact that we have not progressed the Stormont House mechanisms. The failure to progress those means that the British Government are also not providing the money that was to come with them. That is having a massive impact on our Justice budget, because the PSNI is effectively picking up the issue without any additional funding from the Stormont House mechanisms. We need to address that again; it needs to be dealt with. The British Government need to move forward with that: to bring forward the legislation, to put in place the Historical Investigations Unit (HIU) and to remove not only the financial responsibility but the toxicity of the legacy issue from current-day policing.

I want to speak briefly as an MLA for Mid Ulster about the issues that impact us. I want to pick up on what the previous Member said about education and the Department for Communities' issues that we want to see funding and finance for. There was a bit of hypocrisy in talking about councils not raising the rate and then asking for money for a sports stadium and all the other things that we want. He also talked about not pointing to Tory austerity. We will not point to Tory austerity then. We will not ask the British Government for any money. We will just say that we want money for everything, but we do not know where the money is coming from, and we will not ask the British Government for any more money. I do not get the logic behind that kind of conversation. Again, we could unite on some of those issues, because the Member is right: investing in sports stadia, education and businesses will all bring money in. It is investment for the future, and that is what we need to do, but, as the saying goes, "It takes money to make money".

We are not asking to get the same money forever and a day, but we are asking for investment to improve our chances of increasing our income and making a more sustainable economy going forward. We will have a better budgeting system as a result. We will get no argument from the Minister about the need for multi-year Budgets. We are agreed right across the House on that issue. I have not heard one Member say that that is not where we

want to be. We could not do it in our own homes, so I do not know how we can run the economy of our devolved institution without having multi-year Budgets. I know that the Finance Minister wants to get to that place.

There are a number of other issues. We can talk about roads and the lack of investment. I was disappointed that the Infrastructure Minister did not put in a bid, particularly for rural roads. I come from a large, rural constituency, and there are a number of issues.

I want to go back to the point about the bridge. A number of Members have talked about how it would be great, saying that we would be linked to Scotland and asking what is bad about that. I do not have any negative comments on that, but I will say this: I tried to get a bus from Newry to Cookstown, and it took me five hours to do that journey. A 45-minute journey took five hours. Let us sort out the public transport here before we look at building bridges to other countries. I am not ruling it out. I am just asking us to use a bit of common sense. Let us put a proper rail and bus network in place here. I am sure that many rural villagers could tell us about their experiences of not being able to get a bus service to the nearest local town. A number of Members talked about access to banks and services. Many of our rural constituents do not have access to those services because they cannot get a bus. It is not because they do not have a bank in their village but because they cannot get to the nearest town, where there may well be a bank.

Let us look at all those issues with a wee bit of common sense and with an agreed and united approach.

A number of Members talked about having a united approach yet then quickly went on to talk about all the ways in which we can divide. Let us therefore genuinely have a united approach. Let us back our Finance Minister in his reasonable, sensible and logical asks of the British Government. Let us support him in those asks, instead of making the entire case for the British Government as to why they should not or will not give the money to the people here who deserve it. I would put those who are awaiting payment from the permanent disablement payment scheme at the top of that list.

Ms McLaughlin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. The debate is primarily about the 2020-2021 Budget, but it is vital that we talk about the 2021-22 draft Budget.

Today, I seek to express my party's reservations about the lack of a sufficient strategy for the Northern Ireland economy and public services. I remain concerned about the lack of sufficient progress being made on the road to economic recovery. There is a seriously disjointed approach to spending, and that needs to be replaced with a new strategy and vision for a better economy post-COVID and post-Brexit. We need it to be matched by long-term Budgets and coherent preparation, not random handouts, chaotic planning and unashamed pushing of party political self-interest.

As the economy spokesperson for my party, I will concentrate my comments particularly on the budget issues for the Department for the Economy. Earlier, we heard concerns from the Economy Committee Chairperson about whether the allocations towards skills development are adequate. I share her concerns. The weakness of skills is perhaps the most pressing of all the

challenges facing our economy. Let us consider where we are at. We are underfunding vocational training by about a quarter when compared with that in other countries. We have a much smaller university sector than that in the Republic of Ireland and in GB, and what we do have is underfunded. Meanwhile, we continue to have far too many pupils who leave school without the basic skills and qualifications needed to give them good jobs or provide them with the skills that our society needs in order to support local businesses to get bigger or attract inward investment. I agree with Robin Newton when he said that far too many of our school-leavers are set on a course that could lead to long-term unemployment. The scourge of our economy is economic inactivity.

Is the scale of the investment in skills development adequate to meet the challenges? Unless the Executive find substantial additional funding for skills development, then, no, it is not. I therefore urge the Executive to support new bids to improve our skills base, and I urge the Department for the Economy to face up to the scale of the problem that we have in our hands.

I will now speak as the MLA for Foyle. I put on record my concerns about the Minister for the Economy's comments about Ulster University's Magee and Coleraine campuses. They have caused absolute uproar in Derry. It is almost as if some MLAs want to revert to the 1960s. We thought that progress had been made with the New Decade, New Approach agreement and that provision at Magee had crossed the line. The agreement contained commitments that the Executive would expand university provision at Magee and bring forward proposals for the development and expansion of the Ulster University campus at Magee college, including the necessary increase in medical student numbers to realise the campus target of 10,000 students.

I do not see that in any plan in the draft Budget or in any future planning. The Economy Minister, according to her reply to my question for written answer last month, has unilaterally downgraded that commitment to the consideration of any expansion proposals for either the Coleraine or Magee campus.

That is not good enough. It is a solo run from the Minister, who is attempting to renege on commitments that were collectively entered into by her party's leadership along with the leaderships of other parties.

6.30 pm

Dr Aiken: I thank the Member for giving way. I want to highlight the fact that the Ulster Unionist Party supports building the graduate medical school at the Magee campus. Obviously, one of our biggest problems is trying to recruit and retain medical professionals, and anything that we can do to speed up the building of the medical school will be useful.

Ms McLaughlin: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am talking about the wider expansion to 10,000 students, but thank you for your support.

I stress that it should be obvious by now that Derry has, by a long way, the lowest higher-education student density of any city on these islands.

We have another challenge: the decline of our traditional commercial centres. That should be one of the major

priorities for the Executive Office, which is leading on the high-street task force. That task force was announced — *[Interruption.]* Sorry, that is my phone; I beg your pardon. That task force was announced at the beginning of August last year, yet it met for the first time only last week. So much for treating our high streets as a priority. Reshaping our city and town centres will need vast sums of money as well as new ways of thinking about them. Traditional commercial centres have been left empty as a result of COVID, but the crisis has been building for years, with the growth of home shopping and internet banking. If ever we needed a reminder that we have crisis in our high streets, the announcement of branch closures by the Bank of Ireland yesterday was it. We need to make our city and town centres attractive places in which to live, work, study and have fun. They must have a future, and we will not be able to provide that without the necessary investment.

Despite the pandemic, the most intractable problem globally remains climate change. I am not convinced that Departments have fully taken on board just how difficult it will be to meet the net-zero carbon emissions target by 2050. If the draft Budget for next year is a guide, Departments are not taking it sufficiently seriously. Nor does it seem that they are working in partnership sufficiently, which is essential, given the cross-cutting nature of the problem with energy policy.

There is no reference to the green new deal, which was a commitment in New Decade, New Approach. When are we going to begin serious work on the massive retrofitting exercises needed to bring our homes to the level of energy efficiency needed to start the journey to a low-carbon future? Neither is there recognition of the scale of expenditure required to cut our society's carbon emissions and build an economy based on the renewable energy and low-emissions technologies. Compare that with the Scottish Government's commitment to invest over £2 billion over the next decade to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2045.

It is way past the time for us to keep doing the things that we have been doing. We have to be radical and radically reshape our expenditure profile and do things differently: invest in skills, invest in more infrastructure, invest in more green technologies and invest in the future.

It would be remiss of me to not bring a little dose of reality into this conversation. We are all aware that Northern Ireland is an unsustainable economic entity. We cannot pay our way, and have been unable to for many decades. We rely on a £10 billion a year subvention that just about keeps us afloat. The output of Northern Ireland today is far away from that of Northern Ireland in the 1920s, when it accounted for 80% of Ireland's exports, with Belfast the largest city on the island. Today, Northern Ireland exports £10 billion worth of goods while ROI exports £285 billion worth of goods.

The average income in the Republic of Ireland is £38,000 against the average income here, in Northern Ireland, of £22,000. That leads to the average spending power of Southerners to be almost twice that of Northerners. There is a serious differentiation between our two economies on this small island, and it always astounds me that the DUP refuses to acknowledge the economic failure and inefficiencies of our economic circumstance.

At this moment, I find it incredible that the DUP is so blinded by ideology that it refuses to acknowledge an economic recovery strategy that maximises the benefit from our protocol position at the crossroads of the European and UK markets, with particular opportunities in agri-food, life sciences and low-carbon transition. The failure to grasp that competitive economic advantage will no doubt go down as another missed opportunity for unionism and a failure of their collective political leadership.

Finally, I emphasise again that this must be the last year when the people of Northern Ireland tolerate this farcical improvisation of Budgets in this Assembly. The people of Northern Ireland deserve better, and, based on the many contributions that I have heard, right across this House, today, I ask Minister Murphy to ensure that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past, and can he do better, please?

Mr McGuigan: I am conscious of the Budget debate taking place in the most challenging of circumstances. We are in the midst of an unprecedented global health and economic crisis. In the space of the last 12 months, COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on many families and communities as the virus has spread throughout our population. Unfortunately, the human cost has been devastating, with over 2,000 deaths, and my thoughts are obviously with the families of those who have lost a loved one in the past year.

Necessary action to deal with the pandemic has also meant hardship, worry and difficulties for some businesses and employees. In the midst of a global pandemic, this was never going to be a straightforward year for the North's finances. Despite the high level of support provided by the Executive, there is no doubt that the pandemic has left our economy in a difficult situation.

I am conscious that today's debate is primarily on the Budget and spending in this current financial year, though it makes provision for the initial months of the 2022 financial year. Due to COVID, there are very good reasons for the number and value of in-year reallocations that have taken place this year. Given the late announcements from the British Treasury, there are many reasons why, at this late stage, considerable amounts of money are left by the Executive to spend. In the past few months, I have noted that the Finance Minister has repeatedly called on his Executive colleagues to come forward with bids to ensure that that money is spent prior to the end of March.

No doubt, I, like others, will be regularly contacted in this difficult year by concerned businesses and members of the public who are struggling as a result of the pandemic. Some of those have not even received any support from the various schemes. So, it is vital that all is done to ensure that the money is allocated in the short time ahead and in a way that helps those who need it most. The Minister for the Economy is key in that responsibility.

As Deputy Chair of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, I support the comments made earlier in the debate by the Chair of the Committee and want to add a few points. As a member of that Committee, I find it impossible to talk about finances or the Budget without referring to the impact of Brexit.

Brexit, as pushed by the right wing of the Tory party and supported by the DUP, presents a potential threat to

agriculture and rural development here in the North. In the sector, the negative implications of Brexit will have the greatest impact on our rural and peripheral communities. As we have left the EU, there is no long-term certainty about the future of the single farm payment, which, if discontinued post-2022, will plunge nearly 25,000 farm families into poverty.

The British Government have dragged the North out of the EU against the wishes of the 56% of the population of the North who voted against it. In that context, the protocol has been an important mitigation that reduces some of the negative impacts of Brexit. The AERA Committee received evidence from departmental officials on the significant threat that Brexit represents to public services. The budget allocation for what was CAP pillars 1 and 2 is £315.6 million. There is a shortfall of £14.4 million, which we would have received had we remained in the EU. The North of Ireland will lose out on £34 million of funding over the next three years because the Tory Government have netted it off our budget.

The British Government are penalising the North for using flexibility under previous rules. That is made worse by the loss of the EU fund for disease eradication, which contributes to the cost of our TB programme. While the AERA Committee has been advised that reduction in funding will not impact on the current rural development programme, it will impact on any future agriculture policy framework for the North.

The South will receive approximately €10.73 billion in European Union funding under the common agricultural policy over the next seven years. The North is now obviously out of that policy, while our neighbours in the South remain in it. That will leave an uneven playing field on the island and could pose a threat to our Northern farmers' ability to compete.

The DUP supported the end of the EU CAP funding, and we are now left with only a Tory manifesto commitment that direct payments will continue until the end of this British Parliament. However, as the Government have repealed the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, that may provide further instability for farmers and rural businesses, who do not know what the situation will be beyond 2022.

We currently have the tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI) programme. That is hugely important for rural communities, and, while it is welcome that the budget of £1.8 million has been confirmed, it needs to be baselined into the future.

Rural policy in the North has largely been shaped and influenced by the EU since the 1970s. EU structural funds are worth £100 million per year. I note that the Finance Minister stated in the past that the British Government have made no commitments to replace those vital structural funds.

I will move on from Brexit to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has also been particularly challenging to our agriculture industry. The £25 million support scheme for farmers facing financial difficulties, including £7 million for beef farmers, is welcome but does not go far enough to address the challenges faced by the sector. I represent a rural constituency, and I think that it is important that we continue to mainstream rural and equality needs by maximising them and making them fully understood in all Departments and all government decisions.

A vital part of the AERA Committee's work obviously encompasses our environment. As Sinn Féin's environment and climate spokesperson, I put on record again that we cannot let the tragedy of COVID distract us from preventing the current and future climate-based tragedies that will occur if we do not act. While addressing coronavirus and providing relief to affected businesses and workers must be our most immediate concern, the post-crisis recovery programmes present an opportunity to align public policies more closely with climate objectives and to limit the risk of locking in carbon-intensive infrastructure. Recovery packages can be designed to orientate investment towards sectors and technologies that can accelerate the transition to low- or no-carbon alternatives, improving resilience to future shocks from climate change and creating new industries and jobs here in the North in the process.

One of the many things that COVID-19 has shown us is the direct effect that we can have on our planet's ecosystem. As lockdowns took place across the world, we saw dramatic improvements in air and water quality and biodiversity, with the pandemic even leading to a major decrease in noise pollution. While we are all eager to return to normal once the pandemic ends, it must be a new normal. We cannot revert to the practices of the past.

I will quote from representatives of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) when they gave evidence to the Finance Committee on the draft Budget for the incoming year. They said:

"You have been discussing the impact of the pandemic on budgetary matters. The impact of the pandemic has been incredible; it has been very significant. Having said that, it has also demonstrated and given us a glimpse of what is possible. For example, we were told that you cannot move tens of thousands of workers from the workplace to home overnight. You can."

The ICTU representatives outlined a valid and vital point.

A green economy is affordable, and we cannot afford not to do it. Although getting the economy back up and running will inevitably mean an initial decline in the environmental improvements that we have seen over the past year, we must not let them roll back too far or for too long. Enhancing environmental health through better air quality, water quality, sanitation and waste management, along with efforts to safeguard biodiversity, will reduce the vulnerability of communities to infections and pandemics.

6.45 pm

In addition to the challenges of Brexit and the pandemic, Tory austerity has meant that the block grant has not kept pace with demand, so our capacity to deliver public services has been undermined, and the Minister of Finance's ability to provide a Budget that delivers improved public services to our people has been limited. I noted Robin Newton's comment about Sinn Féin labouring that point. While others may not use the phrase "Tory austerity", it was clear from listening to the chief executives of the health trusts yesterday that they are concerned that budget impacts could cause damage to the health service. I also noted comments that were made during evidence to the Finance Committee from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, as I mentioned, and Ulster University's economic policy unit, which talked of the uncertainty of the standstill

Budget for this year and next year, and the impact that that will have on our public services. Sinn Féin believes that we need the full transfer of economic and fiscal powers to the North. We want greater emphasis on all-Ireland integration and cooperation in the delivery of public services. Regardless of whether it is this year's Budget or next year's Budget, or any Budget in the future, one thing is clear: relying on a British Government, especially a right-wing Tory Government, will never be good for citizens on this island.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Pat Catney.

Mr Catney: My legs are sleeping. Sorry about that, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

I understand the Department of Finance's difficulties in bringing forward the Budget; I understand that the Treasury did not confirm the funding envelope until the end of November; and I understand the Minister's difficulties in bringing a draft Budget to the Executive. However, here we are once again, debating a piecemeal Budget that does not address the need for longer-term strategic thinking on the fiscal position of Northern Ireland. That approach does not allow for a full conversation about the issues that departmental budgets face. This year, the financial outlook for Departments will remain largely unchanged from last year, but, beyond that, we have a lack of information on what that means for departmental spending. More detail must be provided as soon as possible so that we know what existing spending may continue, what new projects may arise and what funding might stop altogether.

If we look at the Department of Health and the Department of Education, we see that those two Departments cannot withstand another year of standstill Budget. Health's spending is predicted to grow by 6.5% every year. In 2015, we talked about Health's spending growing by 5%, so the situation is getting worse rather than better. Without much-needed reform, our ability to fund an effective health service will cease to exist.

We all know of the pressures that have been faced by our education system over the past number of years. The pandemic cannot have made anything better. If support is not provided to our young people and their return to school as quickly and effectively as possible, the events of this year could end up having a long-term effect.

When the Executive returned last year, they knew that they had to come up with an ambitious plan to get buy-in from the public after three years of disastrous inaction. A year later, Members rightly ask questions about the UK Government's funding commitments in respect of New Decade, New Approach. We need more discussion about and more clarity on progress on the key NDNA commitments. However, without the proper prioritisation of conversations, the 'New Decade, New Approach' document could end up being another fig leaf agreement that sits on the shelf alongside the likes of the Fresh Start Agreement and the Stormont House Agreement, with no plan to tackle health waiting lists. How will the Executive develop a regionally balanced economy with the proposed fiscal council? It is great having ambitious plans, but, if you never implement them, what benefit is there?

Going forward, we must get serious about public service reform. Budgets will always be tight, and circumstances will always come up that we think take precedence over this important piece of work. However, the pandemic

has drastically changed the landscape. Approaches that we took in the past may no longer be effective, and new opportunities should be grasped to better serve the public. Although work is ongoing on the development of the economic strategy, there must be adequate budgetary provision for the priorities highlighted by such a strategy. Our economic recovery from the pandemic could be maximised if we considered the benefits of our position, due to the Northern Ireland protocol, as an access point to the EU and UK markets, particularly in the areas of agri-food, life sciences and the low-carbon economy.

The need for strategic thinking is apparent across all Departments. Work on investment and anti-poverty strategies is ongoing, but we have other long-term challenges. We have challenges in health and social care and because of climate change. We need to develop in our young people the skills that make them fit for purpose for future employment opportunities. Without adequate funding for schools and training, we will condemn yet another group of young people to low-skilled jobs and lose others to the brain drain. Strategic thinking needs to be long term, and it is incredibly difficult for Departments to plan strategically and improve on what they deliver when faced with a single-year budget. Single-year budgets also encourage the continuation of existing allocations, rather than facilitating a more fundamental review.

What should effective funding look like? Multi-year Budgets are central to enabling long-term planning and to facilitating value for money, capital programmes and sufficient public-service reform. In my area, with sufficient long-term thinking, funding for the expansion of greenways and the Lagan canal would completely transform our use of active travel and how we work and live. Behavioural change caused by the pandemic will create the need to transform our commercial centres. Regional towns will become hubs of our economic activity. This can be facilitated only with sufficient investment in infrastructure and, as I hear everybody saying, especially about rural areas, in broadband.

We need to provide allocations to tackle the growing housing crisis. We must look at where we live and at how to bring more people into town centres. That can create micro-economies and low-carbon hubs, with everything located within walking distance of our homes. Further strategic infrastructure projects like the M1/A1 bypass are needed to promote a post-Brexit all-island economy, while work on the recently approved Knockmore rail halt just outside the centre of Lisburn unlocks access to public transport for all those using or going through Lisburn.

Of course, the areas where completely new economic hubs can be created are limited. For me, though, I can just about stretch myself to think of one key area that is yet to be developed, one key area that has the potential to enhance the economy at a sufficient level regionally and one key area that, due to infighting and indecision, has been a black hole for lack of funding and missed opportunities. I refer, of course, to Maze/Long Kesh.

I noted with interest yesterday that £1.3 million had been allocated in the spring Supplementary Estimates to Maze/Long Kesh. Maybe this is the year when we will come together to unlock the potential of the land there. Maybe this is the year when sensible heads will prevail, and just maybe I will not have to raise Maze/Long Kesh year in, year out in Budget debates. I live in hope.

Ms Bailey: I welcome the opportunity to speak today on another Budget and another accelerated passage. I will do my bit to save Mr Catney from breaking his Lent alcohol fast. I do not wish to repeat much of what has been raised by Members during the debate today, but I have to admit that, at this stage, I am really glad that I do not share your commitment, Mr Catney.

We have heard Committee responses to the Budget from the Committee Chairs today. We have heard that we are still in extraordinary times dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis that it has brought with it. We also know that women and children are impacted more severely during crises. That is, of course, on top of the austerity agenda of recent years. We have heard about the identified strategies yet to be implemented by the Executive: the gender equality strategy, the race equality strategy and the disability and poverty strategies. They are all still unmet. Those who can least afford it are suffering, and that is to our shame. We have all been lobbied by sectors that have set out some clear plans for how we move forward to a fairer and more just society. The feminist recovery plan, which was mentioned by Mr Nesbitt, is one example. I recommend to anyone who has yet to read it that they should take the time to do so.

We can no longer continue to distract ourselves from the fact that we urgently need to protect those most at risk in Northern Ireland. We need to urgently rethink our economic and fiscal priorities. Previous years' spending shows that public spending per head in Northern Ireland is the highest in the UK. We have the highest spend of any region on public order and safety; economic affairs in enterprise and economic development; economic affairs in employment policies; agriculture; fisheries; forestry; health; recreation; culture and religion; and social protection. We spend more than the UK average per head in each of those categories but not on economic affairs in science and technology, transport or environmental protection. On environmental protection, we have the lowest spend of all four UK regions.

The New Decade, New Approach agreement promised us much, but, perhaps most relevant to this Bill, it promised us an independent fiscal council. The agreement states:

"An independent Fiscal Council will be established in Northern Ireland by July 2020. As per the Fresh Start Agreement, the membership and terms of reference of this Council will be agreed with the UK Government. It would:

◦ prepare an annual assessment of the Executive's revenue streams and spending proposals and how these allow the Executive to balance their budget; and

◦ prepare a further annual report on the sustainability of the Executive's public finances, including the implications of spending policy and the effectiveness of long-term efficiency measures".

We all know that the deadline of July 2020 has long gone. Almost one year on, I am not aware of anything solid being done to establish an independent fiscal council. I would be greatly encouraged if the Minister could give an update to the House today on that issue and maybe include a new deadline for an intended establishment date: July 2021, perhaps. We need a reply that goes further in commitment

than the response that the Minister gave to a question for written answer a few weeks ago:

“While this work had not progressed as intended earlier this year as the Department focussed on the COVID-19 response, I hope substantial progress can be made on this in the New Year.” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 134, pWA56].

Minister, it is nearly Easter. Why have an independent financial institution (IFI)? The OECD argues that IFIs:

“can help to address biases towards spending and deficits ... foster greater transparency and accountability and enrich the public debate.”

What is not to welcome about that? I am curious to know why this five-party power-sharing Executive seem reluctant to have such a body established.

7.00 pm

It has been mentioned, of course, that we urgently need a green recovery. In response to questions from Rachel Woods MLA during last year’s COVID budget debate on funding a green recovery, the Minister said:

“The process that we are dealing with is COVID allocations: money that we received from Treasury this year that was not in the plans last February/March when we were setting the Budget or even when we were discussing the idea of a revamped Programme for Government. This money has come to us and has to be allocated within this year. So, we are not talking about long-term plans being attached to this; we are talking about economic recovery in the here and now, meeting the challenges of the pandemic and trying to assist businesses to get through this crisis. That does not set aside the fact that the Executive will set a Budget coming into the autumn. We will consult on that and agree it in early spring. I hope that it will be a multi-annual Budget, if we can get clarity from Treasury. That Budget, and the Programme for Government that accompanies it, will be where the discussion on long-term, green recovery planning should be had.” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 131, p14, col 2].

Following on from that, in a written response to the RSPB’s written request to the Minister to establish a green recovery fund just last week, the budget director in the Department said that Ministers should reprioritise their departmental budgets to fund green initiatives. That suggests to me that the Minister and his officials really have no regard to their role in a green recovery. Now is the time for a green COVID recovery strategy. Now is the time to deliver that and to put the mechanisms in place. If we could not discuss it when dealing with the money for COVID allocations and it is not included in this Budget, when are we supposed to get it?

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

The Green Party has said before — I want to repeat it today — that we must have a sustainable, fair and just recovery to get out of this. We need a plan that we can fund, especially as we face economic recession. It must not be like the one that the Governments implemented after our last social and economic disruption through

the economic crash in 2008, when we bailed out the banks; rather, we must look to provide stimulus through components of the green new deal and to bail out our people. There will not be quick fixes. We need long-term plans that do not penalise people by entering into austerity policies on the long road that we have ahead.

I reiterate that our Green colleagues in the European Parliament have already articulated that:

“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 its inherent weakness, we need to revitalise the economy through legally binding targets and targeted investments. We need a just transition and a green new deal.”

As we in the Green Party have stated many times in the 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 us back to business as usual, to a world where many struggle to get by, a world endangered by escalating pollution and waste. It is a vision that aims to reduce waste, to cut bills for participating households, to sustain employment through recession and to modernise our housing stock. I remind Members that the Executive parties committed and agreed to this back in 2011. Last year, in response to Rachel Woods MLA’s call for a green and just recovery, Minister Murphy said:

“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.” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 128, p240, col 2].

The Green Party in Northern Ireland fully accepts that there will always be a finite budget, but doing the same thing with it over and over again will never bring a different outcome.

We can, however, do things differently if there is the will to do so.

The very way in which we carry out economic appraisals needs to be improved if we are to justify the very necessary cost of investing in our environment, social infrastructure and a green new deal. We need to think about how we appraise future investments. Benefits far into the future cannot continue to be seen as having a lesser value. There are issues around economically valuing non-economic goods such as nature, biodiversity and human health, and that can always be done better to make the argument for investing in our future. We must also consider non-economic costs and what will happen without a green new deal. The impacts of not having one would be catastrophic, and we know that. There are aspects of the green new deal that, because of the inherently new challenges posed by climate change and the need for imaginative solutions, will not be captured by the green book model. We need to include those benefits in our economic appraisals and better capture their value.

Let us end the narrative from some that there is no magic money tree. Indeed, for much reform, a magic money tree may not even be needed. I have already mentioned the areas in which Northern Ireland's spend per head is higher or lower than that in other regions, but we can no longer financially afford to uphold our fractured, segregated and divided society. If we work to end that, finance can be redirected to a better and more sustainable outcome.

For example, in education, we know that there are close to 50,000 empty desks across the school estate and that upwards of £95 million a year is wasted on the duplication of services. An estimation given by the Integrated Education Fund (IEF) is that as much as £1 billion-plus has been spent over the past decade alone on bringing our young people into contact with each other in various cross-community initiatives to correct the negative consequences and prejudice resulting from their initial segregation. Add to that the cost of school transport, which is approximately £81 million a year, with children being bussed past their nearest school to attend a school with a different management type. That demonstrates the staggering economic costs of a segregated system.

Although in Northern Ireland the health spend is equal to that in other regions, there is very little accountability and transparency to the spending. The Green Party therefore calls for reform of and reporting on our health services. It supports the full implementation of Bengoa and the 'Delivering Together' and 'Power to People' healthcare transformation reports and the delivery of more care in the community. It is really serious when we hear a GP say to the media, "It feels as though the whole service is crumbling around us. It does not feel safe". That is really serious, but that wrong can be put right if there is the political will and the bravery to implement what is needed, and if what needs to be done is done.

We know that the Infrastructure Minister has identified that there is insufficient network capacity for waste water treatment works in all of Northern Ireland's local authority areas, except for Warrenpoint — I do not know why, but Warrenpoint is the exception — yet we keep building private development projects. Our spend on transport is the lowest. Our public transport service is not fit for purpose. When it is cheaper for an average family to own a private vehicle than it is to travel on public services, we are in a no-win scenario. Only 3 kilometres of a promised 27-kilometre Belfast cycle network, for example, was delivered. Annual funding to maintain roads is £50 million less than what is needed each year. Required maintenance of £1.2 billion is required just to keep the network safe. There is also the lack of a road maintenance strategy, yet the Executive response is to build more roads. Costs for the A5, for example, will exceed the outline business case costs by 38%, and delivery will be 10 years later than expected.

The sand beds of Lough Neagh are being dredged to provide concrete that is needed for development projects, and the Minister tells us that there are no detrimental environmental impacts.

The Mobuoy dump on the banks of the River Faughan is described as a "super dump". We are all aware of it; it is one of the biggest illegal dumps in western Europe. It is estimated that it will cost £50 million to engage contractors to clean up the dump site. However, there is no sign of that happening either, and communities are still forced to live

with it. Despite the NDNA commitments, there has been no progress on an independent environmental protection agency (EPA) for Northern Ireland to prevent and deal with environmental crime, such as operating an illegal dump.

The lack of a clean air strategy means that, due to particulate matter poisons, there are an estimated 500-plus premature deaths in Northern Ireland. In the period 2017-2025, the total cost to the HSC from air pollution in Northern Ireland is likely to be between £55 million and £190 million. The sector that will bear the brunt of that cost will be secondary caregivers, which is historically known to be a low-wage and female-dominated workforce. However, the cost in all other sectors combined is likely to exceed that spend and is more likely to be between £182 million and £635 million. When all diseases are included, air pollution alone is expected to cause 84,000 new cases of disease in Northern Ireland between 2017 and 2035. That will result in the shift of an economic burden of inaction from DAERA to create and uphold an air pollution strategy on to the cost to the health service and human lives.

In last year's Budget, £2.2 million was allocated to deliver new climate change legislation, as well as a scoping study for an independent environmental protection agency. Yet here we are, one year on, and climate change legislation from the Department has not materialised, and the creation of an independent EPA seems to have fallen off the radar. There are so many examples from each Department where joined-up, future-proofed thinking, if applied, could prove to be economically beneficial and create healthier and happier communities and people. That can be applied to housing; welfare; advice and support services; legacy; dealing with our past; and victims and survivors, including victims of institutional abuse. Many of those issues have already been raised today. The list is extensive, and many examples have been outlined by Members today.

One thing above all highlights the failure of delivery of this budgetary system: before COVID, one in four children in Northern Ireland was living in poverty. One quarter of our children were living in poverty. How can that be in a region with, supposedly, the sixth highest GDP in the world? Is it because the macroeconomic indicators do not paint the whole picture? If so, let us paint a new picture. If we moved to joined-up working and ended departmental and ministerial silo working, we could move to a focused, shared and joined-up system of delivery from this five-party Executive. We could make our Budget work better for people, we could achieve quick results, and we could build a more resilient and sustainable economy. We could actually build back better rather than just talk about it.

There has been a lack of time to respond to the draft Budget or conduct equality and human rights screenings. There is still no Programme for Government. The draft PFG that was established through NDNA included commitments on:

"Tackling disadvantage and driving economic growth on the basis of objective need ... underpinned by key supporting strategies".

Progress has been made through expert-led advisory groups and co-design working groups to develop a gender equality strategy, a disability strategy, an LGBTIQ+ strategy and an anti-poverty strategy. However, without the specific adoption of those crucial social inclusion strategies in the PFG, the work of the expert-

led community groups and the development of those strategies are at a real risk of being blocked by individual Ministers.

7.15 pm

There has been no apparent progress on the implementation of the racial equality strategy or even the creation of a childcare strategy. We have even failed to get COVID mitigation payments to businesses that were instructed to close their doors and suffered devastating economic impacts. We failed to get payments to people that would allow them to stay home and isolate, so it should be no great surprise that this Budget is much like every other Budget in style and substance.

New thinking will take brave leadership. Whether that leadership comes from civil servants or Ministers may be a moot point, but, preferably, that, too, could be joined up and come from both levels, for it is urgently needed. We are in multiple crises with the pandemic, and its economic consequences and the climate and biodiversity emergencies, which most here are only beginning to engage with as concepts, yet we are nowhere close to planning a strategy to deal with them.

Whilst delivering this Budget is the responsibility of the Finance Minister, do we really need reminding that it comes from a five-party power-sharing Executive? Much of the discourse today has, again, been pretending that the Executive parties are in opposition to each other, but you are not. You share power, therefore you share responsibility, and this Budget lies at the feet of the DUP, Sinn Féin, the SDLP, the UUP and Alliance. As your parties' Ministers oversee the spending year ahead, I challenge each of you to step up, be brave and begin the radical change needed towards fiscal sustainability and a green recovery built around a just transition so that we can build back better. This Budget has none of that in it, in spite of the talk around all those concepts. Words, it seems, are cheap.

The Green Party knows how far-reaching and front-loaded the change has to be, and we will stand in support of any Minister brave enough to acknowledge that and move towards it. Time is running out. We are living through the beginning of a drastic change. The only question remaining is do we survive or thrive? There is no thriving in this Budget, and it is debatable whether we can survive without the urgent change that we need. This Budget really falls so far short on both measures.

Mr Speaker: Can we, please, bring Mark Durkan into the Spotlight?

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. You caught me a bit by surprise, there. I thought that I had a wee while yet, and I was just tucking into my dinner.

As my colleague Matthew O'Toole has outlined, the entire approach to this Budget has been chaotic, with little evidence of strategy, long-term or otherwise. We are all well aware of the UK Treasury's cynicism and its failures, yet the Treasury's approach is no surprise. What is needed is agile and creative thinking by the Finance Minister and other Ministers, pre-empting it and advocating for the funding and flexibility needed to fulfil the promises that have been made to people here in the North time and again.

It is not good enough to lay all the blame at the door of the UK Government or at the door of the pandemic. The money that we do have has not been properly allocated or spent, and that is down to a lack of planning and a poor grip on policy design. With a bit more imagination, the Finance and Communities Ministers would, for example, be exploring different funding models to ensure that more social housing was built, rather than considering selling off the Housing Executive, or taking up the SDLP's call for a mortgage support scheme to prevent homelessness and further housing stress as the full economic extent of the pandemic takes effect.

The Finance Minister makes his own job a bit more difficult when he ends up handing back tens of millions of pounds of unspent funds to the Treasury with one hand and, with the other hand, asking for more funding. Unfortunately, that is an example that is followed by colleagues in other Departments. It still stuns me that the Communities Minister returned £2 million that was earmarked for the COVID discretionary support scheme. What a slap in the face for families across the North who are stretched to their limits and who are trying to do the right thing and follow public health advice. If they come under the prohibitively low income threshold, they are very unlikely to be part of the 2% of claimants to get £500 or more. The average payment is £147, and two Communities Ministers have insisted that that is a more generous scheme than the £500 self-isolation support that is available in other regions.

Today, we discussed the road map out of lockdown. No one should be in any doubt that the requirement for self-isolation will continue, as will the hardship that the pandemic has caused. It is imperative that people are not forced to choose between feeding their families and following public health advice by self-isolating. That is just a microcosm of the bewildering approach to expenditure that marks our entire budgetary process, which leaves people here short-changed.

The same myopia is evident in the draft Budget for the coming financial year, but I will limit my remarks to some of its most glaring contents or omissions. Claims for universal credit here are up by 126%, and the Department for Communities estimated that over 1,400 new staff would be needed to deal with that hugely increased workload. Unfortunately, the Communities Minister made a bid for only 900 new staff, but even that has been rejected as per the draft Budget. I raised that with the Finance Minister last week. The consequence of that, though, is that the already intolerable and, some might say, inhumane five-week wait will be dragged out even further for some applicants, some of whom may have been the very people who could benefit from one of those jobs. That is not to mention the stress on existing staff on the front line, who have been fantastic throughout the crisis.

On top of that, in the draft Budget, there is a proposed £1.5 million cut to the independent advice sector. That is a minuscule saving in the overall Budget, but its impact will be enormous, not least, again, for those tens of thousands of people who are trying to navigate the social security system for the first time. I have serious concerns about the debt that people are being driven into. It is a charter for loan sharks. When those people go out and do their utmost to get a job, they will find, as the Communities Committee was told by departmental officials that this region:

“will be the only region on these islands that will not be adequately resourced to support people who face unemployment in the ... biggest economic crisis faced in our lifetime”.

That is pretty stark, and that was from the officials. However, that is because the Job Start scheme for young people, or false start, as I have taken to calling it, the work experience programme and the upfront childcare costs for parents who are returning to work have all been denied funding. Those labour market interventions are critical. This will cost us much more in the long term, and I do not just mean economically.

As a post-conflict society, we already have our complex and intergenerational mental health issues, but those have been compounded massively by the pandemic, particularly for our children and young people and for those who have lost their jobs and businesses and are under massive pressure. Yet, the full scale of the crisis does not seem to have been grasped. We can all express our support for positive mental health, but what people really need are the services to manage it and to prevent problems with it in the first place. When assessing bids or looking at how we are going to use COVID funding for next year, mental health must be top of the list.

I am conscious of time, Mr Speaker, so I will highlight briefly the potential of city deals and the subregional stadia strategy, particularly for my home city of Derry and my constituency of Foyle. City deals have the potential to generate economic returns far beyond the original investments and rebalance regional disparities in the North. As Mr Newton mentioned, consultation on the subregional stadia programme ended in 2016, and, as I have said previously, it has taken on an almost mythical status for many clubs and communities. As I have said, there must be a fair geographical spread.

My colleague Sinead McLaughlin has once more made the case for the expansion of Magee. It not just Derry that needs it but Northern Ireland. She referred to how, 100 years ago, we led the way in exports. Sadly, we still do, but what we export now is our most valuable commodity: our young people. So many of them do not return to these shores after they have gone elsewhere to study.

I am sure that the House will be thrilled to hear that we, as Foyle representatives, will not just shut up now that we finally have our city deal signed off. It is a great start, but that is all that it is. Even in the Department for Communities' draft budget, £8 million of capital is earmarked for Belfast's city deal but only £500,000 for Derry.

Failure to think creatively and strategically and lackadaisical implementation are a toxic mix for public finances. Budgets are the bedrock of government strategy and have the power to change lives here for the better. We need a dynamic and coherent strategy that invests in the economy and in people and recognises the new challenges of a post-Brexit and, hopefully soon, post-pandemic world.

Mr Allister: Having listened ad nauseam to complaints about standstill Budgets, I thought that it might be a useful and informative exercise to compare the figures in the Budget that we are debating tonight with the figures in the

parallel Budget from this time last year. When you do that, it is, indeed, rather informative.

Clause 1 of the Bill sets out the sum of money that is to issue out of the Consolidated Fund this year. The sum is set out as £22,220,000,000. When you go to last year's Budget, you discover that the figure was £17,500,000,000. In the short space of one year, we have seen a significant increase in the Consolidated Fund drawdown from £17.5 billion to £22.25 billion — almost £5 billion. Of course, a substantial portion of that will be the £3.3 billion of extra COVID money that we got, not all of which we could spend, which indicates the extent of that commitment to Northern Ireland. However, it is increasingly untenable for people to talk about a standstill Budget when this Budget has a rise from the Consolidated Fund of almost £5 billion in just a year.

Go to clause 2, and you will read the figure for the use of resources. This year, it is £25.124 billion. Last year — a mere 12 months ago — it was £21 billion. That is an increase of £4 billion.

Therefore, when we hear the repeated mantra of severe detriment and loss, we need to take heed of what the actual figures tell us.

7.30 pm

Earlier in the debate, I heard the Sinn Féin Member for North Antrim lamenting about the situation pertaining to agriculture spend post Brexit. I recall many in the House telling us that, when we lost what they misnamed EU funding — more properly, the British funding directed through the EU — it would be the end of agriculture. Yet, if we compare DAERA's DEL spend in this year's spring Supplementary Estimates with last year's, we discover an increase of £350 million, primarily in food and farming spend. So, far from the doom and gloom that we were almost promised by some, that is the reality.

We go to the Department for Communities. The Minister of Finance does not often talk about the AME spend in Communities. That is the benefit spend, and it is taken as a given, but it is all taxpayers' money. We discover that the AME spend is up by £660 million in one year.

We arrive at a gross resource in capital spend of approximately £30 billion a year: a phenomenal amount, and a reminder of the benefits of being in the United Kingdom. Of course, this year, we had the very telling reminder of the benefit of being under a free National Health Service during the awful COVID proceedings. It is, I think, both sobering and necessary to reflect on the sheer scale of budgetary amounts that the Assembly is blessed to have.

For some, that is just something to ignore, but that is the reality. Approaching £30 billion of spend in Northern Ireland is not to be sniffed at, though some would toss it aside and say, “We need more”. Some would even say, even though they know that the sums can never add up, “In fact, we need fiscal powers”. They should be careful what they wish for. If you ask for fiscal powers, you might be told to raise the £30 billion that you spend. Where would you find that from a working population of 700,000 or 800,000? You would know all about poverty and high taxation then.

I want to seek absolute clarity from the Minister on two other things. I go back to the issue of the payment scheme

for innocent victims of the Troubles. I want the Minister to be clear with the House. Outlining the ambit of the Executive Office, schedule 3 to the Bill says:

“victims and survivors including actions and payments associated with the preparation and implementation of a Victims Payments Scheme for permanent disablement”.

Can the Minister confirm to the House that the Executive Office’s ambit is sufficient to cover the payment of the disablement pension long promised to victims?

Is that ambit sufficient in that regard when it talks about:

“payments associated with the preparation and implementation”.

or is that only for the administration? That is an answer that I would certainly like to hear. Is that an ambit that covers the actual payment of the pension, or does it only cover the administration of the pension? The House is entitled to hear that on the record from the Minister.

Yesterday, I raised the issue of the £1 billion headroom. In his reply, the Minister did not deal with that issue at all, so I will repeat it. Are we actually providing £1 billion of headroom in respect of money that we do not have, on the basis that we give each and every Department an abundance of headroom and they will spend the money somewhere — such money as we have left over from COVID? Is that actually what is happening, and is it good practice and appropriate to build in headroom for money that you do not have? I do not think that it is, but that seems to be what has been going on in this budgetary round.

This is my final point. We are into 2021, and the Budget, in schedules 3 and 4, goes into the expenditure in 2021-22, yet there is not one line — not one ambit — in the Budget that touches upon the centenary of Northern Ireland. This is Northern Ireland’s centenary year, yet, within all these ambits, there is not a single one that creates an explicit spending head for the centenary. That is a shame and a disgrace on the part of an Executive who are the Government of Northern Ireland, which celebrates its 100th year. It is a telling commentary that not once is any scope made for celebrating the centenary, be it through community grants to community organisations that might wish to do that or be it through grants to schools or youth organisations that might want to do that. There is not a single ambit, express and explicit, for that purpose. That is a shameful commentary on this Budget, and it needs to be rectified.

Ms Hunter: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the Budget debate in my role as my party’s health spokesperson and as a member of the Health Committee. I hope that, next year, we have less of a disjointed process and that, next year, there is increased collaboration and partnership with Departments and their organisations to deliver a Budget that works and delivers for all our people in Northern Ireland. There are a number of points about the Budget, as it relates to health and social care, that I would like touch on.

First, there is the issue of workforce and recruitment challenges because of non-recurrent Budgets. Yesterday, I wrote to the chairs of the health trusts across the North further to their statement and response to the draft Budget

consultation. I understand that that joint statement from the chairs was an unprecedented move, which underscores the deficiency of this Budget.

Trust chairs have the responsibility for governance and running the service, and the scale of their concerns about the Budget is deeply worrying.

The Budget settlement, as proposed, does not give trusts the flexibility to recruit staff and to address severe workforce issues. That is simply not sustainable and does not allow for any kind of future planning. There is also the potential that it will lead to millions of pounds being paid to agencies to plug workforce gaps, particularly in professions such as nursing, as we all know.

During the pandemic over the past 12 months, we have seen the pressures that our NHS staff have been under. It has brought home to us all just how overstretched our services are across the Six Counties and how stressed staff have been. Of course, workforce pressures are not new to the NHS, but we would be lying if we said that they have not been exacerbated due to COVID-19 pressures.

There is also safe staffing. I understand that the draft allocation does not provide funding to cover the Executive’s commitment to that and that it will have to be covered in monitoring round bids. When it comes to the monitoring rounds, I hope that that will not be an issue and that those bids will be successful. Safe staffing levels should be the minimum standard of patient care that we try to achieve. I welcome the fact that some progress has been made on the development of legislation in that regard and hope that it can be progressed. In an ideal world, we would be looking more at holistic levels of care, but, with the current pressures and restraints, I recognise that, for the most part, that is some way off.

In addition to the restrictions that the settlement imposes on staff recruitment, how can other hugely pressing issues such as waiting lists and transformation ever be addressed within the constraints of in-year, non-recurrent funding? We all know someone, be it a friend, family member or constituent, who is waiting for an operation or a diagnosis. We recognise that the pandemic has forced trusts to prioritise and save lives. That is entirely justified, but, as we move towards easing the restrictions, we must be in a position to deliver care to all those who need it. The Budget does not give trusts the resources or capacity to tackle our waiting lists, which were among some of the worst on these islands before COVID-19. That continues to be deeply concerning. I urge the Finance Minister to look again to see what additional resources can be allocated.

I also want to mention briefly transformation and service redesign. While all Members will share the aim of having world-class health services and centres of excellence across the North, transformation needs to be done in partnership with local communities. I recognise that a number of service reviews are waiting to be commenced. It is crucial that those are not done until there can be proper community consultation.

One area of healthcare that I am sure that all Members will share my concern about is funding for the mental health and well-being of our constituents in Northern Ireland. Since becoming an MLA last May, I have raised that with the Health Minister in the Chamber on a number of occasions. Local organisations are doing fantastic and often unrecognised work on suicide and suicide

prevention in our communities, and one that comes to mind is the Community Crisis Intervention Service that is based in the north-west. While, of course, any and all funding is to be welcomed, the constant uncertainty and need to continually fight for funding places huge pressure on stretched services. It also leads to uncertainty for staff employment and for the service users who rely on them. I ask the Executive, again, to recognise how vital the service offered by those organisations is — it is very often life-saving — and to provide them with funding that is longer-term, sustainable and ring-fenced, to allow them to continue that life-saving work. As we heard recently, investment is also badly needed to secure detox services in the north-west.

As we, hopefully, now begin to slowly emerge from the pandemic, we all have a much greater appreciation and understanding of the great and often difficult work that is done by those in our health service and working on the front line. Our health workers deserve a wage that reflects the depths of their devotion. That is a lesson that has been learned and is something positive to take from the awful year that this has been.

There is a real momentum to address the shortcomings and failures that we have seen in the system, and we should open up the discussion about bringing a world-class system of healthcare to Northern Ireland. Our health service is clearly suffering after more than a decade of underinvestment. Last year, we all stood at our doors and clapped for our amazing healthcare workers, just a short six months after nurses had to strike for pay.

We should never let that happen again. I therefore call on the Executive to match their rhetoric on supporting the health service with action and funding. Reform of and investment in our precious health service are direly needed and long overdue, and now is the time to act.

7.45 pm

Mr Carroll: People Before Profit will be opposing the Budget and is deeply concerned by it. We are concerned about how it has spectacularly failed to deliver on key commitments made last year in the New Decade, New Approach agreement and about its inability to achieve the expansion of the services needed in the face of the pandemic and to tackle wealth inequality across our society. For weeks, even in its draft form, the Budget consulted on by the Executive was utterly unacceptable. Potential reductions are proposed to core funding for front-line workers, welfare support, homeless services and mental health provision, while job training for young people has been ripped out. That is no way in which to treat people who have sacrificed and struggled through the challenges of the pandemic. That its proposals, even in draft form, were circulated is an insult to the people on the ground on whom they will have a direct impact. The Executive have sought to present it broadly as a standstill Budget, but, considering the serious increase in need due to the pandemic in the area of health and the economic implications, not to mention rising costs, the draft Budget is, in many areas, one that harks back to politics characterised by neoliberal economics and insufficient public spending. Nowhere does it offer seriously to eradicate poverty or challenge the growing threat of unemployment across society. In that context, we cannot and will not support it.

If anything, the current Executive seem to take a head-in-the-sand approach towards those issues. For example, in preparation for this Budget, much is being made of the high rate of unemployment here, which stands at 26.6%. That is 5.9% higher than the British average. That worrying figure has not simply fallen from the sky, nor can it be attributed solely to the damaging impact of the COVID pandemic. Unemployment has been a long-standing problem across our society because successive Stormont Administrations have presided over years of reductions in public spending, leaving our economy subject to the whims of free-market forces.

Moreover, the parties that currently comprise the Executive spent the past decade lobbying the British Government for powers to cut corporation tax and to reduce taxes on the rich. Our party has always opposed that neoliberal vision and believes that, in this decade, Stormont needs urgently to fight for widespread and progressive taxation on the rich and the wealthy as a way in which to tackle inequality and expand investment towards human need, and to act in the interests of working-class people more generally. The legacy of previous decisions by Stormont Executives is well illustrated by the fact that we are still paying millions of pounds in interest to fund various PFI initiatives that represent a colossal waste of public money. Those were brought about by the parties that were also responsible for the renewable heat incentive and other scandals. When we consider that nefarious record of public spending or the fact that, when the Budget drafts were released, the Executive revealed that they were unable to spend £300 million of COVID support money, it is simply unacceptable for Stormont Ministers to tell us that their hands are tied and that they cannot further fund services any better.

This Budget also clearly repeats the same failures of the past through the Executive's inability to provide the important mechanisms of scrutiny and accountability. Let us be clear about the process here. When this Budget was put out for consultation, the Finance Minister admitted that there was little time to:

“consult with the public and finalise the Budget”,

before opening up a short window of consultation. Trade unions, anti-poverty campaigners and welfare advice organisations were alarmed by this Budget, as anyone following the media will have seen. The consultation process ended at the end of last week, yet we have had a situation in which the First and Second Stages of the Budget Bill are being rushed through once again, after Standing Orders were suspended to do so, in order to force through an unpopular Budget. Are we seriously to accept that the Executive even looked at the responses to the Budget consultation in that period? I doubt it. They had, in my view, already agreed to change Standing Orders to push ahead with the Budget proposals in advance of the consultation submissions being looked at.

True to form, the Executive are again rushing through policy with little oversight. That has already alarmed many anti-poverty campaigners.

The updated Budget proposals from last night are presented in a way that spending figures are so general and broad-sweeping that it is next to impossible to detail where exactly money will go, but measuring these documents against the draft proposals is alarming.

In DOH health spending, we see significant reductions in schedule 2 relating to spending ending this month. Over much of the past year, we have seen a decrease of almost £600 million in resources authorised for use and a reduction of £40 million in accruing resources. However, when we look at the Department of Health spending for schedules 3 and 4, which relate to the upcoming period, it gives no real indication of spending detail or breakdown, and we are to assume that it is a flat Budget. That is most alarming, considering that we are still in a pandemic. The Budget fails to provide funding for a range of health issues previously deemed priorities by the Department and the Executive. They include a commitment last year of £75 million to action a transformation of the health service, and that is not included in the Budget. Its absence will likely add significant pressure to our health service.

Despite the crisis facing our care homes, and the repeated commitments from the Minister and the Department to address it, the money set aside to review adult care via 'Power to People' has not been allocated. That signifies no fundamental change in the operating of our care system and represents a continuation of the crisis-driven for-profit system.

Despite our health service and its staff being completely overwhelmed by work this year due to the pandemic, there seems to be absolutely no acknowledgement of the need to bolster staff and those able to work in our health service. The £6.5 million for 900 extra nursing and midwifery students over three years has not been included in the Budget. That means that our health service will continue to be understaffed and under-resourced. As many Members said, the pandemic has presented untold mental health stress and pressure for communities that already suffer disproportionately from depression, suicide and mental health stress.

The £10.6 million for the mental health action plan has not been included in the Budget. That means that the Department is unlikely to be able to deal with the extra mental health stresses and pressures brought on by the pandemic. We need to increase our provision of counselling, including in GP centres and elsewhere. I note that 50% of GP centres in my constituency are unable to provide in-house mental health services. That is a shocking figure. This proposal takes us in the opposite direction and signifies no real commitment to improving mental health services for those who desperately need them. We are disappointed that the money set aside to rebuild cancer, oncology, haematology, and services for palliative and end-of-life care have not been included or detailed in the Budget.

NDNA promised increased provision for those in need of IVF treatment, but the Budget does not account for it. We are concerned about the impact that that could have on couples who have no time to wait whilst trying for a family.

Last year, healthcare workers took industrial action, in part to highlight the lack of safe staffing in our health service. It is of grave concern that the Budget has not allocated the necessary resources to allow for safe staffing in our healthcare settings. That puts further pressure on our healthcare workers, who have given their blood, sweat and tears over the past year, and it potentially places patients in unsafe conditions.

The other alarming area of the Budget proposals is in the Department for Communities. We will never forget that the parties presiding over the Budget are the same ones that disgracefully pushed through Tory welfare reform. We are concerned that the Budget does not meet its section 75 obligations and will have a broadly detrimental impact across society.

We are in the midst of an unprecedented global health pandemic that has thrown people's lives into chaos and put many more people in an increasingly precarious situation. The number of people on universal credit has exploded. The number of people who are unemployed, or who may become unemployed when furlough ends, has increased dramatically. Now is the time to expect the Government to do everything necessary and everything that they are capable of to protect people, especially the most vulnerable. That is not what the Budget proposes to do. In fact, it does the opposite.

The treatment of the welfare advice organisations through this process has been disgraceful.

We all saw the headlines on proposals, but no additional resource funding has been allocated to the Department for the independent advice sector to support welfare change in the draft Budget 2021-22, and that equates, in real terms, to a £1.5 million reduction in funding. Utterly shameful stuff. Proposals to slash funding for advice services, especially at present, are an attack on workers' rights and on those who find themselves in the position of looking for help from the Government.

There have been no significant moves to address the need to increase staff numbers to process and pay the working-age benefits, and there have been question marks over plans to recruit additional staff to process and pay working-age benefits in light of the increased demand for social security, which will bring about more hardship and delay.

The settlement does not seem to provide any COVID-19 allocation to address the need for labour market interventions to support people to return to employment and thereby help with the economic recovery. In the past year, 10,720 redundancies were proposed, with the manufacturing, retail and wholesale sectors hit particularly badly, and unemployment among young people aged between 16 and 24 has been running at 11.7%.

The absence of employment support will compound the problems that have intensified as a result of the pandemic and its economic fallout. A lack of planning on employment programmes for young people, the advisory discretionary fund expansion and payments of upfront childcare costs, which has been referred to, as well as work experience programmes, is another area of deep concern. The failure to protect and help young people represents, in our opinion and that of many others, a gross failure in the Government's duty.

Taken as a whole, the Budget represents a further attack following the decision to inflict Tory welfare reforms on the low-paid and the most vulnerable in our communities. We can and must do better, and the Executive must break from a strategy that fails to put the interests of the vast majority of people first. Everyone in our society deserves dignity, respect and equal treatment, and the Budget, as even some MLAs from Executive parties have admitted, fails to do that. For that reason, I will oppose it.

Our party will continue to be a voice for working people and communities. There are some ideas that should be considered in the Government's strategy but have not been. The vulnerable should be protected by fully funding advice services and replacing failed Tory welfare reforms with a more humane system. A public jobs programme should be created to help deal with the rise in unemployment, the environmental crisis and the housing crisis. There should be increased funding and capacity for the NHS, including a massive recruitment campaign to deal with the ever-mounting waiting lists. There should be an urgent increase in funding for mental health services and a strengthening and extension of COVID support measures to protect workers and the vulnerable in our communities. There should be a significant pay rise across the board for workers and a strengthening of workers' rights, as well better financial support for the low-paid and those in precarious employment who need to self-isolate. There should be a full reimbursement of students and those who have been forced to pay tuition fees, and there should be a new economic strategy to tackle wealth inequality. You may say that that is a wish list, but we have been through a very tough and difficult year, and people demand nothing less.

Ms Sugden: I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to today's Second Stage of the Budget Bill. Given the stage of the debate and the time of the evening, I promise you that I will make this brief.

I understand the pressures of the previous year. I understand the pressures of creating a Budget in the final year of a mandate with no discernible Programme for Government other than a political document dubbed 'New Decade, New Approach'. Sadly, it was not a new approach. We still have parties competing with each other in and out of government; we still have Ministers working in their siloed Departments; and we still have one-year Budgets, which provide no opportunities for long-term planning, stability and good governance.

Many Members have spoken today of the necessity of a strategy, and I agree. We must get back to an outcomes-based approach that focuses on public services rather than on public spend. However, alongside any approach, we need leadership, responsibility and courage from those who are delivering. Otherwise, the strategy is just words on paper.

We must also find a better way of responding to unexpected events and circumstances and find a way to address the immediate issues in parallel with solutions to our long-established problems, such as waiting lists, which were as much an issue last year as they are today.

8.00 pm

Every year since 2016, there has been a crisis, and, every year, crises are given as a reason not to govern. I accept that we cannot control some of those events, but we can control how we react, and, to an extent, we can control our environment. It is all of our jobs to improve public services for everyone in Northern Ireland, but somehow that stopped. It stopped four years ago and it stopped last March.

Again, I do not underestimate the challenges of the past year. It has been unprecedented, but we need to get a grip on our public services, because undoubtedly while

the pandemic has made public services difficult, public services as they are have made the pandemic even more difficult.

I intend to speak at length to only one omission in the Budget, as other Members raised many of my other concerns, and I am grateful to all of them. They raised important concerns about mental health; special educational needs; an economy stimulus regionally and more locally on the high street; rural needs, including improvements of infrastructure; and access to services.

I remain disappointed by and represent the concerns of young people and employers that labour market interventions have not appeared in the Bill. Given that under-25s make up the biggest proportion of those people who have been made unemployed, it is short-sighted at this point to shelve schemes that would help young people into work.

The Job Start scheme, for example, is a variation of Westminster's Kickstart scheme. To be fair, I would understand if a better and more flexible variation were launched in Northern Ireland, but it does not feature in the Bill, which makes no sense. The Job Start scheme is an income-based scheme that is delivered by the Department for Communities, not the Department for the Economy. It ensures income as well as providing people with valuable work experience that will eventually lead them into jobs.

The Minister highlighted the necessity for income support, particularly during the pandemic. Job Start sitting in the Department for Communities is income support with added value, so why is it not in the Budget? Every day that the Northern Ireland Executive do not launch the scheme, another young person will seek opportunities elsewhere. Given that the Kickstart scheme in GB launched several months ago, our young people who want to live and work at home now because of the pandemic will reluctantly move away from Northern Ireland towards other aspirations and jobs.

The Northern Ireland Executive's inaction is actively contributing to our brain drain and to our loss of skills, impacting on our economic investment opportunities and, most concerning, telling our young people that they are not valued. I wrote to the Minister about Job Start, and he responded outlining the challenges of the previous year, the ongoing effect of the pandemic and the impact on the number of individuals requiring support, particularly from the Department for Communities in helping people get back to work to earn an income. I really understand, but Job Start will help people to get back into work in a meaningful way that considers young people's interests, talents and skills and actually keeps them in work. It is investment to save, investment to innovate and investment in our young people.

To labour the point, those young people are already accessing income-related benefits because there are no jobs for them in the midst of a pandemic. Why not provide income-related benefits via a workplace that is willing to give them experience and training and, potentially, a job at the end of the programme? Young people do not want to be at home. They want to work. They want to build a life for themselves, and it really baffles me why our Executive are not helping them to do that at this juncture.

I support the focus on maintaining good health during the pandemic. Good health, however, includes good mental

health. At what point do we realise that the reaction to COVID-19 is creating another pandemic, an illness that has long infected Northern Ireland because of trauma suffered? Every year, government inaction creates a new variant, and, sadly, for too many people, including young people, that variant is deadly.

I appreciate that there is a bottom line. I appreciate that Departments need to ease internal pressures in order to ensure day-to-day operations. However, we are in the business of public services serving the people of Northern Ireland. We need to serve them, we need to serve them well and we need to do better.

Mr McGlone: Tá mé ag dul a bheith measartha achomair, a Cheann Comhairle. I will be relatively brief, Mr Speaker. We have taken quite a considerable time. I appreciate the forbearance of Members.

The SDLP has a number of concerns about the Budget allocation for the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, many of which I have raised previously. In particular, we are concerned about the failure of the Budget to address the impact of Brexit on the funding available for agriculture and especially for rural development. It has been known for some time that funding previously available to the Department and through the Department to farmers would be affected by Brexit. Some £15.3 million over the next three years has been lost from the funding to support the bovine TB programme, and it is projected that £34 million has been lost from the previously available funding for rural development over the next three years. That amounts to a shortfall of some £19.5 million for next year alone, all as a consequence and an outworking of Brexit.

That funding has not been replaced in the Budget. Any additional funding that has been secured from the UK Treasury will instead be used against the cost of the sanitary and phytosanitary process, which has not been considered as part of the Budget, as well as wider policy work that includes Brexit, staffing costs and environment programmes. Again, a shortfall is predicted for those areas of some £3.3 million.

We also share the Department's concern about the overall resource shortfall in the Budget of £33.9 million. The implications of the New Decade, New Approach commitment for the establishment of an independent environmental protection agency has not been considered in the Budget either, which presumably means that the commitment will be delayed even further.

As the first post-Brexit Budget, there is little sign of the benefits for the agriculture sector that were promised by some of the hardline Brexit advocates. Their reliance on direct UK Treasury funding to cover the gaps created by that process demonstrates the foolishness of that position. We already knew that relying on the British Government to match EU funding was not really going to work. That direct funding is short; it was always going to be short and will continue to be short of what is required. The gaps will continue to grow in negotiations with the British Government on future agricultural funding. Perhaps the Agriculture Minister's party can finally admit that promises from that source should have been taken with a big pinch of salt.

That said, the Budget presented to the Assembly fails to meet the needs of the Department of Agriculture,

Environment and Rural Affairs, and the responsibility for that lies with the Finance Minister and the wider Executive. There is probably no other Department that faces as much change and uncertainty as a consequence of Brexit than DAERA. The Budget does little to alleviate the prospects of the months and years ahead, and provides scant hope for the funding shortages for the Department. It will be for this Assembly and future Assemblies to seek to minimise the impact of those cuts in funding and farming, the environment, support and rural development.

Many of us from rural communities know that development is underpinned by rural development programmes. They initiate and support many of our microbusinesses. Those of us from rural communities understand that those microbusinesses often grow from subsidiaries of a family farming business. Many of the businesses that I know, which are extremely successful in my area, have been grown by people who worked in farming and saw an opportunity, and that broadened out. They now employ many of their neighbours. That rural support and pillar of funding, provided through DAERA, was pivotal in helping many of those smaller businesses to grow and provide employment in their parishes, which was not available previously.

I conclude with just one item for the Minister, which I have already raised today: COVID-19 support for our Lough Neagh fishermen. This issue has been elongated, torn out and dragged out through the Department for a long number of months. There is no justification for it. People were promised that this support would come last summer; they anticipated that it would definitely be there in the autumn; some thought that at least they would be given something for Christmas; but no. It never arrived.

Many of those fishing families are on relatively low incomes, and they need that support. We have been critical of the slowness of other Departments in getting out support, but they do not match this Department, which moves not even at a snail's pace. A snail's pace is fast compared with how it has moved. It is abysmal and awful that people cannot get the money that is due to them and which was promised to them. I have made enquiries about whether the Department of Finance has authorised DAERA to make those payments and sanctioned their being sent out. Will the Minister clarify that that is the case? It would be helpful in pursuing where the delay is. We are duty-bound to deliver to those families and to help to support them through the difficult times that they have been trying to work their way through.

Gabhaim buíochas leat, a Cheann Comhairle as ucht an ama agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an tacaíocht, tá súil agam, don na hiascairí ar Loch nEathach. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your time. I thank the Minister for his support, I hope, for the fishermen on Lough Neagh.

Mr Speaker: Maith thú. Well said.

Mr Murphy: It has been a long day and a long debate, but that is to be expected when there are a lot of issues to be talked about. I am prompted to go back, because, particularly in the latter stages of the debate, a lot of Members talked about what this Budget will do for next year. The Budget for next year has not been debated yet. This is a Vote on Account: it does not constitute the setting of a Budget for the 2021-22 year; it is merely to allow the Departments to continue to operate to provide services

in the early months of that year and will depend on the consideration of the Executive's final Budget through the Main Estimates and the Budget (No. 2) Bill in June. Since the Budget Bill is out there, people have, understandably, referred to it. When Members are voting, they need to be certain that we are not voting on next year's Budget. I was surprised by some of the Members who made that fairly basic, common mistake.

The other issue is the common thread that ran through the debate, which was, "We need more money for this" and "We need more money for that", much of which I cannot disagree with. Of the many issues raised, there are very few that I do not agree need more money. I agree that the Executive should spend on all the issues that have arisen from the pandemic. I agree that we should spend to support the vulnerable and our healthcare workers. We should spend on education and invest in skills and training. We should invest in the green new deal. I get all the issues that were raised by those in the Chamber.

Here is the thing: for the entirety of last year, right up to the end of November, the Executive were promised a multi-year Budget. We had a sense of hope that it would be a decent Budget, because the Budget that we got this time last year was an improvement, and, for the first time in many years, every Department had received an uplift. We sincerely hoped that it would mean an improved position that would allow us to plan for the time ahead. However, at short notice, we were told that we would not get that. We got an annual Budget. It was a flat-cash Budget. Jim Allister tried to add some fantastical figures to it. The British Government should have employed him, because he did a better job than they did of trying to spoof what was in the Budget and inflate what had been made available to us. He has outdone them in that regard.

Nonetheless, today, I read a report by the Ulster University economic think tank that accepts that this is a standstill Budget in the cash available. I think that it was Gerry Carroll who made the point that a standstill Budget is, in effect, a cut. That is what we have been given. It came on 25 November, and then there was the obligatory two-week hiatus for the Secretary of State to confirm it before we could even start to consider allocations. That presented the Executive with two options: roll over every Department's spend so that they all had the same spend as last year; or go for a reprioritisation exercise, which, given the timescales involved, was not doable in any significant sense. So, the entire Executive — all five parties — agreed that we would go for a standstill Budget. That has presented a huge range of problems for all Departments. The alternative, if Members propose, "We need more money for this" and "We need more money for that" is a reprioritisation exercise.

That would mean that some Departments would get additional money. Generally speaking, that would be Health — a lot of Members have argued for Health spend — and, probably, Education.

8.15 pm

When you go down the list to Infrastructure, Agriculture, Finance, Communities and Justice, and to all the other issues that Members raised, you get into further cuts, so you have less money to spend on the things that Members were saying were priorities. So there is a responsibility on Members who stand up to lecture me. I have listened

to quite a lot of lectures today about what we are doing wrong, what we should be doing right and where we should be spending more money, but nobody in those contributions said where we would get it from. Members argued that more money should be given to Justice for policing, which is a very valid argument, and if we are going to lose policing personnel, that will be a huge difficulty for society. However, nobody said that because we need more police, the money should be taken off Health or the Department of Agriculture or the Department for Communities. In the entire course of about six or seven hours of debate, nobody presented an alternative to what the Executive were faced with.

There were substantial criticisms, and we are Executive Ministers. I am the Minister of Finance, and I am happy to take all the criticisms that come our way. Members talked about a lack of strategy and a disjointed nature, and, of course, there are difficulties and there are things that the Executive should do better, but these are the realities of the finances available to us, and everybody here knows that. When Members make their statements and probably write them up and send them to the local press saying, "Money should be spent on this. I support that and I want to see that invested in", they do not say how it is going to happen. They do not say where it should be taken from. In a finite Budget situation, we have two choices. We either spend what we have and give the Departments what they need, or we decide to reprioritise and take money off Departments to put it towards what Members argue is priority spending.

Ms Bailey: Thank you for giving way. Minister, I made points about where money could be reallocated and saved in order to spend on priority needs. Continuing with the current system of duplication of services and silo working is not effective and is not fiscally responsible, and I was using those examples to try to encourage Executive Ministers to work better together to prioritise and reallocate our money in more effective ways. I think that I was giving those examples. Apologies if it did not come across very well.

Mr Murphy: Of course the Executive should and could work better on everything. I am sure that Committees would all accept that they could and should work better as well, and all of us can always do better. I heard you argue that the education system needs to be changed, but the education system will not be changed in time to improve next year's Budget. It will probably require significant investment, actually, to change the education system. The issue of 50,000 extra desks in schools will not be addressed overnight. Others talked about the cost of division, and those are all admirable long-term objectives, but they are not going to change the budgetary position for 2021-22. That is the point that I am making. I am not denying that Members have suggestions and arguments to make, but they are not going to significantly impact on what we have to spend next year. Next year, what we have to spend is the same as what we had last year. With additional costs and salary costs, we have, in effect, a cut for next year. I am just laying it out as the Finance Minister for people to see it, and if you want to argue that we should be spending money here and we should be spending money there, you are duty-bound to tell us where we should get that money from, and in a fashion that can actually yield something.

I do not want to single it out as a party, but I have to say that there was a strange trend among SDLP Members to say, "Do not be blaming the British Government for this. We are to blame". That is a very strange mindset, because the reality is that we do not decide what our funding envelope is. We do not have any control over that decision. We do not decide the Budget cycle that we have; the British Government decide that. We did not decide the timing of all of that. We were supposed to know this last summer, and the Government decided, for their own interests and their own priorities, to run that right up to nearly Christmas. In those circumstances, I am not sure how we should say, "Don't stand up and blame the Brits". That was the lecture from about six or seven SDLP MLAs over both days. I thought that that was a strange position. It is kind of a warped colonial mindset where we cannot challenge the source of the problems but have to blame ourselves for these ills. The reality is that we do not have control over those factors. If we did have control over them, we might have a different outcome. Actually, the Chair of the Committee for the Executive Office suggested that I was not allocating the unspent money because I secretly do not want this state, the North, to work.

I have a higher ambition than the working of this state; I have made no secret of that. I would like to think that he has as well. I thought that that was very strange. There is probably work for a psychiatrist to analyse that type of approach: that we would punish ourselves to prove a point. I assure him that I and my colleagues on the Executive will try to make absolutely the best use of the resources that we have and to get the most resources that we can. That is what we have been doing.

Since I came into this job, I have spent my time fighting battles with Treasury to get flexibility; to get it to honour the NDNA commitments, which were abandoned within 48 hours of being signed up to; to push for confidence-and-supply money that was promised to the party opposite, which we managed to get; and to fight for lost European funding and challenge the decision to hold on to the replacement European funding and use it for the levelling-up agenda in Britain, which will not benefit us at all. I have been fighting those battles every day since I came into office. I found it bizarre that Mr McGrath said, "You might not want to spend this money on people's services because you might want to prove that the North doesn't work". I do not have to do that to prove that the North does not work; it has not worked since its inception. It does not require me to do anything to do that. I have an ambition for a much better outcome for all the people who live on this island.

Several Members made arguments around the victims' payments. It is absolutely unacceptable that we are in an argument over victims' payments. We tried to head that off last September by having a sensible discussion with the Secretary of State. I listened carefully to Mike Nesbitt. I absolutely respect his view, and I do not doubt his sincerity. He had that role. He has listened to many testimonies, and, clearly, he has been impacted by them. I absolutely respect his point in that regard. However, none of the Members who raised that, including Mr Allister, who is now absent, has ever said that we should pay for it or that the British Government should pay for it. They have said, "Somebody should do something about that. Somebody should sort that out. It needs sorted out. Victims are hanging on". I absolutely accept that. We have

been trying since last September to sort the issue out. We did not want to be in a situation where victims would have to hold on and wait. We did not create the scheme that is now in front of us with the massive additional costs. We created a scheme — you, a Cheann Comhairle, were part of it, as were, probably, older Members here — when we were in Stormont House, in which we looked at the physical injuries to victims who were from here. We had those discussions; in fact, even with that limited scheme, we had a discussion about who was responsible for paying for it. Quite a lot of that happened under direct rule; it did not happen on the watch of the Executive or even from 1998 onwards. There was a discussion around that.

The British Government took that and added substantially to it. They added people who were psychologically injured, and there is an argument for that. They added service personnel from the British military, who were paid by the British Government to come over here and were the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence. The injuries and psychological trauma that they might have suffered are the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence. However, the British Government's position is that we, out of the limited resources that we have to pay for all the services that, everybody has identified, are stretched, underfunded and need to be improved — we cannot get out of that vicious circle because we do not have the money to invest our way out and improve services — should pay for all of that. They say that we should pay for those costs, which we did not agree to or sign up to, out of our money that provides for our services.

I do not say that to make the argument that it is services against victims. It is abhorrent to have to make the argument that we have to judge victims' payments against the services that we could provide. Mike Nesbitt talked movingly about victims: we could provide all that money, but, next year, somebody could talk about people who have died on waiting lists or been denied treatment because we did not have the money for those services. We have been desperately trying to have that conversation with the British Government, but all that we have had is bluster and falsehoods from a Secretary of State who, after having accepted at our meeting the Actuary Department's figures for all of that, said the next day, "It's only a few million pounds. They could pay for it out of their underspend". That is not sincerely trying to deal with the victims' payments issue; that is playing politics with it. We have never sought to do that. The Executive are absolutely committed to paying for victims' pensions, but there are people who have played politics with it and added to a scheme that, by their own rules, they are responsible for and yet refuse to engage with us in a serious way to address the issue.

I absolutely accept it when people say, "Get it sorted"; that is what I am trying to do. You need to come off the fence, however, and say, "I believe that the Executive should pay for it out of their resources" or, "I do not believe that the Executive should pay for it". Some people have said that. Some people have argued the Executive's position, which is that we should not pay for it because we cannot pay for it and that, if we had to pay for it, that would be at catastrophic cost to the public services that we are trying desperately to provide.

A range of issues was raised. I do not wish to stay here all night, but I will address some of them. We were taken

back to the argument about the percentage of the bids, which Mr Frew introduced yesterday. I made the point to him that I would not measure it against the percentage of the bids but against the percentage of the money that was got. To me, that is more important, because quite a lot of Departments repeated bids continuously throughout the year. He accepted that.

It is interesting that DFI was used as an example. I checked the figures: in total, the Department for Infrastructure got £196.6 million of COVID money over the year. That was 95% of its COVID bids, not including repeat bids. Take repeat bids out of it, and it was 95% of DFI's COVID bids. It is important that people see the full picture. I have no desire to get into the issue that there were no bids in October or January for road maintenance and all of that. If Members wish, however, to create the argument, as Members of the Minister's party have been doing for the past while, certainly in the past two days, that somehow there was a denial of funds, I have to say that a huge tranche of funds went to the Department for Infrastructure. It is up to the Minister to decide how to spend the significant budget that she got last year. When we were asked to prioritise bids that came in, there was £104 million for Translink, because it was a priority for the Department for Infrastructure; £20 million for lost passenger income; £36 million for the Driver and Vehicle Agency; £25 million for the bus and coach industry; and £31.6 million for Northern Ireland Water. Mr Frew raised the issue of the lack of infrastructure investment for Northern Ireland Water, which I accept. We have allocated money for that in the draft Budget. We have also looked to reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing to increase that, because we recognise that the failure over many years to invest in our water and sewerage infrastructure has had a knock-on effect on the ability to develop and invest properly in growth, as well as having created environmental issues.

Chris Lyttle, the Chair of the Education Committee, argued for the need to ensure adequate resourcing of childcare in the Department of Education budget. I know that he is not here, but he may be listening in. The Department of Education received £195 million from Executive funds to address pressures related to COVID-19. That included £26.8 million for payments to families in lieu of free school meals; £18.7 million for holiday hunger payments; £30.6 million to fund holiday hunger payments into the next financial year; £30.5 million for the childcare sector; and £87.4 million for the Education Restart programme. Substantial money has been invested.

Jim Allister raised a range of issues. He is no longer with us, and I am not sure whether he is listening from another place: I shudder to think. When he raised this yesterday, we told him that it was an accounting issue. The functions of a Department are itemised. Victims' funding is itemised for both the Department of Justice and TEO. That does not mean that the funding is there for it, not does it mean that the funding is assigned for it. The issue of funding is obviously still to be worked out. He listed the costs as being way above and beyond even what the Secretary of State tried to tell us was available to us. He has obviously included the COVID money, the NDNA money and a range of other moneys in the Budget this year that were not in there in previous years.

I have dealt with a lot of the issues. To Members who have misplaced their arguments — we will probably have the

same debate in June when we come to the actual Budget — I say that what is set out is a draft Budget.

It was based on that collective decision taken by the whole Executive that we did not have the time to reprioritise, so we basically rolled over the money that we got and had a standstill Budget, with nothing extra for any Department. We have got some flexibilities since making that decision. We have looked, where we can, to additional funding, and we have looked to see what the spend is. In doing that, Departments identified £1.7 billion of unmet pressures, and that is a huge, huge challenge.

8.30 pm

We are looking at the issues that have been raised, such as safe staffing for health workers; the independent advice sector, which the Communities Minister said that she will be able to cover; the recruitment of benefits staff; and labour market interventions, which Claire Sugden spoke on, as did Gerry Carroll. We will look to address those issues between now and the final Budget stage. I hope to be able to do something on that. We recognise that that there is a huge range of very pressing issues, but it is vital that we try to assist particularly young people, support those who have become unemployed as a consequence of the pandemic, and make sure that there is support and advice for such people. The safe staffing issue for health workers is also vital. We have, for next year, given a commitment to the Education Minister on teachers' pay and a commitment to the Health Minister on safe staffing.

Last, but by no means least, was the issue of the Lough Neagh fishermen. I am not certain as to why or how that has not been paid, but I will check and come back to you. If it was bid for and has not been paid, that is one thing. However, if it has not been bid for, there is very, very limited time left to put something together for it. My understanding from DAERA is that — we got this response from a number of Departments — it has bid for all that it is going to bid for and is not bidding for any more. That is why we are trying to kick in the contingency plans. I know that it has been a matter of severe concern. Someone else from that corner lambasted me today and said that, if I did not spend all the money, I would go down as a failure. I got that yesterday as well. There was a common thread through the scripts of some SDLP Members; there must be a similar ghostwriter behind them all. I assure them that I intend to spend that, but if the bid is not in at this stage, that is a problem. If it is in and has not been paid, I will happily take it up with the AERA Minister.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Murphy: Yes.

Mr O'Dowd: On that point, I and others have been lobbying the Agriculture Minister about the eel fisherman. The money is available; it comes from EU maritime funding. The money is there; the scheme is there. It just has not been paid.

Mr Murphy: OK. I accept that point. I am not familiar with it, but I certainly accept it. I am happy to raise it to see what the issue is with payment.

A Cheann Comhairle, I am sure that you and other Members will be glad to know that this is coming to an end. I have tried to respond to as many issues as possible. I have tried to remind Members that we are here to debate

the Vote on Account, but I am not surprised that they want to raise the draft Budget, and I do not deny them the opportunity to do so. Undoubtedly, Members will raise that, and I have no doubt that we will come back to debate it all again. When Members address those issues and when they come back to address the final Budget, once we have put out that document, if they have arguments for change, I would appreciate it if they would tell us how we should provide that change. That is a very simple requirement. When you have the same amount of money and something has to change, you have to take money off somebody to give it to somebody else. I would therefore be obliged if Members would follow through on the logic of their arguments and say where that money should come from.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I do not want to delay him or anyone else, because we, particularly the Minister, have been here a long time. Does he hope to be able to give more of an update on the fiscal council? He talked about multi-year Budgets, and he has just talked about having more structure and Members making positive suggestions. Does he hope that, when the final Budget is brought before the Assembly, we are in a position to talk in detail about those two institutions?

Mr Murphy: Yes. I apologise: he and Clare Bailey raised the issue of the fiscal council. She obviously is not aware, although most people are, that, two weeks ago today, I put a paper on a fiscal council and a fiscal commission to the Executive for approval. I am waiting for that to be dealt with by the Executive. As far as I am concerned, that proposal has been delivered on by my Department, and I want to see it delivered on by the Executive as a whole. Absolutely, both issues feed off each other. People will know the work that has been identified for a fiscal council.

A fiscal commission will look at issues like spending power and what we could do, and I think that its report will be for an incoming Executive. That is because our intention is that it will take most, if not all, of the rest of this year. Therefore, it will be for an incoming Assembly and Executive to debate and discuss what powers they might seek to use. However, we have never had an exercise to look at what powers might be available and what we might hope to do with them. Perhaps, that would take away some of the uncertainty that we live with, in that we do not decide our funding envelope or the timescale for our Budget, and we do not decide when we know about all of that; it all just lands on top of us and we have to plan as best as we can.

As I have said, it is imperative that the legislation that has been debated today continues its passage through the Assembly so that public services and our response to the pandemic 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, and into the early months of 2021-22 in the Vote on Account.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I advise Members that, as this is a Budget Bill, it is established practice that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 17/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Second Stage of the Budget Bill. Amendments to the Bill may be submitted to the Bill Office up to 9.30 am on Wednesday 3 March.

Adjourned at 8.37 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 8 March 2021

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Tributes to Mr Jimmy Spratt

Mr Speaker: Members, we start our business by expressing our condolences following the passing of our former colleague Jimmy Spratt. I know that we were all deeply saddened to hear the news of Jimmy's death on Thursday. Jimmy was well known for his long career of over 30 years in public service as a member of the RUC and as chairman of the Police Federation. He then entered the Assembly in 2007, and that is when I got to know him, as we both represented South Belfast at the time.

As well as being constituency colleagues, Jimmy and I worked together in many capacities, including as members of the Policing Board, on the then Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and, indeed, on conflict resolution work in Asia. Jimmy also chaired a number of Committees in the Assembly, including the Regional Development Committee for three years in the 2011 mandate.

We obviously came from very different political backgrounds and perspectives, but I had a great respect for Jimmy, as we developed a strong working relationship; indeed, what I would call a friendship. I enjoyed working with Jimmy very much, as he was a straight talker with a good sense of humour. You were never in any doubt about where Jimmy stood on any given issue, but you could always do business with him, and he was clearly committed to making the Assembly work during his time as a Member.

In recent years, Jimmy spoke openly about his long battle with cancer. In doing so, he demonstrated his strength of character, even when he was seriously ill, and many of us admired him for that. I express the condolences of the Assembly to his colleagues in the Democratic Unionist Party. All will recognise today that a family is grieving. I know that I speak for all in the Assembly in recording our sincere sympathies for his wife, Lynda, his four sons, his daughters-in-law and his grandchildren. Jimmy was a strong family man, and I hope that his family can take some comfort from memories of happier times.

Mrs Foster: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for your kind words about our dear friend and colleague Jimmy Spratt.

The news of Jimmy's passing was expected, but it still hit very hard when I was told last Thursday morning. He had fought cancer in such a stoic way with his wife, Lynda, always by his side, but the fight came to an end

on Thursday morning and it was time to leave this earthly world.

Jimmy and I were not what a lot of people expected from DUP MLAs. He was a Presbyterian and I was an Anglican. He used to joke about that with Dr Paisley, and he laughed when Ian asked me how the Anglicans were, as if I could answer for the whole Anglican communion. We both joined the party around the same time, and Jimmy's service in the RUC was also something that brought us together as my father had served in the police as well.

Jimmy joined the Royal Ulster Constabulary in 1972 when the IRA campaign of violence was at its bloodiest, and he served in the police for 30 years. Towards the end of his time, as you said, Mr Speaker, he became chairman of the Police Federation after having been involved there for a number of years in other functions, and he was a great advocate for his fellow officers.

When he retired from the police, the desire to serve the community was still there, so he joined the DUP and was elected to Castlereagh Borough Council. He became group leader of the DUP team on the council after Peter Robinson left the council chamber, and he really enjoyed his role as a councillor and group leader. In 2007, he was elected to serve as an MLA for South Belfast, and, as you have reflected, Mr Speaker, he held many positions in this place during his time here. He stepped down due to ill health in 2015, but he still kept a keen eye on what was going on up on the hill.

When devolution returned to Northern Ireland in 2007 after the St Andrews Agreement, Jimmy and I sat behind Dr Paisley and Peter Robinson in that now famous photograph in the Long Gallery at Stormont, when the DUP leadership met the Sinn Féin leadership for the first time. Jimmy believed in devolution and knew the work and sacrifice that were needed to make it happen. He had lived and served through the Troubles and had seen the death and destruction that they had brought, and he wanted to make Northern Ireland a better place for all.

There were and are many challenges in keeping Northern Ireland moving forward in the right direction, but Jimmy never shied away from that challenge. When I needed help, I rang Jimmy, as I did not so long ago, and he was always willing to help, even when he was not well. He was an incredibly brave man, and he showed that bravery throughout his life, not least in his final battle. I will miss his mischievous smile, his dry asides and his determined, clear counsel, but I am thankful to have had Jimmy as a friend and colleague — the kind of friend who thought

nothing of jumping in a car and coming to Enniskillen to canvass for a day.

To Lynda and the family, I send my love and prayerful support. We all know that there will be difficult days ahead but there will also be days of joyful remembrance. Jimmy had a strong faith in the risen Lord as his saviour. I watched his funeral service online. and I smiled when his minister, the Rev Mark Brown, said that Jimmy had instructed him to leave people in no doubt about the need for salvation. Jimmy was giving clear advice, even though he had passed.

I want to finish with two verses, if I may, Mr Speaker. As the Bible says in Philipians 4:7:

“And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus”

and in Matthew 5:4:

“Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.”

Mr O’Dowd: On behalf of Sinn Féin, I want to pay our tribute to Jimmy Spratt. My experience of Jimmy mirrors yours, Mr Speaker. I got to know him through the Assembly, and it was a classic example of the fact that peacebuilding is not something that simply happens between Governments, political parties or communities: it has to be at a personal level. Jimmy’s background was very different from mine, and I never thought that I would be standing here and paying tribute to a former RUC man. However, Jimmy was the sort of character who was firm in his own beliefs and could express them, but he did so in a way that did not antagonise or inflame the situation.

I never doubted for one moment that Jimmy was a unionist, but I always believed that he was here, as many are — with the greatest respect to everybody in the Chamber, we are all here trying to do a job — to try to make this place work for everyone. As I said at the start of my tribute to him, he is a classic example of how peacebuilding is achieved: at a one-to-one level as much as at Government-to-Government level.

I always found Jimmy to be courteous but firm. As I said, he was a political figure who could give his point of view without inflaming or antagonising the situation. On behalf of Sinn Féin, I pass on deepest sympathies to his wife, Lynda, and his four sons.

Ms Mallon: I offer my condolences and those of my party to the Members opposite, who knew Jimmy Spratt as a close friend and trusted colleague. Having recently experienced the loss of a colleague, we know how difficult that process is, particularly in the current circumstances. I know that the First Minister, in particular, will feel Jimmy’s loss sorely. On behalf of the SDLP, I send heartfelt condolences to Lynda, Jimmy’s wife, and their four children. The loss of a family member has been made so much more difficult by the pandemic. I hope that, when this is over, they have the time and space to remember Jimmy together.

I did not have the opportunity to serve in the House at the same time as Jimmy Spratt, but I did have the pleasure of meeting him on a number of occasions as a councillor, and he always found time to speak to me. At our most recent meeting, at the funeral of Councillor Rosaleen Hughes,

who was a great friend of Jimmy’s, he even found time to give me some valuable words of encouragement. I always found that Jimmy saw the person, not just the politician. The warm tributes paid by his colleagues today are testament to a man who dedicated himself to making this place work and serving the needs of the people whom he represented.

In the febrile political environment that we experience today, we could all learn from someone who made his arguments directly, passionately and honestly, but who also demonstrated respect and humility when listening to the experiences of others. It is clear that he was held in respect right across the political spectrum. There is no doubt that Jimmy felt a lifelong call to public service. As a police officer, councillor, MLA and, I have no doubt, a source of advice and counsel to successive First Ministers, he has made an indelible impact on our shared community.

Mr Butler: It is a privilege to offer, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, condolences to Jimmy Spratt’s wider family and friends and his colleagues in the Democratic Unionist Party. I did not know Mr Spratt personally. However, I have heard many a testimony to Jimmy over the years since I entered politics. Every time, he was described, as Mr O’Dowd said, as straight and firm, proudly unionist but non-antagonistic, and someone who, perhaps, could be best described as a constituency politician. No greater tribute can be paid to a politician.

As someone who served for 20 years in the Prison Service and the Fire and Rescue Service, I want to pay a personal tribute to someone who followed that line of public service throughout their working life and worked for the betterment of the public. The stories that emanated from Jimmy Spratt’s life and which were shared at his funeral and by the First Minister, should give comfort to his family that his memory will be long held in high esteem right across Northern Ireland and the communities that we all represent.

Jimmy had a long battle with cancer. As the First Minister said, his death was not unexpected. However, every time, regardless of the house that we come from, a death like that is hard to take. Our thoughts and prayers are with Lynda and her four sons. Finally, it is incredibly comforting, if you have a faith, to know that, when someone passes, they have a future in Jesus.

12.15 pm

Mr Dickson: I knew Jimmy Spratt many years ago from my work in the Labour Relations Agency when he was chair of the Police Federation for Northern Ireland and represented that body in very difficult and challenging employment negotiations. That is where I first came across Jimmy Spratt in his professional role. I was also well aware of him as a local councillor, and we met at various council events through the Northern Ireland Local Government Association and other council organisations.

When I came to the Assembly, he had already completed one term and was the Chair of the Regional Development Committee, the first Committee that I joined in the Assembly. He was open and generous in the way in which he allowed Members to participate in all the work of the Assembly. He encouraged us. We did not always agree; we did not always meet eye to eye on the various issues in front of us. However, the way in which he engaged with

Members was always excellent, no matter which party they came from.

For me, and in a very personal way, it was the bravery with which Jimmy spoke up about his battle with cancer. Cancer is a very difficult thing to talk about in public, and he stepped forward and did that. I will always remember that he sent me a very personal note when I received my diagnosis. To Lynda and his family, on behalf of the Alliance Party, I extend our condolences. Thank you.

Mr Stalford: In the Second Epistle of Paul to Timothy, we read:

“the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award me on that day: and not only to me, but to all who crave his appearing.”

I rise to pay tribute to a life of public service. Mr Jimmy Spratt faithfully served his constituents as a Member of the Assembly, but he also served in the police during some of the darkest days of the Troubles. I recall Jimmy telling me some of the stories of a dark time for this country before I was born. He served to protect the community in those dark days during that very difficult time.

Jimmy was a firm unionist, and there was no disguising that. He joined the Young Unionists in Moneyreagh as a young man but went on to serve as a Democratic Unionist councillor, the Mayor of Castlereagh, an Assembly Member and as the Chair of the Regional Development Committee, as has been said.

He was blessed in life to have a loving family: four sons, his wife, Lynda, and his grandchildren, who would have been such a comfort during the final days of his life. I wish to place on record my deepest sympathy to his family at this very sad time.

Mr Allister: I wish to join the tributes to Jimmy Spratt. He clearly had a very enviable full life of service, and, as has been commented, some of that was in the police during the darkest of times, and anyone who does that is deserving of the gratitude of us all. When it came to his final months and years of life, he showed great stoicism and courage in the manner in which he fought the dreadful disease of cancer. His conduct in that fight was exemplary. Now that he has passed, though his colleagues in the House will miss him, he will be missed most by his family: his wife, sons and extended family. I wish to extend my sincere condolences to his family and to his political party, where he was held in high regard and will be deeply missed. Above all, it is his family who will miss him, and I join in the condolences and expressions of sympathy to them.

Mrs D Kelly: I will say a few words, having had the privilege of serving on the Policing Board with Jimmy Spratt. I can relate to the First Minister’s comments about his mischievous sense of humour, because, many’s the time, he would have tipped me a wink before he started to wind up some senior police officers at the board through his questioning and probing. I pass on my sincere condolences to his wife, Lynda, and his sons. Funerals are a very difficult time at the moment. When people are ill, family members and friends cannot go to give comfort in the way in which we would hope. My sincere condolences to his family, friends and colleagues in the DUP. I always

found Jimmy to be a gentleman, and he was quite dapper in how he dressed. His sense of humour always appealed to me, and I know that he will be missed by many.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the tributes —. Sorry, I call Robin Newton. Apologies for that.

Mr Newton: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Tributes have rightly been paid to Jimmy Spratt today for his service. It was a privilege to know Jimmy and to be with him in his political life and, indeed, in the Assembly. We shared membership of the same Democratic Unionist Party branch, and Jimmy was always in attendance before his illness.

The funeral service encapsulated many things about Jimmy, and the Members who have spoken today, from the First Minister down, have encapsulated many of Jimmy’s attributes. First, he was a man of faith. He believed in God and the Lord Jesus Christ. He believed very much in his family, and it was extremely important to him. Jimmy enjoyed no greater pleasure than to have his family around him, particularly his grandchildren.

Members have mentioned his service in the RUC, and I suppose that his life could be summed up in many ways by that one word: service. Service to his family, service to his employer — the RUC — and, more latterly, service to the people of his constituency. Indeed, he served not just his own constituency. He was an elected representative on the council, and, when he became an MLA, he served further afield by helping to produce legislation and so on. He was proud to serve as the Mayor of Castlereagh Borough Council, as it was then. As has been said, he took over the leadership role of the DUP group on the council when Peter Robinson stood down. My goodness, what a burden that would have been to follow in the footsteps of Peter Robinson.

Jimmy fought a long fight against cancer. He made, and was willing to make, his points of view known on his illness and on the pandemic, and he appeared on television on a number of occasions to make those points.

I extend my condolences to Lynda, to his four sons and, indeed, to the wider family. Jimmy’s life can be summed up as a life well lived.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the tributes to Jimmy Spratt.

Public Petition: Urgent Provision of a Detox and Centre of Excellence for Addiction for the Derry City and Strabane District Council Area

Mr Speaker: Karen Mullan has sought leave to present a public petition, in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes in which to speak.

Ms Mullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, for accepting this petition. Today, I bring forward an online petition, which is signed by over 9,000 people, for a detox centre and centre of excellence for addiction in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area. On International Women's Day, I present this petition on behalf of a very brave and inspirational young woman called Tamzin White, who recently lost her mother, Louise, to a long battle against alcohol addiction.

Louise was only 40 years of age. She was a mother to three beautiful daughters: Tamzin, 18 years old; and two younger girls, Farrah and Lola-May. Louise was also a much-loved daughter, sister, aunt and friend.

Yet again, because of addiction, a family has lost a loved one who should have had her whole life in front of her. This has been a campaign and a clearly identified need in Derry for many years. Along with many citizens of Derry, I call on Minister of Health Robin Swann to listen and to make plans for the delivery of the much-needed services for many suffering families and individuals. 'New Decade, New Approach' clearly refers to additional funding to support an addiction centre in Derry. That is a clear commitment that all parties in the Executive signed up to in January 2020. Other Members for Foyle and I have raised the issue in the Assembly and will continue to do so.

I am sure that every Member in the Assembly today knows of a relative, friend or colleague who is battling or has battled addiction. Addiction is no longer an affliction that brings shame on a family or community; it is a disease, like many others, that we as a society battle every day of the week. We need to ensure that we, as legislators and the Government, provide the services and treatments that our citizens need and deserve.

It may be too late for Louise, but, for many others, it is not too late. I appeal on behalf of Tamzin: do not let this commitment that we all made last January be another false dawn. The people of Derry and the north-west region need the service, and we need it now. Finally, I appeal to Minister Swann to give the issue his immediate and serious attention, to deliver the detox centre of excellence that was promised in 'New Decade, New Approach' and to keep his offer to meet Tamzin.

Mr Speaker: In light of social distancing, I ask the Member to remain in her place and make arrangements to submit the petition to my office later. I thank the Member for bringing the petition to the attention of the Assembly. Once I have received the petition, I will forward it to the Minister of Health and send a copy to the Committee.

Matter of the Day

Withdrawal Agreement Grace Periods

Mr Speaker: Mr Declan McAleer has been given leave to make a statement on withdrawal agreement grace periods that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should rise in their place and continue to do so. All Members called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has finished.

Mr McAleer: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle, for the opportunity to raise this very important Matter of the Day.

I want to pick up on the solo run made by the Minister in ordering that construction at the ports be stopped and on the decision by the British Government to unpick aspects of the withdrawal agreement. They did it unilaterally and outside the partnership and the agreed intergovernmental arrangements that they have with the EU. That is bad business, and it contravenes an international agreement. It will have a bad impact on our businesses here and on our international reputation as a region to do business with.

Unfortunately, the need for checks has arisen as a result of Brexit and the divergence of the UK from the EU. If we did not have any divergence, we would not have any checks. The majority of people in the North recognised that and wanted to remain. My party wanted to remain, and the majority of the House wanted to remain. That did not happen. The backstop, which could have prevented checks, was also rubbish. We have ended up with the protocol — the withdrawal agreement — and now we have a situation where the British want to unpick parts of that international agreement; indeed, we have the AERA Minister, Gordon Lyons, going on a solo run and ordering the stopping of the construction of the ports facilities. He did not run the decision by the AERA Committee, nor did he run it by his senior officials, who are now seeking legal advice on the matter.

The economic importance of our ports is absolutely huge. From Belfast alone, there were 550,000 freight trips across the Irish Sea last year. Of the trade from the North to Britain, 70% goes through Belfast.

Making the decision on the ports and, indeed, on tweaking aspects of the protocol outside the agreed intergovernmental arrangement is, as I said, bad business and represents bad faith.

12.30 pm

DAERA has been preparing the ports since the Command Paper was published last year. The contracts were awarded in October, and DAERA is now negotiating with Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) on the status of those contracts, which are now in place. I accept that there were implementation issues at the outset in January, but the message that we, as a Committee, get is that things are improving, the Trader Support Service is improving and businesses are getting used to the common health entry documents. There are still some issues to deal with. Some 57,000 units have passed through the ports since it began, and businesses are calling for calm heads and a clear plan. On the revocation of article 16 —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McAleer: — they do not want the prospect of World Trade Organization rules.

The decisions by the Minister and the British Government could have a huge impact on our local businesses.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McAleer: It is important that we raise that.

Mr Stalford: It is important to start from first principles: we do not consent, have not consented and never will consent to the provisions in the withdrawal agreement. Extending grace periods is, insofar as it goes, perhaps positive, but it is not enough. The protocol should be abolished and consigned to the wastepaper bin where it belongs. Frankly, I find it bizarre that elected Members of the House are demanding that their constituents be punished and that provisions that make it harder to establish businesses and to trade should be — what was the phrase? — “rigorously implemented”. It is for the parties that argued in favour of the protocol to justify that to their constituents and justify why they are in favour of barriers to the biggest market that we have: the UK domestic market.

The only conclusion that people will come to is that the pro-protocol parties have a higher fealty and allegiance to the European Union than to serving the interests of their constituents. The idea of the European Union is more important to the parties that argue in favour of the protocol than making life better for their constituents. Having spent four years demanding the provisions and their rigorous implementation, some, at least, had the political nous to try to back-pedal from some of it by saying, “Oh, these are just teething problems”. That was the argument that was used. When issues like this are raised, it is apparent that rigorous implementation is the position of the pro-protocol parties.

What does that mean? It means that it is more difficult to start businesses, to trade and to engage in economic activity that would benefit the community. Members opposite arguing that it is a good thing for Northern Ireland does not at all stand up to scrutiny, and people can see that.

The Member who spoke before me mentioned the need for cool heads. Can I suggest that he visit Iveagh House and suggest “cool heads” to the Foreign Minister of the Irish Republic? Mr Coveney's contributions in the media over the last week do not demonstrate a cool-headed approach: quite the contrary. Some could say that he is deliberately inflaming the situation.

I finish by congratulating my Executive colleague Gordon Lyons on the action that he has taken. It reflects the fact that the unionist community in Northern Ireland will never, ever, consent to living under the protocol.

Mr O'Toole: I am glad that the matter has been brought to the Assembly. To answer the previous point, I say that the people of Northern Ireland did not vote for Brexit in the first place. We have a set of arrangements that reflects our unique status. People can constantly bang the table and gin up anger about the protocol, but, if they do not address the basic reality and starting principle that a hard Brexit — leaving the single market and customs union — creates the need for a threshold between the European single market of half a billion people and the UK market, we will get nowhere. Those realities exist. They have been created by the UK Government — successive UK

Governments — and, as the Member opposite has decided to turn it into a political slanging match, have been enabled by the Democratic Unionist Party, who held the balance of power at Westminster for two and a half years.

In relation to the grace periods, no one is opposed to businesses having more time to prepare, but there are two things. First, we on this side of the Chamber and others who voted for the motion tabled multiple motions in the Assembly last year to give businesses more time to prepare and call for the transition period to be extended. That is exactly what we asked for, but the UUP, DUP and TUV voted against that. They literally voted against more time for businesses to prepare.

With regard to the specific extension of the grace periods, as I have said, businesses have struggled to deal with changes that were forced through at short notice, but, as the previous Member said, it is exaggeration and distortion to claim that the world is falling down around us. These are difficult changes in North/South and east-west trade, but businesses are coming to terms with them. The way to go about securing easements and making the protocol work is not through constant provocation and threat, as the new UK Minister seeks to do. That will only put Northern Ireland in the middle of a difficult relationship between the UK and the EU. That is not in anyone's interest.

Over the weekend, I heard the First Minister say that she had heard business groups welcoming the extension of the grace periods. That is true: several business groups have welcomed it. They have also said that they did not want it to happen like this, because they know the damage that it will do to UK/EU relationships. If you can find a single business group that wants the protocol to be junked and walked away from, then bring them here; I would love to hear from them. What I hear from businesses is that they want certainty and stability. The constant ramping-up of tension, whether in London or Belfast, is not doing anyone any good. We need to make this work, and it can work for the benefit of all our citizens.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: We are a unique place and a unique society, and there is no getting away from that. We have to make this work and make it work properly.

Mr Beggs: The Northern Ireland protocol is adversely affecting many businesses, particularly smaller businesses that are being overloaded by the bureaucracy. Many of their suppliers in GB no longer supply them. That is the reality of what is happening. Prices are increasing. There has been a total ban on many goods coming into Northern Ireland. Our garden centres cannot even order plants: British soil is not deemed to be acceptable here. On 1 April, with new restrictions on parcels coming into Northern Ireland, virtually every online retailer would be adversely affected.

Just last week, the permanent secretary of DAERA indicated that 20% of documentary inspections in the entire EU were happening because of the Northern Ireland protocol and that it would increase significantly on 1 April, when the so-called grace period came to an end. Northern Ireland would face a similar number of checks to the rest of the EU. This is a bureaucratic nightmare that the EU has introduced, affecting Northern Ireland. The EU needs to get real and stop trying to impose such ridiculous conditions. Why some other parties want to have barriers

to trade I do not know. The first so-called grace period was due to end on 1 April. There is another one on 1 July and another on 1 December. There are huge problems for businesses and trade, and the EU has been dithering in recognising them. Let us remember that, if a company wants something delivered in three weeks' time, they need to order it, sometimes, with several weeks' lead time, and then there is the distribution beyond that.

The EU has been too slow to get rid of its ridiculous procedures. I fully understand why the United Kingdom Government have acted, and I am pleased that they have. The EU has introduced disproportionate procedures to protect its single market. Where is the unfettered access that was granted to Northern Ireland? They have certainly not introduced a light-touch system; it must be one of the most bureaucratic systems ever thought about.

It has absolutely no regard for the joint nature of the Belfast Agreement and the impact that its proposal is having on unionist opinion. It says that it introduced the system in order to protect the agreement, but it has disrupted the Northern Ireland economy and trade. It is making unionists very concerned about the current political status, which it has changed without their permission. I fully understand why the British Government have taken that action. What we do not want is the removal of the grace period. The Northern Ireland protocol has to go so that we can let something be introduced that can give a degree of protection to Europe that it says it needs but without the bureaucratic nightmare that has been introduced.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Dickson: The Alliance Party supports the extension of the current grace periods for Irish Sea border checks. However, very serious concerns remain over the way in which the UK Government have unilaterally acted to extend them rather than achieve a way to work with the EU. That is a matter of serious concern. It is even sadder to hear in here today those voices that welcome the breach of an international agreement. Those people need to stop and think about what they said. They are welcoming a breach of the law by a Government whose international reputation will, undoubtedly, be damaged by their actions. That has already been highlighted by the United States of America and others.

The Government should be taking this time to achieve sustainable long-term solutions and mitigations in the operation of the protocol. For my party, the priority should be the conclusion of bespoke UK-EU agreements, which are veterinary agreements in this case, that are along the style of the Swiss model and extending that.

While the announcement of an extension of grace periods might superficially be attractive in the short term, it has very serious long-term consequences. Breaking the law, particularly international law, always has. It will bring further disruption to the United Kingdom. Businesses in Northern Ireland want and require stability and legal certainty. The actions of the Government and those who rail against the protocol are doing the very opposite. They are destabilising business and bringing legal uncertainty to the situation.

However, Northern Ireland is not alone in that, because the damage will also happen to the rest of the United Kingdom. Too often, we look at ports like Larne, Belfast and

Warrenpoint, and we jump up and down when Ministers make decisions about what they want to do here, but we should also look at ports in England and at how they relate to business across the continent. They are suffering equal and similar problems, all of which have been brought about by the pig-headedness of the United Kingdom Government in their negotiations. Any punishment of businesses sits entirely at the feet of those who sold Brexit and defeated the backstop in a parliamentary decision.

Ms Bailey: Here we go, yet again, discussing the impact of Brexit when many of us knew — all of us knew — that it would bring no benefits and certainly no settlement for Northern Ireland. When we hear that businesses are adversely impacted by the protocol, the question needs to be asked. Businesses were going to be impacted no matter what the arrangement. This is not about where the border is if you want to stand up for businesses, because if it was a land or a sea border, businesses will still be affected. We need to acknowledge that that argument is a party political one and not one that is set up for helping any businesses. Brexit is bad for Northern Ireland, and the protocol is the minimum standard of protection for us against the harshest outcome of the hard Brexit that Boris Johnson sought.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bailey: No, I will not.

Any solution for issues arising because of the protocol needs to be sorted out with the Joint Committee. Nobody in the House should be fooled that the EU or the United Kingdom Government are looking for the best outcome for Northern Ireland when they are rolling out the programme for Brexit. That is not the reality, because, every which way, Northern Ireland is set to be harmed.

12.45 pm

Should we need to be reminded, Boris Johnson even told Donald Tusk in a letter that the UK supports a backstop that applies "unless and until" something better is found. Those opposing Brexit, those opposing the protocol, those opposing where we are today and those bringing judicial reviews to our courts need to step up and start telling us what is better because I want to hear it, businesses want to hear it and people want to hear it.

My colleague from South Belfast Christopher Stalford, who has left the Chamber unfortunately, said that we need to step up and represent businesses and people. Does he need to be reminded that over 70% of people in South Belfast unanimously rejected Brexit? Where was his representation then?

The issue needs to be solved in the Joint Committee. We need to acknowledge that there is no good outcome for Northern Ireland and that, in mitigating what we have and what we will continue to see, it needs to be firmly put to the Joint Committee, and the EU and the UK Government need to step up and start looking after the interests of Northern Ireland rather than their own agendas.

Mr Buckley: Northern Ireland unionism is a broad church, both communal and political. It has many opinions and people differ on many issues, but one thing that it stands in absolute unison on is that the Northern Ireland protocol must go. It is in conflict with the economic, political and peace settlement in Northern Ireland.

Extended grace periods are to be welcomed for the simple fact that they give some immediate certainty to businesses that are calling for them. They allow the Government to pursue urgently the replacement of the Northern Ireland protocol, but let us be clear: tinkering, small fixes and grace periods that will kick the can down the road simply will not be good enough. Real solutions are needed, and that starts with the heart of the issue: the replacement of the Northern Ireland protocol. It has caused political and economic instability in Northern Ireland.

Let us look at the economics. It is bad for business and has created trade impediments with our largest market, which is the internal market of the United Kingdom. I hear Members asking businesses that do not agree with the protocol to come forward, but they obviously do not want to listen because concerns about the protocol have been placed on record from day dot. People are worried about their businesses and their ability to trade with their own internal market of the United Kingdom.

Let us look now at the politics. I have heard many Members, notably the proponents of the protocol, talk about the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement being the peace settlement upon which the current Northern Ireland operates today, but they were silent when, via the protocol, the Government used the very agreement that they champion and removed the safeguard for the unionist community — the principle of consent — and they did not even bat an eyelid. They do not want to listen to unionist concerns. It is anathema to them, but I can tell you very clearly that there is a great deal of unease in our community because of the violation that the protocol has caused to the Northern Ireland peace settlement.

The EU is threatening legal action against Her Majesty's Government when it is, in fact, the EU that has altered the terms that many Members claim are the settlement upon which Northern Ireland is governed. However, all that seems to be irrelevant to the pawns of the European Union who sit in the House pontificating about how Europe has our best interests at heart. They do not recognise the fact that there are two communities in Northern Ireland and that one of those, the unionist community —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Buckley: — sees this as a direct violation of its rights as equal members of the United Kingdom. That has to be addressed.

Mr Allister: Grace periods are designed to ameliorate some of the harsher edges of the protocol for some time. However, when even those grace periods provoke the fury of Sinn Féin and other protocol parties, it is abundantly clear to many in our community that those parties care nothing about the people or businesses of Northern Ireland. They demand not only the rigorous implementation of the protocol but more rigorous pain for the people of Northern Ireland, more rigorous pain for our consumers and the more rigorous destruction of our businesses. That tells us a great deal about the protocol parties and about where their sympathies and priorities lie.

Let us be clear: derogations, easements and grace periods may, in their own place, contribute something, but they do nothing to address the core issue, which is a constitutional one. It is the fact that Northern Ireland has been abandoned to a foreign customs union code, a foreign single market for goods and a foreign VAT regime,

all overseen by foreign laws and administered, ultimately, by a foreign court. That is a transfer of sovereignty. I am staggered that, in this House, those who proclaim themselves to be democrats — Sinn Féin, Alliance, SDLP and the Greens — are totally complacent with the fact that almost two thirds of the laws that govern our economy are now made not in Belfast or London but in Brussels. We make no contribution to these laws, we have no say in them, and we do not pass them. Yet those who call themselves democrats are silent. That is the essence and the nub of the obscenity of the protocol. That constitutional change denies the people of Northern Ireland, through their elected representatives, any say over all those laws that govern our daily lives. If people are democrats at all, they should be up in arms about the denial of human and political rights involved in the fact that we are now governed by foreigners.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Allister: Our laws are made not here or in London but in Brussels, yet those who sit here cheer that on. Shame on them.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the discussion on the Matter of the Day.

Assembly Business

Standing Order 34: Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill

Mr Speaker: As this is only the second time that the Assembly has considered a motion under Standing Order 34, I will explain the procedure. Standing Order 34(5) restricts the debate to two Members. Only the proposer of the motion and a Member who opposes it may make a brief statement. I have ruled that the time limit for each statement will be five minutes, as was the case on the first occasion.

Standing Order 34 also states that, after both statements have been made, the Question must be put without further debate. Members should not try to make interventions, and I will not take any points of order until this item has concluded. The motion does not require cross-community support.

Ms Bradshaw: I beg to move

That the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission be asked to advise whether the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill is compatible with human rights.

Mr Speaker: You have five minutes to propose the motion.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am particularly grateful, on International Women's Day, to those women who have campaigned so courageously for women's rights.

The proposer of the Bill argues, fundamentally, that the current regulations are discriminatory and therefore a breach of human rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006 and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Since it is entirely right to establish what those rights are and legislate accordingly, it is essential, before proceeding with the legislation, to explore the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission's view on whether the Bill is compatible with human rights obligations and whether Northern Ireland may currently be in breach of the convention with regard to the rights of the unborn child.

All human rights are a balance, and it should be noted that, in 2008, the chair of the convention, Theresia Degener, said:

"Disability rights and gender equality are two components of the same human rights standard that should not be construed as conflicting".

She also noted that using the convention in any effort to restrict or prohibit access to safe abortion:

"constitutes a misinterpretation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities."

The question arises as to how the convention should be interpreted in that regard.

One further UN convention is of relevance to the Bill, as it specifically seeks to amend regulations arising from the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). It was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979 and applied in the United Kingdom since 1986, with reference

to the report on the 'Inquiry concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland under article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women' of 2018. To be compatible with international human rights standards, therefore, Members will want to be assured that the amendments to the relevant regulations proposed in the Bill are compatible with the recommendations to the CEDAW report, as contained in paragraphs 85 and 86 and as explicitly required in Westminster legislation.

Mr Speaker, will you ask the gentleman behind me to stop speaking, please?

A Member: Hear, hear.

Mr Allister: Apologies.

Ms Bradshaw: Section 9(1) of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 is specific in requiring the Secretary of State to ensure the implementation of paragraphs 85 and 86 of the CEDAW report. Paragraph 85(b)(iii) of the report directly addresses the balance of rights in this legislation. It requires legislation to allow access to abortion in the case of:

"Severe fetal impairment, including fatal fetal abnormality, without perpetuating stereotypes towards persons with disabilities and ensuring appropriate and ongoing support, social and financial, for women who decide to carry such pregnancies to term."

As such, it needs to be noted that this piece of legislation does not distinguish between severe and fatal, but it does require the ending of stereotypes and ongoing social and financial support for women who decide to carry such pregnancies to term. It is right to seek advice on exactly how that is to be understood in terms of the international human rights obligations arising from it.

Members may also welcome advice on the human rights implications of the Supreme Court judgement of 7 June 2018, even though it was, at the time, obiter dictum. It was endorsed by the High Court in Belfast in October 2019, and it clarified the incompatibility of the then existing law on abortion in Northern Ireland with human rights obligations. Moreover, Members may welcome advice on any potential implications for economic and social rights arising as an unintended consequence of the Bill.

The motion is not a commentary on the intention of the Bill, which provides for a welcome discussion on how best to ensure the ongoing support for women to take babies to term, if available, as well as around the urgent need to stop the perpetuation of stigma around such conditions as Down's syndrome. Rather, it is a request for clarity on the best way to ensure that disability rights and gender equality are treated and advanced in legislation and public policy as part of the same internationally recognised human rights standards.

In closing, it is appropriate, on this day, to note that women's rights are central to the issue. The question is about how they are to be interpreted. We should never underestimate how important that is. In addition to the lack of support throughout their life for women who choose to carry pregnancies to term in the event of a diagnosis of severe impairment, there is clear evidence that the impact of female-specific health conditions, such as heavy menstrual bleeding, endometriosis and pregnancy-

related issues on women's lives, including on workforce participation, productivity and years lived in good health, is overlooked. Furthermore, since the Bill is predicated on disability rights, it is to be hoped that the motion will have the full support of the Assembly —

Mr Speaker: Time is up.

Ms Bradshaw: — and that the advice of the Human Rights Commission can be provided promptly. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Allister, who seeks to oppose the motion. The Member has five minutes in which to do so.

Mr Allister: There is such a compelling irony in someone rising in the House to invoke the cause of human rights in order to protect the bringing of death to the womb. The unborn should be in the safest possible place when they are in the womb, yet abortion, of course, makes it the most dangerous place for some. Then, to suggest that, somehow, one should invoke the issue of human rights in order to protect the bringing of death to the womb is not just absurd but an irony beyond description.

1.00 pm

It is an irony that is added to by the very bringing of this motion in circumstances in which it makes no difference. A motion under Standing Order 34 will not stop the Second Stage debate on the Bill. It will not, if the House approves the Second Stage, cause the Bill to be stopped from proceeding to Committee Stage. It will not bring into play views that otherwise would not be heard, because every Bill that comes to the House, particularly one of this nature, as of right and of necessity, will go to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission for its views as a consultee.

Here we have a motion demanding that something that will inevitably have to happen anyway be done. It really is such empty grandstanding to bring such a motion to the House. The Human Rights Commission will be consulted. It will have its say. It does not take Ms Bradshaw to table a motion to cause it to have its say, so it really is grandstanding of a particular nature on this occasion. When you add to that the invocation of the very notion of human rights in the context of bringing death to human beings, it is quite, quite out of place.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission be asked to advise whether the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill is compatible with human rights.

Mr Buckley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I share the concerns of the Member who spoke previously about the grandstanding nature of the motion. The Speaker will know that the Health Committee has already requested the views of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, something that my party supported. That therefore begs the question of why the Member felt it necessary to bring the motion to the House today. Can the Speaker confirm that the Human Rights Commission, as a statutory consultee, automatically receives all legislation that is introduced in the Assembly? Furthermore, will he confirm that the passing of this motion has no impact on the Bill's proceeding to Second Stage?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. I have already made it very clear that the Human Rights Commission is advised of every Bill that comes to the Chamber immediately after its tabling. The Human Rights Commission therefore was advised of the Bill on the afternoon that it had its First Stage.

Mr Buckley: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, can you also clarify that it will have no effect on its moving to Second Stage?

Mr Speaker: It will not have any effect on the timing of the Bill's Second Stage. That is correct. I suppose that, in one sense, it means that, although the Human Rights Commission is a formal statutory consultee and will no doubt make its contribution to the debate in due course, under the Standing Order 34 action, once the Human Rights Commission provides a document, it will be provided to the Speaker. I will then make sure that that is delivered to every Member of the Assembly.

I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments, please.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In case you are about to vacate the Chair, I should raise this matter while you are in the Chair. Perhaps you are not vacating the Chair. Mr Speaker, will you convey to the Assembly Commission, which you chair, the very great hurt and anxiety caused to innocent victims by its callous refusal, because of the Sinn Féin veto, to allow the illumination of Parliament Buildings on Thursday night, when we have an international day that marks the sufferings of innocent victims of terrorism? Can you please convey that to the Commission?

Mr Speaker: The Member will know — he has drawn attention to the fact — that I chair the Assembly Commission, but, as he is also aware, I have no vote on the Commission; I take no part in the decision-making. Even though I have not put a single proposal to the Commission over this past period in respect of any particular request, the Assembly Commission has considered these matters intensively for quite a while. I am pleased that my adviser has been key to discussing the issues with the members of the Commission. I do not accept that the Commission acted callously. The Member has put a point on the record, although, as he will know, it is not a point of order. Nevertheless, he has made his point in the Chamber. I am sure that those who may wish to listen to it will do so if they so desire.

Mr O'Dowd: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. There is a growing trend in the Chamber to abuse Standing Orders by raising points of order. That is a classic example of it. Will the Speaker undertake to look at how Members use points of order in the Chamber?

Mr Speaker: I try to give latitude to all Members when they raise matters of importance, but, on occasion, that has been abused and misused. If I have to restrict points of order or cut them off, I will not hesitate to do so. There are one or two Members who want to make sure that they get their voice on the record. That is fine, but you can do it outside the Chamber if it is not a point of order. I try to give people as much latitude as possible, but my patience is tried occasionally.

I ask Members to take their ease for a moment.

Executive Committee Business

Health and Social Care Bill: First Stage

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I beg to introduce the Health and Social Care Bill, which is a Bill to dissolve the Regional Health and Social Care Board; to make provision for and in connection with the exercise by the Department of Health and Health and Social Care trusts of the functions of the Board; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: That constitutes the Bill's First Stage. It shall now be printed.

Members, take your ease, please.

Budget Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As we approach Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill, can you confirm that a budget Bill is no different from any other Bill in that it is subject to amendment? Pursuant to Standing Order 38, a Bill can be amended, provided that the amendment is:

"relevant to the provisions of the Bill and ... not ... in conflict with the principle of the Bill as agreed to at Second Stage."

I therefore express disappointment that the amendments that I tabled to bring into the Budget Bill provision for some grants in respect of the Northern Ireland centenary, which, amazingly, is totally absent from the Bill, are not to be debated. Did they offend Standing Order 38?

Mr Speaker: The Member is straying well beyond what is supposed to be in a point of order. I remind the Member that it is not in order to challenge rulings of the Speaker, who, following appropriate advice from officials, determined that no amendments would be selected in this case.

I call the Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, to move the Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been selected for debate. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group the eight clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by the four schedules and the long title.

Clauses 1 to 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 4 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Members, take your ease for a moment.

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

Committee Business

Protection from Stalking Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

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 10 December 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Protection from Stalking Bill [NIA Bill 14/17-22].

1.15 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate.

Mr Givan: The Committee Stage of the Protection from Stalking Bill began on 9 February 2021. The Bill contains 20 clauses and is divided into three parts. Its primary objective is to improve the operation of the justice system by creating a specific new offence of stalking that recognises the experience of victims and the behaviour associated with stalking. It also creates an offence of threatening and abusive behaviour that can be triggered by a single incident. Both of those offences have stronger and more appropriate penalties that will provide better protection than under the current harassment legislation and reflect the seriousness of the crimes. There is also important provision in the Bill for special measures for all victims of stalking when giving evidence, together with stalking protection orders. Critically, the onus will be on the police, rather than the victim, to apply for the orders, and they will enable the police to proactively intervene, disrupt stalking behaviours before they escalate and protect victims when there is immediate risk to them.

To assist its scrutiny of the Bill, the Committee has issued a call for evidence through media notices in the main newspapers and the Assembly website and has written to a wide range of key stakeholders and organisations seeking views and comments. We expect significant interest. Despite the current COVID-19 restrictions impacting on Assembly business and the continued need to adhere to social distancing, the Committee intends to undertake detailed scrutiny of the Bill and will take oral evidence on the key issues brought to our attention to ensure that the legislation is as robust and effective as possible and that any current legislative gaps are fully addressed. The Committee is particularly keen to hear from victims of stalking behaviour on their experiences and their views of the Bill. Stalking is a fixated, obsessive, unwanted and repeated behaviour that often escalates quickly and can be terrifying for victims. The effect of such crimes is clear, can have a profound and lasting impact on victims and cannot be minimised in any way. It is essential that victims have a voice in shaping the legislation.

On 25 February, the Committee discussed the timetable for the Bill and agreed to seek an extension to the Committee Stage until 10 December 2021. That time frame is necessary to provide the Committee with the time to undertake the scrutiny in relation to the Protection

from Stalking Bill that I have just outlined and to provide maximum flexibility to complete the Committee Stages of the Bills that are already with the Justice Committee or that will be referred to it in the near future. This Bill and the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill are with the Committee at present. In addition, the Second Stage of the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill is scheduled for tomorrow and therefore could be with the Committee by Wednesday. According to the legislative timetable previously provided by the Department of Justice, the justice (miscellaneous provisions) Bill is also due to be introduced this month. That will be a large Bill covering a disparate range of policy areas to which, the Department has indicated, further provisions will be added by way of amendments during its passage through the Assembly. The Committee will therefore have four Bills to manage over coming months. Given the limited time until the end of the Assembly mandate, it will not be possible for the Committee to undertake work on each Bill sequentially. Work on the Bills will also have to be balanced with other work that the Committee is required to complete and issues that arise unexpectedly.

At Second Stage, I highlighted the pressing need for this legislation to provide the necessary tools for the criminal justice agencies to tackle stalking behaviour, take into account patterns of such behaviour over time and bring perpetrators to justice. I assure the House that the Committee will endeavour to finish the Committee Stage of the Protection from Stalking Bill earlier, if that is possible. However, the extension until 10 December provides us with the required maximum flexibility to manage the heavy legislative programme that we have to complete and to prioritise work on particular Bills at certain times, if that is necessary. I commend the motion to the House.

Ms Dillon: I concur with the remarks made by the Committee Chair. We support the extension. It is prudent of the Committee to ask for the extension. There is no doubt that we will need it. This is an important Bill, with quite a number of clauses in it. If the domestic abuse Bill is anything to go by, the Committee will have some, hopefully, good and positive suggestions in relation to the Bill.

I would like to point out that we in the Committee will endeavour to complete the Committee Stage with as much urgency as we can. We want to see this important legislation in place. I am sure that the Chair, other Committee members and MLAs across the House are in the same position as me and have been lobbied in their constituency office because people are suffering as a result of stalking behaviour but we do not have the correct legislation to protect them. It is important that we get the Bill through its Committee Stage and through the House as quickly as possible. However, it has to be right. It is extremely important that we get the legislation that we put in place right. We must ensure that we have optimum opportunity for scrutiny and that stakeholders have the optimum opportunity to have their say and to come to the Committee in order to make sure that what we put in place is right for those who are at the centre of this: the victims. It is important not only that the legislation is right but that it is passed as speedily as is humanly possible.

Ms S Bradley: I also concur with and support the Chair and Deputy Chair's words on the matter. The SDLP supports the extension. Whilst we rightly have a stringent

process for building up legislation, Members will know that the consultation with stakeholders begins almost prior to any suggestion of a Bill being introduced, and I know that that work is ongoing with different stakeholders and different Committee members. I agree that we need to bring the Bill to the table and get it to the stage where it is an Act as quickly as possible, but we must do that responsibly and in a way that, we know, will have absolute effect for those who are really struggling with the terrible act that is stalking, which is difficult to live with. The more I learn about it, the more disturbing it is to see how people try to function in their daily life with a stalker in their midst, with some of them maybe not even aware of it for some time.

I concur with the words spoken in the House today, and I put it on the record that I will work with members to make swift work of the legislation.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No other Members have indicated that they wish to speak.

Mr Givan: I concur with the comments from Sinéad and Linda. The Committee will expedite its role as quickly and efficiently as possible.

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 10 December 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Protection from Stalking Bill [NIA Bill 14/17-22].

Standing Order 112

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures): I beg to move

Leave out Standing Order 112(8) and insert:

“(8) Except where paragraph 8A applies, a notice under paragraph (3) must be given to the Speaker’s Office not later than 9:30 am on the sitting day (or as the case may be the first sitting day) on which M intends P to vote on M’s behalf.

(8A) This paragraph applies where M becomes aware, in the course of a sitting day, that he or she is required to self-isolate in order to comply with public health regulations or guidance. Where this paragraph applies a notice under paragraph (3) may be given to the Speaker after 9:30am but such notice:

- a. must be given as soon as possible and in any event a reasonable time before any vote on the item or items of business to which the notice applies; and*
- b. must state when M became aware that he or she was required to self-isolate in order to comply with public health regulations or guidance.”*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have five minutes to propose and five minutes to wind up. All other Members will have five minutes.

Ms Ní Chuilín: On behalf of the Committee on Procedures, I am pleased to move the motion, which proposes to amend Standing Order 112. Standing Order 112 is part of the current temporary measures in place to facilitate Assembly business during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. It relates to the deadline for giving notice that a Member wishes to vote by proxy on a particular sitting day.

Currently, Standing Order 112(8) states:

“Notice under paragraph (3) must be given to the Speaker’s Office not later than 9:30am on the sitting day (or as the case may be the first sitting day) on which M intends P to vote on M’s behalf.”

When the Committee agreed a range of new and temporary Standing Orders to facilitate the continuation of Assembly business in March 2020, one of the most important considerations in agreeing the temporary provisions on voting was the need to maintain social distancing in the Chamber and Lobbies. Standing Order 112, which introduces proxy voting arrangements, was designed with that consideration in mind, to stop a large number of Members passing through the confined space of one of the Lobbies during a Division.

At the end of last year, the Committee discussed the continuing pressures on plenary business, including the need and subsequent legal requirement to self-isolate in certain circumstances. During the discussions in Committee, concerns were raised that, under the current arrangements, a Member who is in attendance in Parliament Buildings who had chosen not to nominate a proxy to vote on their behalf and who then received a notification to self-isolate after 9.30 am would be compelled to leave the Building and be unable to vote on that day. Subsequently, the Committee agreed that no Member or party should be disadvantaged in that way. The

Committee agreed that this set of circumstances, in which the current COVID-19-related health regulations compel a Member to self-isolate and to leave Parliament Buildings on a sitting day after the deadline, had not been envisaged or, indeed, was not a consideration when Standing Order 112(8) was drafted, agreed by the Committee and then introduced by the Assembly. With that in mind, the Committee agreed at its meeting on 16 December 2020 to consider an amendment to Standing Order 112(8), and it sought legal advice on the matter. At its meeting on 17 February, the Committee received legal advice on the draft amendment, and it was content that the amendment addressed the Committee’s concerns. Subsequently, it agreed a draft motion to amend Standing Orders.

The amendment provides that the deadline of 9.30 am to nominate a proxy no longer applies to a Member who becomes aware in the course of a sitting day that he or she is required to self-isolate in order to comply with public health regulations or guidance. In those circumstances, a Member may give notice to nominate a proxy after 9.30 am. However, it is important to emphasise that such notice must still be given as soon as possible and, in any event, in reasonable time before any vote on the item or items of business for which the notice applies. It will also be necessary in those circumstances for Members to inform the Speaker when they become aware that they were required to self-isolate. Members should therefore be in no doubt that, if they have not given notice in reasonable time before a vote, it will not be possible for there to be a proxy vote on their behalf on the matter. The position is unavoidable as a period of time is required to carry out the necessary administration to enable a proxy vote.

For the purposes of clarity, the deadline that is being amended today applies to a Member who is nominating a proxy. Standing Orders do not set out a deadline for Members who hold proxy votes from nominating another Member to carry out those functions. However, if it is ever necessary to nominate another Member to carry out those functions, that will also need to happen in reasonable time before any vote. Should the Assembly agree to amend Standing Order 112(8), it is clear that renewed guidance may need to be issued with regard to the change. I have written to the Speaker to that effect in order to offer any further information on the Committee’s deliberations on the matter, if it is required.

Finally, as I have said previously in the House, the Committee will carry out its role. It will continue to keep Standing Orders under review and make amendments when or if required. I commend the motion to the House.

Ms S Bradley: I put on record the SDLP’s support for the motion in the hope that no Member has to use it and that we are facing brighter and more positive times. However, it is prudent to make the provision.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: To make a winding-up speech on that exhaustive debate, I call Mr Tom Buchanan.

Mr T Buchanan: As was outlined, the amendment has come to the House today after concerns were raised by the Committee with regard to Standing Order 112. I will not go over the technical aspects of the proposal as that has been covered in the Chair’s introduction. However, I will summarise. The proposed amendment will allow a Member to nominate a proxy to vote on their behalf after

the deadline of 9.30 am in the specific circumstances of self-isolation. That applies after 9.30 am, when they have been compelled to leave the Building. Where that happens, the Member will give notice as soon as possible and, in any event, a reasonable time before the vote on the item of business to which the notice applies. The Member must also state when they became aware that they were required to self-isolate.

1.30 pm

The temporary provisions exist to ensure that Assembly and Committee business can continue during the pandemic. They were agreed by the Assembly in March 2020, and that work was, necessarily, undertaken at pace. At that time, the Committee acknowledged that further amendments could be required to enhance the provisions as we take the pathway out of the pandemic. The proposal before the House is an example of the Committee's reviewing the temporary provisions, reacting to ongoing circumstances and offering proposals where necessary.

As the Chairperson explained, the Committee was concerned about cases arising in which Members who intended to be in the Building on a particular sitting day received notification to self-isolate after 9.30 am on that day. In such cases, the Member would be compelled to leave the Building but would not be able to nominate a proxy to vote on their behalf on that day. Today's amendment seeks to address that situation.

The other temporary provisions remain as introduced, in that there is no specific deadline in Standing Orders if a Member holding proxy votes needs to pass authority to another Member. Sinéad Bradley, the only other Committee member to speak in the debate, gave the full support of her party to the measure. She looked forward to brighter days as we move out of the pandemic, which is a sentiment that we all reiterate. We are all looking for brighter days as we come out of the pandemic.

I remind Members that today's proposed amendment is to the temporary provisions in Standing Orders. However, as mentioned before in the House, the Committee continues to consider the instances in which proxy votes could be retained on a more permanent basis and how that might be reflected in Standing Orders. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: 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):

Leave out Standing Order 112(8) and insert:

“(8) Except where paragraph 8A applies, a notice under paragraph (3) must be given to the Speaker's Office not later than 9:30 am on the sitting day (or as the case may be the first sitting day) on which M intends P to vote on M's behalf.

(8A) This paragraph applies where M becomes aware, in the course of a sitting day, that he or she is required to self-isolate in order to comply with public health regulations or guidance. Where this paragraph applies a notice under paragraph (3) may be given to the Speaker after 9:30am but such notice:

a. must be given as soon as possible and in any event a reasonable time before any vote on the item or items of business to which the notice applies; and

b. must state when M became aware that he or she was required to self-isolate in order to comply with public health regulations or guidance.”

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members should take their ease for a few seconds to allow a change at the Table.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair)

'Skills Strategy and Economic Output Micro Inquiry': Committee for the Economy Special Report

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the Committee for the Economy's special report providing evidence from stakeholders to inform the forthcoming skills strategy; supports the development of a cross-departmental and inclusive approach to skills development; recognises the need for collaboration between the public sector, employers, industry and all levels of education to ensure that our people have the right skills and access to lifelong learning; and calls on the Minister for the Economy and her Executive colleagues to use this evidence in planning for the new skills strategy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to an hour and a half 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. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Dr Archibald: I am glad to speak as Chair of the Committee for the Economy and to move the motion.

The Committee undertook this mini-inquiry to seek views from a range of stakeholders on what the framework for the new skills strategy should cover, strategically and practically, and produced this special report highlighting a range of themes.

We met a range of 50 stakeholders including industry bodies, employers, recruitment specialists, universities and colleges, student reps, the third sector representing people with disabilities, older people and women, social enterprise, trade unions, qualification awarding bodies and Departments. That afforded us an excellent insight into what the framework for a new skills strategy should be to help to rebuild our economy on a local and global platform. I put on record my thanks to those who participated for their time and effort and to the Committee staff for their work in organising it and compiling the report.

The Department's new skills strategy will be a key driver for economic growth, particularly as we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, and has the potential to make a vital contribution to the economic recovery and to enable us to build resilience into the economy. The strategy's design must support individuals, communities and industries to adapt to the demands of the global economy as well as to meet the changing needs of the local economy.

Recent research highlighted that over one third of adults here said that they had not taken part in learning since leaving full-time education, which is much higher than in England, Scotland or Wales. Stakeholders spoke passionately to us about building a culture of lifelong learning, where there are lifelong learning opportunities for all. That may or may not involve formal qualifications but would certainly benefit workers in terms of confidence, resilience, setting personal goals and making a contribution not only to their employers but to their families and communities.

There is no doubt that that will require further investment and a range of delivery channels, including within the community, at universities and further education colleges, and to be driven by employers who can co-design that learning to improve profitability and employee well-being. We were urged to ensure that there is a focus on delivering a skills-for-all approach. To do that, the strategy must be inclusive and provide support mechanisms to help people of all abilities to have access to rewarding work, where they continually build their resilience and confidence, and to deliver great benefits for employers.

We should push forward a targeted plan to help families that face intergenerational low educational attainment and worklessness to build confidence. We need to give them the financial and emotional support required to get into the kind of work that is rewarding but also provides opportunities for training and advancement in their chosen field.

Our workforce need to be offered flexibility in how, with employers, they develop responsive and productive businesses. For a long time, people with disabilities, older people, women, carers and other disadvantaged groups have struggled to participate to their full potential in the labour market. Therefore, conditions need to be flexible, and we need sectoral agreement between government, employers and unions for the likes of childcare and the payment of benefits while learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted skills areas where there are gaps, particularly in digital skills and STEM qualifications. We need to turn our attention to providing an incentive to bridge the gaps by making sure that people know about the opportunities. That is where enhanced career services fit in, giving advice to people of all ages about what they could become involved in.

There are many citizens with excellent transferable skills who could easily move into new sectors and have lots to offer employers. We heard particularly about older people who, out of necessity, continue to work, and those who were made redundant in certain sectors heavily affected by the pandemic. Employers tell us that they are looking for particular soft skills, such as communication, creativity and problem-solving. They may be able to train people who have those skills to become successful employees, making valuable contributions in a global market.

We want to see those people having the opportunity to reskill and upskill to achieve their potential. A vital ingredient will be ensuring government investment in helping, particularly SMEs, to establish learning and development programmes for staff to develop and upskill. We need greater investment in training to develop junior members of staff into middle managers and future leaders, and that will require access to courses in management, leadership and enterprise skills.

Many different issues are connected to closing the identified skills deficit and to ensuring that our people and communities are equipped with the skills and capabilities that will bring them satisfying, well-paid and worthwhile work, with support and pathways for continued professional and other development throughout their working life.

The Committee has heard calls from many stakeholders for the delivery of a skills strategy to address skills gaps, promote entrepreneurship, increase productivity

and reduce unemployment. Industry has alerted us to a shortage of skills in STEM subjects, so we need to address that and promote them to potential employees, particularly women, who remain under-represented in many STEM subjects and careers. To establish what government can do better, stakeholders have asked us to ensure that the skills strategy, the upcoming 14-19 review and the 20-24 strategy are well connected and do not operate in silos. They must be part of a broader goal to encourage higher productivity for the economy, build confidence and resilience in communities and grasp the opportunity now to set a strategy that caters for people to learn from 17 to 70 years of age.

Our young people in particular need to be given a better understanding of the context of the working world with which they will engage. That could include providing a greater degree of knowledge about the sustainability of workplaces, careers and the wider community. When we look at the modern role of universities, it is important for them to provide civic leadership and to work with the wider public sector to ensure that higher learning is engaged with local communities and workplaces. Universities, schools and colleges can and should be hubs for co-design and co-creation of public policy alongside government at all levels, local communities and groups, as well as individuals.

There is a pressing need to look for ways in which to fund education that are sustainable and inclusive, and where attendance is determined by ability and not just the ability to pay. The universities here are well placed to take a bigger role in the development of our communities and in the creation of societal wealth, in addition to generating job opportunities.

When we look at how government delivery currently works between the public and private sectors, we can see that the pace needs to be quicker and more agile in order to limit the disconnect between the two. The Committee has recognised that the Minister for the Economy's recently published economic recovery action plan focuses on skills as one of its four key pillars. In keeping with that, our micro inquiry has also highlighted the fact that investment in skills will help businesses rebuild and grow their markets, protect and strengthen their supply chains and maximise new opportunities for job creation. It will also help people to avail themselves of new and better employment opportunities and accelerate the growth of sectors that are of strategic significance.

We must deliver on the policies that are needed to help stabilise the economy right now and to make it grow in future in a way that improves its responsiveness to the needs of our communities and businesses. The skills strategy is an important bedrock for achieving that outcome, and it must fit the needs of citizens now and in future.

I will now make some brief remarks as Sinn Féin's economy spokesperson. The new skills strategy has to find a way in which to bring together priorities, objectives and strands of delivery in a coherent way, remembering that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for delivering skills. For me, one of the key things from the inquiry report is the need for inclusivity and the skills-for-all approach. We need to remove barriers to learning and training and ensure that those who are far from education and work have pathways to achieving. It is really important that

young people who face additional challenges have the type of support that they need. That goes beyond training and teaching, to mentoring and well-being support.

Where there are models of best practice, those should be mainstreamed and adapted. Community education has a really important role to play and needs to be supported appropriately. Removing barriers also means ensuring that the additional challenges that are faced by women are recognised and addressed. As is highlighted in the report, it is very important that, to support sustainable economic development, people have the opportunity to access flexible, agile, motivating, satisfying and properly rewarded work. Strengthening workers' rights is the other pillar for helping to achieve that, and delivering on the commitments in New Decade, New Approach would be a good start in that regard.

It is widely recognised that, coming out of the pandemic, ensuring skills development opportunities will be very important in supporting those who have lost jobs to find new work opportunities, to help those who are in roles that have irreversibly changed because of the new ways of working adopted and to support new business development and work opportunities. There needs to be a particular focus on opportunities for young people, who are in the most badly affected demographic.

Sinn Féin wants every young person to have the opportunity to be in work, training or education.

1.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Dr Archibald: Skills underpin so much. The new skills strategy will be key in helping to drive the economic recovery. I look forward to its publication. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Stalford: I want to associate myself with almost everything that the Committee Chairperson said. The report is a good piece of work. It highlights some of the serious issues that we will have to tackle. I welcome the fact that the motion recognises that the solutions to those problems cannot come from one Department alone but that what is required to get to grips with the economic situation that confronts us is a cross-governmental approach, embracing not only the Department for the Economy but Finance, Education and almost every facet of government and the Administration here.

At the start of the COVID crisis, we were told that we were facing the very real possibility of 15,000 deaths in Northern Ireland. Mercifully, that figure has not been realised. However, what we are facing is the very real possibility of up to 100,000 job losses as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Committee, rightly, highlighted the response to COVID-19 and the economic recovery that, we hope, will follow as an area of work in the report. There is no getting around the fact that serious economic damage has been sustained by the Northern Ireland economy because of the strictures that we have all had to live under in order to beat COVID. It will require flexibility, imagination and innovation as we come out the other side of that in order to rebuild the economy.

I will share with the House just one figure that, I think, should give us a glimmer of hope. Even during the

crisis, more than 1,000 new jobs have been created in tech. Northern Ireland is a leader in that area. We need to build and expand on that and approach new areas. One important issue is the need to improve the careers advice given to young people in schools, as the school that someone goes to almost determines the careers advice that they are given. That is wrong. For kids at grammar schools, there is an automatic assumption that they will pursue some sort of academic route. Actually, a culture has now been created where almost everyone is encouraged to pursue an academic route, the consequence of which is that we now have a massive deficit in trades and vocational occupations. That skills gap will need to be filled as we develop the economy.

The Chairperson referred to the economic recovery action plan, and it is my understanding that the Department for the Economy has bid for £290 million to finance the plan. With regard to my earlier comment about the need for a cross-governmental approach, it is my hope that the Department of Finance will approve that, although I have to put on record my disappointment — I am sure that the Minister will speak to this — that, over the course of the past 12 months, the Minister has been armed with less than one third of what she asked for from the centre. If we are serious about investing in and trying to rebuild the economy, it is important that the necessary resources be provided to the Department.

The Committee was right to labour the third theme in the report: the response to COVID-19. I will read a key point from the report:

“Investment in education and upskilling is essential, and this must be as accessible to all as possible.”

I absolutely agree with that observation. The days of leaving school at 18, maybe going to university, starting a job and being in that job for ever are over for almost every occupation, short of the Civil Service. Therefore, it is important that we create an environment where our people are constantly arming themselves with new skills, are exposed to new areas of training to allow them to have full and productive working lives —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Stalford: — and indeed, as was said, to have satisfactory jobs and contribute to the economy.

I am happy to support the motion. I commend the Clerk of the Committee for his work in pulling this report together.

Mr Stewart: Like the Member who spoke previously, I agree, for the most part, with the Chair of the Committee. I pay tribute to Peter Hall and the entire team in the Committee for the Economy for pulling this report together. The report is very detailed and informative and will play a very important role in the forthcoming skills strategy. Key to the report are not only the questions it asked but the people of whom it asked them. The answers that came back from over 80 stakeholders, listed in appendix A, show the level of engagement that took place, and that was key to making it the report that it has become.

I agree with the previous Member who spoke on the careers aspect and changing the age-old opinions and assumptions about where people go. There has often been an assumption that your school and the courses that you

chose dictated the path that you would take, whether that was university or vocational studies. We need to change those mindsets to try to adapt to the modern world that we are living in.

We eagerly await the consultation and the final publication of the skills strategy. Given the many years of underinvestment in skills and the impact of COVID-19, the strategy will never be more important, and it is needed as quickly as possible. I hope that the work that has been put into this micro inquiry will ease the passage and production of the consultation and final skills strategy and help it get out as quickly as possible.

The report says:

“The Strategy’s design must support individuals, communities and industries to adapt to the demands of the global economy, as well as meet the changing needs of the local economy.”

The key to that is to ensure that the strategy is a live document that adapts over time, with collaboration and cooperation from all Departments as well as local government. The skills strategy must be given time and be supported in successive mandates. Too often in the past, we have seen bright ideas come along in key strategies and publications that, two years later, are on a shelf gathering dust. Everything that we do, whether economic recovery, skills or the reform of our health service, will take years or, potentially, decades. We need to formulate policy and stick to it. Yes, we can adapt policy while working it through, but sticking to the policy is key. I will be really annoyed and upset, and it will be regrettable if, in the next mandate, we are looking at a new skills strategy because the previous one did not work. The strategy needs to be live and needs to be able to be adapted, and there are enough recommendations to do that. I know that the Minister wants to see that as well.

The report also, rightly, mentions the need for inclusive learning for people with disabilities and mental health problems. I welcome the report’s call for an inclusive skills-for-all strategy. We will all acknowledge that our social enterprise sector has done amazing work to give disadvantaged people employment and training opportunities. It is essential that, within the skills strategy, we engage with the sector and avail ourselves of its skills and knowledge to develop a skills-for-all strategy.

As has been said, the economic impact of COVID-19 has not yet been fully realised. Regrettably, there will be job losses and an even greater need for retraining and new skills opportunities. I want to see a bespoke version of the UK Government’s Lifetime Skills Guarantee, which is a scheme designed to help adults gain in-demand skills and open up job opportunities. We could adapt that scheme to make it Northern Ireland-specific.

Another key scheme worth mentioning is the Department for Communities Job Start scheme. I have mentioned the Job Start scheme before and how important it is to keep that scheme going. The Job Start scheme was designed to provide internship places for people coming out of education with businesses that did not have the means to provide paid internship places. Regrettably, despite many months of delays to make it Northern Ireland-specific, the scheme has been put on ice, even though it only cost £16 million. I have been contacted by many young

people who want to avail themselves of the skills and on-the-job learning that the Job Start scheme would have provided. Worse still, they are talking about going to GB or further afield to avail themselves of schemes that will be supported. We often talk about the brain drain and the impact of losing the young people whom we most need to keep. That scheme was designed purely to keep them here, and it is very important to get it back off the ground and to make that public plea. Minister, you could speak to the Minister for Communities to stress how important the cross-community nature of that scheme is.

Finally, in my last 15 seconds, I will talk about the need for our SMEs to be supported in the strategy. Too often, support measures go to big business in particular and miss out the 90% of our economy that should be focused on.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, Question Time is due to commence at 2.00 pm. Therefore, I suggest that the House takes it ease until then. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak is Stewart Dickson.

The debate stood suspended.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Minority Ethnic Development Fund: Applications

1. **Ms Flynn** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the level of applications for support from the minority ethnic development fund. (AQO 1686/17-22)

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): The minority ethnic development fund (MEDF) is a key element of our policy for racial equality and good race relations. It remains the flagship funding stream to support voluntary and community organisations to address the needs of people from minority ethnic backgrounds. During its existence, it has supported hundreds of groups and project.

In line with recommendations from a recent review of the fund, the 2021-22 application process opened earlier than normal on 18 December 2020 and closed on 25 January. The Department received 58 applications, of which 32 were successful, and all applicants were informed of the outcome on 2 March 2021.

Ms Flynn: I thank the First Minister for her answer. As we heard, the minority ethnic development fund is supporting crucial work. Does the First Minister agree that that work is undermined when political representatives, such as her party colleague Gregory Campbell, make unrepentant and unapologetic racist remarks?

Mrs Foster: As I understand it, Gregory had a very good meeting with the North West Migrants Forum. Of course, that conversation will continue. That is absolutely positive and it was the right thing to happen.

Mr McGrath: I welcome the new timescales that the First Minister announced. In preparation for next year, could they be brought forward a little more? Groups are concerned that, if they find out about their funding only on 2 March and people's contracts are up by 1 April, it gives them only a couple of weeks to prepare for what needs to happen in the future. Is there any way of bringing that cycle of applications forward, even by a month or two, to give groups the opportunity to prepare?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Chairman of the Committee for his question. One of the issues that has been raised with us is the need for longer-term funding, which is probably what the Member is referring to as well. It is our desire to enter into multi-year budgets for those groups rather than their having to apply every year. We know about the pressure that spending so much time getting ready for applications and, because it is a competitive fund, having the uncertainty of knowing whether or not they will be funded, puts on organisations. We are working with annual budgets, and I hope that we can move to multi-year budgets in the new mandate next year. Officials are working out the details of how we can achieve that, but

we certainly intend to move to those budgets in the next mandate.

Ms Armstrong: From the figures that the First Minister gave, it appears that 45% of those who applied were not successful. Are you considering taking forward some sort of capacity-building programme for the sector, given that so many have been turned down for funding at this stage? What other support will be provided for the BAME community?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. Unfortunately, like most funding streams, the MEDF is very much oversubscribed. She is right to point that out. To ensure that we fund the projects that best support what is going on in the community, there is an application process, and proposals are addressed by a selection panel convened by the Executive Office. The panel comprises five members, including Executive Office officials who have knowledge of the minority ethnic sector and the issues affecting minority ethnic people and have experience in administering grants. As I said, it is a competitive process. Anyone who has not been successful in the process should look for feedback. We made feedback available because some people were disappointed when they were not successful, and we hope that that will help with their applications at another time.

The Member will be well aware of a number of ongoing programmes in TEO and across Government in relation to hate crime: the Peace IV building positive relations programme; our own central good relations fund; and, of course, our councils are also providing funding. We have been doing a lot of work through our shared future fund. As the Member may be aware, that fund is not in the draft Budget, but we are fighting very hard to get it into the final Budget because we believe that there is a lot of work to be done. As I said, groups that were not successful on this occasion should certainly seek feedback. That may give them the knowledge to apply in a more positive way in the next round.

Mr Speaker: I advise Members that questions 4 and 9 have been withdrawn

Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland: Dedicated Mechanism

2. **Mr Blair** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the initial work of the Equality Commission and Human Rights Commission regarding the dedicated mechanism. (AQO 1687/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission are working jointly to discharge their functions as the dedicated mechanism. As TEO sponsors the Equality Commission, I can provide some general information about the steps that it has taken to recruit staff to its dedicated mechanism unit. A director and a number of permanent staff have been appointed, and work is under way to fill the remaining vacancies. Both commissions have engaged with a range of stakeholders to raise awareness of the role and remit of the dedicated mechanism and article 2 commitments. This has included engagement with the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), TEO, the Independent Monitoring Authority and the Executive Office Assembly Committee.

Mr Blair: I thank the First Minister for her answer. Further to that, will the First Minister clarify whether the joint commission has or will be given the access required to departmental information to determine the current and possible future challenges and issues that may arise across Departments because of EU exit?

Mrs Foster: As I said, we sponsor the Equality Commission. The NIO looks after the Human Rights Commission, so it is in charge of the governance in and around that. The protocol, including the dedicated mechanism, is the commitment of the UK Government. Consequently, they are responsible for looking after the funding of the commission. I imagine that there will be no difficulties with either commission, given that they are independent organisations engaging right across government, getting any information needed to deal with the matters that the Member raised.

Mr Stalford: Article 2 of the protocol reflects the commitment made to uphold the Belfast Agreement. Given that the agreement's principle of consent is being turned on its head, is the First Minister aware of any indication that the Human Rights Commission or the Equality Commission is considering the impact upon the human rights of members of the pro-Union community in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: The Member is correct that article 2 of the protocol says:

"The United Kingdom shall continue to facilitate the related work of the institutions and bodies set up pursuant to the 1998 Agreement, including the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland".

It will be very interesting to see whether either commission has been looking at the diminution of rights under the implementation of the protocol and, in particular, the change in the principle of consent. In December, under a statutory instrument, that change was effected by the Secretary of State in the House of Commons: he changed the consent from cross-community to a simple majority. I will await with interest to find out whether either organisation has any comment on those matters.

Ms Sheerin: Will the First Minister provide an update on the funding for the dedicated mechanism and outline the financial position for 2020-21?

Mrs Foster: The Equality Commission has agreed funding with the UK Government to discharge the new role of the dedicated mechanism. The initial funding agreement is for three years, running until 2022-23. The Northern Ireland Office has advised that, in common with all UK Government and Northern Ireland Departments and arm's-length bodies, future funding for the dedicated mechanism beyond 2023 will be subject to the normal spending review processes. Funding has been agreed between the Equality Commission and the Northern Ireland Office totalling £1,898,000 for three years until March 2023.

Mr Stewart: Does the First Minister agree that equality of opportunity for goods and services has been undermined as a direct outworking of the Northern Ireland protocol?

Mrs Foster: I absolutely agree with that. We are in a situation where consumer choice is being threatened in the operation of the protocol. We were told at a meeting

of the business engagement forum on Friday that, were it not for the actions taken by our Government, supply lines would have been severely curtailed, because people would have been taking action to get ready for the end of the grace period. There are severe difficulties in relation to the operation of the protocol and, as the Member says, to equality of opportunity.

Mr Allister: Given that, under the protocol, huge swathes of the law, as it affects our economy, will now be made by a foreign power, with obvious detriment to local political and equality rights, would the First Minister expect those who go by the name of the Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission to show an interest in and to report on such matters?

Mrs Foster: As I indicated to my friend the Member for South Belfast, I would have thought that both commissions would be interested in that, given that article 2 is there, supposedly, to protect the Belfast Agreement. The operation of the protocol and the way in which the architecture has been set up has changed the Belfast Agreement. Therefore, there should be a real and meaningful look at the protocol and its operation by the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission.

Urban Villages: Update

3. **Ms Mullan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Urban Villages capital programme. (AQO 1688/17-22)

Mrs Foster: With your permission, Mr Speaker, junior Minister Middleton will answer this question.

Mr Middleton (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): I thank the Member for her question. Completed capital projects totalling an investment of £915,000 in the Bogside, Fountain and Bishop Street Urban Village include Destined Learning Disability Centre, Fountain Play Park, and Abercorn Road Revitalisation environmental improvement scheme. The refurbishment of Cathedral Youth Club is nearing completion. The planning application has been approved for the New Gate Arts and Culture Centre, and the project will involve the redevelopment of the existing centre with the addition of a new performance space. Design work has commenced for a new build extension to the Gasyard Heritage and Exhibition Centre, and the business case for the Meenan Square development project is with the Department of Finance. Work is ongoing to acquire the site subject to business case approval.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for his answer. I welcome the progress, in particular, at Meenan Square, as will the residents of Dove Gardens and Abbots Walk who have had to endure that eyesight for far too many years. It is important that we continue to invest in our communities and neighbourhoods alongside the bigger strategic projects in city deal. Minister, I notice that the public realm project is in the early development stage. That will put the finishing touches to the projects. Can you give a timescale for when that project is likely to go ahead?

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for her question and her comments. I completely agree that this is very much of good benefit to the area. I welcome the support of the elected representatives on the ground who are working with Urban Villages.

I do not have a timescale to hand for the public realm work. I know that the Member has been proactive in lobbying for that work, and it is something that we very much want to see, alongside the investment in the derelict buildings and the wider area. I am happy to write to the Member with a timescale for the public realm work.

Mr K Buchanan: Can the Minister outline the background to the Urban Villages programme?

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for that question. The Urban Villages initiative is a headline action of the Executive's Together: Building a United Community strategy.

It is a good relations programme led by the Executive Office and spans four areas in Belfast and one in Londonderry. Each of the areas has a history of deprivation and social tension. The combined population of the areas is in excess of 100,000 people. A capital programme estimated at £47 million has been approved, subject to funding, up until March 2023. That is to support development of up to 76 capital projects across the five Urban Village areas.

2.15 pm

The investment by the Urban Villages initiative builds and transforms community facilities and spaces into catalysts and beacons for shared space and good relations. They are designed to equip and empower communities to increase, enhance and sustain the extent and nature of connections and relationships between people in each space. They are physical anchors providing a long-term legacy and enabling a people- and place-based infrastructure to realise the ambition of the Urban Villages initiative as a long-term driver of good relations.

The categorisation of the capital projects reflects the amount of financial investment in each but also, crucially, the planned impact on the lives of people living in the Urban Village areas and the contribution to promoting good relations. Three broad project categories have been developed to support the capital planning model: transformational projects, which, generally, are £2 million or above and will have a major impact on the Urban Village areas; landmark projects, which are estimated at between £500,000 and £2 million; and local projects, which will have a single-use focus or mainly localised impact.

I thank the Member for the question. It is a good-news project for all those areas, and we look forward to seeing the roll-out over the coming months.

Mr Durkan: I very much welcome the junior Minister's update on all the schemes. I, like Ms Mullan, have a particular interest in the Meenan Square scheme, and I commend the officials who have been working diligently on it and worked hard to seal the deal with landowners, albeit for a price lower than that originally agreed on. This will be much more than a simple physical regeneration scheme. Will the Minister outline any of the detail of what the scheme will consist of and how it will be sustained going forward?

Mr Middleton: I share the Member's comments about officials. They have done a tremendous job in getting the project to this stage. I reiterate that the support of political members is important for all the projects in those areas.

The Urban Villages initiative transformation project in Londonderry is the Meenan Square project. It will have a truly transformational impact on the space and for the people of the area. The Urban Villages initiative has developed a business case for that major mixed-use regeneration project, which aims to reinvent the site as a shared space for fostering positive community identities and building good relations, while harnessing the wider economic and social benefits, thus reclaiming and repurposing what was a dilapidated site and, for far too long, a catalyst for antisocial behaviour.

The business case has been submitted to the Department of Finance for consideration. Work is ongoing to secure the purchase of the site, subject to business case approval. Owing to the site's history of antisocial behaviour, it is important that fencing be installed immediately to mitigate the risk. In preparation for that, Apex submitted a planning application on 7 October 2020, which will allow for fencing to be erected to secure the site immediately on purchase. I hope and expect that the Urban Villages officials will keep all political representatives up to date in the coming weeks, but I agree with the Member that the project is very much a priority for the Urban Villages initiative.

Victims' Payment Scheme: Update

5. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the funding for the Troubles-related-incident victims' payment scheme. (AQO 1690/17-22)

6. **Mr Stalford** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the current discussions with Her Majesty's Government on the funding for the Troubles-related-incident victims' payment scheme. (AQO 1691/17-22)

10. **Mr Butler** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme. (AQO 1695/17-22)

13. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what further discussion they have had with the British Government to secure funding for the Troubles-related-incident victims' payment scheme. (AQO 1698/17-22)

Mrs Foster: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 5, 6, 10 and 13 together.

Let me first say that the deputy First minister and I remain entirely committed to delivering the scheme, which aims to go some way to acknowledging the suffering and trauma of victims and survivors who are living with significant disabilities. The recent court ruling has made it clear that there is a legal duty for victims' payments to be made, and it is important that we emphasise that to victims and survivors and the organisations that represent them. However, the important issue of the funding pressure on the block grant arising from the scheme remains to be resolved. It remains our view that the scheme should be funded by the Westminster Government as an addition to the block grant. The deputy First Minister and I, along with the Justice Minister and the Finance Minister, met the Secretary of State on 23 February to discuss funding to the block. Discussions focused on a flexible approach to finding an accommodation on funding issues. We committed to work together to achieve a positive resolution

as quickly as possible for victims, in line with the recent Court of Appeal judgement. It was agreed that further work would be taken forward by officials and that we would meet again in the near future.

The Executive have committed significant funding this year to establish the administrative arrangements for the scheme. Progress to date includes the ongoing development of an online system to receive applications; the appointment of an interim victims' payments board; the appointment by the Department of Justice of an assessment service provider; and accommodation secured for staff who will deliver the scheme. The Lord Chief Justice also recently announced Mr Justice McAlinden as president of the victims' payments board. The draft Budget for 2021-22 provides £6.7 million for administrative costs. In particular, that will allow victims' organisations to recruit additional staff to support applicants to the scheme.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the First Minister for her response. I am sure that she will agree that it is appalling that victims have had to go for legal redress. What is the next step? Will we force victims back into court to get a political fix? I do not know whether the First Minister can give us an insight into how the figure of £800 million has been arrived at as a potential cost. Many people are surprised at that amount.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. I absolutely agree with her that it is appalling that this ended up in court. However, I put it on the record that the victims and survivors who will be recipients of the payment should not be distressed or concerned, because the payment is an entitlement, regardless of whether it comes from Westminster or from our block grant, and it will be paid when it is due. I also reflect on the words of Alan McBride recently, when he said that people should not be made to feel guilty about applying for the payment: absolutely not — far from it. These people are entitled to the money, and discussions on the funding source will not prevent us paying out money that is due to victims and survivors.

Work is ongoing on the figures that have been spoken about. Government actuaries from Westminster have been working with our officials on the range of expenditure that can be predicted. However, it is demand-led, so it is very difficult to assess, particularly in relation to psychological permanent disablement, how many people will come forward. Therein lies a difficulty. We will have to find a way through that and find certainty. I reiterate: recipients of the payments who are due the payment should not be distressed or concerned. They will be paid.

Mr Stalford: Does my Rt Hon friend agree that those who devised the scheme should be reasonably expected to finance it and the continued foot-dragging of the Secretary of State on the issue does a gross disservice to many victims?

Mrs Foster: It is important that we recognise that the scheme was set up in Westminster and that normal policy is that the place that designs a scheme is responsible for funding it. We recognise that the Assembly was not sitting at the time and that is why the Government took action. However, the way forward is collaboration between us and the Northern Ireland Office to find a way through all of this. That is important, so that we end the uncertainty that has been going on for far too long. We all acknowledge that. We

need to work with victims' groups and directly with victims, so that they can get due recompense for their suffering.

Mr Butler: The costs of the Troubles-related permanent disablement payment have rocketed, as has been said. Will the Minister outline the assumptions that her office made to lead the Government Actuary's Department (GAD) to put an upper figure of £1.2 billion on the lifetime costs of the scheme?

Mrs Foster: As I have indicated, initially, work was carried out by our officials and the Government Actuary's Department in Whitehall has been involved with us to establish the scheme. I am not making any apology for this: the scheme is a good and wide-ranging scheme, and, because of that, there are huge costs. We need to find a way to cover those costs. The permanent disability is 14%. That is not the highest range in the scheme, so quite a few people who meet that 14% will come forward. Therefore, we need to assess how we can cover all of those payments. Of course, the early payments will be higher, because those who are over 60 can take a lump sum and may decide to take that instead of an annual payment. That being the case, more money will be needed at the start of the scheme. We will continue to work with the Government Actuary's Department. It is technical work, and there are a lot of unknowns, but we will try to get an estimate with which we can move forward.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the First Minister for her answers. There are bereaved families across Northern Ireland who have an empty chair that will never be filled. What communication has the First Minister had with them or groups that represent them since the recent court case? What has been the First Minister's most recent correspondence with them?

Mrs Foster: The office is, as am I in particular, very aware of the issues affecting bereaved victims and survivors. We are keen to address as many of their needs as possible and to acknowledge their ongoing loss, which, of course, is still keenly felt. Currently, the victims' fund provides self-directed assistance payments and health and well-being support to bereaved individuals who had registered with it before 31 March. Our officials have been working with the Commission for Victims and Survivors and the Victims and Survivors Service to consider options to meet the needs of bereaved victims and survivors, and we have agreed that we will allow a scheme to open shortly, with payments made from April 2021 for people who were not captured before 31 March 2017. I very much welcome that. I acknowledge the work of the South East Fermanagh Foundation in particular. It has been lobbying for a long time to have the scheme reopened, and I am pleased that we have been able to reopen it so that we can take forward the needs of the bereaved.

Ms Dillon: I welcome the announcement that the scheme for the bereaved will be reopened.

The policy that has been developed around the permanent disablement scheme was developed in Westminster, and, according to their statement of funding policy, they have to fund it. I think that we are agreed on that across the House. I want to establish that we are agreed across the House that the British Government have a responsibility to fund the scheme and to fund our block grant so that we can meet the payments of the scheme, particularly given the comments that have been made around the fact that

we can no longer afford to allow the victims to wait and to have the constant fear that the scheme will fall at the last hurdle and they will end up back in the courts. We do not want to see that.

Mrs Foster: The Member is right: the policy funding statement says that funding will come from where the scheme was developed. The Government argue that they developed the scheme only because there was no Administration here at that time. That is why there is discussion going on in relation to those matters. There is a need for us to collaborate on finding a way forward that is acceptable to all of us. I hope that the Northern Ireland Office and the Finance Minister here and, for that matter, the Justice Minister will work with the deputy First Minister and me to find a solution to what is a big funding gap. It is vital that we deal with those matters together.

Mr Allister: The Court of Appeal was emphatic that the legal duty was on the Executive Office to fund the scheme. On Friday, in the court, according to press reports, counsel representing the First Minister and deputy First Minister said:

"The position has always been that the Executive Office will fund the scheme when it has the money. It doesn't have the money".

Will the First Minister reconcile that conditional statement with the assurance today that no one will go short and the money will be paid once it is due?

2.30 pm

Mrs Foster: To be fair to the Executive Office, we are acting under a court judgement at present, so we will have to pay the money out. The Court of Appeal has been very clear about the issue. As the Member is probably aware, it has now joined the Department of Finance to the proceedings, and I think that that is a helpful move, because TEO does not have money in and of itself and the Department of Finance does. It is important that I send out the very clear message today that, when the applications come in and when the money is due to victims, they will get their money.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions. Claire Sugden's question has been withdrawn.

Mother-and-baby Homes: Expert Panel

T2. **Ms S Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, after wishing the First Minister a happy International Women's Day and stating that she seeks to support those women who are victims and survivors of the notorious mother-and-baby homes, what assurances the First Minister can give that the inquiry into those homes will have sufficient powers to gather all the information required to seek absolute truth and justice, given that while she welcomes the establishment of the expert panel to work with victims to set the terms of reference for an independent investigation, she notes and is disappointed that it will not be a full public inquiry. (AQT 1072/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question, and happy International Women's Day to her too. The group that has been set up is not the final destination. It is working with the victims under the leadership of Judith Gillespie on trying to co-design what will be the final outcome of whether there is a public inquiry or another sort

of inquiry. The names that we have been able to secure for that expert panel are of very heavyweight people, and I think that that will give a lot of confidence to the victims of this terrible time in our history. I very much hope that they can work collaboratively to come back then to find out what sort of inquiry it is that they want us to take forward.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the First Minister for her answer. Given that the Irish Government have already realised that there is a requirement for legislative change to the issue and without wanting to pre-empt any outcome of the panel that you referred to, has the Executive Office carried out an initial scoping exercise to establish whether there will be any legislative requirements? I see that the Irish Government are looking at legislation on the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and at a law that is focused on providing dignified burials. Has any consideration been given to that?

Mrs Foster: The Member will know that we are at a slightly different point in our process than the Republic of Ireland is in its. It had a commission of inquiry for quite some time, and the report of that came out in January. It has now decided that a number of steps need to be taken. I cannot prejudge what the inquiry will look like and what its outcomes will be, but I assume — maybe it is wrong of me to assume this — that there will be very similar outcomes to parts of what you are seeing now in the Republic of Ireland on memorialisation, apologies, recompense and all the things that are going on there. As I said, this has been set up in a way that means that we get the largest amount of buy-in from the victims, who, frankly, lost their voice in the past. We want them to have a voice in the process, and that is why co-design and co-production are so important to us in it.

Students: COVID-19 Restrictions

T3. **Ms Bailey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister will outline the specific, detailed and unambiguous COVID-19 regulations that will apply to students while they are residing at a term-time address, bubbling and travelling in the lead up to St Patrick's Day and the Easter period. (AQT 1073/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Obviously, that is a matter more for the Minister for the Economy, who looks after students' rights and everything that is connected with that. It is very important that everybody abide by the public health regulations at the moment. We saw yesterday in parts of Belfast people who were rightly jubilant about Rangers's success in the Scottish Professional Football League (SPFL), and I send the club my absolute good wishes. It is wonderful to see Steven Gerrard and our own Steven Davis at the top of the SPFL.

However, as Ally McCoist rightly said, we have to abide by the public health regulations. They are there for a reason: to protect our communities. I make the same plea in relation to students coming up to St Patrick's Day. Given that a lot of students are studying remotely from home at present, I hope that there will not be the same crowds in and around Belfast, but we will be sending out very specific messages next week before St Patrick's Day.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for her answer. I asked a question about the PSNI response in the Holylands area last week, where £11,000 of COVID fines were handed out. There is a hamster wheel that goes on every year;

I was dealing with that issue long before I was elected. The problems in the Holylands extend beyond the COVID pandemic. I am aware that the Executive set up a task force to deal with that back in August or September, when we saw the influx of freshers. Will the Minister give us an update on what has taken place with the Executive's Holylands task force?

Mrs Foster: That is a subgroup of our overall task force. The Health Minister has been engaging with it because he has concerns coming up to St Patrick's Day. I am more than happy to write to the Member to give her an update on the work, which is ongoing. As I said, we will be communicating generally about St Patrick's Day and Easter in the coming days.

Irish Language Week

T4. **Mr Lunn** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that, hopefully, the First Minister will be aware that this is Irish Language Week, whether she will join him in acknowledging and welcoming the annual event and will she congratulate the Irish language movement in its ongoing work to promote its cause. (AQT 1074/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member. This is a very busy week, with International Women's Day, Commonwealth Day and Irish Language Week; it has become a very congested part of the year. I absolutely acknowledge the work that goes on to promote the Irish language across Northern Ireland and the work of those from the Ulster-Scots community who wish to promote the Ulster-Scots language and identity. Of course, if they desire to have a week to celebrate the Irish language, I wish them well for their week of celebration.

Mr Lunn: I thank the First Minister for that. It was well said. It is a two-week period; it is not even one week any more. Will she confirm the promise that was made by her and her colleague at the Executive Office Committee recently that Irish language legislation will be introduced that will enable the appointment of an Irish language commissioner in time for it to be completed and enacted before the end of the mandate?

Mrs Foster: As the Member will know, that is part of a package of identity and cultural pieces that we will bring forward, as we said, under the NDNA agreement. It is our intention that that will come forward so that it will be completed by the end of this mandate. I am almost tempted to now say, "Sin é", but maybe not.

Mr Speaker: Agus sin é fosta.

Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland

T5. **Mr Humphrey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, after wishing the First Minister, in his role as chair of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association at Stormont, a happy Commonwealth Day, whether she will update the House on what action she is taking to rid Northern Ireland of the obnoxious Northern Ireland protocol. (AQT 1075/17-22)

Mrs Foster: A happy Commonwealth Day to the Member as well. As I said, it is a busy day today. It is good to see the Commonwealth flag flying over Stormont Parliament Buildings today.

As the Member will know, the protocol is causing untold damage to east-west relations in Northern Ireland for trade

and the identity of those of us who are unionist. There is a need not only to tinker at the edges of the protocol but to have it replaced. That is, obviously, not the position of TEO; that is my position. There is a need to deal with that urgently because damage is being done to the economy here in Northern Ireland. Therefore, under its own terms, a recalibration is needed.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the First Minister for her answer. I, too, join her in congratulating Steven Davis and the Rangers football team on securing the fastest-ever Scottish Premiership title.

Only a few days ago, First Minister, I was contacted by a scout leader in my constituency who had been working with the Woodland Trust on planting trees. That work has had to be put on hold because they have not been able to bring the trees in from the mainland. The synagogue is in my constituency. The Jewish community has been unable to get kosher meat. As we reach Passover, this problem has become particularly acute. Are Her Majesty's Government aware of the scale and depth of the problems that the protocol is causing to people in Northern Ireland and that it is not some sort of hiccup or teething problem, as the Prime Minister might suggest?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for those very real and tangible examples of the impact of the protocol. I note his remarks about the Jewish community. I have to say that that is very concerning. We have a very small Jewish community in Northern Ireland, and the fact that it cannot access kosher meat causes me a great deal of concern.

I attended the Secretary of State's business engagement forum last Friday. I have to say that the business community there universally welcomed the fact that the Secretary of State had put this variation in place, albeit for only another number of months. The business community said that the variation had to happen at the beginning of March because, had it not, some product lines would have ceased within the next week or so. Businesses raised concerns about cost, delay, technical difficulties and the diversion of trade. I listen to Members in the House speak about what business wants. I listened very clearly to what businesses want. They do not want the continuation of what we have seen in the protocol. I have also listened to people say that the action taken by Her Majesty's Government in respect of the protocol was illegal. The United Kingdom Attorney General will say otherwise, and, frankly, that is good enough for me.

Paramilitarism: Executive's Message

T6. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in order to touch on another aspect of the First Minister's campaign against the protocol, and given that she will be aware that the Executive are actively engaged in attempts to eradicate paramilitarism through their paramilitary task force and associated campaigns, whether the First Minister thinks that the fact that she met with representatives of the gangs that are actively involved in criminality, drug-dealing and murder undermines the message from the Executive. (AQT 1076/17-22)

Mrs Foster: No, not at all, because the members whom we met are committed to peaceful and democratic means. I find it astounding to hear criticism from Sinn Féin when the army council is still in existence. That is not my assessment but the assessment of the Chief Constable of the PSNI.

It is very hard to take criticism from sources who should know better. We want to encourage everybody to engage in peaceful and constitutional politics. We want people, if they have a concern, to be able to raise that concern and not feel alienated or as though nobody is listening to them. That is the important point about the engagement with the Loyalist Communities Council (LCC). It really is astounding to hear members of Sinn Féin come out and criticise this party, which has always condemned violence from any source, for meeting the LCC — quite incredible.

Mr O'Dowd: The First Minister will be aware that this is not the first occasion on which political unionism has sought common cause with armed loyalist groups. The point that I am making is that these groups are actively involved in crime today, largely against the communities that the DUP represents and unionism represents. When you sat down with them, you did not seek that they go away; you sat down seeking common cause in your opposition to the protocol. Do you not believe that that was a mistake?

Mrs Foster: I am very interested to know how the Member knows what I said to the LCC. Was he there? No, he was not there. I have always been very clear with members of paramilitary organisations, wherever they come from, that they should cease and desist from their criminality. I have always done that, and I always will. They need to move away from that. That is what our Communities in Transition programme, which sits in TEO, is all about, is it not? Is the Member suggesting that we move away from Communities in Transition, which, by the way, is doing very good work in communities right across republican areas and loyalist areas? Let us have less of the cant and hypocrisy in the House; let us have some realism.

2.45 pm

Omagh Bomb: Justice Delay

T7. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister will give her assessment of the appalling delay in the process of justice for the victims of the Omagh bomb, given that she will be aware that 19 August 1998 is a date that is, no doubt, etched on all our memories, when at 3.10 that afternoon, 29 innocent people and two unborn children lost their life following a car bomb in Omagh, something that has been described as the single worst atrocity of the murderous campaign in Northern Ireland, and, since then, the victims' families have been seeking justice and although, in 2013, they issued judicial proceedings that concluded six years later in 2019, to date, a verdict has not been forthcoming from the Lord Chief Justice. (AQT 1077/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I want to thank the Member for recently facilitating a meeting with some of the Omagh victims where, again, I was struck by their determination and desire to seek justice for their families and loved ones. He is right: we all remember the really dreadful day when that horrific bombing took place. The delay is quite incredible. I think that they said that four judges have been involved in the judicial review. The final hearing was in July 2019, and yet there is still no judgement on the matter. There needs to be closure brought to that judicial review so that the families can move on in their campaign to find justice.

Mr Speaker: Time is up; apologies. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment.

Communities

Mr Speaker: Questions 4 and 13 have been withdrawn.

HMO Legislation: Update

1. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the implementation of current houses in multiple occupation legislation. (AQO 1701/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): The Houses in Multiple Occupation Act 2016 came into operation in April 2019. My Department commenced a review of the implementation of the HMO licensing scheme in 2020. The operation of licensing for HMOs is led by Belfast City Council on behalf of all councils. My Department provides support and assistance to councils in the development of the licensing scheme and has provided detailed guidance for local government in the exercise of its regulatory functions. We have also provided a statutory code of practice for landlords to manage their properties to the required standards. I propose that the review will look at the impact of the regulatory scheme on councils in terms of resources, guidance and legislation, with a view to identifying any changes necessary to ensure that the legislation achieves its policy intent.

We have directly sought views from councils and landlords. The Department does not have information on tenants who are living in HMO properties and therefore sought the views of those tenants through tenant advocacy groups. The online survey on the nidirect website has been open since December 2020 for tenants or anyone with an interest in the regulation of HMOs to provide their views on the implementation of the licensing scheme. The Department will analyse the responses to the survey and take forward work on any changes required to ensure that the scheme functions as intended.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister. Happy International Women's Day. Obviously, we both represent the Holylands area of South Belfast, and you will know that the ongoing problems there are escalating as we get closer to St Patrick's Day.

First, to determine how their lives are impacted on, are you going to try to meet the residents of the Holylands, be it over Zoom or through some socially distanced meeting, to hear at first hand a more qualitative response from them to the consultation that closed on Friday? Will you also join me in calling for people to stay away from the Holylands on St Patrick's Day?

Ms Hargey: I thank the Member for her question. It is timely, given the week that we are approaching. As I have said, the primary objective of the consultation was to look at how the scheme is functioning primarily in the Belfast City Council area and how that then impacts across all 11 council areas. The review is therefore very much about looking at the resource, the guidance and the legislation. As I have said, it will also engage with residents and those who come forward, which will, I assume, include the Holylands residents.

As a local representative for the area and having served on Belfast City Council, I am acutely aware of the issues that have been going on. I know that the previous MLA for the area, who is now the Speaker, did a report on this some 10 years ago. We have also had the Buchanan

report and the one from Louise Brown Associates. A group was also set up on Belfast City Council to look at the issue. I want to continue to engage with residents who live there, students, representatives, landlords and the statutory agencies to find a longer-term solution. We recognise that the HMO legislation by itself will not deal with the issue, because the area is already over the threshold that would be set if we were to take a fresh look at HMOs today.

We therefore need to look at what we can do to rebalance that community to meet the needs of all those who reside in it. I echo the call — indeed, I have done so — to tell people that we are still in the midst of a public health pandemic. I know that the Health Minister has also spoken about this. People need to adhere to the guidance and the regulations. I ask any people who think that they want to go to the Holylands next week not to do so. I ask them to use their common sense and ensure that they stay away, not just for the peace of mind of the residents and students who live there but for the wider public as we try to deal with the pandemic and for the health trusts that are trying to reduce the number of cases at the moment.

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time is up.

Ms Hargey: Again, I echo the calls for calm and for people not to go near the area.

Ms Mullan: I know that you are committed to improving protections for tenants in the private rented sector, and I have written to you and the Housing Executive about unlicensed HMOs in Derry. Minister, what is your Department's oversight role in the licensing of HMOs, and what is it doing to address the unlicensed HMOs?

Ms Hargey: Thank you very much for your question. My Department has responsibility for policy and legislation on HMOs. HMOs, in some ways, meet the housing needs of singles, those in temporary employment, students, those on a low income and migrant workers. It is therefore important that they be considered as part of an overarching housing mix. Councils have been responsible for implementation and licensing from 2019, and that requires landlords to meet important quality and safety standards before a HMO is let. Belfast City Council has set up a HMO unit to cover all the councils. If you have concerns about specific addresses, those should be raised with the unit as soon as possible so that further action can be taken.

Housing Executive: Landlord Component

2. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on her plans for the reclassification of the Housing Executive landlord component. (AQO 1702/17-22)

9. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the planned reforms of the Housing Executive announced on 3 November 2020. (AQO 1709/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I will answer questions 2 and 9 together, as both refer to the revitalisation of the Housing Executive.

The plans that my colleague Carál Ní Chuilín set out to Members in November's statement on housing reflect a much-needed revitalisation programme aimed at securing the long-term future of our biggest social landlord and ensuring the maintenance and investment in our social homes.

One of those measures, which I have urgently been pursuing, is to exempt the Housing Executive from paying corporation tax. I am happy to report that that exemption will now apply, resulting in millions of pounds of additional investment in Housing Executive homes. Although that is welcome news, the change alone will not alleviate the investment challenges that are faced by the Housing Executive, which in 2018 estimated that in excess of £7 billion would be needed over the next 30 years.

That level of investment is simply not affordable, particularly as one of the biggest constraints that the Housing Executive faces is its inability to borrow. Borrowing, in its current form, will score against the Executive's block grant, and so borrowing to maintain homes would be at the cost of other capital priorities, such as investment in hospitals and schools.

Work has commenced to update the investment financial analysis, which needs to reflect the recommendations following the Grenfell tower fire as well as carbon neutralisation. I have asked officials, through co-design, to consider and assess options that will realise my vision for the Housing Executive as a sustainable social landlord that can maintain and provide good-quality and affordable social homes for those who need them.

As Carál set out, the consideration of options will focus on those that promise to retain what is valuable about the Housing Executive model. Indeed, I have asked officials to ensure that they exhaust all options that limit change as far as possible.

I intend to bring recommendations before the end of this mandate —

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time is up.

Ms Hargey: — that will include details on timescales and budgets for implementation.

Ms McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. Have she and the Finance Minister considered making a costed proposal to the Treasury on a housing revenue account for the Housing Executive to enable it to borrow?

Ms Hargey: All options are being explored. As I said, I want to keep the good qualities of the Housing Executive. If there is a way that the Housing Executive can borrow without any change, I will explore that as the primary option. We have to look at all options because the financial challenges, and the impact that they are having on the existing housing stock can no longer be ignored. Therefore, all options are being considered. Once that has been done, proposals will be brought forward for decision.

Mr Catney: I wish all the women in the Chamber a great International Women's Day. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that any reclassification does not lead to insecure tenure, higher rents and less accountability for Housing Executive tenants as we have seen happen with the transfer of public housing in Britain?

Ms Hargey: At the British-Irish Council meetings, we have been looking at practices elsewhere across these islands. The key is ensuring that we have a social housing landlord that is fit for purpose and homes that are up to date. We know that if we do not look at the investment challenges facing the Housing Executive, it will lose over half its stock

over the next period. That jeopardises the future of social house building by the biggest landlord.

I have committed to co-designing options with tenants — we want to make sure that they are involved — and those who are on the housing waiting list and have been waiting years to find a social home to call their own. We also want to design those options with the trade unions and the workers in the Housing Executive. Primarily, I want to look at options in which the Housing Executive can borrow, as I said earlier. We have also committed to looking at a sustainable rent trajectory for Housing Executive tenants, whilst giving a commitment that they will remain among the lowest rents across these islands. I am committed to looking at all of that in the overarching plan that I will bring to the Executive in this mandate.

Mr Boylan: I welcome the Minister's commitment to building better homes. Will the removal of the historical debt and exemption from corporation tax enable the Housing Executive to begin building much-needed homes again?

Ms Hargey: The removal of the Housing Executive's historical debt and exempting it from paying corporation tax will be only a minor alleviation in the overarching investment challenge. The announcement in last week's Budget is welcome, but there is still a long way to go. We have to look at this comprehensively, in terms of a review of the Housing Executive rent, making sure that we have a long-term sustainability model. All those things will be taken in the round.

3.00 pm

Dealing with corporation tax and the debt in themselves will not overcome the challenges. The Housing Executive has to have the ability to borrow for future house builds while retaining its existing and future stock. Work is ongoing to cost those options, and, again, they will be presented to the Executive when the time is right.

Mr Allen: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. The revitalisation statement mentioned reclassifying the Housing Executive as a mutual- or cooperative-type body. Minister, are you able to point to a similar body in another jurisdiction that has the same vision as the one that you are creating for the Housing Executive?

Ms Hargey: We are assessing all options at the moment. I would like to do this while retaining the Housing Executive's current classification. Other questions are being asked in Question Time about the standards and conditions in which residents are living. We know what the investment challenge is, given that almost £7 billion is going to be needed. Clearly, the money is not there. That would be nearly my full budget for the next eight or nine years. That is the reality of the challenge.

In looking at the classification, the big focus is to get the Housing Executive to borrow so that it can look at long-term investment over many years and use that borrowing function to do that. We want to look at other options, and, as I said, we are continually engaging, across the islands, to see which options work well. The new chief executive coming into the Housing Executive has extensive experience of housing associations in England and has worked for a housing charity in the South of Ireland, so we will also be engaging with them.

All that will be part of the process that we will be looking at over the coming months. The pros and cons will be costed. I want to remain committed to the good values of the Housing Executive in the 50 years since its formation and make sure that we carry those into the next 50 years. However, I want to make sure that we can retain the stock that we have and build even more properties.

Mr Speaker: I call Kellie Armstrong.

Ms Armstrong: Apologies, Mr Speaker. I was indicating for the next question.

Housing Executive: Cavity Wall Insulation

3. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister for Communities how many Housing Executive properties have cavity wall insulation that is deemed to be not fit for purpose. (AQO 1703/17-22)

Ms Hargey: In 2019, the Housing Executive published a research report on cavity wall insulation. The findings for the Housing Executive's stock were based on a sample survey of 825 properties. The research found that 63% of those properties had cavity wall insulation installations that were non-compliant with modern industry standards. Although the Housing Executive's data on the construction of its stock is not comprehensive, it estimates that if that 63% were extrapolated, it would represent 40,600 of its cavity wall-constructed properties. So it is an issue that we are looking at.

Mr Allen: As the Minister pointed out, there is a significant problem in the Housing Executive stock in relation to cavity wall insulation. The research pointed out that 63% of the stock was non-compliant with modern standards, as the Minister mentioned. However, the Housing Executive indicated that it did not intend to take that recommendation forward in its current financial circumstances. Has the corporation tax situation any bearing on that? Also, on how many of the 1% of properties has action been taken?

Ms Hargey: A cavity wall insulation action plan is out for consultation and is due back at the end of March. We will be looking at the proposals within that as part of the wider revitalisation programme and the funding and sustainability of the Housing Executive. There are critical issues.

In real life, the investment challenges mean that people are in homes that are not up to the standard required if you were building a property today, and that is not good enough. We need to deal with and overcome those challenges.

I will look at the action plan and the consultation, and I will listen to what tenants and housing professionals say. I will consider that as part of the action plan at the end of March. We want to look at the issue in the longer term and set it against the financial plan to see what we can do to make sure that the existing stock of over 80,000 homes that are in the Housing Executive's ownership are brought up to today's standards. We also want to look forward to the retrofitting issues that have to be addressed by considering fuel poverty and carbon emissions targets. That will be part of the revitalisation, and costings will be done and will be presented to the Executive before the end of the mandate in order to be taken forward.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, Minister. Minister, I am glad to hear you use the term "retrofitting", as some of us have been working on environmental options moving

forward. The cavity wall review is ongoing, and given the fact that many people in the building industry say that the material that is used in cavity wall insulation, which is polystyrene balls, is causing so much of the damp, is it not time to set that aside and to start looking at retrofitting from now?

Ms Hargey: We are starting to look at retrofitting, and a cross-departmental working group has been established to look at the green commitments that we have made and at the 2050 target for carbon-neutral options. We will look at an assessment of properties in the time ahead. There is a huge issue with damp and cavity wall insulation and how the homes that are involved were constructed to begin with. We need to look at building standards, particularly for new builds. We are considering that as part of the wider revitalisation agenda. All that will have to be costed, we will have to prioritise what we need to move on and then we will publish a plan.

I will review the action plan on cavity wall insulation once the consultation is finished, and I will consider proposals for the implementation of that plan. Some of that may be superseded by the longer-term work that we are going to look at. However, we are not ready to give an update on where we are because we are at the start of that process.

Mr McGuigan: Minister, given the answers to questions that you provided today and the work that you have previously been involved in, it is clear that improving housing quality for tenants in the private and public sectors is something that you are committed to. You mentioned the cavity wall insulation plan and gave a time frame of March. Over and above the consultation period, what progress has been made and are there any implementation time frames?

Ms Hargey: On 22 December last year, the Housing Executive issued the draft cavity wall insulation action plan for public and industry consultation. That set out proposals for addressing research findings and recommendations. Responses to that consultation are due on 31 March this year, and we intend to publish the final action plan later in the year. We will have a more definitive date after we have assessed the consultation responses, and I will come back to update Members in due course.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. I welcome the work that she outlined on energy conservation in public-sector homes, which is long overdue. Minister, you frequently referred to modern energy conservation standards for public-sector homes. What, specifically, is that standard and how does it compare with the standards that are set for private sector-built homes?

Ms Hargey: I was referring to the fact that building regulations standards need to be updated. That is a long-running issue. We need to ensure that we future-proof new builds, so we need to update the regulations as soon as possible, taking issues such as climate change, fuel poverty and the need for retrofitting into account. I hope that we will start to look at and engage on those regulations as a matter of urgency. If we are going to reach the targets that we want to reach by 2050, the regulations will need to be updated as soon as possible.

Child Poverty

5. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on her Department's work to address child poverty. (AQO 1705/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department is leading on the development of the Executive's anti-poverty strategy using a co-design approach. Consultation on the emerging strategy is planned for later this year. It is anticipated that, subject to Executive agreement, the new strategy will be published in December 2021.

Recently, it was announced that the 2016-19 child poverty strategy would be extended until May 2022. The purpose of that strategy is to ensure that government works collectively to tackle the issues that are faced by children and families. The reason that it was extended was to allow that poverty work to continue through a co-design approach. As work progresses on the anti-poverty strategy, there will be a number of opportunities for children and young people to engage with the development process.

I also note that my Department has invested funding in the region of £304 million on a range of support programmes and projects to respond to the hardships that have been faced during the pandemic. The expert panel on the anti-poverty strategy was launched on Friday. The co-design groups have been established. They have access to that report and will now start the important work of co-designing the strategy, taking into account what the expert panel has said and also other experiences and, particularly, engaging children and young people, children's rights advocates and cross-departmental work. The role of Education and Health will be critical over the next couple of months, and a draft strategy will then go out for consultation later in the year.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her answer. Official figures show that one in five children here lives in absolute poverty. Worryingly, there has been an upward trend in child poverty levels since 2018, which is set to continue as a result of the pandemic. In response to previous questions for written answer, the Minister indicated that the child poverty strategy has never been allocated funding specifically. Why is that the case? Is the Minister minded to support fully funded delivery models or mechanisms to accompany the development of the next strategy, including cross-departmental budgets, given that the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 would surely facilitate that?

Ms Hargey: We are developing the anti-poverty strategy and also looking at children's poverty. One of the early considerations for the co-design group will be whether those two strategies merge into one. There has been some consideration of that. The expert panel also looked at that issue. We are engaging the Children's Commissioner and others. Therefore, one of the first areas will be about whether that becomes one strategy.

The next phase of work by the co-design group is to work with the sector. Children and young people's professionals and advocates who are part of that co-design group will engage with children and young people themselves. The other important strand is the cross-departmental work. That is where there has to be representation from all Departments, recognising that it is a cross-cutting issue.

It has to involve people who can make decisions and align budgets in order to meet needs. It is about costing up the proposals in the anti-poverty and children's poverty strategies going forward. I would like to see proposals that are costed and time-bound when they are presented to the Executive. It will then be for the Executive, when they receive that at the end of the year, to look at it as part of the Budget-setting process going into 2022.

Mr Durkan: As Ms Woods mentioned, child poverty figures have not improved here in five years. There are now 122,000 children living in relative poverty. Will the Minister mitigate the two-child tax credit rule and benefit cap in order to ease the immense pressure on families with children, and, if so, when?

Ms Hargey: That is a crucial issue, which was also raised in the expert panel when I engaged the Human Rights Commission as part of its work to look at future mitigations. That issue was also looked at. Of course I support bringing forward proposals to end that, along with other mitigations. As the Member will know, the issue will be the Budget and the block grant. We have been trying to get into a cycle of multi-annual Budgets so that we do not come to a cliff edge each and every year around grant programmes right across the board. Unfortunately, that has not happened this year.

The Member will also know that we have a flat Budget this year, which, in real terms, means a cut. That has an impact on the whole Executive and, whether it is through the Department of Education, the Department of Health or the Department for Communities, on children and young people.

3.15 pm

I will bring forward proposals to look at future mitigations, and this will be one of the issues considered in the time ahead. I will bring forward costings, and it will be down to the Executive as a whole to look at the financing of that. The matter needs to be raised with the British Government. We have said that we should build back better and build back social. The pandemic has impacted most on low-income families, women and children, and the block grant has not reflected that. We have been given an increase in COVID money, but that is in-year cash, and, as the Member knows, we cannot build that into our revenue base. There is a job of work to convince the British Government of the value of looking at this in the block grant. Of course, I will bring costed proposals to that effect. I encourage all parties in the Executive to work with me to ensure that we can implement that in the time ahead.

Mr Speaker: I call Robbie Butler. Will you be brief, please?

Mr Butler: Will the Minister advise what collaboration she has had with the Minister of Education on efforts to address child poverty?

Ms Hargey: As I said, we are at the early stage of developing the child poverty and anti-poverty strategy. The expert panel has been established, and its report was launched last week. Before the report was made public, I communicated its content to all Executive Ministers, including the Minister of Education. Due to COVID, we have been working more closely on child poverty issues such as free school meals. The cross-departmental working group includes representatives

from the Department of Education. There is a big role for Ministers and officials in looking at the plans in detail and working with the co-design group to do things differently in government. The key is to change what we have been doing up to now. Things need to change. We need to be more joined-up and break down the silos. The strategies give us a real opportunity to work with communities and young people on the ground in the time ahead.

I will convene a meeting with Executive Ministers in April on the issues. I will give an update on the expert panel reports and, importantly, make sure that I have Executive buy-in to the strategies before the final documents are presented to them in December. That engagement is ongoing, and it is important that all Ministers work together. Poverty is not just an issue for me in the Department for Communities. I have given a commitment that I will start to devise and work on the strategies, but all Departments need to work more collectively and align their budgets to the strategies' recommendations. We will do that in the time ahead.

Mr Speaker: Time is up for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

PIP Appeals: Backlog

T1. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Communities, given that more than 6,039 people are waiting for personal independence payment (PIP) appeals, how she plans to deal with that unacceptable backlog. (AQT 1081/17-22)

Ms Hargey: There has been a huge issue. The Member will understand that the public health pandemic caused the suspension of face-to-face assessments. We have been working with the Appeals Service to look at all the appeals and issues.

You are right: there is backlog at the moment. We are looking at telephone interviews and virtual interviews through Zoom. It is important to recognise that the nature and type of appeal need to suit the appellant. That is particularly true of PIP appeals, which look at a person's physical disability or their mental health and well-being. In a satisfaction survey on the issue over 60% of appellants said that they wanted a face-to-face assessment and appeal. The difficulty at the moment is that we still have the COVID regulations, which do not allow for that.

The Appeals Service has suspended face-to-face meetings, and that has been extended to the first week in April to take into account the current health regulations. We are keeping it under review and looking at more online options such as Zoom interviews and telephone appeals. If people are looking for face-to-face contact, we will have to look at how we can accommodate that once the restrictions begin to ease. We will work with the Appeals Service to see if we can create a timeline as to how quickly we can reduce that waiting list as much as possible. I cannot give you all the answers until we know more about the regulations, which are being reviewed on 16 March, but I am hopeful that I can supply more information to the Committee and the Chamber in the time ahead.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for her answer. Can the Minister give me a guarantee that, when those people finally get their appeals — they could have been waiting for well over a year — the payments that are awarded to them will be backdated from the date that they applied or from the date that they had their PIP taken off them?

Ms Hargey: The awards are looked at in terms of backdating from the date of appeal, yes. That is one of the issues that are considered. Our focus now is to make sure that we get appeals looked at as soon as possible, and we will work through that with the Appeals Service and the independent advice sector, which is supporting many of the individuals.

Subregional Stadia Programme for Soccer: Benefits

T2. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Communities whether she agrees that the allocation of £36.2 million for the development of the subregional stadia programme for soccer is a positive move, not just for sporting reasons but for mental and physical health. (AQT 1082/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Yes, definitely. The subregional stadia will do a lot of good for grassroots football and will have an impact on the ground. I am keen to see that progress as soon as possible. We are working through the advisory group to look at the subregional stadia, and we are working with the sport's governing body and with the organisations that are involved. I want to bring proposals to take that forward as soon as possible and to get the money that has been allocated out as quickly as we can.

Mr Newton: Minister, 10 years ago, the £36.2 million was allocated. There have been two consultative exercises on the programme. What can be the problems that are not allowing you to allocate the money to the successful applicants?

Ms Hargey: The first report is 10 years out of date, and, when I came into office, the second report was four years out of date. The last consultation that was done will be published as soon as possible, and, when you read that consultation, you will see that not everybody was in agreement on the previous scheme. As Minister responsible, I wanted to take a fresh look at that, and that is why I have engaged in the short review process. My aim is to bring forward that scheme within this mandate to ensure that the money finally reaches those who need it.

Welfare Reform: Independent Advice Services

T3. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Communities, given that Professor Eileen Evason envisaged that independent advice services are a vital part of mitigations to protect the most vulnerable from the harshest impacts of welfare reform, whether she can provide a further update on the discussions that she is having with the Department of Finance and the Executive to secure a £1.5 million allocation for vital independent advice services. (AQT 1083/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As someone who was a community worker in the past and from working with people who avail themselves of the advice service in the area that I live in, I see the value of the independent advice sector. As I said earlier, we have been given a flat budget. It did not include the £1.5 million, but I have given a commitment that I value the role of the independent advice sector. I acutely see the need to continue independent advice, particularly for those who are going through the welfare changes that we face. I will find that money in the budget as we come into the new financial year.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her answer. On 16 February, when discussing the bedroom tax, the Minister stated:

"I have draft legislation and regulations to close the loopholes to ensure that families —just over 220 of them, I think—do not fall through them. I will soon bring those forward for Executive approval, to be introduced in the new financial year." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 136, p9, col 1].

Can the Minister provide an update on that legislation being brought to the Assembly?

Ms Hargey: Yes, the regulations or the changes that are needed are ready. I had a meeting with officials last week to discuss some of the proposals that need to go through the Committee and the legislative changes that then need to be made.

I will make a further submission to the Executive shortly on bringing that forward before the end of the financial year.

Conversion Therapy: Ban

T4. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on work to ban conversion therapy, given that, like all MLAs, she will have received significant correspondence encouraging such a ban. (AQT 1084/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Thank you very much for raising this important issue.

Just over a week ago, I met a group of doctors, some of whom were involved in the 'Spotlight' programme on the issue last September. I have also met some political parties to provide an update. In 'New Decade, New Approach', the Executive agreed to a sexual orientation strategy. The expert panel's report on that draft strategy was published on Friday. The issue of conversion therapy is part of that, so, first, I make a commitment to bring forward draft legislation to ban it.

The expert panel has looked at the issue. Rather than rushing to legislate now, we need to assess how widespread the practice is. We need to look at the levels and the different names by which the practice is known. Britain made announcements over two years ago. We know that legislation was going through in the South of Ireland. They tripped up on their legislation partly because of their assessment of how widespread the issue was. We will look at that, working with the co-design group on the sexual orientation strategy, to ensure that we have up-to-date data and information on the practice. I do not want to leave any loophole that would allow the practice to continue, which would make the legislation meaningless. I will take that forward.

I will look at drafting legislation at the same time as we make that assessment of need. We will not wait for that to be completed before drafting legislation. I hope that, over the coming months, we will start to formulate that. We will establish how widespread the practice is and be able to include that in the drafting of the legislation, and, by the end of the mandate, we will have legislation ready to come before the House.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister for her response. It is a harsh and cruel practice. It seriously impacts the mental health of members of our community. I welcome the

announcement of strategies and impending legislation. Sometimes the Executive are good at announcing strategies and legislation but not just so good at delivering them. I take the opportunity to encourage the Minister to move as quickly as possible to deliver this, while closing all of the loopholes that she has mentioned. We are the last place in these islands to deliver this, so there should be plenty of experience out there on what to do and how to get it right.

Ms Hargey: When you look at other jurisdictions, you see that what they have brought forward is not good enough. The expert panel has recognised that there have been huge gaps. That is what the panel has been telling me. If I could, I would legislate to ban this practice tomorrow, but I have to listen to those who are impacted on by it on a daily basis. I agree with you. In meeting people both privately and openly on the issue over the last couple of months, I have seen how people have been affected by it. It has completely changed their lives and their family dynamics. It is a cruel treatment that must be banned and ended as soon as possible.

I have to make sure that we do not make the same mistakes as other jurisdictions, which have held up their implementation of the ban. You will be aware of the campaign that there has been. The British Government announced two years ago that they would ban it. Nothing has been done, for exactly these reasons. I want to make sure that I work with the community to assess the need and the breadth of the problem, but I will not wait for the end of that work. I want to draft legislation as we move through that process, to ensure that, once the assessment is done, we can move on the legislation. I give a commitment that I will not wait around: I want to do this as soon as possible. If you want to sit down with me at any time, I am more than willing to do that.

Social and Affordable Housing

T5. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister for Communities, after congratulating her on her success in ensuring that the Housing Executive remains exempt from corporation tax, whether she can detail how much additional funding will be available for social and affordable housing as a result. (AQT 1085/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Over £56 million has been paid to the British Treasury in corporation tax duty over the last six years.

That is a huge amount over those six years that could go into the provision of new housing and into updating existing housing. That has been a really good news story, and I thank the Minister of Finance and the officials who have been working on that. With the Chancellor's announcement last week, we finally have it over the line.

3.30 pm

I will continue to look at whether any of the payments that have been made can be backdated and also at the wider historical debt that is there as well. Those conversations will continue, but it is a huge help to the Housing Executive in managing its existing stock and investing in future stock.

Mr Speaker: I call Caoimhe Archibald to ask a supplementary question. May I have a brief question and response, please?

Dr Archibald: Go raibh maith agat for the answer. Will the Minister provide an update on her overall plans to increase social and affordable housing stock?

Ms Hargey: As I said, part of last November's housing statement looked at a supply strategy and at dealing with the financial restrictions on the Housing Executive's ability to borrow, not just to upgrade existing properties but to construct new properties. Those plans are being costed, and the supply strategy is being developed. Before the end of this mandate, I will bring forward timelines and costings for how we will take that work forward. I commit to doing that and will update Members on the specifics in the time ahead.

Mr Speaker: Time is up. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment, please.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair)

Committee Business

'Skills Strategy and Economic Output Micro Inquiry': Committee for the Economy Special Report

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the Committee for the Economy's special report providing evidence from stakeholders to inform the forthcoming skills strategy; supports the development of a cross-departmental and inclusive approach to skills development; recognises the need for collaboration between the public sector, employers, industry and all levels of education to ensure that our people have the right skills and access to lifelong learning; and calls on the Minister for the Economy and her Executive colleagues to use this evidence in planning for the new skills strategy. — [Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy).]

Mr Dickson: The past year has perhaps been one of the most challenging that many of us, and certainly those in the worlds of business and employment, have ever faced. Hopefully, however, we are increasingly seeing a bright glimmer of hope on the horizon. With every day, we are making progress on finding our way out of the pandemic. Nonetheless, it appears that higher unemployment in the near future is likely, and the skills strategy that the Department for the Economy produces will be key to tackling structural issues in our labour market, such as underemployment, low pay and driving our recovery from the pandemic.

Time is very short, so I will take a few moments to speak about some of the issues that have been highlighted by the Committee's report. As Members will know, skills requirements are dynamic and continually changing, so government strategies need to keep up. Unfortunately, there are widespread mismatches that lead to underemployment, unemployment and lower productivity. The report notes that there are particular areas in which focusing efforts could provide a considerable change in results. For example, the area of digital skills, which is fast becoming the linchpin of any skills set, must be central to a skills strategy.

It seems very likely that the pandemic will accelerate digitalisation trends, so this will become more acute. Employers have been highlighting a mismatch of skills for some time. Vocational courses are not meeting the needs of manufacturing businesses, and that requires additional training to be provided. SMEs also feel that skills training support is not necessarily aimed at them.

Speaking as chair of the all-party group on social enterprise, I feel that we should not lose sight of the support that they require. I believe employers have a duty to develop the skills of their workforce, but government must also ensure that the right skills are there to attract businesses and help them to expand. Intergenerational underachievement is another structural issue. Reference has already been made today about how we should improve and invest in our education system. Communities need the tools to tackle underachievement, including

careers advice. That demonstrates the need for stronger cross-departmental working.

I have criticised before what I describe as the silo mentality between Ministers in the Executive and also between Departments. Departments and agencies have a role in tackling deprivation and need to work together. Considerable work needs to be done to provide more comprehensive careers advice in schools to tackle the cultural mindset that a career path usually goes through university. Others have referred to this, and it is simply not the case for so many careers. Contrast that with Germany, where university is just one of multiple equal career paths for people to follow. Our further education colleges are key to the future. We must ensure that they are sustainable and resourced. However, considerable duplication exists, particularly with sixth form colleges.

We are all in agreement that we must establish a culture of lifelong learning, but we have not seen that embedded in Northern Ireland. I hope that the Department will look for examples of best practice, perhaps in Nordic countries. Over a third of adults in Northern Ireland say that they have not taken part in learning since they left full-time education. That is very much to our detriment. How can people access new skills if the support and advice are not there? Reference was made earlier to a life skills guarantee, offering a range of fully funded courses to those without a level 3 qualification. It is definitely something that we should seek to recreate here. I will be interested to hear what the Minister has to say on that.

A number of actions in the Minister's recently published recovery action plan will help towards a lifelong learning environment. The Minister has also rolled out other programmes for apprenticeships. Unfortunately, however, many employers have found that the time is not right to bring back apprentices. We need to encourage ongoing support as the restrictions ease. That is a key area of work. We must make sure that skills are accessible to all. We need to break down the barriers of unemployment; we need to ensure that we match our skills with the needs of businesses.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Dickson: This requires serious intervention and funding for skills opportunities as we emerge from the pandemic.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Clerk and the Committee for tabling this motion. It is a very important motion and a very important piece of work that I was part of at the time. A wide range of stakeholders was involved, and we used the technology available to bring those stakeholders together to collate their views. It was a useful exercise. It is important that, with those views, we now take that forward to ensure that we address some of the issues that they have raised, many of which I share.

The Minister has taken steps to support learners during COVID-19. Skills policies will be an essential component for Northern Ireland as we exit COVID and put together an exit strategy. In recent years, Northern Ireland has made significant progress in strengthening its skills base and improving economic output. The skills of our young people are now seen to be above the OECD average in reading, mathematics and science. However, COVID has represented a greater threat to further progress.

In response to those worrying statistics, the Minister has taken a range of steps to ensure continuity of learning for our young people and towards allowing those of all ages affected by the disruption of the pandemic to upskill and reskill. To that end, I welcome that the Minister has included the apprenticeship recovery package, support for some of the most vulnerable learners in accessing digital learning, adjusting the skills focus programme and delivering a range of free online qualifications.

Retaining the focus on building a resilient and adaptive skills base will be a crucial element of the Executive's recovery from COVID-19. The economic action recovery plan, which was recently announced, sets out a wide range of actions and initiatives. The Minister has included a wide-ranging skills strategy for Northern Ireland, which can provide a longer-term and more strategic approach to the challenges facing our work force.

The motion refers to ensuring that Northern Ireland has the right mix of skills, which should be cross-cutting in nature and cross-cutting for the Executive. That needs to be recognised through practical action, but, most importantly, through adequate funding. To that end, it is important that the Finance Minister ensures that appropriate funding is put towards addressing the many issues raised in the report that was brought forward to the Economy Committee.

New Decade, New Approach committed that the Executive, collectively, will invest strategically to ensure that Northern Ireland has the right mix of skills for a thriving economy. However, it is important to point out that, at times during the pandemic, the collegiate spirit towards supporting our economy has not always been evident or displayed. For example, the Sinn Féin Communities Minister has failed utterly to deliver on the Northern Ireland parallel scheme to the Kickstart initiative. It is a real shame that that has happened, given that, in GB, the Kickstart initiative has created job opportunities for over 120,000 young people between the ages of 16 to 24. Neither was that collegiate spirit displayed by the SDLP's Infrastructure Minister, who had to be cajoled and persuaded for months before commencing a scheme to support our hauliers and coach and taxi drivers.

When we talk about enhancing skills and building a resilient and agile workforce that is capable of responding to future crises and challenges, a cross-departmental, cross-cutting willingness to own these issues and ensure that they are sufficiently funded is vital.

Ms Dolan: Sinn Féin welcomes the findings of the micro inquiry on skills. With unemployment rising, it is essential that we have a skills-based recovery that can help support and train our people for new jobs and industries. Although we welcome the Department's various initiatives, such as skills academies and apprenticeship programmes, there needs to be a conscious effort to help underrepresented groups to access skills. The Department's new skills strategy will be a key driver of economic output, particularly as we emerge from COVID-19. The strategy's design must support individuals, communities and industries to adapt to the demands of the global economy, as well as meet the changing needs of the local economy.

One of the primary aims of the Minister's economic advisory group will be to assess future skills, reskilling and upskilling needs in the context of a new skills strategy. We

need a skills delivery framework that can help workers of all ages, employers and communities to adapt, and one that helps to build an economy that delivers for everyone.

The points in the micro inquiry are well made around needing to look at skills matches. The needs of the workplace are changing at such a fast pace, which has probably been accelerated by COVID-19. Digital skills are becoming more important, with the majority of jobs requiring a certain level of expertise. The Department's skills barometer has been useful in identifying skills gaps. It is important that councils continue to look for those gaps and work with local colleges and training providers to help fill them so that people can find work close to home.

In my constituency, we have the top-class South West College, which has the state-of-the-art Erne campus ready to open to match the existing and innovative South West College skills centre. Facilities like that not only help to reskill and upskill our workforce but have the potential to fight back against the brain drain. One point in the report that links to that is the requirement to change the cultural mindset here that leans towards a university degree as the only or the superior option on the pathway to employment. After doing a degree and knowing what I know now and having engaged with South West College on several occasions, I would reconsider my educational pathway if I were to do it again.

3.45 pm

On this, International Women's Day, the Department for the Economy should look at skills programmes that will specifically assist women to reskill and re-enter the workforce. Women in Business recently launched a returners programme that is designed at getting females who have been out of work back into skills programmes and job opportunities. The most recent programme was oversubscribed, and it is clear that if the Department provided specific schemes for women, they would avail themselves of them and re-enter the labour market. To allow more women to return to work, stakeholders also urged revisiting the childcare strategy, as it plays an important role in giving parents the opportunity to work or to avail themselves of training.

The points are well made in the inquiry report that we cannot look at skills in isolation and that we need to look at affordable childcare, guaranteed financial reward, providing appropriate training and progression plans and the option for flexible working in order to meet the demands of caring responsibilities.

While not covered in the report, it is also important that the Department continues to address rural broadband and digital hardship, as those are barriers to upskilling for rural residents like the people I represent. To that end, the Department must ensure that the digital hardship fund is accessible to the students who need it. We need sectoral agreement between government, employers and unions to update and agree standards so that employees are continually reskilled and they can maximise their personal development while ensuring that workers' rights are at the forefront.

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome today's debate and the publication of the Committee's report on its micro inquiry into the skills strategy and economic output. At the start, it is worth asking what the economy means for many in our society and how they relate to it. While there are obviously the

macroeconomic questions that we, as policymakers, have to tackle, the relationship between the economy and the consumer or the worker is much different. The basics of it are that the relationship with the economy is such that people require a job to pay the mortgage or the rent, put food on the table and put clothes on their children's backs. Those are the basics, but we want much more than that for our citizens. We want them to be able to have a high quality of life and to have the time, space and finances to have hobbies and luxuries and to enjoy their time as well. However, I suspect that, sometimes, when workers and others hear us discussing the economy in this Building and elsewhere, it is an abstract theory rather than a reality that the decisions that we make here will affect them and their children's lives moving forward. That is perhaps more so now because of the changing circumstances that COVID-19 will bring to a changing world.

It is interesting to note that the three major elements that are facing the world today are, obviously, COVID; the changes that will come with Brexit to purchasing goods and to where those goods will be manufactured; and the greening of the economy, because more and more businesses are looking at how they source their materials for the products that they either sell or make. So, there are huge opportunities in that for our citizens, and we need to give them the proper skill sets to deal with them.

I want to concentrate on the element of the report that looks at learning and universities and schools. One particular element caught my eye, which I will come to in a moment. One of the questions at the start was about how we achieve goals. We have to change the mindset about career pathways, and my colleague Jemma Dolan touched on that. Universities are not the best option for everyone, so let us promote other career pathways that are not necessarily associated with universities.

We should value electricians as highly as teachers and bricklayers as highly as IT experts. Not everybody will be able to, want to or have the skill sets to work in IT. Of course we should attract international IT businesses, but we must also have an economy that relates to the people.

One comment in the report caught my eye. It is the view of some stakeholders:

"Careers advice is offered in schools, but often not by a dedicated expert from the Department's Careers Service, leading to recommendations that may suit the needs of the school, rather than those of the individual pupil."

Advice is given that suits the needs of the school rather than those of an individual pupil. There, right away, is something that has to be changed in the culture. That goes back to the point I made: if we do not value certain career pathways, young people and their parents will be dissuaded from taking them, even though those pathways can provide a high quality of life, a good salary and a good lifestyle for the person who chooses them. It is often seen as the case that, if you do not attend university, somehow you have not achieved. That is a huge mistake, and it will be detrimental to our economy. Some earlier contributors said that the skills barometer shows that skills are lacking in some areas, particularly in vocational courses.

Minister, it was a huge mistake not to provide the £500 funding to full-time students in colleges. That separates universities and further education colleges

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr O'Dowd: It almost suggests that it is a lesser course or career pathway. If we want to change mindsets, we have to value all students.

Ms Sugden: It is my pleasure to contribute to the debate as an independent Member for East Londonderry and as a member of the Committee for the Economy.

I associate myself with many of the comments made by other Members, in particular those of my colleagues on the Economy Committee. The micro inquiry is important work that sought the views of many stakeholders, who have a valuable input in developing a new skills strategy for Northern Ireland. I hope that their input will be considered.

I want to talk about the skills strategy in general, and my first comment is on previous success. I speak to many businesses across Northern Ireland, and I ask them why they wanted to come to Northern Ireland when other regions were open to them. They want to come to Northern Ireland because they believe that we have a very good skills offer. That is something that we must continue to build on. For example, one of the great policies taken forward by the Department for the Economy is the Assured Skills programme. I understand that the Minister continually announces new opportunities in that respect. What is great about such policies is that they look at industry and at the skills that are required and then enable individuals through on-the-job experience, and, hopefully, they get a job at the end of it. They invest in the individuals themselves, insofar as they will take an interest and decide whether it is for them. That is really important.

The same could be said for apprenticeships. As other Members have said, not everybody needs to go to university or have a full, formal education to get to where they want to be. I was on a call with the Minister prior to the debate, and we talked about the value of all jobs and all skilled work, whether it is that of an electrician, an architect or in other areas. It is really important that we put the same value on that and ensure that we work towards a strategy that also considers people's passions. People will want to work if it is an area in which they are interested. It is not good enough to say that people should just get a job; it is about investing in them as individuals, and they in turn will invest in their communities.

Others spoke about cross-departmental working, which is key. We need to look at our system of education, the career pathways and the advice that is given to young people when they get to the point in their life when they decide what they want to do. It is not enough to say that people should go down a certain pathway because of who they are or because of their background. Today, I heard that some young women were not being encouraged to go down the STEM route, for example. That might be simply because of their gender or, perhaps, because their school has not encouraged that route previously and there is no legacy of that. We need to look at how we develop that. We need to ensure that the advice given in a school is in line with the advice given in all other schools across Northern Ireland. Someone in rural east Londonderry should not

have different opportunities from someone in Belfast or Derry. It is important that we look at that.

The Department for Communities should also have an input, as others have said. I remain disappointed that Job Start has not been progressed in Northern Ireland, despite assurances that we would get it last November. There are jobs and opportunities there. Northern Ireland is at a disadvantage because we are not progressing that scheme. We need to ensure that there is cross-departmental working on that type of scheme in any future skills strategy and ensure that we can take the opportunities when we find them. We will be left behind, and that serves no one in Northern Ireland.

We also have to look at the situation in a post-COVID era and what that means when we work from home. That will require improved infrastructure, and we see a broadband roll-out across Northern Ireland that will help with that. However, there might be other things that we need to do. How do we support people working from home, particularly if they live in rural areas? It is not enough to say that you get in front of your laptop, behind your desk, as I am doing now. Social interaction is important, and important relationships need to be built. How do we feed that into a skills strategy that considers a new, post-COVID world?

We also have to look at the issue in light of it being 2021. What does the economy look like? Today is International Women's Day. I organised a call with the Minister prior to the debate, and we talked about young women and the businesses that they are taking forward, businesses that fit into their lives and their family lives but give them the opportunities to be successful. In 2021, they utilise social media and other opportunities to ensure that their business is a success. We cannot look at the economy in the traditional way that we did before, particularly in a post-COVID era. COVID seems to have pushed us forward
[Inaudible.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Ms Sugden: There are a lot of opportunities. I am pleased that the Minister is looking at this and trying to develop something new. That is good for everyone in Northern Ireland.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I apologise to the Chair of the Committee for being a little too late to hear her opening remarks. The debate started earlier than we had anticipated.

I thank the Chair and Members for their contributions to the debate. I welcome the focus on skills of the Executive, Assembly and other stakeholders. There has never been a more important time to focus on and invest in skills. Only last month, I published my economic recovery action plan with a firm emphasis on the importance of investing in skills, if we, as an Assembly and Executive, are serious about economic recovery. I was pleased to see a wide range of business organisations and other stakeholders endorse my plan, and I trust that I can count on the support of the Committee and the Assembly in calling for the Executive to fund that comprehensive plan to reopen, recover and rebuild the local economy.

In addition to my economic recovery action plan, officials in my Department have been working on a new skills strategy for Northern Ireland. Therefore, from my perspective, the

Committee's report is timely and helpful. The context, however, in which we are developing the strategy has changed considerably over the past 18 months. When we began developing the strategy, the biggest challenge for businesses across Northern Ireland was access to skills and talent. That position has changed dramatically, with unemployment figures at a record high and the potential for a further increase when the furlough scheme comes to an end. We also have a range of long-standing issues in the labour market, with low levels of productivity, high incidence of economic inactivity and a disproportionate number of people with low or no skills. I agree that the skills strategy has a key role to play in addressing the short-term challenges arising as a consequence of COVID and in addressing the long-term, systemic weaknesses in our economy that have bedevilled us for decades. That said, a strategy on its own cannot bring about the societal and cultural changes that are necessary to address those deep-seated issues. We will need everyone — government, business, education and communities — to play their part.

4.00 pm

Funding is undoubtedly a key component of the changes that are necessary. There is no doubt that we are losing ground to our competitors. There has been a disinvestment in skills over the past decade across the public and private sectors, and that is a trend that we must reverse. I look forward to Members who participated in the debate today supporting my bids to the Finance Minister to do just that.

I also agree that there is an opportunity to consider whether there are more efficient ways to deliver training and development, particularly given the move to online delivery as a consequence of the pandemic. I also believe that we need to change attitudes to learning and upskilling. Our economy is changing very quickly, with automation and digitisation transforming the workplace. My colleague Mr Stalford noted the number of jobs created in the tech sector during the pandemic. He quite rightly acknowledges the importance of matching skills with future jobs markets. It is essential that employers and individuals recognise the need to invest time and money in skills development. We no longer have the luxury of a job for life, and we all have a responsibility to prepare ourselves for the changes that are happening now and in the future. Increasingly, we need to make it clear that lifelong learning is a key to earning.

That point is very clearly articulated in the first theme in the report, supporting our people to greater employability. I am committed to supporting companies and individuals through the transition and, ultimately, to deliver the outcome of more people in better jobs. We already have some superb programmes such as Skills Focus and InnovateUs, which are delivered through our colleges and are aimed at supporting SMEs to upskill employees. We want to build on that success and provide further opportunity to help those companies to grow. I also intend to launch a suite of skills interventions that will assist individuals to gain the skills that they need in areas such as digital technologies and to gain employability skills and skills in leadership and management. That will be a £15 million investment over the next three years that will make a positive contribution to our economy.

The second theme deals with academic institutions and community learning. There is no doubt that we can and

must have a more joined-up skills ecosystem in Northern Ireland. That was a key issue raised by the OECD report published last year, and it will be a focus for me and for the Education Minister. Part of creating a more joined-up system will be to ensure that individuals have all the relevant information about career pathways to make informed choices about their future, and I do note the comments from Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart and Mr O'Dowd about careers advice. We need careers advice to be valuable, to be flexible and to indicate to young people that all pathways are equally valid and equally valued.

In reference to Claire Sugden's intervention, I had a really uplifting call with her and some members of the north coast business community to celebrate achievements of women on International Women's Day. Indeed, we must ensure that more young people, like some of those on the call, are able to engage in the STEM pathways, with the success that they are already proving.

I also wholeheartedly agree with the points that were made around community-based learning. I am a passionate supporter of community education. I have seen at first hand the positive impact that community learning can have on people's lives. Not everyone will want to or can attend university or college, and we have to find a pathway that meets the needs of everyone in our society and ensures that no one is left behind. I note that the Member from Fermanagh indicated the importance of online learning and access to better broadband, and I am excited to inform the House that, this week, we will announce the first live connection with Project Stratum, the £165 million intervention to provide first-generation broadband to rural parts of Northern Ireland from the DUP's confidence-and-supply deal with the Government.

The third theme usefully sets out some key points on how skills can assist the COVID response. As I said, that resonates very strongly on a number of different levels. I repeat my call for the Committee to support the funding for the recovery action plan. Investment is key. I have made a number of bids to the Executive for funding in the next financial year, including £50 million for a suite of skills interventions. A key part of that investment will be to grow and expand our apprenticeship offering. We have made great progress on growing the apprenticeship system into new areas and at higher levels. We now have nearly 1,000 higher-level apprentices working and studying at foundation and degree level. That is in addition to the 9,000 apprenticeships at levels 2 and 3. One of my priorities was to support the system during the pandemic. That is why we introduced the support for employers to retain their apprentices and recruit new ones. As we look forward, we need to expand that initiative. We also need to expand apprenticeships by removing the current age restrictions so that everyone, irrespective of age, is able to retrain and gain skills. We also need to ensure that the public sector becomes a much larger player in the apprenticeship system and offers a range of public-sector apprenticeships. That will be key to our economic recovery.

I also want to increase the scale of the Assured Skills programme and short-term courses to assist individuals back into employment. As was pointed out in the debate, the Assured Skills programme is one of the huge successes in that policy area. Firms such as KPMG announced its centre of excellence for Northern Ireland,

which created 200 new jobs in Northern Ireland, because it had access to the Assured Skills programme. We need to keep investing in the programme and lauding the flexibility that it offers employers as they seek to grow or even establish themselves here.

The report also identifies inclusive learning in the workplace as a key theme. I have already referenced my intention to expand the apprenticeships programme and the policy work that we are doing to replace existing European social fund (ESF) projects. I recognise that individuals face a range of barriers to employment, including childcare and access to benefits. Those are issues that span multiple Departments and that I know are actively being considered by the respective Ministers. I had a very productive conversation last week with the Communities Minister about the intention to launch new skills programmes with the really complementary programme of Job Start so that the two can work together on skills and the employability issues that will be needed for the economic recovery pathway.

The Committee report highlights lifelong learning as a theme. I have already stressed the importance that I place on that. It will be a key priority for the new strategy. For a range of reasons, we in Northern Ireland do not participate in learning beyond formal education. We languish at the bottom of the league table when compared with other European countries. That may be cultural, but we need a step change. We need to understand that a love of learning goes beyond the early years, school and university and that it is available to all of us at any stage in our life. As I have said before, we need to ensure that there is a pathway for everyone, whether that be into a job, into training or staying in education. We have already restarted our work on the 14- to 19-year-old project. The synergies that we will need between education and further education are very important.

I also want us to enable young people to make those pathway choices earlier than the current prescriptive age of 16.

As the Chair said in her opening comments, collaboration and cooperation across government are key if we are to deliver on the ambition contained in any new skills strategy. Success requires a whole-government approach and is not just the responsibility of the Department for the Economy. I am pleased to say that every Department is represented on the project board that leads the strategy, and I hope that I have demonstrated that to you today by talking about the conversations I have had across government about skills, employability and economic recovery.

I am actively considering the establishment of a Northern Ireland skills council, an advisory body that would include business representatives, employee representatives, education representatives and individuals with expert knowledge of the emerging demands on the skills system in an ever-changing economic environment. An early priority for such a body would be to ensure that gender diversity and equality of opportunity were at the top of the education, skills and employability agenda. As I said, the development of a new skills system in Northern Ireland is a major undertaking, but it is imperative if Northern Ireland is to flourish over the next decade.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call on Sinead McLaughlin, the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy, to conclude and wind up the motion. You have up to 10 minutes.

Ms McLaughlin (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I am delighted to rise on behalf of the Economy Committee to wind up today's extremely important debate. As the Committee Chair and other members of the Committee have indicated, we are keen to engage with the Minister to ensure that the views of Members and stakeholders on the shape of the new skills strategy are acted on. I thank the Minister and all the Members who contributed for their participation today. I also thank the many stakeholders who contributed their views to the Committee's special report, as well as the Committee team for their work.

I will take a brief moment to make a personal reflection on this International Women's Day. Access to skills and education is a life-enhancing right, but, for many women in the world today, it is not a privilege that they are afforded. There are over 132 million women in the world who are excluded from education. We must challenge that and encourage change. Today's debate is also important because we, as Members of the Assembly, must ensure that we collectively do all that we can to develop and support a world-leading education and skills strategy, ensuring gender equality and barrier-free access for all.

I will now reflect on Members' contributions to the debate. The Chair of the Economy Committee, Caoimhe Archibald, gave context to the motion, stating that skills would be a key driver for economic growth and recovery. The importance of skills for all and the benefit of lifelong learning were highlighted. The Chair raised the matter of the urgency of closing the skills gap and deficits to promote entrepreneurship, increase productivity and reduce unemployment.

Chris Stalford, from South Belfast, said that the development of a skills strategy will require a cross-departmental approach. The Member also raised the issue of the need to fund bids coming from the Department for the Economy to fulfil many of the areas outlined in the motion as we move towards economic recovery.

John Stewart emphasised the need for the skills strategy to remain a live document that is acted on and the importance of a skills-for-all approach remaining a central focus. I concur with the Member about the lack of a Job Start programme based in Northern Ireland. The Member indicated that employers and young people were ready to engage with the Job Start programme and asked the Economy Minister to engage with the Minister for Communities to find a solution.

Stewart Dickson concentrated his comments on matching skills with the needs of the economy. He also raised the important issue of delivering first-class careers advice and guidance in our schools and communities.

4.15 pm

Gary Middleton concentrated on skills being an important COVID exit strategy. He also highlighted the need to finance the economy recovery plan. Jemma Dolan raised the issue of brain drain, particularly in rural areas. Jemma highlighted women's access to skills and discussed the need for affordable childcare and caring support. John

O'Dowd stated that the relationship with the economy is complex and changing. He cited three key changes that will impact on our economy imminently: COVID and Brexit and the green economy. He said that there is a need to value all skills pathways, not just academic ones. Claire Sugden indicated that skills are the main reason cited by investors who choose to locate in Northern Ireland and that, therefore, we must continue to develop and evolve our skills base. She indicated that not everyone needs to go to university and that it is important that we value all career pathways.

Finally, Minister Dodds gave a very warm welcome to the micro inquiry and report, which she said was timely and necessary. The economic action plan places a strong emphasis on skills, but one of the key areas that the Minister highlighted is the need for investment. She discussed longstanding problems with our economy and the need for a skills ecosystem. She indicated that this needs to have all-government support and that everybody must be involved: government, business and education. The Minister encouraged change in delivery; she also encouraged change in attitudes. She linked learning and earning and said that it is important that the outcome is that people are in better, well-paid jobs. The Minister went on to say that she is giving great consideration to a Northern Ireland skills council and that she hopes to set something up to support skills development in the near future.

I thank everybody for participating in the debate. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the Committee for the Economy's special report providing evidence from stakeholders to inform the forthcoming skills strategy; supports the development of a cross-departmental and inclusive approach to skills development; recognises the need for collaboration between the public sector, employers, industry and all levels of education to ensure that our people have the right skills and access to lifelong learning; and calls on the Minister for the Economy and her Executive colleagues to use this evidence in planning for the new skills strategy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments before the next item of business.

Private Members' Business

Promoting a Gender-sensitive Assembly

Ms Bailey: I beg to move

That this Assembly, on International Women's Day, notes recommendation 12 of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's 'Report on Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly', which proposed that the Assembly should consider adopting measures to create a gender-sensitive Assembly; and endorses the recommendations in the gender-sensitive Assembly action plan as put forward by the Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus.

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 to propose and a further 10 minutes to wind up the debate. All other Members will have five minutes. I now invite Ms Bailey to open the debate on the motion.

Ms Bailey: Happy International Women's Day to everyone in the Chamber. This is the first time that there have been predominantly females in the Chamber, and that is good to see. Thanks to Trevor and Mike — yes, you get a special mention.

I move the motion as the current chair of the Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus. Members will be aware that the 2015 'Report on Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly' set out to analyse the key challenges and barriers facing women when entering politics in Northern Ireland and the Assembly. It also made recommendations to enhance the role of women already active in the political arena. One of those recommendations was the creation of the Women's Caucus and another was the establishment of a gender-sensitive Northern Ireland Assembly.

We have come a long way with the representation of women in political life in Northern Ireland, but we have not come far enough. The Good Friday/Belfast Agreement committed to increasing women's participation, but women remain under-represented. Time and time again, Northern Ireland has been called out on that.

The Assembly and Executive Review Committee's report stated that it is a serious matter to be addressed urgently. But where is that urgency? Only 35% of our MLAs are women. It is time to get a little bit more urgent. To say that that is overdue structurally and institutionally is a gross understatement.

Our narrative in Northern Ireland for the past 20 or so years has been underpinned by parity of esteem, but that has not been extended to all of the people that the Assembly aims to represent. Where is the parity of esteem for women? Where is the parity of esteem for those with multisectionalities? Representation is not true or effective unless there is adequate representation for all the people who we are here to legislate for. There is no shortage of potential leadership outside the Chamber, and it is up to the Assembly to endorse actions to counter the marginalisation that stops those potential leaders stepping forward. It is up to us. The Women's Caucus sees that as imperative, but we cannot effect that change unless we are supported by the Assembly.

We know that women's meaningful participation in politics helps to advance gender equality for society as a whole. We know that it affects the scope of the policy issues that are debated for legislation and the types of solutions that are brought forward. We know that it allows for greater responsiveness to people's needs. We also know that it increases cooperation among political parties towards having a more sustainable future. We know that having more women in positions of leadership and decision-making will reflect women's lived reality and will directly influence legislation and policymaking so that they meet the needs of women. Our Women's Caucus is an example of that. Today we bring forward the motion, united across party lines. The potential in that is transformative for the Assembly and Northern Ireland.

The engagement of women is crucial, but women are not a homogenous group. Women lead intersectional lives with different lived experiences that inform different priorities and needs. Political representation must reflect that. A gender-blind or gender-neutral approach does not work because society is neither gender-blind nor gender-neutral. Systemic, institutional and structural inequalities have seen to that.

We know the barriers. They are very well-understood by most, and they permeate across all sectors of women's lives. Many women have overcome those obstacles, which should be recognised and celebrated, but that is not enough. The playing field needs to be levelled for all women. Equal access to opportunities needs to be universal. That equality needs to be substantive.

Every woman MLA does an exceptional job because they carry extra burdens. We are at 35% of representation, and we need to be at 50%. A gender-sensitive approach is paramount if we are to meaningfully achieve that. The aims of the Women's Caucus are set at that. At 35%, we are on the way out of marginalisation, but considerable steps need to be taken in order to get the Assembly to where it needs to be. It will be only as the number of women MLAs increases that we will be able to work more effectively together in order to promote substantive gender-sensitive and institutional change. It is crucial to do that, and everyone should be brought along on that journey.

The root causes of marginalisation in the political sphere are well known universally and specifically here in Northern Ireland. Everyone must be involved in the solution to the problem. We must shift the focus of responsibility for advancing gender equality away from women MLAs and onto the Assembly as a whole, which means all its Members, institutional culture, processes and mechanisms. Our gender-sensitive Assembly action plan looks at the Assembly carefully. It acknowledges the unseen but undeniably felt barriers that deter the presence of women and limit their participation and retention, and it brings forward strong and actionable solutions.

A gender-sensitive Assembly is one that meets the requirements of all the people in its structures, one that does not enforce direct or indirect discriminatory practices, is one that is family-friendly, one where women and men's needs to live and work are enabled and one where sexist language and behaviour are not tolerated. That directly results in legislation-making processes that are gender-sensitive and more effective.

It results in Parliaments that deliver better to constituents, fulfil the democratic mandate and are more legitimate overall. All member states of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which includes the UK, adopted a plan of action for gender-sensitive Parliaments in 2012. Westminster has taken significant steps to work towards that, but our devolved Assembly is lagging far behind.

4.30 pm

The Women's Caucus's action plan lays out a clear guide for how we can fulfil our end of the bargain so that we can improve the overall quality and legitimacy of this institution in order to be recognised on the world stage as an example of best practice. This is an unparalleled opportunity to be outward-looking rather than insular and to keep pace with international standards so that we do not continue to procrastinate, stagnate or row back on our hard-won gains on gender equality.

The gender-sensitive Assembly action plan addresses how to do that by setting out priorities and strategies, and targeted interventions that are achievable and essential. It focuses on the needs and interests of current and future female MLAs around the Assembly's structures, operations and methods, and aims to address the problems of discrimination and recrimination; on processes that facilitate participation for everyone, such as a formal mechanism to enable the Women's Caucus to bring forward issues of concern, and reviewing the Assembly's voting mechanisms; on actions that promote equality and participation, such as initiatives that are related to encouraging women to enter politics and targeted engagement with the media; on an environment that is accessible to women and men, has zero tolerance of discriminatory and sexist language and where all MLAs are encouraged to engage in the gender mainstreaming processes; and on gender-sensitive political parties and politicians as being essential elements in driving forward that change. The Women's Caucus wants to encourage women into politics and support them once they are elected to enable them to remain in those positions and champion their progression.

The Assembly and Executive Review Committee recommended those measures, so we are now bringing them forward in the action plan with a road map for implementing them. We recognise the problem and present an effective, robust and sustainable solution. I call on the Assembly to endorse the action plan so that we may finally take the steps to create a gender-sensitive Assembly. I commend the motion to the House.

I want to make a short contribution in my capacity as an MLA and Green Party member. I thank the previous chairs of the caucus, some of whom are in the Chamber. I particularly thank Cairtriona Ruane, who, when I was first elected in 2016, was the chair of the caucus and gave me a special invite to join; at that time, the rules of the caucus did not allow me to be a member automatically.

There is so much that I would like to say today, on International Women's Day, not only to mark the achievements and hard-won rights of women but to acknowledge the long road that lies ahead. In my last few seconds, I pay tribute to the women from the North West Migrants Forum for the launch of their new project and for finding not only their voice but their power in challenging the barriers and institutions that keep them marginalised. I

pledge to do all that I can to support them and look forward to seeing some of them being elected to the Chamber.

Mr Speaker: I call Paula Bradley. All Members will have up to five minutes in which to speak.

Ms P Bradley: Thank you, Mr Speaker. At the end of the speech from the chair of the caucus, I was reminded of a time when Mitchel McLaughlin was in the Chair for one of our debates on International Women's Day. I was speaking and went well over time and, when I sat down, he said, "I daren't have interrupted you there". I absolutely get that and thank you, Mr Speaker, on Clare's behalf for allowing her to go over time.

Mr Speaker: Mitchel was always a soft touch, if you know what I mean [*Laughter.*]

Ms P Bradley: I also join Clare in wishing everyone in the Chamber a very happy International Women's Day. I begin by thanking all the wonderful women who have supported me and given me the strength through this journey, which at certain times has been horrendous and at other times has been a wonderful experience. I say a big thank you to all of them. I also want to thank all the many women who, over the past year of COVID, have stepped up to the mark. They have been at the front and centre of their communities, front and centre of our health service and front and centre of our retail services, so a big thank you to them.

When I was looking through the pack prepared for us today, I read through some of the speeches. It was extremely thought-provoking to see the names of so many strong women who have stood in the Chamber over the 10 years that I have been here and delivered speeches on International Women's Day. We had Karen McKeivitt, Megan Fearon, Jo-Anne Dobson and Sandra Overend. Of course, I have to mention the great defender of rights for women, Caitríona Ruane — someone who, I am proud to say, was, by the end of that term, a very good friend.

I have very fond memories of them all, and reading their contributions took me back to 2015, when I sat on the AER Committee. Trevor also sat on the Committee, as did Pat. It was a really motivational time, a time of hope and a time when we felt that we were going to bring about great change.

We have brought about change. This is a very different Chamber from the Chamber that I remember from 2011, when I first came here. There is a different dynamic in the Chamber. We no longer hear the heckling when a woman gets up to speak that I experienced then. By the end of the 2011-16 mandate, every Member who sat on these Benches knew that that was not acceptable, because I did not accept it. I did not like it, I did not want it, and I did not want to see any female in the Chamber being treated in that way.

As I said, we have hope, and there have been many good things. However, as the chair of the caucus said, we have so much more to do. We had three years when we did not have the Assembly, and we have had the COVID pandemic for the past year, but I am so glad to see this issue back on the agenda in the Chamber. What change can we effect to encourage the many women who will come behind us? Some of you will be here for many years after I am long gone, and a whole new generation of women should feel

part of politics in Northern Ireland. I absolutely support that.

Various issues prohibit women from entering politics, and the chair touched on some of them. If you ask me whether I recommend being an elected Member, my answer will fluctuate. Some days, I will say, "Absolutely. It's one of the greatest things you could do". On other days, I will say, "Stay away from it. It is awful, it is toxic, it is horrible", but that is a reference to outside; not in here.

I read a report in the 'Belfast Telegraph' — I took part in it — that a quarter of female MLAs had been sexually harassed and three quarters had experienced sexism on social media. The report described the influence that that has on our lives. It has a deep influence on our lives and on how we behave, and that should not be the case. As women who are elected and standing up for what we believe in, we should not have to face that tyranny of abuse.

I was heartened to see the Westminster report on pregnancy. I think that it was about Ministers. The Assembly definitely needs to look at that, especially for all you wonderful young women out there — not so much for me — when it comes to pregnancy, proxy voting and taking leave to have your children. I remember what Michelle Gildernew and Nichola Mallon had to face in those first few months after having a baby. After this debate, we need to take that forward positively. We also need to look at paternity leave. A gender-sensitive Assembly is not about just women; it is about equality across the board for women and men.

In finishing, I want to say a big thank you to Mike Nesbitt and Trevor Lunn. Trevor Lunn has been a great supporter of this issue from our time on the AER Committee all those years ago. Thank you also to Mike Nesbitt, my vice-chair on the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 all-party group, who has shown real commitment to effecting change in women's lives. To all those many men out there who are supporters and feminists in their own right, I say a big thank you. We need more of you. We need you to step up to the mark and put it out there and on the record that you support women.

Ms Sheerin: There is nothing difficult to follow there at all; thanks, Paula.

I am delighted to support the motion as a member of the Women's Caucus and in my capacity as Sinn Féin's equality spokesperson. The theme of this year's International Women's Day is "Choose to Challenge" and the creation of a gender-sensitive Assembly is key to challenging many of the obstacles that women and girls across the North face daily. This is not about having diversity for the sake of it, nor is it about gesture politics, which only ever have a place, in my opinion, when they are backed up by action. If you cannot see, you cannot be, but, more importantly, you will not be thought about.

For women across the globe, it takes an average of between eight and 10 years to get a diagnosis of endometriosis or PCOS, both of which have chronic pain as a symptom and require surgery to manage. If no one around the table has ever asked their doctor about their PMS, or has ever had to explain to a teacher that they could not do PE that day, or has ever realised that they have come to work without period products and have stood in a public toilet for 10 minutes with the sweat lashing

off them, trying to make a £1 coin fit into a slot that was made for a 50p piece, how can we ever expect to improve services for menstrual health? If knowledge and learning on those topics are not improved, and GPs are still going to prescribe the contraceptive pill to 13-year-olds with extreme PMS instead of trying to identify the cause and treating them accordingly, how can anyone be expected to know what is healthy and what is not?

Research tells us that women have been disproportionately impacted by crises such as austerity, Brexit and COVID-19, with the last-named — the most recent of the three — as Paula mentioned, really exposing some deficits in our public services. We know that the unpaid care economy is dominated by women and that the majority of domestic and caring duties in the home fall to women. Additionally, research tells us that the majority of public-sector workers are women and that women are more likely to have been laid off or furloughed during COVID-19. When we look at that through an intersectional lens, we can see that women who also qualify in minority groupings, as was mentioned by Clare, the chair of the Women's Caucus, have been impacted even harder. Sixty three per cent of disabled women have struggled to access basic necessities during lockdown, and 43% of BAME women believe that they will be in more debt after the crisis, compared with 37% of white women. Leaving the EU is likely to result in a rollback of workers' rights, including parental leave, equal treatment and rights for part-time workers, on which women rely.

Those are many examples of how gender equality can be mainstreamed in policy. My party colleague Minister Deirdre Hargey has just published the report of her expert advisory panel on the gender equality strategy, which includes a commitment to implementing international human rights legislation to tackle gender neutrality in policymaking.

Given the aim of the motion, there are a number of practical steps that we should consider in order to encourage more women to get involved in public life. In my experience as a rural female representative, I have received support and help from men and women in my party. Sinn Féin has more female MLAs than others at the moment. One of the key policies that we have adopted internally is the use of gender quotas for elections, which means that our councillors, TDs, MLAs, seanadóirí and MPs are representative of our membership. The mainstreaming of affirmative action really does lead to positive results. Mandatory childcare for politicians is one of the key tenets of a gender-sensitive Parliament, recognising that parenting whilst in public office is incredibly difficult and demanding and that it is something that has a disproportionate impact on women.

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women's (CEDAW) concluding observations in 2019 noted:

"the Committee remains concerned about the lack of uniform protection of women and girls from all forms of gender-based violence across the jurisdiction of the State party, noting with particular concern the inadequacy of laws and policies to protect women".

This Assembly should implement a stop violence against women and girls strategy to tackle gender-based violence, particularly as much of that originates in misogyny and

sexist prejudices. Those same discriminatory prejudices often manifest themselves in the form of online abuse from keyboard warriors and in negative comments about our appearance that we, as women, have to contend with every time we put ourselves out there.

The motion calls for the implementation of UNSCR 1325, which identified intimidation by paramilitary groups as an obstacle to female participation in public life. We have seen in recent weeks how that does not have to be exaggerated. To be a politician is to be a public servant and a community activist, and I got involved in politics because of my desire for a better and fairer Ireland. As such, my feminism is interlinked with my republicanism. Improving our Assembly to encourage more female participation can only be a positive thing for us all.

Ms S Bradley: I wish a happy International Women's Day to everybody here. I want to thank St Mary's High School in Newry, with which I had the privilege of joining this morning to celebrate International Women's Day. That was a very enjoyable experience.

At the beginning of the debate, many of us were recalling how, this time last year, the Assembly Chamber was filled with young women who were, shall I say, very enthusiastic and very inspiring.

Their absence today is noted. To have those young women around us definitely added to this place, and no doubt it will in the years ahead. During these COVID times, a bit of a dampener has been put on what we are trying to achieve through such events.

4.45 pm

That having been said, it is timely that we have brought forward the motion. I thank the officials on the caucus, who are predominantly women, and the Clerks who assisted and supported us in putting forward today's proposals. The action plan is not just about getting women into politics. In a way, we have started to become good at that. We have tried to understand the barriers and open doors. Perhaps what we are less good at, or where there is room for improvement, is retaining women in politics. When women arrive in the political forum, it may be that they are at an age and a time in their life when their choices are their own and are easier made. Once caring responsibilities become part of their life, however, there is definitely a different playing field. Ms Bradley listed names. I can think of a number of women who came through the House and perhaps left too early, and that was not always because of the expression of the electorate. It may have been because the facilities and opportunities in politics were not always there. We therefore need to get better at opening the door to women in political life. This place does stand as an example to other places and other workplaces through how we manage women in the workplace and offer facilities to them.

Reference was rightly made to childcare, not just in public life but in all walks of life. Childcare can be an absolute barrier to employment. It can be the deal-breaker that makes it not worth your while going out to work, because you will surrender so much and because there is little in the way of any financial reward or career prospects beyond that. That is not good enough. Women should have that choice, and it should be based on what they choose to do and want to do.

I thank my colleague and friend Pat Catney, who is doing a lot of work on period poverty. It is about individuals going off and taking on the mantle and task of doing small pieces, because all those little pieces of the jigsaw add up to making life better for women.

“Choose to Challenge” is the theme of this year’s International Women’s Day. I have chosen to challenge the lack of understanding about the issue of menopause that exists for women. It is still quite taboo in many circles. It is not openly talked about. It is not a comfortable conversation. Many people find it easier just to park the subject. I do not believe that we should. Here in Parliament Buildings, we can set an example to all. Some of the solutions to assist women through the menopause are not rocket science. Rather, they are simple things such as ensuring that there is air conditioning or a window nearby, an understanding that fresh, cool drinking water should be provided, or an understanding that, when a woman leaves a meeting, it is not an insult but might be necessary for a few moments.

I understand that many women, thankfully, go through menopause without it having any great effect. For some women, however, it can be quite problematic. Some of the jokes and jibes that are associated with the menopause can be quite hurtful, but they are brushed aside as light-hearted banter. At times, they are not. The menopause is a time in a woman’s life when there could be a knock to her confidence. It is for other women to build that woman up, not knock her down. We in the Chamber all need to be strong in our vocal support of those women. We also need to support the women and men who, as line managers, are charged with supporting those women. We need to know that they are comfortable. Let us open the conversation, make the language comfortable for everybody, and reach a time when it becomes a policy like all others, where we just understand that it is about making life better for women in their career and workplace.

I will end on that note. I thank everyone and wish everyone a happy International Women’s Day.

Mr Speaker: I will direct my fire at Mike Nesbitt. Remember: five minutes to speak.

Mr Nesbitt: I will not dare go one millisecond over my time, Mr Speaker.

On behalf of my party, I support the motion, thank its sponsors and wish everybody a happy International Women’s Day. I speak partly as deputy chair of the all-party group on UNSCR 1325: women, peace and security, and I thank the chair for her kind words. Behind the catchy title of that APG, there is great work going on. Jonna Monaghan and Liz Law of the Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform (NIWEP) do great work with us. Rachel Powell of the Women’s Policy Group (WPG) has brought forward the COVID-19 feminist recovery plan, which focuses on the gender pay gap and the disproportionate impact that the COVID pandemic has had on women.

I also speak with a little bit of international experience. I have been to Africa twice as an associate trainer with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) and have worked in Sudan and Ethiopia with aspiring female politicians. It seems to me that there is a commonality between what holds them back and what holds people back from coming into this Chamber. It is largely a fear of the unknown. To some extent, it is a fear of misogyny,

bullying and intimidation by men. It is also a fear of the impact on their work-life balance. Practical issues such as the absence of a crèche and working through late-night debates are all factors that need to be considered.

At that point, I have to address the imbalance in the MLA group of the Ulster Unionist Party. We do not even get over 30%, as you will all know. One of my deepest regrets on the day on which I gave up the leadership of the party — the day of the 2017 election results — was that we were saying goodbye to Jo-Anne Dobson and Sandra Overend. Sandra was the person who did most to encourage female membership of the Ulster Unionist Party at that time. She encouraged females to think about standing for election through the Dame Dehra Parker programme. I am sure that some of you will know —.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Nesbitt: I will give way, yes.

Mr Wells: I know Mrs Dobson very well. There was an allegation that, had the constituency been properly and evenly divided, Mrs Dobson would have had a reasonably even pool of votes to canvass. As a result of the configuration of the constituency, she feels, she was not given a fair crack of the whip. That is hardly promoting one of the best women we have had in this Building.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Nesbitt: I acknowledge the Member’s intervention. I am not sure how relevant it is to the debate. However, I will say this to the Member: in 2017, Mrs Dobson had a larger share of the constituency than she had in 2016 and had more first-preference votes to go for. She got elected in 2016. The fact that she did not get elected in 2017 does not reflect that she had votes taken away from her: she had a larger share of the constituency.

As I said, Dame Dehra Parker was the first woman to be elected, in 1921. She also had the distinction of becoming the first female to hold a Cabinet position, when she was made Minister of Health and Local Government in 1949.

I pay tribute to three councillor colleagues from Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council who have given a modern twist to the Parker programme: Julie Flaherty, Louise McKinstry and Jill MacAuley, who have run a social media campaign called “We need you, girl”. Last week, they had a major Zoom conference with a significant number of females engaging and expressing an interest in finding out more about becoming an elected representative.

During my five years as leader of the party, I found the easiest thing to do when trying to encourage people to come in was to identify whom I wanted — people such as Steve Aiken and Doug Beattie — speak to them directly and encourage them. When I went to potential female candidates, not one came back positively. It might be because of me, but I wonder to what extent it is about the reputation of the House and how they feel about it. Some really capable females, when they thought about it — they did not think about it for that long — said that they did not want to do it. We all need to reflect on that.

Briefly, I want to go on a tangent, but it is an important one. Another person whom I brought in — he was co-opted — was Andy Allen, and we should focus on the fact that we need to be more representative of people with disabilities.

When Andy first came here, he was in a wheelchair and he could not vote without somebody helping because there were steps and no appropriate ramp in the Division Lobby. I would love us to think about those issues as well.

My final thought is on the COVID feminist recovery plan. It was mid-November when I mentioned the plan to the First Minister and deputy First Minister in the House, and I still await their response. I hope that it is a positive one, because that would be a fitting mark for International Women's Day.

Ms Armstrong: Happy International Women's Day. Mr Speaker, thank you for allowing the debate to take place today. The motion has been co-signed by all parties and the independent Member and calls on the Assembly to adopt measures to create a gender-sensitive Assembly. I am the former deputy chair and current Alliance Party representative on the Assembly Women's Caucus, and I am proud to hold that position. I fully support our call for the Assembly to take forward a gender-sensitive action plan. I hope that, this time, we will finally be heard.

The Assembly and Executive Review Committee report, as mentioned by others — 'Report on Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly' — was published on 17 February 2015 and confirmed that:

"The Committee recommended that the Assembly should establish a working group on a gender sensitive parliament. The working group should have equal membership of male and female MLAs."

That group did not happen, but that does not mean that it still could not. In 2016, the Assembly acknowledged the work of the then Speaker's reference group. I was part of that group but not as an MLA; I had not been elected at that stage. I came along here voluntarily, to the visitors' cafe in the basement and to other rooms, and we discussed ways forward. At that time, there was a discussion that having quotas could improve the gender balance in this place. We are getting there, but, in 2021, here we are still asking for a gender-sensitive Parliament to be introduced.

The Women's Caucus, in having its first ever debate today, used the mechanism of cross-party signatures to get the motion on the agenda. I hope that, in future, the Women's Caucus could be recognised for its work and would, as our chair mentioned, be able to table motions in its own right, rather than having to adapt procedures to help us have our voices heard. The Women's Caucus request states that a gender-sensitive Parliament is one that responds to the needs and interests of men and women in its structures, operations, methods and work:

"A gender-sensitive parliament is founded on the principle of gender equality – that is, that both men and women have an equal right to participate in its structures and processes, without discrimination and without recrimination. A gender equality policy provides direction for the setting of priorities and strategic, well targeted interventions to achieve them."

There are three elements that are essential to us achieving a gender-sensitive Parliament: an environment that is accessible to both men and women; processes that facilitate the participation of both women and men; and actions that promote equality and participation.

As others have stated, there are specific actions that will enable the Assembly to take forward those elements, but we need to create an environment that recognises that the Assembly is comprised of people who are elected to serve everyone in Northern Ireland and to find ways to enable that to happen. For example, why do we not take the opportunity now to update Standing Orders to enable proxy voting outside of COVID arrangements to allow Members to have maternity, paternity and adoption leave or even sick leave? That would help to encourage younger women and men to be politicians. Why is it that my colleague Judith Cochrane is the only female MLA to have had a private Member's Bill reach Royal Assent? Why does the House not do something to talk to all the women MLAs and say, "What is stopping you? What is the barrier?"?

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Ms Armstrong: Not just at the moment.

Eileen Bell was our only female Speaker. There is an opportunity —.

Mr Wells: Where is the equality?

Ms Armstrong: You will have your opportunity in a moment, Mr Wells. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

5.00 pm

Ms Armstrong: In this place, we use words like "madam" and "mister". Why do we not just use the terms that people are given for the jobs that they have? There needs to be an audit of language in this place, which our report calls for, in order to make sure that it is inclusive.

Also, the House may congratulate itself on the provision of free sanitary products, but it ignores menopause, and I welcome the Member from the SDLP bringing that forward. Some of us struggle in this place with the heat blowing out of those fans or with the freezing cold air. It is not easy.

The problem is not in this room; it is getting to it. Social media, aggression, violence, attacks on offices and how the media treat us have a lot to do with that. At a previous International Women's Day, there was a female participation event and lots of young women were here. That night on the media, the one man who was in the room appeared on the television. They ignored all the rest of us — I see that a Member is nodding — who had done interviews. They ignored us completely.

Finally, I thank —.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Ms Armstrong: Mr Wells, I will give way.

Mr Wells: I want to put it on record that there was an inaccuracy there. Patricia Lewsley, an SDLP MLA for Lagan Valley, way back 20 years ago, successfully promoted and got a private Member's Bill through the House.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you for that.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you. I will maybe have to update the Bill Office, which provided me with that information, but there we go.

Finally, I thank the women — the grandmothers and the mummies, although some of us do not have them any more — on whose shoulders I stand. I also thank all those girls, including my daughter, who I embarrassed in the Chamber, and all those young women who are looking for inspiration for their time. I thank every one of you. We may all come from different political places, but, together, as women, we respect each other in this place. We work together and are trying our best for everyone across Northern Ireland. Thank you.

Mr Sheehan: I thank the Women's Caucus for tabling this very important motion on this, Lá Idirnáisiúnta na mBan — International Women's Day. You just have to look at the membership of the Assembly to see that women are still badly under-represented. Female under-representation cannot be seen in isolation from the way that society in general is organised and the gender inequality that exists in day-to-day life for women. Even today, a report in the media suggests that, on average, a young woman who is starting out on her working life today will, when she reaches retirement age, end up with £100,000 less in her pension pot than a man. That is not right. That is just one small example of how women are disadvantaged, but there are many more.

We in the Assembly have a responsibility to try to ensure that gender equality is a priority. It rests with us, as political leaders, to set an example. While there have been improvements in here over the years, there is still a long way to go before we have a genuinely fair and gender-sensitive institution.

There are, of course, many barriers that must be overcome before we reach that holy grail, not least the fact that this institution is not family-friendly. I am constantly amazed by the ability of my female colleagues not just in my party but across the parties to carry out their role as elected representatives, which includes late-night sittings and meetings in the evenings after we finish here. This is no nine-to-five job with 37.5 hours a week. We are constantly on call, and there is no doubt that that impinges on and intrudes into family life.

However, we here on our own will not resolve what is a deeply rooted societal problem of inequality. Education clearly has a role to play in encouraging girls to pursue what could be seen as non-traditional subjects such as science, technology, engineering and maths. There should also be mandatory subjects in schools relating to gender relations and the empowerment of girls and women.

As was highlighted, childcare is an obstacle for many women. Data from NISRA shows that the most common reason for economic inactivity among men has been identified as sickness or disability. However, for women, the most common reason is unpaid caring responsibilities. It is a fact that women, in the main, take on caring responsibilities, especially for children. How can we attract women into politics if we do not make the effort to provide childcare? The Assembly needs to set an example by establishing childcare facilities for Members.

In politics, women suffer more than men with harassment and abuse, both within politics and on social media. I noted Paula's comments that the heckling that used to be common in the Chamber has ended. I remember the Women's Coalition, in particular, complaining about male Members mooring when they got up to speak. I am glad to

say that that is a thing of the past. There have also been many instances of misogynistic, hateful and sexist abuse towards female politicians from all parties on social media. Greater deterrents are needed to end that type of behaviour. Awareness training is also needed to get women into politics. Assembly staff need training so that they can anticipate policies or procedures that may have an adverse impact on women fulfilling their role as elected representatives on an equal footing with their male colleagues.

I send my solidarity to all female colleagues from all parties on this International Women's Day.

Ms Dolan: Happy International Women's Day to everybody. Women should be respected and appreciated every day, but their impact on and contribution to our lives should be particularly celebrated today. I commend the staff of the Women's Caucus for keeping us in check and putting the motion together.

It is internationally recognised that society's needs are better served when there is diverse political representation. While the recent increase in the 2016 and 2017 Assembly elections is welcome, women are still under-represented in the Assembly at only 33%, despite constituting 53% of the population. That is the lowest female representation compared with other devolved legislatures. The North of Ireland also has the lowest percentage of female councillors with only 26%. Currently, in the Dáil, general election guidelines require candidate quotas of 30% women. The introduction of gender quotas before the 2016 general election to the Dáil increased the proportion of female candidates by 6.5%. Sinn Féin has been working to increase its female representation. An example of the benefit of that is that its Assembly team now has more female MLAs than males, and its two party leaders are women.

A political career path is deemed as being not family-friendly due to long plenary sittings and the varying demands that are placed on Members' time. It remains true that women are the main carers in our society, and, as such, we need to explore strategies to improve the work-life balance and consider childcare issues and other caring responsibilities, issues that have already been touched on today. If we are serious about getting more young women into political life, we need to make some serious but very doable changes. As far as I am aware — I stand to be corrected — the permanent secretary of the Department of Finance was looking into allocating space on the estate for a childcare centre and/or a family room for MLAs and Assembly staff. That would be a positive step and should be pursued.

The low percentage of women in elected roles here is a microcosm of the under-representation of women in sectors across society. NISRA statistics show that, in 2020, women constituted 79% of those in part-time employment in the North, and one third of working-age women are economically inactive. That compares unfavourably with a wider average across these islands, where women constitute 74% of part-time employees and 25.6% of those deemed economically inactive. Structural inequality disadvantages women through the persistence of a gender pay gap in the North. Research by the Association for Real Change (ARC) and Ulster University shows that the gross median weekly female earnings are £127 less than men's. All employers must work to end the gender pay gap in order to advance women's rights and workers' rights.

In Britain, gender-disaggregated data shows how many women are claiming universal credit and how many redundancies have been of females.

That crucial data is needed here to determine the extent of gender inequality. However, NISRA data is not disaggregated by gender. Publishing gender-disaggregated data is one of many measures that can be taken by the Assembly to make the labour market more equal.

Women are more likely to be engaged in informal, temporary or precarious forms of employment, including employment with zero-hours contracts. To tackle that, I am bringing forward a Bill that will end zero-hours contracts and replace them with banded hours contracts. That will provide stable employment for women. In the North, many of the women in poverty work. This is connected to reduced working hours for women. They are more likely to work part-time and struggle to increase their hours of work due to caring responsibilities. Caring for young children limits the number of hours that a person can work and the distance that they can travel for work, which leaves many women locked in poverty, especially when jobs are low-paid.

The campaign theme for International Women's Day 2021 is "Choose to Challenge". Therefore, we should be challenging ourselves to implement the changes necessary to become a gender-sensitive Assembly and society.

Ms Hunter: Happy International Women's Day, everyone. This is my first in the Assembly, so I am delighted to speak today. Historically, women in Northern Ireland have played a huge role in paving the path to peace. We draw inspiration from the likes of Brid Rodgers, Mo Mowlam, Monica McWilliams and so many more. Shining a light on today, the SDLP wholeheartedly supports the motion on creating a gender-sensitive Assembly. I thank Clare and the other Members involved in tabling it.

It is fantastic to see more women involved in politics, but the reality of how far we have left to go is eye-opening. I continue to be inspired when I see women across all political affiliations leading from the front. Looking at other parties, it is evident to me that, despite our political differences, many across the House are undeniably passionate and wholeheartedly devoted to the betterment of their communities, and I respect you all for that.

Whether as a councillor, MLA or MP, it is most welcome to see so many women becoming politically involved, especially in grassroots activism. I wholeheartedly welcome the fact that Queen's student union now has an all-female line-up: a very capable bunch indeed.

There are many evident barriers for female politicians. However, many are not so visible and happen behind closed doors. Often, sadly, such barriers, when not challenged, can be found in council chambers: the dismissive attitudes; the overlooking of intellect; not attributing ideas to the women who came up with them; and the, "You're new here. Watch how we've always done it". However, I am an optimist when it comes to change. I believe that we are in a transitional and transformative part of our history. Women are single-handedly challenging the more traditional ideas of what a decision-maker, a policymaker or a peacebuilder looks like. At my age, it has been a very interesting experience. Other female MLAs and councillors of a similar age would probably agree that, at the best of times, it is not always easy or straightforward and that the path has not yet been carved out. There is

often an assumption that young people in politics lack the life experience to lead. I do not think that that is true. I have often found that, if you are not tenacious and dogmatic in your approach, you are seen to be doing it wrong, and that you have to be inherently more masculine to fulfil the role.

My vision for the future is that, within our political structures in Northern Ireland, we start to see greater diversity in our representatives to reflect our changing population and demographic. On the topic of making the Assembly more inclusive, we must urgently address the shaming of women in political roles and public life who take maternity leave. Representatives in the South have voiced concern about that. Maternity leave should not be negotiated; it is a fundamental right. Nichola Mallon, the SDLP Minister, and Claire Hanna have raised this and are seeking change.

Looking at our past political landscape, we see that women have had to fight just to be at the table. They have done incredible work, especially the Women's Coalition in the 1990s. It was really inspiring to see women coming together and rising above the religious and sectarian tensions of that time to do the best for their families and communities. Being a member of the ceasefire generation, I feel a sense of obligation to maintain the peace and stability that women fought so hard for then and for which, as we have seen in the Chamber, they continue to fight.

5.15 pm

More women in politics is a very positive thing. In Scotland, for example, we saw the free provision of period products in 2019. I am inspired by the work of my colleague Pat Catney in seeking to eradicate period poverty. It is a subject that we all know is traditionally taboo, but I love that it is being brought forward by a man with two daughters who speaks without shame on the matter.

There are many challenges left to be addressed. It is important that we all keep the doors open and do not pull the ladder up behind us but that we encourage more women of all ages and backgrounds to become involved in politics. Female leaders should not be limited or defined by what they wear, what they look like or whether they choose to have children or not. Women collectively coming together and having discussions like we have had today — politicians, activists on the ground, those working in the community and voluntary sector — need to speak up on the barriers and the sexism. We should continue to challenge the current barriers and to strive for change.

Miss Woods: I thank the Women's Caucus for tabling the motion. On International Women's Day, it is especially timely and significant that we should be debating the issue. The motion talks of the Assembly adopting measures to create a gender-sensitive Assembly, and I totally agree, but I want to put a question to you all listening here today. What national Parliaments across the world have the highest percentage of women elected? Just think about it. I will tell you at the end, and no cheating. Do not look it up on Google. I will give you a clue. The UK ranks thirty-ninth.

We have only to look around the Assembly to see the imbalance that we have with the representation of female MLAs. There are 32 of us, which is similar to Westminster, which has around 33%, and at our council level. We have to ask ourselves why that is and what we are going to do about it. What are the barriers to women becoming elected

here? Could it be the toxic masculinity of some areas of politics and the constant misogyny? Is it acceptable for female politicians to be told that they, as the only women present in a room full of men, are there to make up the gender balance or to make cups of tea? Of course not. It is totally wrong, and things need to change.

Paula has already mentioned this, but I was one of the female MLAs who was recently interviewed by Suzanne Breen about our experiences as female politicians, and we all must have said similar things. Seventy per cent of us have had sexist remarks made to our face by men, and three quarters have experienced sexism on social media.

Vile comments are made about women in the political arena, especially in party leadership, about what they wear, what shoes they wear, what they look like, their hair, their make-up, their personal life and their relationship status, why they are not married, why they do not have children and what age they are. That has to stop. Personal attacks, abuse and harassment disproportionately affect women in public life, and not enough is being done to give a positive platform and credit to women who lead in our society. That is why debates on days like this are so important.

I will touch on what has already been mentioned: where is our childcare strategy? Juggling the demands of work and family is so difficult and renders many women unable to seek meaningful employment. Too often, the only option available is poorly paid work or a zero-hours contract. Having to spend the little money that they have on childcare pushes women back into a vicious cycle of struggling to balance work and looking after family.

Women bore the brunt of so-called welfare reform, and still do, and women are disproportionately affected by climate breakdown. Women are there to pick up the pieces to ensure that they not only stand as representatives but do so in positions of leadership, as well as looking at other groups that are traditionally sidelined, such as those who are disabled, as Mike mentioned, but also those who identify as LGBTQ+ and BAME women. Where are they? How do we get to 50:50 representation? Those are all questions that political parties and Departments must address sooner rather than later.

On a wider point, there is a worrying trend in many policies to neutralise gender and the realities that we actually live in. If that trend continues, it will be to our detriment. If we fail to recognise the gendered nature of specific societal issues, we will fail to deal with them. It is my firm belief that the blind pursuit of policies that neutralise gendered issues is a failure of government. Gender is not neutral. Societal problems such as domestic abuse and sexual violence are gendered issues, and, if we fail to recognise that in government, we fail to effectively tackle such issues. We cannot bury our heads in the sand.

Much more work needs to be done to recognise the unique circumstances and experience of women in the criminal justice system, for instance. The prison system was built by men for men: that is recognised. We need to look at those who find themselves homeless as a result of being trafficked, exploited and abused.

I could go on all day, but, to give an answer to the question that I posed at the start, the national Parliaments with the highest percentage of females elected are Rwanda, Cuba and the UAE.

I thank the members of the caucus for bringing forward the motion. I choose to challenge each and every one of us in the Assembly to celebrate women's achievement, to raise awareness against bias and to take action for equality.

Mr Carroll: I did not intend to speak at all. It is important that these debates be led by women, and they have been led very strongly today. Being a sole MLA, however, I have to speak to offer my party's support to all the women here and everybody on International Women's Day.

If I may paraphrase Kellie Armstrong, the problem is not in the Chamber. We saw previously an MLA signify the problem exactly. When women are speaking, they should be listened to, even if there is disagreement. Talking about men's equality, or alluding to it, is very offensive on any level, but especially today. I think that that is worth saying.

I offer my solidarity to everybody in our community. I offer it to all the women who have been working throughout the pandemic as healthcare workers, nurses and people in ICU but also, as Members have said, to those in caring responsibilities, which fall overwhelmingly on the shoulders of women. Women have always been at the forefront — you do not need me to tell you — of the struggle to change the world and in fighting for a better world. International Women's Day has its origins in radical, socialist and feminist women fighting to change the world. It is worth remembering that.

I just wanted to offer my support for the motion and solidarity to everybody, here and beyond, on International Women's Day.

Mr Lunn: I welcome the motion. I noticed that it was tabled by six female Members. It could have been more gender-balanced than that, if you had asked, but there we are. I do not blame you for that.

A Member: It is the Women's Caucus.

Mr Lunn: Yes. Other Members mentioned the genesis of the Women's Caucus, which came about through the Speaker's Reference Group, which Steven Agnew and I sat on. We faded out of the process after that.

That is all by the way. I wish everybody, as everybody else has done, a very happy International Women's Day, and that includes the men as well. We are just as entitled to have a happy day as the women are. *[Laughter.]* If our women are happy, we probably will be, too.

I was a Member of the AERC when the topic came up. Paula referred to it earlier. My natural modesty prevents me from saying which Member proposed that we discuss the topic at the Committee, but let us just say that it was me. *[Laughter.]* I was prompted at that time by a former Member who has been mentioned several times. She is a very good friend of mine, and we became friends through the Assembly. That is Caitríona Ruane. Caitríona had dropped a hint to me that she would like to do this investigation or inquiry, whatever the word is. Her feeling was that, in the atmosphere at the time, if she proposed it, it would not be accepted by the Committee. If somebody like me proposed it, however, possibly it would. The Committee, to its credit, accepted it quite readily.

At that time, there was definitely a need for that sort of discussion to take place. The transformation of this place in my time, which started in 2007, has been quite dramatic. That does not mean that we have got there yet, but the

changes are here for all to see. At that time, we had very poor female representation. It was a male-dominated environment, in spades. Members have mentioned the unsocial hours. It was not family-friendly, while childcare was non-existent. It still is. We took evidence from a number of people, most of whom were experts in their particular field. The one who impressed me most at the time was Jane Morrice, who is a former Deputy Speaker of the Assembly and, along with Monica McWilliams, one of the two Women's Coalition Members at the time. Her words stuck with me. I looked them up today.

She referred to:

"the incessant attempts to demean, humiliate and treat with disdain."

That was the attitude of men towards women. That was true; she was not exaggerating. It was before my time, but the treatment that Women's Coalition Members got in this place was disgraceful. We have learned from that; we have moved on.

Members have referred to the 30 recommendations from the Committee. Have any of them been fully activated? I do not think so. Lip service has been paid to some of them, but the recommendations that matter, and which would make a big difference, have not been implemented. I will not go through the list, but the recommendation to balance caring responsibilities with a political career, which is a big one, has not been addressed.

I will touch on the representation situation here, because, frankly, it makes for sad reading for some. I am not trying to be unkind to anybody, although it may sound like it, but it is a fact that there are 38 unionist MLAs on this side of the House, seven of whom are women. Rosemary is one out of 10 in her party, so there are six in the DUP. The other parties can give themselves a bit of a pat on the back, because they have done well, but we are not there yet. There is still a long way to go, but progress has been made. The glass is one third full rather than two thirds empty. I urge the Women's Caucus to continue. Keep the pressure on and make the men and the Assembly listen to your message, because it is valid. You will find that there are plenty of men about this place who will agree with you and want to see change. We are not all misogynist pigs. I would not have said this 10 years ago, but the majority of the men in this place will support you. I want you to keep at it.

Finally, Mr Speaker, I know that I am slightly over my time, but let me say that I will be retiring next May. My contribution to this process will be, I think, to be replaced by much younger, female representation. I will leave it at that. Good luck to all of you.

Mr Speaker: Claire Sugden is not in the room. We had her down to appear via StarLeaf, but she is not in the audience. I call Rosemary Barton to make a winding-up speech and conclude the debate. Rosemary has 10 minutes.

Mrs Barton: I wish you all a very happy International Women's Day. I thank everybody who participated in what has been an interesting and wide-ranging debate, with many comments that I wish to consider. Ms Bailey talked about the purpose of the Women's Caucus and spoke about parity of esteem for women. She said that action must be taken to prevent the marginalisation of women, particularly in politics. She also said that political representation must reflect the population and that

female representation here needs to be up to 50%. It is approximately 33% now. Ms Bailey also said that a gender-sensitive Assembly would result in legislation that would provide opportunities to be outward-looking. That was the most important part of her speech.

Paula Bradley referred to the strong women who have stood in the Chamber in the past. She also referred to the importance of women in society. She spoke about what we have been through recently with regard to working through COVID and keeping our homes together. She said that it has not been easy for people who have lost employment or who have had family members off school, and she spoke of the women who have played a crucial role in that regard. She also spoke about the abuse that female MLAs take. Women should not have to deal with that. She spoke about pregnancy issues for female MLAs and the fact that there is no such thing as maternity leave for them.

5.30 pm

Ms Sheerin spoke about the importance of period products and about the fact that the majority of people who were furloughed as a result of COVID were women, not men. She said that many of the people who are affected as unpaid people in our economy are women; they are the ones who stay at home and look after the house. She also suggested that we should, perhaps, use gender quotas and perhaps have mandatory childcare for politicians. She said that we need to tackle gender-based violence. That is very important.

Ms Sinéad Bradley reminded us about the number of young people who were in this Chamber this day last year, and I was thinking the same when I came into it today. She spoke about the difficulties of retaining women in politics, and I think that we have seen, through the years, the difficulties that many parties have had in keeping women once they, perhaps, have families and caring responsibilities. She referred to the cost of childcare for women and how it prevents women from going out to work, and she challenged a lack of understanding and assistance for women around the menopause.

The three gentlemen Members who are present for the debate are very welcome, too. Mike Nesbitt spoke about his experience of working with politicians internationally, and, surprise, surprise, we all have the same issues. He also spoke about the Dame Dehra Parker programme that the Ulster Unionist Party had, and that, indeed, was a success. It may not seem that way, given that I am the only Ulster Unionist Party female MLA, but it was a success a couple of years ago, when we had Jo-Anne Dobson, Sandra Overend and Jenny Palmer. I know that a number of them came up through that Dame Dehra Parker programme, which I also attended. It was a success. Mr Nesbitt also spoke about the representation of people with disabilities, and I think that we, as an Assembly, need to look at that, particularly women with disabilities.

Ms Armstrong said that the Women's Caucus should perhaps look at bringing more motions in its own right. She spoke about a gender-sensitive Parliament and that that needs to have an environment where men and women are equally valued and there is equality for both. She asked for Standing Orders to be updated, particularly for paternity leave and maternity leave. Ms Armstrong was also concerned about the language that is sometimes used, so

she talked about inclusive language and the issues with social media for women.

Mr Sheehan spoke about female under-representation in the Assembly and said that young women who are starting work today will be much less well off at the end of their career than men will be over their lifetime. He praised the females in the Chamber who participate, and, indeed, he praised them for staying late into the night for Assembly sittings and talked about how that impinges on their family life. He talked about issues of childcare and caring responsibilities, and, of course, he referred to the misogynistic abuse that women have had.

Ms Dolan said that women need to be respected and appreciated, not on one day of the year but every day. She, again, referred to quotas for increasing women's representation and exploring the strategies that we need for work-life balance. She said that a third of women are economically inactive.

Ms Hunter said that we still need more women in politics. She said that the Queen's University students' union officer team is now all female, and she was optimistic that perhaps this was the start of these ladies moving up into political life and other life. She also said that women should not be defined by what they wear or look like.

Miss Woods spoke about the sexist remarks that are made to ladies. She also referred to what women look like, what they wear and the comments that are often made about those. She spoke about the difficulties of juggling childcare and work.

Mr Carroll offered his solidarity to the women who spoke today and to the women who have been affected over the past year or so by COVID. Mr Lunn again referred to 2007, when there was a very poor level of female representation here in Stormont. He talked about 30 recommendations that were put forward by a review that took place and said that a number of them have still not been implemented.

There is no doubt that the under-representation of women in political life in Northern Ireland is a problem. Attempts to address it have fallen short. We know that the repeated scrutiny of that failure has come up with the same conclusion: it is a serious matter that must be addressed with urgency. We have the Belfast Agreement to look at and all its implementation arguments, which make commitments to increase women's representation in public and political life in Northern Ireland. We must make good on those commitments. We cannot continue to deprioritise or move slowly on them. The time is now — the time is today — to make that endorsement and to champion the targeted and strategic interventions that are set out in the action plan.

The motion calls for the Assembly's endorsement of the Women's Caucus action plan to implement measures to create a gender-sensitive Assembly. That action plan is grounded in research on gender equality here in Northern Ireland. The Assembly and Executive Review Committee made those recommendations after its comprehensive audit and resulting in-depth report on women in politics in Northern Ireland. The Assembly has been scrutinised and deemed to be not good enough as an institution that facilitates and promotes participation and inclusion for women. We know that if you do not have adequate representation of women in positions of decision-making and leadership, you have an Assembly that does not legislate at the level of gender sensitivity that it should, that is not as effective as it could be and that is less democratic

than it could be. We know that women's equal participation in political processes results in tangible gains for everyone, for the legitimacy of Parliament and for the quality of the analysis and solutions that are brought forward to create legislative change.

The Women's Caucus recognises that, and, today, we brought the motion to the Assembly in order to reiterate the considerable amount of work that remains to be undertaken. The action plan serves to create a gender-sensitive Northern Ireland Assembly that is founded on the principle of gender equality so that men and women can access their equal right to participate without discrimination. I call on the Assembly to endorse the recommendations in the gender-sensitive Assembly action plan that has been put forward today by the Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus.

Mr Speaker: Pat Sheehan is whispering over to me. You have broken me today with the time.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly, on International Women's Day, notes recommendation 12 of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's 'Report on Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly', which proposed that the Assembly should consider adopting measures to create a gender-sensitive Assembly; and endorses the recommendations in the gender-sensitive Assembly action plan as put forward by the Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus.

Mr Speaker: I thank everybody for their contributions to the debate. It was a very worthwhile and important debate. The contributions were of significant quality and content.

I also thank the Members who took part in the Speaker's Office initiative, which includes a number of videos that are being broadcast on the Assembly's website today. As many of you will know, women here participated in that. I thank the Assembly, the Speaker's Office staff and the Communications team for putting the videos together. A total of some 17 videos are being broadcast on the website today. They feature a range of people, including a number of MLAs; people from public office, including our own Lesley Hogg, the Clerk/Chief Executive; and Brenda King, the Attorney General. We also have a range of sportswomen, disability campaigners and academics on the videos. I commend that initiative and encourage people to log on to the website to look at and listen to those very inspiring stories from some remarkable people in our community. It is really only a drop in the ocean of the talent and ability that we have across our society.

On this International Women's Day, I want to show my solidarity with all the women who are stalwarts in our communities and families and among our friends and loved ones. They are people to whom we can look up with admiration, to say the least. I thank everybody for their contributions today.

Adjourned at 5.41 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 9 March 2021

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Nesbitt: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I believe that, during an otherwise very welcome and harmonious debate yesterday evening to mark International Women's Day, Assembly Member Wells may have misled the House. In an intervention during a speech by Kellie Armstrong, he claimed that, some 20 years ago, Patricia Lewsley successfully introduced a private Member's Bill to the House. It is my understanding that it was her intention to introduce a private Member's Bill, but she was thwarted by the fact that the House was suspended in 2002. I would be grateful if you would examine the case to determine which narrative is accurate.

Mr Speaker: OK. The Member has raised the point. I will look at the Hansard report. I was here in the Chair, as far as I remember, for the exchange. I will look into that, as the Member has requested. Thank you.

Ministerial Resignations and Appointments

Mr Speaker: I have received notification from the First Minister and deputy First Minister that Mr Gordon Lyons has resigned the office of Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and that Mr Gary Middleton has resigned the office of junior Minister.

I have also been informed by the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party that Mr Edwin Poots has been nominated as Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Mr Poots accepted the nomination and affirmed the Pledge of Office in my presence and that of the Clerk/Chief Executive on 8 March.

I have also received correspondence from the First Minister and deputy First Minister that Mr Gordon Lyons has been appointed to the office of junior Minister. Mr Lyons accepted the nomination and affirmed the Pledge of Office in my presence and that of the Clerk/Chief Executive on 8 March.

Public Petition: Call for a Review of the Burial Grounds Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1992

Mr Speaker: Mr Alex Easton has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak.

Mr Easton: Mr Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to present this petition to the Northern Ireland Assembly today. It follows an incident in my constituency that should never have occurred and which I would like to prevent happening again. The petition has over 5,750 signatures.

A constituent recently contacted me following the death of their uncle Mr Mulholland. Mr Mulholland had purchased a burial plot years ago, well before 1992, for three people in Clandeboye Cemetery. His wife and child were already buried in the plot, and, before he passed away, he had expressed his wish to be buried with them. However, the family was told only the day before the funeral that the grave could not be dug deeply enough and that their uncle would have to be buried somewhere else.

It is truly horrific for a grieving family to have to be put through that. On further investigation, it turns out that the Burial Grounds Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1992 changed the required depth of burial plots, meaning that some graves will no longer be able to legally hold the number of occupants for whom they were purchased.

The key problem here is that those who bought their burial plots prior to 1992 have not been informed by their councils of those changes. The council offers a depth-testing service for graves, charging £110 for the service. That charge is scandalous. It is disgraceful that bereaved families have to pay such an amount, when plots were purchased decades ago for a certain number of people. I find it deeply unfair that those affected should have to pay those costs. The service should be available to those families free of charge. This moneymaking scheme needs to end.

The council has not attempted to contact those who may be impacted by this problem. Indeed, there has not been even a general publicity campaign. Hopefully, this petition and the publicity surrounding the passing of my constituent will go some way to raise awareness. However, more is needed, and perhaps the Minister could look into that aspect of this problem and the merits of an awareness campaign. I also believe that an apology is owed to the impacted families for that oversight by the council.

Thankfully, I can report that urgent action was taken, and Mr Mulholland was able to be buried in the plot with his

family. The council was able to change the soil to a lighter type, and a shallower coffin was used to facilitate the burial. However, those solutions will not work for every burial. Therefore, the Minister for Communities needs to take urgent action on this issue. We do not know how many people have been impacted, but I would suggest that it is quite large, with 15 other families coming forward to report the same experience.

This is a serious matter, and it needs to be dealt with in a timely and sensitive manner. I would, therefore, ask that the Burial Grounds Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1992 are reviewed by the Minister and action taken to allow those who purchased plots before that change to be buried in those plots and for leeway to allow burials to go ahead.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. In light of social distancing, I ask the Member to remain in his place and to make arrangements to submit the petition to my office. I thank the Member for bringing the petition to the attention of the Assembly. Once I have received the petition, I will forward it to the Minister for Communities and send a copy to the Committee.

Ministerial Statement

British-Irish Council: Digital Inclusion

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance that he wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members in the Chamber that, in light of social distancing being observed by parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members participating remotely must make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. Members in the Chamber must also do that but may do so by rising in their place as well as notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly.

I remind Members to be concise in their questions; this is not intended to be a debate as such. In accordance with long-established procedure, points of order are not normally taken during a statement or the question period afterwards.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I wish to make the following statement on the British-Irish Council digital inclusion work sector ministerial meeting, which took place in virtual format on Friday 5 March 2021. Minister Dodds and I attended, and Minister Dodds has agreed that I make this statement on behalf of us both.

The Isle of Man Government, which lead the digital inclusion work sector, hosted the meeting. Minister for Policy and Reform, Ray Harmer MHK, welcomed the delegations. The Welsh Government delegation was led by Julie James MS. The United Kingdom Government were led by Caroline Dinenage MP; the Government of Guernsey by Deputy Andrea Dudley-Owen; the Government of Jersey by Deputy Jeremy Maçon; the Scottish Government by Ivan McKee MSP; and the Irish Government were led by Eamon Ryan TD.

This was the second ministerial meeting of the digital inclusion work sector. It was an excellent opportunity to engage with Ministers from the other member Administrations on an area that is as relevant and important today as it has ever been, especially in the current climate of rapid advancement of new technology, digitisation and, of course, more public services being accessible online. The meeting focused on the benefits that can be derived from being online, as well as on overcoming the disadvantages that come from a lack of access. There are still significant groups of people who remain excluded because of their socio-economic status and a lack of digital skills. With the introduction of COVID-19 measures across member Administrations, there has been an increased requirement to access vital services online, including track and trace, remote learning, online healthcare consultations and universal credit claims. Those who have limited access to devices and low levels of ability to interact online are in danger of being excluded.

Closing the digital divide has genuine, measurable benefits for individuals, the broader community, businesses and government. Locally, my Department's digital inclusion unit continues to promote a digitally inclusive society through a range of projects undertaken in partnership with a number of local organisations. One such example is Connected, which is a pilot project that will provide free digital skills training and the loan of an internet-enabled tablet device

for a minimum of six months to a limited number of elderly or vulnerable people. I am encouraged to see that the forward work plan will now encompass elements of online safety as well as digital skills provision.

The Council discussed at length how we might learn from the experiences of other Administrations, and there was a commitment given to making collaboration a key part of addressing the challenges. Everyone is at risk from the dangers that are posed by online threats, and, last week, Ministers endorsed the joint publication of a series of infographics that provide simple advice on how to go online safely and confidently. I am keen for my officials to continue that vital work with other Administrations, because digital inclusion has been a key priority for some time, and we are collectively making real progress through shared learning.

I take the opportunity to thank the Isle of Man Ministers and officials for their hospitality and for hosting Minister Dodds and British-Irish Council ministerial colleagues across the Administrations, all of whom participated so productively in the meeting. It was agreed that the next ministerial meeting for the digital inclusion work sector will take place in 2023.

Mr Frew (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I regret to inform the House of the absence of the Chairperson, Steve Aiken. I am sure that the House will join me in wishing Steve all the best in his recovery, and we hope that it will not take too long.

I thank the Minister for his statement. I applaud Diane Dodds, the Economy Minister, for the work to roll out Project Stratum in this sphere. Of course, that came about through confidence-and-supply money, and it is good to get that on the ground.

The Minister talked about his Department's digital inclusion unit. How does the unit promote digital inclusion? Will he tell us a little more about the related range of projects and partnerships that he mentioned? What lessons have been learned during the pandemic about the importance of digital inclusion for different sectors, including the elderly and the socially disadvantaged? How might they be best protected when they are online?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Deputy Chair for his question. I endorse his comments about the Chair. I hope he makes a speedy recovery.

As the Member will know, the Department of Finance's digital shared services (DSS) directorate provides services to all Departments. It has a particular responsibility for digital inclusion, and the digital inclusion unit's established aim is to promote a digitally inclusive society through a range of projects. It works in close partnership with public and private organisations to help people get online. It also works alongside Departments. There are a number of schemes, including the Go ON NI digital inclusion programme, which has been running for some time. That programme has raised the percentage of adults who use the internet to 86% in 2019 from 67% in 2011. It is targeted at the harder-to-reach, digitally excluded sections of the population, such as older people, people with disabilities, disadvantaged communities, rural communities and the long-term unemployed.

It is a very successful programme, which has enlisted the help of three different sectors to reach people. Libraries

NI has a network right across the North of almost 100 libraries, which are online. Ninety per cent of citizens here live within 3 miles of a library, which as well as being important for this project shows the general importance of the availability of reading material. The digital inclusion unit also works with Business in the Community, which provides access to business volunteers from across the region, and Supporting Communities, which delivers digital skills training here.

10.45 am

Therefore there has been significant roll-out. The digital inclusion pilot project was also rolled out to people, particularly the elderly and vulnerable, to give them a tablet and connect them. That was substantially oversubscribed and had to be ramped up. Of course, there is now an emphasis on using digital services safely online. That is an increasing emphasis in the approach. It was also an emphasis in the discussions with Ministers from other jurisdictions. The issue is not unique to us. We will continue to invest in that programme because it is having tangible results for connectivity. As the Member rightly said, it is not just about the socio-economic factors or, indeed, lack of digital skills, particularly among the older population, but the ability to connect through the provision of broadband services, which is crucial to connectivity. All those matters need to be addressed.

Mr McHugh: My question is in a similar vein. If anything, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of digital connectivity, and, in many respects, developments have probably happened more quickly as a result of it. It is good that the Council is focusing on that issue. Does the Minister agree that there is a heightened risk of creating a digital divide that would exacerbate inequalities, not only in connectivity, which the Minister mentioned, but in socio-economic groupings?

Mr Murphy: I concur. The Member is correct that the pandemic has probably brought the issue more sharply into focus, because so many services must now be accessed online, and, where you have large rural areas with difficult or non-existent broadband connectivity, an older cohort of people who are isolated and vulnerable, and people who have learning difficulties, their inability to access those services creates a digital divide. We have to be mindful of that and take whatever steps we can to address it.

Of course, that moves into the economics sphere when businesses in rural communities cannot do the kind of online business that is readily available to businesses in urban settings. Project Stratum aims to address that through physical infrastructure. We need to continue to engage with that. With regard to the programmes that we are rolling out, we must also ensure that people have the necessary skills, as well as the safety and confidence, to go online to use the government services available to them.

Mr O'Toole: I cannot be the only one who has read the statement and is slightly confused about what the actual actions are that emanate from it. That is no offence to the officials who, presumably, drafted it. Given that the meetings seem to happen only once every couple of years, it would be helpful to understand precisely what actions emanate from it.

There are two areas of particular interest. Online harm to young people is in the news at the minute, and we know that it is having a particularly detrimental effect on mental health. The fact is that young people are online so much now. The second issue is migrating large parts of the economy online. Was either of those discussed specifically at the meeting? Did any specific actions emanate from that, given that the Council will not meet again for another two years?

Mr Murphy: Just so that the Member understands how the British-Irish Council works: various Administrations take the lead in certain sectors. The Isle of Man Government take the lead in this sector, and there is ongoing engagement between officials. The ministerial meetings are not frequent, but that does not stop the work stream itself going ahead. It is an opportunity to share best practice and ideas.

As I said, infographics were promoted as part of the meeting to share that across the various jurisdictions. Online safety is a key feature. There was broad discussion among all the representatives on all the issues that the Member mentioned and the importance of ensuring that, first, people have access. The pandemic has heightened the necessity to be able to access services online and also the need for the growing and advanced technologies that we now have, even since the last time that the Council met, to ensure that young and older people are safe using technology. That is why infographics were promoted.

The Isle of Man Government are continuing with that work stream, and they will continue to engage with officials from each Administration. That work will not just stop between now and 2023.

Mr Muir: As the Minister will be aware, throughout the pandemic, there has been increased digitisation, particularly for online sales. In my area, I see numerous delivery vans because of the pandemic. The Chancellor was supposed to announce a tax last week to rebalance the cost of online sales, but that was not forthcoming. Has the Minister considered reviewing our non-domestic rating system to ensure that the balance is more fairly shared? Currently, the cost is very heavily felt by those bricks-and-mortar industries that are not online.

Mr Murphy: As the Member knows, there will be a rates review. A lot of the big online shopping services do not have a physical infrastructure in the area. People often refer to Amazon, which is building a centre on the outskirts of Dublin, but it has very little presence here and mainly does deliveries. The ability to rate and derive an income from Amazon in comparison with the amount of business that it does is limited. Therefore, the Member is correct: taxation is a more obvious way to yield an income from online shopping services rather than through the properties that they use. They do not have a high-street presence, they operate through warehouses and distribution networks. I am happy to look at rates, but given those companies' physical presence here in comparison with their delivering to people's doors, it might not yield that much. However, I am happy to look at that as part of the rates review.

Mr Givan: The statement refers to the online digital dynamic in the context of COVID, and colleagues have mentioned that. Nowhere has that been felt more than in our education system. The divide between those who can

afford computers, iPads and broadband connections and those who cannot is having an impact. In that context, will the Minister encourage his Executive colleagues to support the Education Minister and let all our children return to school before Easter? A return to school is the best way to deal with the digital divide.

Mr Murphy: It is interesting that the Member has access to the Department of Education's paper for the Executive when Ministers have just received its proposals. Of course, all Ministers want all the restrictions to be lifted as soon as possible. I am particularly conscious that the Executive have agreed on a priority for getting kids back to school. The priority for a return to school is for a variety of reasons, one being access to online services that the Member has identified, which are no substitute for face-to-face teaching. Of course, we want a return to school as quickly as possible, but it will be based on health advice about safety, the course of the pandemic and the transmission rates. The Executive will look at the evidence and try to achieve a return to school as quickly as they can.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for the statement. I note that the statement refers to the fact that everyone is at risk when it comes to the dangers posed by online threats. Will he elaborate on the importance of online safety, given the growing problem of cyberbullying and online abuse?

Mr Murphy: Online abuse has been very clearly identified. Yesterday was International Women's Day, and online abuse is particularly relevant to women. A very high proportion of the victims of online bullying, commentary and intimidation are women. Clearly, the people who provide online platforms have a role to play in dealing with that issue. While some of the digital support provided by the Executive and other Administrations at the BIC meeting helps to support and advise people, the providers of digital platforms have a huge responsibility to make sure that online bullying, racism, sexism and other horrible experiences are addressed. Generally, the online bullies remain anonymous, and the platform providers must deal with that in a fashion that assists people to use the internet safely.

Ms Dolan: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. As the Minister is aware, Estonia is often hailed as a country that has had an extremely successful digital transformation in recent years. Has the Minister looked into the potential economic benefits that could be gained by following the Estonian model of delivering public services online?

Mr Murphy: Yes, the senior management at Enterprise Shared Services has recognised the importance of the digital journey undertaken by Estonia. It is a very good example, and there is a history of contact and engagement with the Estonian Government, including a visit by the then Finance Minister, Simon Hamilton, in 2013 to learn from their experience. That engagement also included agreeing a concordat, which was signed by Enterprise Shared Services and the Estonian Information System Authority in 2014, that sought to set out a framework to enable and encourage closer working relationships and to seek and identify some joint projects with the Estonian Administration.

Mr McNulty: It is a revolutionary moment for me to talk to the Northern Ireland Assembly via StarLeaf. It is incredible, and I am lucky to be able to engage through the

digital inclusion that is possible for me. Some are not that lucky. Places such as Lissummon, Lislea, Crossmaglen, Cullyhanna, south Armagh, Laurelvale, Loughgall and Ballyhagan are not being promised broadband for another three years. Will the Minister tell us what he and his colleague will do to ensure that, as part of Project Stratum, those works will be accelerated so that the digital disenfranchisement that those households and families are experiencing will not continue? Those people need broadband, and they need it now. The Department has said that some properties have 30 Mbps download speeds, which is quite patently not the reality, and those properties need to be included. What is the solution for the properties that are not included in Project Stratum?

Mr Murphy: As the Member will know, Project Stratum is the responsibility of the Department for the Economy. It is not my responsibility at all to roll out Project Stratum. However, as a constituency representative for the very people and areas that he mentioned, I am engaging with Project Stratum, with Fibus, which is rolling it out, and with the Department for the Economy. I do not think that it is acceptable that significant areas that have lacked coverage for many years are at the tail end of the queue for Project Stratum. As a representative of that constituency, that is what I intend to do.

Ms Brogan: I thank the Minister for his statement. As technology advances, one concern is the level of sophistication among fraudsters when using online platforms to target vulnerable individuals and gain access to private and sensitive information. How can we tackle the rise in online fraud, and how can we raise awareness of those scams in order to allow potential victims to identify foul play?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for her question. Clearly, that is another significant issue in online activity, and fraud has become a very significant part of that. Our teams have a close partnership with Scamwise NI. It recently issued some helpful videos to show how those types of scams can take place and the terrible impact that they have on the victims. The Northern Ireland Cyber Security Centre was launched last year, and it functions as a dedicated resource that focuses on providing advice and guidance to the public about how to be cyber safe and secure online. Those are all helpful developments, but, clearly, we want as much guidance and advice as we can get, particularly for vulnerable people who are new to internet services and for people who are not familiar with or confident on them to make sure that they do not become victims of crime on the internet.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Minister for his statement. As a Member from South Down, I particularly welcome any strategy that talks about digital inclusion because there are pockets across South Down, particularly in rural areas, that still await that, and there is no doubt that, as policy develops more online-first services, that exclusion becomes a bigger problem. During discussion of the British-Irish Council's digital inclusion work, did the conversation on digital exclusion come up?

On International Women's Day yesterday there were powerful words from women, including the First Minister, with whom I fully agree on the absolutely toxic environment that the online world can be. Is there a shared view at the British-Irish Council that we all need to put our shoulder to the wheel to make it a safer place for everyone?

11.00 am

Mr Murphy: I concur with the Member on that. That is why, in a previous answer, I highlighted the particular treatment of women online. Bullying, misogyny and sexism are often prevalent online and generally come from faceless and nameless users of online platforms. Yes, it was part of the conversation, because anything that deals with security, confidence and a safe place online should primarily provide a safe place for the primary victims of online abuse, who, in large measure, are women. That was clearly part of the conversation.

As I said in answer to my colleague, the online platform providers have a significant role to play in this and perhaps have not stepped up to the plate just as much as that. While we all want to put our shoulder to the wheel by providing advice, guidance and support for people who use online provision, those who make a business from online platforms also have a responsibility to ensure that they are a safe place for women and the many other users.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement.

Mr Givan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In his response to my question, the Finance Minister made the inference that somehow I knew what was in an Executive paper. Just to have it on the record, at no stage was I aware of what was in that Executive paper. The Education Minister's plans were well documented yesterday on the basis of his public commentary. That is the basis on which I asked my question, and I assure the Finance Minister that there has been no collusion on my part with the Education Minister.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Your point has been made.

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance, Conor Murphy, to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Speaker: As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Budget Bill now. Members will of course be able to have a full debate at Final Stage, which is scheduled later today. Further Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill is therefore concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Members, take your ease for a moment or two.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McGlone] in the Chair)

Damages (Return on Investment) Bill: Second Stage

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

That the Second Stage of the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill [NIA Bill 16/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): In accordance with convention, the Business Committee has not allocated a time limit for the debate.

Mrs Long: It is a well-established principle of our law that someone who is injured as the result of the negligence of another should be fully compensated for any financial losses that result from their injuries but without being overcompensated or undercompensated. That is called the 100% rule, and it is what the Bill aims to deliver. Compensation for financial losses includes compensation for loss of earnings and the cost of care and can run for many years into the future, often for the injured person's lifetime. When compensation for future financial losses is awarded as a lump sum, the sum is adjusted by a percentage rate, known as the personal injury discount rate (PIDR), to take account of the return that a claimant could earn by investing that sum. The purpose of applying a discount rate is to give effect to the 100% rule. The Bill changes how the discount rate is set so that claimants are fully compensated, while ensuring fairness for defendants.

Currently, the discount rate in Northern Ireland is set under the Damages Act 1996 by the Department of Justice after consultation with the Government Actuary's Department (GAD) and the Department of Finance. The rate has to be set in accordance with the decision of the House of Lords in the case of *Wells v Wells*. The current rate of 2.5% was set in 2001 on that basis and was led by the Lord Chancellor before justice functions were devolved. Under *Wells v Wells*, the Department is required to assume that a claimant will invest all of their lump sum in very low-risk investments. The only investments that meet that criterion are interest-linked gilts. They are government bonds that protect against inflation, but, because they are so low-risk, they deliver poor returns. However, evidence indicates that, in reality, claimants would not be advised to invest solely in index-linked gilts but, rather, in a diversified portfolio of low-risk investments. In practice, therefore, setting the rate on the basis of index-linked gilts under *Wells v Wells* does not satisfy the 100% compensation rule.

The Department recognises that changes in the market since 2001 mean that the current rate seriously risks undercompensating claimants. However, if a new rate were to be set under the current framework, it would most likely result in overcompensation. Overcompensation is unfair to defendants, whose costs are normally covered by insurance or the public sector. The other jurisdictions in the UK have already legislated to change how their discount rates are set to better deliver the 100% rule, and the rates in England and Wales and in Scotland are set on the assumption that a claimant will invest in a diversified portfolio of low-risk investments. Last year, my Department consulted on proposals to replace *Wells v Wells* with a new legal framework suggesting the models used in England and Wales or Scotland as options.

At that point, I should advise the House that I have a conflict of interest with the personal injury discount rate on account of my husband's membership of a medical defence union. Medical defence unions, which indemnify their members against claims of negligence in private medical practice, have an interest in the level of the discount rate as it may affect the cost of indemnity and, consequently, the cost of membership. In view of that, I delegated key policy decisions on the discount rate to my permanent secretary, including those made on foot of the consultation on changing how the discount rate was set. However, as the decision that the Department should bring forward the legislation has been made by him and subsequently agreed by the Executive, I can now take the Bill through the Assembly as normal.

A large majority of respondents to the Department's consultation agreed that the legal framework for setting the rate should be changed and that investment decisions by claimants in Northern Ireland are likely to be similar to those made in other jurisdictions. The majority of respondents preferred the England and Wales model, under which the Lord Chancellor sets the rate and the low-risk investments assumed to be made by the claimant are a matter for his discretion.

The Department, however, after careful reflection, believes that the transparency and clarity offered by the Scottish model, along with the control and oversight that it will give to the Assembly, are important and valuable features for a new framework. Under the Scottish model, which our Bill adopts, the investments that a claimant is assumed to make are specified in the legislation, providing up front information to everybody about how the discount rate is calculated. Also, under the Scottish model, the rate is set by the Government Actuary. This reflects the fact that, once the parameters for how the rate is to be set are detailed in legislation, setting the rate is an actuarial rather than a political exercise.

I turn to the content of the Bill. The Bill will amend the Damages Act 1996 as it applies to Northern Ireland. Short and tightly focused, the Bill has six clauses and a schedule. Much of the detail is technical but, in summary, there are three key elements. First, the Bill provides for the task of reviewing and determining the discount rate, which is to be carried out by the Government Actuary.

Secondly, it prescribes a new statutory methodology to be applied by the Government Actuary to calculate the rate. The methodology is based on a notional portfolio of investments that a claimant is assumed to invest over 43 years. The portfolio, for example, provides for investment of 10% in index-linked gilts, 5% in property and so on. The Bill also requires the Government Actuary to apply two standard deductions: a deduction of 0.75% to take account of the impact of taxation and the cost of investment advice and management; and a deduction of 0.5% as a further margin intended to protect against the risk of under-compensation in view of the risk inherent in any investment, however carefully advised.

Thirdly, the Bill provides for regular reviews of the rate. The first review, which will begin as soon as the legislation is commenced, will be a review of the current rate of 2.5%. The next review will be in July 2024 to align with the cycle of reviews of the discount rate in Scotland, and the rate will then be reviewed every five years. The Department can require an earlier review, but this would not affect the

cycle of five-yearly reviews. The introduction of regular reviews of the rate at least every five years will ensure that, in future, the rate will not become out of touch with the changing financial conditions, while the provision for the rate to be reviewed in a five-year cycle gives flexibility for the rate to be adjusted, if required in response to sudden and unexpected changes in the market. Bringing us into line with the Scottish cycle of reviews will allow for efficiencies for the Government Actuary, as much of the preparatory work will be shared with Scotland. The Government Actuary is required to complete a review of the rate within 90 days.

Although we have opted for the Scottish model, one particular difference is that we have decided on a 43-year investment period, rather than the Scottish 30-year period. We did so on the basis of evidence that 43 years reflects the average period over which claimants invest. England and Wales also used a 43-year period when setting the rate under their new framework. The Department will have the power to change, by secondary legislation, the parameters within which the Government Actuary is to calculate the rate, including a power to change the assumed period of investment of 43 years, a power to change the amount of the standard adjustments and a power to make changes to the notional portfolio. The Department will be required to review the notional portfolio prior to each five-yearly review. Any regulations made under these powers will be subject to approval by the Assembly. This ensures political accountability for how the rate is set whilst recognising that, once the methodology by which the rate is set is detailed in legislation, the task of applying it to calculate the rate is purely an actuarial exercise.

The Government Actuary will be required to send a report of his review to the Department, which the Department must then lay before the Assembly. The discount rate, as determined by the Government Actuary, will come into effect on the day after the report is laid.

This is a short and technical Bill. However, it is an important one in delivering certainty, stability and fairness for all parties to personal injury litigation. At present, the settlement of personal injury cases is being delayed. Claimants do not want to settle their cases now because they risk being under-compensated. However, if the rate were to be changed under the current framework, it would risk overcompensation, and defendants would seek to defer. This ongoing period of uncertainty and consequent delay will come to an end only when a new legislative framework is in place and a stable rate can be set under it, which delivers the underlying legal principle of 100% compensation.

11.15 am

To achieve that certainty sooner rather than later, I would have preferred accelerated passage for the Bill. However, that was not unanimously supported by the Executive, some of whom were reluctant to dismiss entirely the Committee Stage. I too appreciate the value that the Committee can add to the legislative process but, in this case, recognise that any added value comes at the price of delay for those who are anxious for their claims to be settled.

As an alternative to accelerated passage, the Executive urged members of the Justice Committee to work with

my Department to complete their scrutiny in the shortest possible time frame, preferably to enable the Bill to complete its passage before the summer recess. That would include the Committee committing to concluding its scrutiny of the Bill by 30 April.

The people awaiting compensation have already had the misfortune of suffering a serious and perhaps life-changing injury through no fault of their own. They need this money to meet their everyday needs and medical care. For them, it is imperative that the Bill is enacted at the earliest possible opportunity. At this point, I ask the Committee to consider a shorter stage of scrutiny and commend the Bill to the House.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): Before I speak on the Bill, I put on the record an interest in this area. It is not a financial pecuniary one in any shape or form. My brother-in-law suffered catastrophic injuries, a number of years ago, as a result of a road accident and, I suspect, will be caught up in the outworkings of the legislation. I have never engaged with him on his case. However, in the interests of being completely transparent, I want to put that on the record, as I have done at the Committee when this is being discussed. I am also representing a constituent, Anastassiya Kravtsova, who suffered catastrophic injuries. I have been representing her over the past number of years. She is very much part of the outworkings of the legislation. I will comment on her situation when I speak in my individual capacity.

As Chairman of the Committee for Justice, I welcome the opportunity to speak in the Second Stage debate on the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill on behalf of the Committee. As the Minister outlined, the main aims of the Bill are to introduce a new statutory methodology for calculating the discount rate, to ensure that the rate is regularly reviewed at least every five years and to transfer the responsibility for setting the rate from the Department of Justice to the Government Actuary. While the Justice Committee recognises the arguments put forward by the Department regarding the need to change the legal framework and fully supports the principle that any framework should ensure 100% compensation for losses suffered as a result of personal injuries that are not the person's fault, but no more or no less, the Committee had not reached a decision on whether it supported the Department's policy positions regarding the new framework that are reflected in the Bill before the Minister instructed officials to issue drafting instructions in November last year.

The Department advised the Committee in February 2020, 13 months ago, that the Minister intended to review the personal injury discount rate and that the statutory consultation involving the Department of Finance and the Government Actuary's Department would be undertaken on a proposal to change the rate from 2.5% to minus 1.75%. At that stage, the Committee noted the proposed review of the rate and the Department's intention to engage with it further once the consultation was completed. Subsequently, in June 2020, the Department advised the Committee that it intended to undertake a public consultation on how the personal injury discount rate should be set. The Committee noted that the consultation document set out options for a new legal framework and agreed to consider the matter further when

the Department provided the results of the consultation and its proposed way forward.

On 22 October 2020, departmental officials attended a meeting of the Committee to outline the results of the consultations and its proposals for moving forward on the matter. In essence, the officials indicated that the proposal was to adopt a new legal framework that assumes that claimants invest their lump sums in a mixed portfolio of low-risk investments.

The personal injury discount rate in Northern Ireland should be set by the Government Actuary's Department, with reference to a notional portfolio on standard adjustments, as prescribed in the model used in Scotland. The interval between statutory reviews should be five years.

Officials advised that the Minister intended to seek accelerated passage for the legislation, and a decision had been taken that the Department would not change the current rate at this time in view of the decision to legislate for a new framework. Officials also advised the Committee that the Minister had declared an interest in the matter, as has been outlined today, and had therefore recused herself and delegated the key policy decisions to the permanent secretary.

Following that oral evidence session with officials, the Committee requested a range of additional information relating to the policy decision-making process and indicated that it had not been convinced of the merits of the accelerated passage route. Since then, the Committee has engaged with the Department and sought further clarification and information to assist its understanding and consideration of the policy proposals. At the request of the Committee, the permanent secretary attended a meeting on 3 December to discuss the policy proposals; the decision to base a new framework on the Scottish model, given that the majority of consultation responses supported the model adopted in England and Wales; and the basis for the Minister recusing herself from the policymaking process.

The permanent secretary was also asked to provide a copy of the responses that the Department had received from the Government Actuary's Department and the Department of Finance to the consultation that it had undertaken on its proposal to change the rate to -1.75% under the current framework. His decision not to change the rate was also discussed.

During that oral evidence session, officials advised that they intended to deviate from the investment period in the Scottish model of 30 years and use a 43-year period in the Northern Ireland framework, similar to the investment period adopted in the English and Welsh models. Following the meeting on 3 December, the Committee advised the Department that, although it recognised the case for changing the legal framework, it would require further engagement with key stakeholders and departmental officials before reaching a decision on whether it supported the Department's approach of adopting an adapted Scottish model as the best way forward to achieve the principle of 100% compensation without either overcompensating or under-compensating injured parties. The Committee also advised the Department that it was not persuaded by the information that had been provided that the legislation to introduce a new legal framework for

setting the personal injury discount rate should proceed by way of accelerated passage, but it advised that it was willing to engage and discuss the legislative timeline with the Department to progress the legislation before the end of the mandate.

In the expectation that payments to individuals in Northern Ireland will increase when a new PIDR framework is implemented, the Committee also wrote to the Finance Minister to obtain information on whether any request had been made to HM Treasury for the same approach to apply in Northern Ireland as had applied in England, Wales and Scotland when the PIDR changed in those jurisdictions. The Committee understands that the Treasury made some allocation to the budgets of those Departments affected to recognise that there would be an increase in the payments made to individuals. The Committee subsequently welcomed the response from the Minister of Finance, in which he outlined that, on receipt of the Committee's correspondence, he had highlighted the issue to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and advised that, if the legislation is brought forward, access to the reserve will be sought in line with that afforded to Whitehall Departments and other devolved Administrations.

More recently, the Committee accommodated a request by the Minister to attend with officials to provide an overview of the content of the Bill and to outline her reasons for, at that stage, seeking accelerated passage. During that meeting on 28 January, the Minister indicated that it was her decision to authorise officials to proceed to issue drafting instructions for the Bill before she had an indication from the Committee of whether it supported the Department's policy approach of basing a new legal framework for setting the personal injury discount rate on the Scottish model. Following the oral evidence session, the Committee discussed the information provided on the proposed framework, noted the reasons for changing the legal framework that sets out the personal injury discount rate in Northern Ireland and agreed that it fully supports the principle that the rate should achieve 100% compensation. On whether the framework being proposed to achieve that objective is the most appropriate way forward, however, members in general indicated that they did not have enough information to assess that properly and fully and come to a decision on whether they supported the approach being adopted by the Department.

In the light of that, members were also not in a position to indicate whether they supported the case for accelerated passage.

I leave it up to individual Committee members to set out their position. Areas of concern that were highlighted as needing further clarification and consideration included whether the proposed framework could veer towards overcompensation, which would have significant financial implications, and ministerial accountability, in striking the rate.

The Committee subsequently wrote to the Minister, setting out the views of members and requesting, in order to fully understand the potential impact of the proposed new framework, that the Department ask the Government Actuary's Department to run a notional settlement amount through the system based on the proposed model for Northern Ireland, with the investment period extended from 30 to 43 years, and based on the Scottish model, to enable a comparison of the outcome to be made, and what

differential, if any, there is, including whether extending the investment period could move further away from the 100% principle.

The Committee also indicated that it would consider any additional information when available and would continue to engage in the matter, while recognising that, ultimately, any decision on accelerated passage for the legislation rests with the Assembly.

The Committee also noted the Minister's view that the Justice Department had to consider the legal framework only within the very narrow remit of ensuring that claimants receive 100% compensation. We agreed to write to the Minister of Finance for his view on the potential wider implications of adopting the proposed framework and asking what consideration had been given to those by the relevant Ministers and/or the Executive as a whole.

The Finance Minister recently responded to the Committee, indicating that it would be for the Department of Justice to lead on any analysis needed to understand the financial impact of policy or legislative changes, as the Department bringing forward the legislation, and that his officials continue to engage with colleagues in the Justice Department on the matter.

In response to the letter setting out the Committee's position, the Justice Minister provided additional information, including an example of a hypothetical case, based on a 0.25% rate change, and outlined her reasons why the Department could not ask the Government Actuary to run a notional settlement through the system to enable a comparison to be made between the proposed model for Northern Ireland and the Scottish model. The Minister also advised the Committee that the Executive had agreed to the introduction of the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill, with a condensed Committee Stage that would need to conclude by 30 April for the Bill to pass all its stages before summer recess. She outlined an indicative timeline for the Bill, providing for 27 working days for the Committee Stage, based on the expectation that the Bill would be introduced to the Assembly on 1 March.

The importance of getting a new framework to set the personal injury discount rate correctly is very clear. It will set the rate for the foreseeable future, and that matters greatly to those who have been injured through no fault of their own. However, we also have a responsibility to those organisations, including the Department of Health, that pay the awards made under the framework. We must ensure that claimants receive 100% compensation and that they are not under-compensated.

However, we must also be sure, as far as possible, that the model that we adopt in Northern Ireland does not overcompensate either. The model brought forward by the Department of Justice is an adaption of the Scottish model, and the Committee wants to understand clearly its implications and the likely level of compensation that it will deliver, as well as considering the other issues that I have highlighted.

While the issue of access to the reserve has been raised with the Treasury, confirmation that the Executive will have such access when a new framework is put in place has not been received, although the Executive would welcome it. The Committee appreciates that the Minister wants this legislation through the Assembly as quickly as

possible and before the summer recess. She has said so on numerous occasions. Indeed, the correspondence dated 16 February to the Committee sets out an indicative timeline, providing 27 working days for the Committee Stage.

However, the Committee needs to consider and decide the time that it requires to scrutinise the Bill properly, assuming that it passes Second Stage today, in the way that we have scrutinised, and intend to scrutinise, the other pieces of Justice legislation that are referred to us. While this is a technical Bill, we must ensure that the underlying policy aims of the new framework are the right approach for Northern Ireland.

Before the Bill was introduced, the Committee had been contacted by a number of key stakeholders highlighting a range of issues regarding the current position on the personal injury discount rate and the proposed new legislative framework. It is a relatively specialised area, but there is a range of organisations and experts who wish to engage with the Committee on the Bill.

11.30 am

All of us are aware of the heartbreaking cases of individuals who, through no fault of their own, have suffered personal injuries, some of which are life changing, and, as a result, they depend on the lump sum compensation that has been awarded to cover future financial losses, such as loss of earnings and the cost of the care that they need. It is in everyone's interests to get this right.

While I can confirm, as I set out at the beginning of my speech, that the Committee supports the principle of 100% compensation, I am not in a position, at this stage, to advise the House of the Committee's position on the Department's policy decisions regarding how the rate should be calculated and the transfer of responsibility for setting the rate to the Government Actuary that are reflected in the legislation. That concludes comments in my role as Chairman of the Committee.

I will now make some comments as an MLA, and my colleague Mr Frew will elaborate further on what I regard as highly irregular activity in the area. Anastassiya Kravtsova is a constituent of mine whom I first met a number of years ago. In 2015, Anastassiya was left paralysed from the waist down as a result of a driving incident of her then boyfriend, who was subsequently convicted of causing grievous bodily harm and served a prison sentence. In the course of that process, he was arrested, was not held on remand, escaped and left this jurisdiction. The police processes left a lot to be desired when tracking him down initially and in the issuing of European arrest warrants and so on, and the family felt very much aggrieved at what they regarded as the failures of the justice system and how the case was being handled. Nevertheless, he was brought back eventually, and a conviction was secured. However, the charges were subsequently reduced and, again, the family felt let down by the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) and the way in which the case had been managed. I facilitated meetings with the director of the PPS, which I appreciated, and we went through the case.

At the age of 16, that girl was left paralysed. She lives in a Housing Executive property in my constituency to which

people have had to fight tooth and nail for adaptations. I was the Communities Minister at that stage and had to intervene to get the Housing Executive and the appropriate housing association to carry out very modest adaptations. In the course of being advised on those adaptations, the comment, "Sure there's a swimming pool nearby. Could you not go there?" was made. That is an appalling example of how one individual has been let down, on numerous occasions, by the state and the Justice Department's handling of a case. Her life-changing injuries are now being compounded by the fact that the interim rate, which was consulted upon — that process was carried out — and which the Government Actuary had approved, has not been changed. The power for that change rests not with this Minister, but the permanent secretary. That is a decision that is being kept under review, as we have been informed.

While this legislation can take its course through the House, there is nothing to stop the permanent secretary striking that interim rate. I have heard the arguments that are made that, under the Wells v Wells system, that presents the risk of overcompensation and that, somehow, people would not settle. However, that rate that we have currently disadvantages such people as my constituent Anastassiya more than it does anyone on any other part of these islands. They are being disadvantaged when that continues to take place. Members and the permanent secretary should listen carefully when Anastassiya says:

"It makes me angry and it makes me so helpless and depressed because I could be doing so much in my life.

My life is on hold. I cannot live a normal life. I struggle every day in the situation that I am living in at the moment. All I can hope and pray for is a quick decision on the rate."

Anastassiya said that that compensation would help her with the medical treatment and the equipment that she needs. Are you listening, permanent secretary? Are you listening to what my constituent has to say?

The chairman of the Bar Council of Northern Ireland, Bernard Brady QC, also wrote to the Justice Committee and asked for the interim rate to be set before this law and this new framework is changed. He said:

"The situation has been having a negative impact on access to justice in serious personal injury cases for over three years".

The Committee has had other correspondence, as have I, making the same point. I have repeatedly made this point, but it is not being listened to. It is being delayed, there is procrastination and it is not good enough. I understand why the Department has a number of actions now with judicial reviews of decisions that it has taken, and I support those actions. If it requires the courts to intervene to do the right thing, I hope that the courts do intervene and do the right thing, because my constituents should not have to suffer as a result of the inaction of this Department of Justice on the issue.

The Minister outlined why she believed that she should recuse herself because of a conflict of interest in the matter. That conflict is as a result of her husband's membership of a medical union. Some may want to commend the Minister for going above and beyond that

extra mile of ultra-transparency and so on. However, it is without precedent to recuse yourself and to invest the power to take those decisions in the permanent secretary. I am not aware of any other circumstance since devolution where that has happened. I understand that, when one declares a conflict of interest, it is in order to show that one is upfront and is being transparent; it is not necessarily to divest yourself from taking a decision.

Mrs Long: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The matter that is being debated is one on which I have taken legal advice, and, where there is a pecuniary interest, the Nolan principles require you not just to declare in advance that you have an interest but to remove yourself from such decision-making that could create the impression that you are making decisions based on that interest. Therefore, I am not going above and beyond what is required. I am following the legal guidance and doing what is right. I think that it is out of order, frankly, for a Member to suggest otherwise.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): On that point, the Minister amply clarified her position, so I suggest that the Member move on to his next point.

Mr Givan: I will, Deputy Speaker, but it is materially important to this policy because this policy that we, as Members, are being asked to vote for has not been developed or approved by the democratically elected and accountable Minister. That was done by the unelected permanent secretary.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): For the Member's view, the Minister already elucidated that she has taken legal advice on that, so I suggest, please, that the Member move on to the next item.

Mr Givan: Yes, Deputy Speaker, I am moving on. The Minister referred to that as the way in which the policy was developed. It was developed by the permanent secretary. That is why it is fundamental to the Bill.

I raise the issue on how far Ministers ought to go. One may say that, when it comes to striking the regional rate, all Ministers have a financial interest in it because they pay rates. They do not recuse themselves and give it to the permanent secretary of the Department of Finance. So, that will be an area that we will explore —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has maybe misunderstood me. This is the third time that I am having to say this. The Minister clarified her position. We do not need to move through that any further. She clarified her position, she made that position very clear and she took legal advice on it. That is adequate for me, so, for the third time, I suggest to the Member: please develop your debate.

Mr Givan: Deputy Speaker, my point has been made and is on the record. I am sure that we will explore how the policy was developed in future debates.

My constituent, and constituents like her across Northern Ireland, is now waiting on the permanent secretary to carry out a review of the interim rate, which is being constantly held under review. That is to whom we are looking in order to have the issue addressed in the here and now. There is a process for the Assembly to go through when it comes to considering legislation. There is a process that Committees go through when it comes to following legislation. I say this with the utmost respect

to the Northern Ireland Executive: it is not the Northern Ireland Executive who decide accelerated passage. It is not the Northern Ireland Executive who decide whether a Committee should have a condensed period when it comes to carrying out scrutiny. It is — helpfully, this clarification has been provided by the Speaker in correspondence with the Committee — a matter exclusively for the Assembly to determine the level of scrutiny that any Committee carries out and whether accelerated passage is granted. My colleague Mr Frew will speak about that in due course. It is, obviously, something that the Justice Committee will have to consider; it will do so at its meeting on Thursday. I very much want to get to a stage at which we have a framework in place that deals with the issues that we have talked about now for some 13 months. We have received representations about it from not only industry but public bodies and individuals who are in receipt of it.

I welcome the fact that the Finance Minister has indicated that his officials are dealing with the Department of Justice to highlight the financial implications for the wider Executive. When I raised that question when the Minister was before the Committee, she said — I am paraphrasing; I may not be quoting her correctly —

Mrs Long: Then perhaps do not.

Mr Givan: I am paraphrasing; the Minister can correct me if I am wrong. I will happily give way to her if she wishes to intervene. She said that the Department of Justice has to be blind to the consequences of the financial implications for all other parts of the Northern Ireland Executive and look at it only in that very narrow context. If I am wrong in how I have characterised the Minister's commentary to the Committee, I will give way.

Mrs Long: The point that I made to the Committee was that, in setting the rate, we cannot legally consider the implications for defendants, which may include public bodies, the health service and other defence unions and medical defence providers. Our sole legal duty is to set the rate in order to achieve 100% compensation. However, we are not blind to the impact that it will have. We cannot allow it to influence the decision. It was, however, raised on numerous occasions at Executive meetings where the matter was discussed, so no Minister, unless they were asleep during the Executive meeting, could have missed the import of what was being said when I raised those matters.

Mr Givan: I am not privy to Executive considerations. Indeed, if the Executive wish to hand over all their documents to the Justice Committee around the issue, I would welcome that. It would be useful to know what consideration has been given by the Minister of Health, the Finance Minister and others. That will help to inform the deliberations of the Justice Committee in considering the issue.

I have outlined the importance of the legislation. I have highlighted the very real impact that it is having on people in Northern Ireland. My party and I will allow the Bill to go through at this stage, but I make it very clear that that is without prejudice to taking a different decision further on in the process. I have not taken the position that this is the correct way in which the legislation has been framed to deal with the issues. It will go to the Committee for detailed scrutiny and consideration, and my colleagues on these

Benches will reach a view at a later stage of the legislative process. The Minister has taken it forward in the absence of having agreement from the Justice Committee that this is the correct way to go forward.

11.45 am

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for bringing this to the House today.

I will not elaborate on all of the issues that were raised by the Chair of the Committee, but there are a small number of points that, I feel, are really important, not least the issue that the Chair raised about claimants awaiting the payout of claims that will make a massive difference to their life. I am sure that we all know people who are in that position, and it is not a nice place to be. It is a difficult situation even when you have the payout because, if you have the kind of injuries that the Chair talked about, no amount of money will give you back the life that you should have had; all it will do is help to make your life a bit easier. I am just putting that on the record. We are thinking about all of those who will be affected and impacted by the decision today.

As the Chair said, the legislation is extremely important. It is important that we get it right, and therefore the Committee Stage is extremely important. As a Committee, we have a responsibility to do this in as timely a manner as possible. That is what the Minister has asked us to do. I do not think that anybody on the Committee has any resistance to doing this in as timely a manner as is humanly possible, because we want to avoid the circumstances where we are not delivering for claimants or where the defendant overpays. We want to ensure that there is no potential impact on the Executive and, as has been outlined, on the Health Department in particular. However, this will affect all of the Executive. All Departments have to pay out on claims relating to accidents that happen in councils or as a result of the condition of our road infrastructure. All of our Departments will be impacted, but there is no doubt that Health will be the most heavily impacted. We must ensure that claimants get 100% compensation: not more than that and certainly not less. That is why the Committee Stage is important. It will ensure that we get all the facts.

This is a narrow piece of legislation. That does not take away from the importance of the information that we have to gather, but it is a narrow piece of legislation, and we must endeavour to look at the issues as speedily as possible and to hear from interested parties and stakeholders as soon as possible so that we can reach a decision on it. I am concerned that any delay in progressing it will have a knock-on effect on other legislation. That does not in any way diminish the importance of this legislation, but every piece of legislation that comes through the Justice Committee is equally important. We have the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill, which has big implications for the justice system. We have the Protection from Stalking Bill, which has massive implications for those who suffer as a result of stalking. The miscellaneous provisions Bill will deal with many issues and some of the important stuff. As I have outlined in the Committee already, my big fear is that, because the miscellaneous provisions Bill is so broad and takes in so many issues, it is the one that will fall off the edge. There are important issues to be dealt with in it, not

least around domestic abuse legislation and the Gillen review.

It is important that we, as a Committee, endeavour to do this in as timely a manner as possible, but we will do it right, as we have done with every piece of legislation and every issue that has come before us. We will ensure that we do it right, and we will work closely with the Minister, the permanent secretary and the Department. Whilst the Minister has recused herself from this, she has not held back from coming to the Committee to respond to questions. She is in the Chamber today to do the same, and that is only right. We have to work with the Department and the Minister to achieve the right outcome for claimants and defendants but, most importantly, for the claimants who are waiting in serious positions in relation to the impact on their lifestyle and their ability to have a normal standard of life.

Ms S Bradley: I rise at the Second Stage of the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill as the SDLP spokesperson on justice and a member of the Justice Committee. I thank the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Committee for putting on record a clear timeline of the events that led to this.

The legislation seeks to ensure that those who have been unfortunate enough to have had an accident that has caused life-changing injuries and are seeking financial compensation receive 100% of the compensation due to them. All in the House will acknowledge that the personal damage in such cases cannot be repaired — it is irrecoverable — and that this crude instrument of financial compensation is used in an effort to honour the claimant's potential life earnings and cover the additional expenses created by the injury, such as adaptations, medical expenses and caring costs.

Compensation can be paid in two forms. There is the option of a periodic payment order, which is, I understand, a much less common type of payment, or the option of a lump sum. As we have heard, those who opt for the lump sum will know that a financial return on that lump sum could be realised. Therefore, an effort has to be made to ensure that the desired 100% compensation is reached. That is done by introducing the discount rate, which has to be struck. Our understanding is that the Department is compelled to deliver the rate set in legislation. The 100% rate is, without doubt, in everyone's interest. It compensates the victim fairly and allows the industry scope for further insurance offers that, sadly, as we all know, will be the basis for future claimants. The only fair and workable way forward for all is that we reach the 100% target.

The argument about the interim rate has been had in Committee. Having listened carefully to the debate for and against the interim rate, I have yet to be convinced that the proposal will significantly change the problem that is currently faced. We are aware that parties are reluctant to settle because, if they do so before the final rate is set in legislation, it may be to their disadvantage. Regardless of which party holds a view on the settlement, both parties will inevitably run a calculation that compares it with the final legislative rate that, they believe, may be set. It only takes one party not to agree for there not to be a settlement, which is, I fear, an inevitable outcome of an interim rate. While I appreciate that the details of the calculations and proposed procedures for arriving

at methods are complex and that the Bill endeavours to address this issue —

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Ms S Bradley: Yes, I will.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for her understanding of the specific issues with respect to an interim rate. I do not believe that we will get certainty in that area. We are talking about settlements and agreements. However, does the Member accept that, with an interim rate, there is also the risk — it is not one that we can consider when setting the rate — that cases will go to court and judges will instruct a settlement based on the interim rate? That would place the health service, the Department of Finance and others in jeopardy at that point. While I cannot consider that in setting the rate, an interim rate does not protect against it.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Minister for her intervention. That is a fair risk to have placed on the record.

As we look at the Bill and what it endeavours to do, I am mindful of the eagerness of those who have proposed the interim rate. I believe that their duty to try to help those people comes from a genuinely good place. It is about reaching victims who await access to money that is rightfully theirs so that they can set up a life that addresses the issues that they face. That said, I genuinely believe that there has to be a more honest and open conversation about the potential for claimants to access an interim payment. When I raised that in Committee, it received a short airing, although Doug Beattie followed up on my question and raised the issue of interim payments.

In considering what we are trying to achieve in the Bill, I think that we are talking about a margin or a percentage. We have to ask this question: are all claimants aware that they are able to sit down with their legal representatives and have the discussion about receiving an interim payment of their settlement? As an example, I throw out the fact that 90% of their payment would not touch the rate that will be set via the Bill. I heard the Department say that it is very much a private matter and the discussions on those settlements will happen between the claimants and their legal representatives. However, many of the claims may be in the public sector, and there is a duty on all of us to make sure that we help any claimant who is awaiting money to make their life comfortable. It is not about having a great lifestyle; it is about making adaptations to your house — for example, building a downstairs bathroom and downstairs sleeping facilities — and making changes that will make your life more comfortable following the horrific outcome of the accident that you have experienced. That has to be at the core of what we are trying to achieve, and, while I have no doubt that we will scrutinise the Bill in the Committee and go through the detail — it is only right and just that we do that — the pressure on all of us should come from the question of whether those people have access to the money that they need today and what the barriers are that prevent them accessing that money.

That is why I will repeatedly bring up the possibility of the interim payment and the fact that all claimants should be aware that they can sit down with their legal representative and discuss access to that payment. That may give rise to a later calculation that will have to take it into account that the full amount of the lump sum was not payable at a set date, but such calculations can be agreed and arrived at.

No victim should be making do or trying to bridge the gap while we go through the politics of what has to happen. No victim's life, lifestyle or what they are able to achieve in their life should be limited by the time frame that the Committee or the Department needs to bring this to a conclusion.

On the detail of the Bill and the commentary that has played out in Committee, the Minister will be aware that I was particularly cautious because, while the model was very much framed on the Scottish model, there was a deviation from the 30-year period to 43 years. I was eager to get a fuller understanding of the potential implications of that. We are all mindful that we do not take legislation and tweak one part of it without realising the unintended consequences. We all have a duty to satisfy ourselves that there are no unintended consequences of such tweaks. I appreciate the Minister's work to date, but there is still a deeper understanding to be acquired before I can give any explicit commentary on that either way.

The SDLP will be at the Committee and, with all other Members, will scrutinise the information in front of us. When the information is not there for us to make an informed choice, we will not be shy in calling that out, because it is in everybody's interest that we get it right. We have to have a steady hand and, while the clock is ticking for the claimants in the background, reach out and find solutions to improve their lives while we take the time necessary to get this right. I thank those who have spoken and look forward to working with Committee members.

Mr Beattie: First of all, I thank the Minister for introducing the Bill. Everything that she is doing is being done for the right reasons. While there may be some disagreements about the methodology that will be used, it is not that we are not all trying to achieve the same thing. I also thank the Chair of the Committee for his powerful testimony about a constituent. It is important to get those human stories because, at the end of the day, those are the people whom the legislation will affect. I thank him for that. The discussion on the interim rate is important, but I will not go into it now. I will not go into too much detail, because the Chair covered everything quite well.

We all want the same thing here, which is for those who are to be compensated to get 100% of the compensation.

There is nobody here who does not want that. If any Members do not want it, they certainly have not stood up to say so.

12.00 noon

We have to be mindful of the compensators, the insurers, the public bodies, including Health and Social Care, our constituents and, more widely, the people of Northern Ireland, whose premiums may increase because of the actions that we take in the Chamber or in Committee. We have to be mindful of them.

The question for me is not this: are we striving to make sure that the plaintiff gets 100% of the compensation? Rather, the questions for me are these: which methodology do we use to achieve that, and which framework do we think is best in order to get it? We all have our thoughts on that, and it is right that we bring those thoughts out at Committee Stage.

The Minister is going for the Scottish model, and she has given really good reasons for why. The case, however, for adding 0.5% to the discount rate as a margin adjustment to counter the chance of under-compensation does not seem to have been made, if you look at the Scottish model. There is a real danger of overcompensating somebody if you apply that margin.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for giving way. It is very helpful. He will be aware that, under the England and Wales scheme, it is for the Lord Chancellor to make that adjustment to prevent under-compensation. In actual fact, the settlement figure that he has for this round is also 0.5%, so the figure is consistent with that used in other jurisdictions in order to prevent under-compensation. It is not one that we have simply pulled from the air.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister. I will be clear: I do not think that you pulled it from the air, and I was not suggesting that you did. The point is that the figure needs to be examined, scrutinised, talked through and understood. That is why scrutiny at Committee Stage is extremely important. Likewise, when we look at the much-preferred English and Welsh model, we have to ask why is it much preferred. What does it do that the Scottish model does not do? We need to examine that. These are complicated issues that we need to address.

I will be supporting the Bill's Second Stage, because, as we have all said, we have to change the outdated discount rate and move it forward. In doing so, however, it is important that we scrutinise that, because the discount rate must be changed and the plaintiffs being compensated must get 100% compensation.

I was never in support of using the accelerated passage procedure for the Bill, and I do not think that that request ever picked up any momentum at all. I will absolutely examine in Committee our ability to do this as quickly as possible through a shortened Committee Stage. I will discuss that to see how we can do it. If I have to work extra days, I will work extra days. If we are asked to do extra Committee days, we will do extra Committee days. Can we achieve that by 30 April? I do not know. At our most recent Committee meeting, the Chair made it clear just how packed our programme is, and I absolutely accept that. We can, however, still look in the margins to see what we can do. In supporting this, I will go away from here knowing that, at Committee Stage, I and my fellow Committee members will see what we can do. I do not think that a single Member here does not want to try to do this as quickly as possible. There is no politics in this one, apart from politics itself. Rather, this is about making sure that we get compensation to those who deserve it, as was outlined by the Chair. I will therefore look at having a shortened Committee Stage and see what I, as the Ulster Unionist Party spokesperson on the Justice Committee, and others can do. At the end of the day, any decision that we make will be made for the right reasons. That is important.

I finish by again thanking the Minister, the Chair and other Members for feeding into this debate.

We have to do this in the most positive way that we can. Negativity in driving this forward will not help us one bit.

Mr Dickson: I genuinely welcome the opportunity to speak on this vital piece of legislation, not least because, as others said, we need to bear in mind exactly what

the legislation is designed to achieve and for whom it is designed to provide relief in difficult and trying circumstances. It has been a long time in coming to the Assembly, not least because it was delayed by the collapse of this institution in 2017.

The Damages (Return on Investment) Bill is technical in nature, but its application in our justice system is incredibly important. It is wide-reaching and based, as others said, on the principle of targeting 100% compensation to provide fairness and stability to claimants and defendants.

Where a person is injured through no fault of their own due to the actions of others, often with life-changing circumstances, as others explained, there is a clear requirement for compensation to be made to that individual. A calculation is made of the return that that person would receive if the compensation had been invested. In Northern Ireland, that is through the mechanism set out in the Damages Act 1996. As a result of the decision, to which the Minister referred, of the House of Lords in *Wells v Wells*, an assumption was made that a claimant was very risk-averse in investing those sums.

If the discount rate is set too high, it will lead to under-compensation as assumed to be earned through the investment of a lump sum; if it is set too low, it will lead to overcompensation, and not enough is assumed to be earned. The current rate of 2.5% was set a long time ago, in 2001. However, the investment market has changed hugely since then, so returns on low-risk investments are remarkably low at this time, and the 2.5% is higher than the claimant is likely to see. We must always bear in mind that the technicalities around this legislation are crucial, but at the heart of what is being worked on is achieving appropriate compensation.

The current methodology assumes that the claimant's investment of their lump sum is of a very low risk. However, evidence shows that that is often not a realistic assumption as people are more likely to invest in a wider portfolio of low-risk investments, so the current rate presents a real risk of under-compensating claimants by assuming a higher rate of return on investments than is possible today. Conversely, if a new rate was set under the *Wells v Wells* mechanism, we would see it likely to overcompensate, which would be unfair to defendants and undermine the 100% compensation principle.

Dealing with this issue has been on the agenda for many years. Unfortunately, as with so many key priorities, it was shelved during the three years that the Chamber stood empty.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for taking an intervention. What is important in this legislation is that we will not set the rate; we will set the framework by which the rate will be set. It is important that people understand that this is the framework, and it is extremely important that we get it right for that reason. The Government Actuary will be able to change the rate, but it has to be changed within the framework. That is why we have to get this right.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Member for her intervention. She makes an important point, one that the Minister made absolutely clear in introducing the Bill, and, as I understand listening to her today, in the way in which she has been working with the Committee to make it absolutely clear that this is not a political decision.

The decision-making around the process has to be handled in a totally open and fair way, and it has to be determined in a technical manner. It is time that the Assembly took action in order to give clarity and to allow people to move forward. The longer the legislation is delayed, the longer it will be before a fair framework is in place for those who have suffered, often life-changing, injuries.

Moving forward, and in considering the options for a replacement, I understand that the Department has looked at the regimes in England, Wales and Scotland. Those models assume that claimants invest in a diverse portfolio of low-risk investments rather than in a single low-risk investment. However, in England and Wales, decisions on the rate are made by the Lord Chancellor, and in Scotland they are set by the Government Actuary and are, therefore, a technical exercise. The point has already been well made that that takes the decision completely and utterly away from any political interference or the interference of one individual. Rather, it is set in an actuarial manner.

I believe that the Scottish model, which is adopted in the Bill, represents a very clear way forward to provide transparency and takes direct decision-making away from, and outside of, politics. That, indeed, is further strengthened by the specific detailing of the expected investments in the text of the Bill which, ultimately, provides clarity and stability and sets out how the rate will be set in future. I welcome the provision for the Assembly to have more oversight of the issue, with changes to the detail of how the rate should be calculated to be approved by the House. That will help to ensure confidence in and democratic accountability of the model.

It is clear that change needs to be implemented swiftly. I hope that the Justice Committee will work constructively and quickly to achieve all of that. It is important that it does so in order to bring this legislation, which has been outstanding, to a close for injured parties, claimants and defendants. I encourage the Chairperson of the Committee and Committee members to engage on the issue expeditiously, while not cutting corners, to get it done within the time frame that has been set out by the Minister.

Mr Frew: The Damages (Return on Investment) Bill is a very important Bill, which will have a massive impact on people's lives, not only at a given point in time but for the rest of their lives. Those people are in a far less fortunate position than the rest of us because they have suffered grievous and life-changing injuries that will affect them and their dependants for the rest of their lives. In some cases, families with young children will be involved. We need to ensure that those people, who have been injured through no fault of their own, are compensated and looked after to the best of our ability.

We welcome the Bill in order to change the rate and the infrastructure, and it is essential that that happens. People have been let down in the past, but that is through no fault of the Minister or officials; that has been down to circumstances that have been beyond our control. However, we are here now, and I am glad that the Minister has been able to bring the Bill forward.

She is correct when she says that it is six clauses long. It is a short Bill, but it is very complicated and will have an enormous impact on people, not least those who have been injured and whose lives and families have been

affected grievously. It will have an impact on insurance businesses and the cost of insurance. That might seem like a small matter in comparison to someone's life-changing injuries, and I would argue that it is, but it will still have an impact on every single citizen in this country, and we have to be mindful of that.

12.15 pm

Ms Dillon: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr Frew: I will, yes.

Ms Dillon: We need to be cautious when considering that, because insurance companies make billions of pounds in profit every year. They have not increased insurance premiums in England and Wales. I am waiting on information about Scotland, because it is the model that we are looking at. We should be careful about having too much consideration for insurance companies, which, we know, make plenty of money off the backs of us all, including businesses. It is unfair of them to suggest that businesses would be out more money in insurance when they pay plenty already.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for her intervention and for putting that point on the record. She is correct. If premiums go up it will affect not only businesses and people but public services. That is a massive issue that we should be mindful of.

There is no doubt about it; the Minister is responsible for making the decision on how she sees the Bill going forward. That is her right. It is the Committee's place, role and duty to scrutinise the Bill and the direction of travel. That is the job that we should be up for. The Minister asked us to be timely and quick. I will talk about that a wee bit later. She is right about that. She has my word that we will try to get through the Bill as quickly, efficiently and effectively as possible.

With regard to the content of the Bill, I welcome the Minister's restating her commitment to the legal principle of 100% compensation. That is what we strive for. It is what we need to see. We will try to achieve that when we scrutinise the Bill and to ensure that we do not do anything that would upset that 100% compensation rate. It is vital. That is the balance that I was referring to when I took an intervention from the Member opposite. The balance is 100% compensation. That will bring assurance to every sector and every person who is involved. That is what we have to strive for. I commend the Minister if, indeed, she restated that she will commit to the principle of 100% compensation.

This question then arises: are we sure that the model that the Minister brings forward will actually achieve that? That is the fundamental question that I believe the Justice Committee must look at and scrutinise, because we are in a place on these islands where the one model has not fitted or been taken forward. We have differences of opinion, and we have different systems in England and Wales compared with what we have Scotland. All that may well have massive implications for all those jurisdictions going forward. We in the devolved Assembly need to be sure that the process that we take forward is the one that fits best for Northern Ireland and all its people, not least those who have been injured and deserve compensation.

I thank the Minister and her officials for their engagement with the Committee. They have been very good and diligent in coming before the Committee to talk about the Bill. I welcome that engagement. It has been very good for us to hear first-hand from officials about the mechanisms of the Bill and to try to understand, as best we can, how they actually work. I would hazard a guess that it has been a learning curve for all members. However, we are pretty good at getting to grips with things. I have every confidence that, going forward, the Committee will be able to scrutinise the Bill well and properly.

However, questions were posed to the Minister and officials that caused concern and alarm. They were just questions that we were able to put to them. There is an issue where it seems to be the case that the Scottish legislation specifically recognises that there is a risk of overcompensation. On that basis, and with its knowledge of that happening, Scotland is, with its legislation, at risk of having a burden placed on its devolved Administration. That might be well and good. It might be that it was the decision that the Scottish Parliament took.

We must know whether a further burden is being placed on any of our public services or Departments. We must know how to balance that burden because it will impact budgets.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: Yes, I will.

Mr Allister: I have been listening carefully to the debate, and I have heard many Members mention the risk of overcompensation and the resulting burden on Departments. I have yet to hear anyone mention the other side of that coin: under-compensation. Money running out creates a burden on the state through benefits. Therefore, it is not a one-sided process, and it is important to get it right not only because that is the necessary thing to do but because we need to protect the taxpayer from future underfunded cases by which insurance companies get off lightly.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his intervention. He is perfectly right. That is the balance that we are trying to strike between under-compensation and overcompensation and how that impacts every single citizen in this country. The Committee needs to be very careful about how it proceeds. We have other issues and concerns, and I know that the Minister has stated —

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member giving way. I will pick up on the overcompensation/under-compensation issue, which comes back to the point that I have made repeatedly. Under *Wells v Wells*, we are not going forward because the Department believes that that creates a risk of overcompensation. If there is no concern about the impact on the insurance industry and public bodies, why not keep *Wells v Wells*, irrespective of its removal in other jurisdictions? We can keep it and move forward with the rate that has been consulted on. If there is no concern about overcompensation, let us stick with what we have and strike the rate.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for giving way. I apologise: I realise that I am responding to the Member who intervened.

No one has said that there is no concern about overcompensation or under-compensation. We are concerned about both because there is a legal principle that we must compensate victims 100%. To be clear: it is not a departmental policy with which you can agree or disagree; it is a long-standing legal principle by which we are bound. The issue of overcompensation has significant implications for public finances and the insurance industry. We cannot take that into account when setting the rate, but it is nevertheless a fact that the ratio of under-compensation has implications for claimants. We cannot take that into account when setting the rate. As things stand, the only thing that we can take into account is the issue of *Wells v Wells*. All other jurisdictions in the United Kingdom have moved away from a position that does not represent 100% compensation. The only way that we can return to 100% compensation, which is our legal duty, is to set a new rate mechanism to reach 100% compensation. It is not an exact science, but we know for a fact that we are either overcompensating or under-compensating if we do nothing.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her intervention. I am glad to be a conduit in this place for a good debate. When I can, I facilitate that. It is good for Members — even Members who are not on the Justice Committee — to understand the issue because, ultimately, the Assembly chooses how we proceed and what votes succeed or fail.

The Minister rightly states that she cannot consider the impacts for all the other sectors, public services and Departments. However, the Committee has to consider that. The Committee has to look at the impacts on the Department of Finance, the Department of Health and the work of GPs.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: I will finish my point and then I will give way.

The Committee has to look into all that. The Department of Health will not have done scoping exercises or impact assessments on how this works. It will have, rightly, determined that it is the remit of the Department of Justice to bring forward the Bill. Although I do not want one Department to step on any other Department's toes, there seem to be blind spots as to the impact assessment and the impact of the Bill on all other spheres of life in this country. I will give way to the Minister, if she still wishes me to do so.

Mrs Long: It is a matter of law, not opinion, that we must 100% compensate. Therefore, the duty that I am bound by in setting the rate to achieve the 100% compensation is also binding on the Committee as it scrutinises the legislation to do that. If the Committee departs from that and brings forward proposals that do not, at their core, set out to achieve 100% compensation, irrespective of the wider impact, any such proposals would be struck down by judicial review.

I ask you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to seek guidance on that point for the Committee and the House before the Bill comes back to the Chamber, because it is incredibly important. There is a legal principle at stake here. It is not simply a difference of opinion. There is a legal duty on us to provide 100% compensation, irrespective of the impact on the insurance industry, the health service and others. I have already made it very clear that the Health Minister, the Department of Finance and the insurance industry are

fully aware of the potential consequences of any change to the rate, so they are able to prepare for that. However, it cannot influence us in the making and setting of the rate, nor can it influence us in how we structure the actuarial information on which any rate would be based in the future.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I appreciate what the Minister is saying about compliance with the law, but, by way of clarity, that will be a matter for the Committee and the Clerk of the Committee. I served on the Committee, and I am sure that the Clerk of the Committee, who is a person with a lot of experience, will ensure that anything that comes before the Committee, or that the Committee initiates, will be compliant with any relevant legislation.

Mr Frew: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for your ruling. I appreciate the Minister's intervention, but here we go again. We have an Executive Minister trying to dictate to the Committee how it does its business. I am getting sick of it — I really am — and I will bring that point up later.

I fully agree with the Minister that we need 100% compensation and that it is set by law, but it is very clear that there are many ways to get to that point, and that has been proven on these isles. Let us see whether our model and our infrastructure offer the best way of obtaining 100% compensation, which is what we all strive for. I do not think that the Committee will do anything that may damage that potential, because every single member of the Committee has recited the line about 100% compensation during the debate. No way would we want to see anybody disadvantaged in any shape or form. It is about getting to that point and making sure that the model is the best model for Northern Ireland and its citizens.

Ms S Bradley: I appreciate the Member giving way. Is it not true to say that the target is 100% and that the effect is the effect on either side of that? There are conflicting agendas here, and the methodology set in the legislation could lean towards one of those agendas over another. The conundrum is how we get to the 100% and remove any bias. I believe that that has been the focus of the Committee members to date. I also believe that there will be a lot of noise from outside parties, and it is only fair to hear them, but we are all still focused on that same target of 100% compensation.

Mr Frew: I agree with the Member, and I thank her for her intervention and for putting that on the record. I believe that that is the case. When we look at the process and infrastructure that the Bill puts in place, we have concerns, even about the answers that officials gave to some of the questions that we posed. One official talked about the difference between the 30- and 43-year investment periods. That was described as a "rounding difference", which would make no difference if it was less than the 0.25%. My understanding is that 0.25% could be worth hundreds of thousands of pounds.

12.30 pm

We say that we are picking up the Scottish model, but we are not really. We are trying to get a bespoke model for Northern Ireland. I am not saying that that is wrong or right, but we will have to scrutinise it and to make sure that it is fit for purpose for Northern Ireland and its citizens.

Those are the questions that have been posed by the Committee already, and the answers that we received raised further questions that we need to explore. That is

just one example of some of the issues that the Committee has grappled with, even to date.

There is also an issue about the Scottish review process and how the Northern Ireland process will align with it, even though the legislation will only be implemented this year. Whilst we like the idea of reviewing laws, apparatus and infrastructure, could that affect settlements? We must look at that. That is what is happening at present: people are holding on and waiting out and are being advised to do so. Even a review mechanism could have an impact on settlements going forward. Those are things that we will try to look at.

I return to my earlier point. The Minister wrote to the Committee, on 16 February this year, about the Bill and the legislative process for it. That letter shook me to my core. The Minister may laugh, but there is a process in the House. I have been here for nearly 11 years, and I can tell Members that the Executive are not the Assembly. It is a place apart; there is a difference; and that has to be so. There is no way that the Executive should dictate to this House — this Assembly — that passes legislation. Any influence or process that jeopardises that separation should be aggressively countered. There should be no stepping into that void, especially when we sit in a five-party coalition. My party is one of them, but I defend the right of Committees to do their work as they see fit and to make sure that the Assembly is independent of the Executive. Without that independence, you lose democracy, and I am not in that space.

For the record, I will read out the first paragraph of the Minister's letter to the Committee, because I think that it is grievous. Remember, the setting was a debate and a toing and froing between the Minister and the Committee, with her wanting the Bill to go through by accelerated passage. Rightly, members of the Committee did not want to pursue that —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I want to clarify one wee point, please. I am happy to allow the Member to put information on the record, but I want to clarify that it is not a debate about the pros and cons of accelerated passage; it is about the principles of the legislation that is in front of us. OK?

Mr Frew: I thank the Deputy Speaker for his ruling. Yes, I will talk about the process and the Committee Stage. That will have a massive impact on the information in the Bill. I quote the Minister. She wrote:

"I wanted to let you and Committee members know that, after taking careful account of the understandable desire for a short Committee stage that a number of Committee members had asked for at its meeting on 11 February and, after discussion at Executive with respect to the urgency of the Bill, the Executive agreed to the introduction of the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill with a condensed Committee Stage. The Executive reached this decision on the basis that it recognises that it is imperative for the Bill to pass all of its stages before the Summer Recess. For that to be possible, our timetable"

— "our timetable" —

"(which is attached) indicates that Committee stage would need to conclude by 30 April."

How dare the Minister dictate to the Committee when it should meet and how much time it should give.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: I will finish my point, and then I will give way. We are given two ears and one mouth, and sometimes it is good for Ministers to hear and listen to what Members of the Assembly are stating. It is not for any Executive Minister to dictate how long a Committee should take to consider and scrutinise legislation brought before it by that Minister. That is a real breach of the way in which this place works and operates. I will defend the right of the Committee to take its time with the process of considered scrutiny of the Bill. We will endeavour to work as hard and as speedily as we can. Like you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will be a guardian of democracy. I will make sure that rushed law does not become bad law and that rushed law does not become flawed law. That letter from the Justice Minister overstepped a mark, and that I cannot tolerate. That is why I speak of it today. I will give way to the Minister.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for giving way. To be absolutely clear, a number of processes take place when bringing forward legislation. As the Member rightly said, I have to seek the approval of my Executive colleagues to bring forward legislation and, for example, to request accelerated passage. That is what I did, in accordance with the ministerial code and the directions around how we bring forward legislation. It was a decision of the Executive, however. It was a decision not of mine but of the Executive to seek from the Justice Committee a shortened Committee Stage. That proposal was put because members of the DUP on the Committee objected to accelerated passage. It was brought forward by their own party leader as a potential way of resolving that conflict. I acceded to that request and, rather than push for accelerated passage, wrote to the Committee, as I was asked to do by the Executive, to request that it consider a condensed Committee Stage in the interest of claimants. The Member is right: it is for the Committee to decide whether to accede to that request.

Given all that the Member has said, it is entirely in order that he, with his one mouth and two ears, understands the consequences of delay and the seriousness of the impact. He has talked a lot about the impact on the public sector and the consequences of any delay for it. It was for that reason that the Executive asked for a condensed Committee Stage: in the interest of claimants. If the Committee chooses to peruse the Bill at length and over an extended period, that is, of course, in its gift. It cannot, with any credibility, then come to the House and complain that blame for the delay lies at my door or is my fault.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I thank the Minister for her explanation. We will not have any commentary between Members in the Chamber. We will do so through the proper process, please.

As I said, I thank the Minister for her explanation and for clarifying the situation to the House. I also know that she will respect the right of Committees to scrutinise fully all legislation that goes through. I have some sympathy with Mr Frew's point, having sat through, on another Committee, some difficult stuff that, had we been given enough information, might have resulted in a much better outcome for the renewable heat incentive (RHI). That was

another place at another time. I therefore have sympathy with the point that the Member is making, but the Minister has explained the route that was taken and the process that was followed.

Mr Givan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister has deliberately misled the House. She said that the reason that she went to the Executive was that it was DUP members of the Committee — one party, singular — objected to accelerated passage. I am not aware that it was only the DUP, as a single party, that objected to accelerated passage.

Mrs Long: I am happy to clarify for the record —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): One moment please, Minister. I will allow you to come back in, but I will not allow the debate to be distracted by things of which I have no knowledge. I will allow you to clarify the point, Minister.

Mrs Long: I am happy to clarify for the record, Mr Deputy Speaker. It was not only the DUP that raised concerns about accelerated passage. However, it was at the Executive.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I am sorry, but there will be no more commentary on this. Both sides of the argument have been fully ventilated and clarified. I have allowed ample latitude for that to happen. Mr Frew, I will return to you.

Mr Frew: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I put that point on record. I am not privy to any Executive business, nor should I be as an MLA. That is a separation that we should protect. You will know that, in the history of this place, only one Committee's scrutiny has taken the 30 days laid down in statute. All others have asked for an extension in order to do their work diligently and appropriately. I do not believe that we will be able to meet the Minister's expectations, and nor should we, because we need to take the Bill very seriously and to make sure that we hear from all witnesses and stakeholders who wish to speak to the Committee.

I will not lay the delay at the Minister's feet, but I will not have the Minister in one or two years' time saying, "Well, you know, the Justice Committee approved this. It passed it and allowed it to go". Committee members will do our job as diligently as we can with the tools at our disposal to scrutinise the Bill appropriately and to the level that it deserves for everyone involved, not least for those grievously injured through no fault of their own.

This is a very important Bill that we, Committee members and Members of the Assembly, should consider seriously. It will affect people we know into the future. It will also affect every citizen in this place, so we should look at it very carefully.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. I am mulling over the comments made by the Minister earlier. At the outset, the Minister quite rightly said that this is a very technical Bill that aims at delivering 100% compensation and that that should be our only motivation. However, twice in her previous comments, the Minister referred to the request for accelerated passage being motivated by the need to reach claimants.

That contradicts trying to focus wholly on the 100%. Is accelerated passage motivated by the intention of reaching claimants? Then to park an element of blame on the

Committee sits uncomfortably with me, as we are doing our very best to scrutinise and to reach the 100% target. However, claimants are brought into the equation, and we are now being told that if our scrutiny takes too long, it is on us and we can answer to claimants. That is quite offensive, and I want to place that on record.

Mrs Long: Through the Chair, if I may—.

Mr Frew: *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Are you OK to *[Inaudible]*?

Mrs Long: If I may —. Would you give way?

Mr Frew: Mr Deputy Speaker, for the purposes of the debate, I will gladly give way to the Minister if she seeks it.

Mrs Long: Yes.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): OK. Minister?

Mrs Long: Thank you. To be absolutely clear: the reason for seeking accelerated passage is so that claimants can get their settlements as quickly as possible. I have been clear about that throughout the debate. The issue here is about those who wish to overly prolong the debate on this issue and not take account of the urgency. On the one hand, with respect, Mr Deputy Speaker, I have been berated about the delay in introducing the legislation and changing the rate. On the other hand, I am being told that the Committee will take as long as it likes with the Bill. We cannot have both of those making sense. What we need to do, and all that I am asking the Committee to do — to be absolutely clear — is to be as expeditious as possible.

If we meet the 30 April deadline, which we formally requested of the Committee, there is every opportunity that we will have a new rate in place this summer. If we do not, the situation will become protracted and will go on beyond the summer recess into the autumn and create difficulties for claimants. That is clear. I am not, to be clear, annoyed with those members of the Committee who previously said to me that they would have accepted accelerated passage, albeit uncomfortably, or that they would support a shortened Committee Stage.

My concern is about those who appear, today, to want to have both the ability to criticise the Department for delay and the ability to take their time.

12.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Minister, I think that we have amply ventilated this issue. People outside this Chamber and those principally affected by this legislation will just want there to be good will and dedication from the Department and the Committee to get the Bill ushered through in a proper manner that allows for adequate scrutiny.

Mr Frew, you had a final point to make.

Mr Frew: Yes, thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have applauded the Minister for bringing the Bill today. I have not spoken about delays or chastised or criticised anybody in the debate for delays. I welcome the fact that the Bill is at Second Stage, and we will do our work. However, I need to put on record that the Committee is scrutinising three other Bills, with another one to come, so do the Executive and the Minister want us to stop the work on the stalking

Bill, the committal reform Bill or any other Bill for that matter?

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: No, the Minister will have ample time at the end. The Committee is doing a lot of work, and rightly so, and we have said to the Minister to bring it to us and we will work through it, but please do not dictate a timetable to us of when you think that we should be finished that scrutiny because we do not know, even today, what might come out of the evidence that people may present to us. That, in itself, may need further scrutiny and time.

I will leave it there, Mr Deputy Speaker. Thank you for your rulings today. I know that it has not been easy for you to be in the Chair, but, having said that, we have had a good, robust debate, and I thank you for that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you. In light of the fact that we will probably wind up before 1.00 pm, if Ms Cameron wants to deliver her contribution to the debate now, that would be OK. In other words, you have until 1.00 pm if you can manage it within that time.

Mrs Cameron: *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Yes. Your name is down to contribute to this debate.

Mrs Cameron: My name should not be down.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): OK. That is grand. Sorry about that confusion. I do not know how that arose. Your name is on our list. You got off lightly today, Pam.

I will move on to Rachel Woods. If you can manage to conclude before 1.00 pm, we would appreciate that.

Miss Woods: I guarantee that I will be finished before 1.00 pm, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for bringing this to the House today. The Chair outlined the process by which we got here and the number of issues that the Committee has already considered, including the setting of an interim rate, the issues of certainty about a legal framework, or being without one, amongst other things. I am not going to go over that or replicate much of what has been said, but I welcome the fact that we are here today at Second Stage.

Proposed changes have been much needed for years, as we know, and have already been highlighted by other Members. Again, I am not going to labour those points, but the people who have suffered a personal injury and who have been waiting to conclude their cases deserve 100% compensation. That must take centre stage in getting a correct framework and correct rate set.

At the end of the day, this is about people, and compensation does not in any way make up for what has happened to them. This is a difficult and complex area of law and one that I do not even pretend to know every detail of, and I have said that throughout much of the Committee discussions on this issue. I believe that it is a position shared by others, too, but, for the record, I give the Minister, the Department and Committee members my absolute assurance, for what it is worth, that I will not protract or delay any scrutiny of the Bill longer than I need to, but I honestly need time to consider this because I need to understand it properly.

Much has been said about the impact of compensation, so I ask the Minister to touch on that in summing up — I would be happy to take an intervention, but I am mindful of the time — to clarify the position on budgets and the impact. The Minister of Finance outlined in a letter to the Committee that access to the reserve would be sought, in line with that afforded to Whitehall Departments and other devolved Administrations. How does that work with regard to the points that have been made by others during this debate on the financial impact of the Bill? Perhaps I have confused myself; it would not be the first time. However, it brings me back to the point that this is difficult and complex and requires scrutiny.

The overriding legal principle is that injured people should receive 100% of the compensation that they are entitled to — no more and no less, as outlined. That is key to ensuring that the proposal meets the relevant legal requirements. The best route to achieve that differs depending on the jurisdiction. I note that there has been some debate over which model is best and over which model, if we use England and Wales or Scotland, we should base ours on. No clear consensus was evident in the consultation responses. The Bill seems to be something of a mix between the English and Welsh model and the Scottish model. Setting the new legal framework on the rate will require scrutiny, and questions should be asked.

Most in the Chamber know my position on rushing any legislation through the House. Given that I am one of the very few non-Executive party MLAs, I welcome that we, as a Committee, will have the opportunity for further scrutiny, even if it is for a shorter period of scrutiny than normal for the reasons outlined.

I am confident that the Committee will be able to expedite the passage of the Bill in order to get the rate set as soon as possible. However, we must provide the appropriate level of scrutiny that the proposal requires, and that goes for every piece of legislation that comes through the House. We have heard from some personal injury lawyers and departmental officials on the main aspects of the Bill, but there is more work to be done and further detail to explore. It will take time, which will be as much as the Committee and the Assembly deem is needed. It is important that that happens. I look forward, as part of the Committee Stage, to continuing engagement with interested parties, representatives, the Department, the permanent secretary and the Minister and to getting the most appropriate legal framework in place.

The Committee has a job to do. It must ask the difficult questions about the proposed new model, such as how the rate is calculated and monitored and how to get the new rate in place as quickly as possible for those who are waiting.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when we will have questions to the Minister for the Economy. We will return to this item of business at 2.45 pm, when the next contribution will be from Mr Jim Allister.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.52 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Economy

EU Office in Belfast

1. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has had any discussions with European Union officials on the economic benefits of a European Union office in Belfast. (AQO 1716/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I thank the Member for his question. Direct negotiations with the European Commission, as a matter of international relations, are the responsibility of our national Government — the United Kingdom Government. Therefore, I have had no engagement with the European Commission on the establishment of a European Union office in Belfast. My work with our Government has focused on the issues facing businesses. It is informed by the issues that businesses raise with me or my officials. Businesses have not raised this issue with me.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answer. Last week, the Economy Committee heard from business leaders, who told us that the retained access to the EU single market must be supplemented by good relations with the EU going forward, as the Minister will know. In Belfast, we have consulates for other major trading partners, such as the US and China. I know that the Minister did say it in her answer, but her position is known. How does she justify her position on an EU office in Belfast, given the opportunity that it would provide to engage, in conjunction with the EU, on the enormous benefits for consumers?

Mrs Dodds: We will, of course, look to trade and to have good relations with the European Union. It is regrettable that our national Government have imposed the protocol, which imposes a huge raft of European laws and regulations on Northern Ireland that are costly to businesses, consumers and our economy. The Northern Ireland Executive retain the Northern Ireland bureau in Brussels, which will be responsible for those relations in the future.

Mr Middleton: Clearly, it is for the national Government to lead on discussions with the European Union, but does the Minister agree that it is important that the UK Government stand up for the interests of Northern Ireland and put across the position that we will no longer accept the protocol?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. It is imperative that our Government continue to stand up for Northern Ireland, not only with intermittent grace periods but by providing a permanent and complete solution to the issues of the protocol, one that respects Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom's internal market and its constitutional position within the United Kingdom.

Ms McLaughlin: What alternative does the Minister have to an Irish Sea border? It is nothing short of Brexit constipation to keep talking about technological solutions, alternative arrangements and, God forbid, the Malthouse

arrangements. What alternative to the current sea border is she offering to Members and the rest of Northern Ireland?

Mrs Dodds: I will not go down the metaphor route on that question, but I thank the Member for it. The checks across the Irish Sea bring costs to businesses and consumers and a lack of consumer choice. This morning, I spoke to a businessman who indicated very clearly to me that the cost of the protocol to his business this year would be somewhere in the region of £500,000. That is an enormous cost that will eventually be passed on to consumers and families and will be reflected in the cost of living for those families. My party and I were clear that we never wanted the Northern Ireland protocol, and we do not see that a border and checks between us and our largest market are of any value whatever to the economy or to businesses in Northern Ireland. Therefore, again, I ask the parties that support the protocol and its rigorous implementation to review that support so that their party leaders will not have to write to me asking for special schemes to support businesses that are incurring costs through it.

Mr Allister: Whereas our feudal overlords in Brussels, who are imposing their laws on our economy and our people without consent, may think it befitting of our state of vassalage that they should impose themselves through a permanent presence as governors general in Belfast, will the Minister assure me that she is in the business of expelling, not facilitating, the protocol?

Mrs Dodds: I made it perfectly clear in my answer that, of course, negotiations with the European Commission are a matter for our national Government. I neither see the need nor feel the want for a European office in Belfast.

Green Economic Recovery

2. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline her plans for a green economic recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. (AQO 1717/17-22)

3. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of whether a green economic recovery is integrated effectively into her recently published economic recovery action plan. (AQO 1718/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to group questions 2 and 3. Again, with your permission, I would like to avail myself of an extra minute to answer the grouping.

On 25 February, I launched my economic recovery action plan, which outlines the decisive actions that I plan to take to support our economy as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. Rebuilding a greener economy is at the heart of the plan, and that includes actions focused on encouraging the development of a greener future in areas such as clean energy, green innovation and energy efficiency. The plan also reaffirms my commitment to the development of the hydrogen and circular economy. Later this month, I will launch an options consultation on my new energy strategy. I expect substantial investment and economic recovery opportunities to arise from the new policies for decarbonising energy in Northern Ireland. Enabling a skilled low-carbon workforce will be key to delivering that.

Embracing and investing in environmentally friendly opportunities offers the Northern Ireland economy the

opportunity to build resilience, increase productivity, create jobs, strengthen competitiveness and realise carbon, energy and cost savings. It is crucial that funding is made available at the earliest opportunity for my economic recovery plan so that it can have the maximum impact. I look forward to working with the Finance Minister and, indeed, all of my Executive colleagues in the coming weeks to ensure that we can rebuild our economy to be more competitive, more inclusive and more environmentally sustainable.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her answer. A green recovery will involve not just green stimulus and investment, of which there is none in the economic plan, to create jobs; it requires new ways of measuring progress. Will the Minister adopt or consider any alternative economic models in her plans for COVID-19 recovery, including alternative ways to measure prosperity and address inequalities in wealth and income?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. I, of course, want the economic recovery action plan to create not just a stable and prosperous Northern Ireland but a more equal Northern Ireland, including a more equally regionally balanced economy. I will look at all the measures as we continue to work our way through that economic recovery plan. It is important that we get the investment for that economic recovery plan so that we begin the journey of reopening, rebuilding and recovering our economy. That is the way to provide inclusive growth for the future.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, for your answers. If your economic recovery plan is to include the whole area of the green economy, it will require you to work together with other Ministers to deliver that; it is not something that you can do on your own or that Northern Ireland can do on its own because it will require the involvement of the European Union and the rest of the United Kingdom. Minister, do you agree that, although your plan is of benefit, it will not stand up unless it includes a wide-ranging and comprehensive green economy intervention?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. He somewhat makes my point for me. My economic recovery plan states that we need specific interventions in relation to the green economy for the sustainable and prosperous future that we see as being really important for Northern Ireland. That will involve me working across the Executive with other Ministers. Of course, I am already doing that. Perhaps the Member is knowledgeable about the innovative project that I am doing with Northern Ireland Water. It is the first of its kind; it will lead to greater sustainability; and, of course, it demonstrates working right across the Executive to produce a joined-up plan for economic recovery.

As we emerge from the dark times of the COVID pandemic, the most important thing that we can do is to help to recover our economy, our health service and our services to people in their communities. The House has my commitment that I will work across the Executive to do those very important things.

Mr Catney: Minister, do you consider the expenditure allocation for the greener economy to be sufficient to enable Northern Ireland to meet the UK's 2050 net zero target, or do you intend to approach the Finance Minister

to bid for additional funding? What we sow now, we will reap in the future.

Mrs Dodds: The Member makes a very important point. In my economic recovery plan, I have identified a sum that will give us some element of recovery for Northern Ireland and, indeed, the green economy in Northern Ireland. That economy is already happening all around us. I do not know whether some of you saw the story last week about the mission to build zero emission boats and vessels in Belfast and the huge and really innovative changes that are being made to do that. When it comes to transport, the use of hydrogen buses is happening all around us. It is happening across the different parts of the Executive. The economic recovery plan is a live document. It will evolve and develop, and so, too, will our asks of the Finance Minister to fund the green economy as we move forward.

Ms Brogan: Does the Minister acknowledge that, as well as providing us with a sound and sustainable economy, a green recovery that delivers cleaner air and water, as well as one that protects biodiversity, can help populations when it comes to developing natural defences to future pandemics?

2.15 pm

Mrs Dodds: I am no expert in the matter, but I know that a greener recovery — more sustainable environment, more sustainable hopes for businesses and manufacturing and so on as we go forward — is hugely important for the benefit of all of our lives, not least for the jobs and prosperity that it can bring us.

Mr Irwin: The Minister has identified the importance of clean energy as a priority for her as we rebuild and regrow our local economy. What future opportunities are there for the hydrogen economy?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question.

This is one of the most exciting elements of the work that we are doing. It is cutting-edge, and it has the ability to really drive forward the investment opportunities that investing in the green economy will give us. It is an opportunity to build on our world-leading capabilities in renewables and advanced manufacturing to create those sustainable jobs. Those opportunities can be realised through producing green hydrogen; supplying this for clean heat, power and transport; and developing and manufacturing cutting-edge technologies such as electrolyzers. There will also be export opportunities for advanced manufacturing in global hydrogen supply chains.

I have already referred to the £5 million of funding that I provided to Northern Ireland Water to undertake an innovative oxygen and hydrogen demonstrator project, the first such project in the United Kingdom and Ireland. That will also help to build momentum in the hydrogen economy. I am aware of many other exciting and emerging projects in this space, and I look forward to engaging with those who develop this cutting-edge technology.

Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland: Economic Impact

4. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for the Economy what work her Department has done to ascertain the impact on the economy of the full implementation of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. (AQO 1719/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question.

My Department undertakes ongoing monitoring of the Northern Ireland economy. It includes the impact of COVID-19 and of leaving the EU and, in particular, the protocol. In the short term, the impact of all of those are intermingled. It is early days for a full measure of the economic impact of leaving the EU and the implementation of the protocol. For businesses, initial survey data indicates that a lot of the initial impact has been focused on the friction in movement of goods from GB to Northern Ireland. Some of the issues will be familiar to those who have been meeting businesses in the last few months: customs and the additional burden placed on businesses; lack of preparedness of GB suppliers; late communication of guidance on parcels; and a wide range of other issues. While the impacts are difficult to quantify, surveys by Enterprise NI and Manufacturing NI have found that a substantial proportion of their members have experienced issues with supply chains from GB.

In 2018, Northern Ireland companies purchased goods and services worth £13.4 billion from Great Britain: 63% of all external purchases. Of that, £10.4 billion was spent on goods and £3 billion on services. That demonstrates the level of dependence on GB of individuals and businesses for their supply chains. At the same time, the DAERA permanent secretary has indicated that, although we have 0.5% of the EU population, we have 20% of the checks on goods. That is surely neither proportionate nor sustainable and is a reflection of the cost to businesses of the protocol.

Ms Bunting: Following the Minister's answer, I trust that those in the House who laud the protocol and call for its rigorous implementation will note the extent to which our external purchases are sourced from GB and will reflect on the significant challenges that the protocol presents to local business.

I ask the Minister to turn her attention to consumers. Will she outline the implications of rigorous implementation of the protocol for them, if no action is taken?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. There is absolutely no doubt that, for consumers, the protocol mainly represents additional cost and less choice. That is very evident across a range of products in Northern Ireland. Just two weeks ago, I met businesses that deliver parcels to Northern Ireland. They indicated that, if our Government had not taken unilateral action, many small providers of goods to Northern Ireland would simply not have bothered, because to do so would not have been worthwhile. They were also finding that there was additional cost to those simply getting normal, everyday items from GB. That is not a sustainable position for consumers or for the economy of Northern Ireland. I reiterate my call for a permanent solution that does away with the frictions of the protocol.

Dr Archibald: If only the Minister and her party had been as exercised about economic impacts when they were cheerleading for a hard Brexit. Does the Minister agree that stunts like that from the DUP AERA Minister and solo runs by the British Government are causing even greater uncertainty and instability for businesses and that, since it is clear that the protocol is here to stay, efforts should instead be focused on working through the structures of the protocol to resolve issues?

Mrs Dodds: I am afraid that the Member is somewhat confused in the way in which she looks at this kind of thing. Those who think that unilateral action by our Government to protect businesses and consumers in Northern Ireland is nothing more than a solo run are foolish in the extreme. It really is quite unbelievable, especially when we consider the advice from retail organisations etc, which have indicated that, although they are not that fond of solo runs, those actions were absolutely necessary to protect businesses and consumers in Northern Ireland. My party did not advocate the protocol. We are not the champions of the rigorous implementation of the protocol. Those who are need to reflect on the damage that it is causing to Northern Ireland.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, I have the Invest NI website open in front of me. I am reading from a page that states:

"This dual market access position"

— referring to the protocol —

"means that Northern Ireland can become a gateway for the sale of goods to two of the world's largest markets ..."

This is a unique proposition for manufacturers based in Northern Ireland as well as those seeking a pivotal location from which to service GB and EU markets ..."

These additional benefits further enhance Northern Ireland's already strong proposition as a prime location to establish, or grow, a business".

Minister, what of that do you disagree with?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. He points out what an absolutely brilliant place Northern Ireland is to invest in and to do business in, but it will be even better when we do away with the frictions of the protocol.

Ms Armstrong: I am a bit flabbergasted as I stand here. Minister, I will go back to Mr O'Toole's point. There are those of us who are trying our best to help businesses cope with the fallout from Brexit and the resulting protocol. What work have you done to promote dual access to both the UK market and the EU market for businesses in Northern Ireland that are looking for the opportunities?

Mrs Dodds: I will always seek to look for opportunities for Northern Ireland businesses. I take that on as part of my work in the Department for the Economy. Before businesses in Northern Ireland can look at outward working, exporting etc, however, they need to be sure that their supply chains are secure and that the intermediate goods that make up part of those supply chains will not be subject to tariffs, as the protocol would have it. The Member needs to reflect on those issues and research the impact that tariffs will have on businesses in Northern Ireland.

Mr Stalford: From the Minister's previous answers, it is apparent that, in television advertising, we are going to see a lot more asterisks with, "Offer not available in Northern Ireland". Does my honourable friend agree that that should be changed to, "Offer not available in Northern Ireland, thanks to Sinn Féin, the SDLP, the Alliance Party and the Greens"? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

Mrs Dodds: I have taken some time to give the figures, which are independent of the Department for the Economy, on the importance of our biggest market. Those who prioritised checks between us and that market will have to bear responsibility and answer to the Northern Ireland public for the additional cost, additional inconvenience and lack of choice that the rigorous implementation of the protocol brings.

BTEC: Vocational Assessments

5. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on alternative arrangements for vocational assessment for BTEC students. *(AQO 1720/17-22)*

Mrs Dodds: In January, I announced the cancellation of BTEC examinations for the remainder of the academic year. BTECs are offered across the UK by the Pearson awarding organisation, and I have ensured that there is alignment with England and Wales to protect the ongoing portability and integrity of qualifications and the interests of all our learners.

The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual), in conjunction with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) regulations, recently consulted on the alternative awarding arrangements for vocational qualifications in 2021, and the outcome was announced on 25 February. BTECs will be awarded using teacher-assessed grades that have been submitted by the learning centres, similar to the arrangements for GCSEs and A levels. That will require the teacher or lecturer to make an informed judgement on the result using a range of evidence, such as performance in tasks or assessments that have already been completed. Those judgements will be quality-assured in the schools, colleges or training providers and then by the awarding organisations prior to the issuing of results.

Awarding organisations are now required to provide clear and timely guidance to learning centres on the assessment and awarding approaches to be implemented, the times by which centres need to submit information and the records that they should maintain on the nature of any centre-based quality assurance. I hope that all that information will be with the centres by the end of March or early April, because it is essential for progress.

Mr Lynch: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, as you said, a decision was made on A-level exams in January, yet BTEC students have been left waiting for full clarity on their assessments. In light of your statement on Friday, how will you ensure that grades for practical assessments are awarded before the end of the academic year?

Mrs Dodds: As I said in response to the Member's substantive question, those who are doing BTECs that require a written examination will follow a pathway similar to that for A levels and GCSEs. I want our young students who are doing professional qualifications and need the practical elements of their course to be vouched for to be able to go back into further education colleges as quickly as possible so that those elements of the course can proceed as efficiently as possible. That will enable us to make assessments and professional judgements on those qualifications as soon as we can. I want our young people to be able to progress, either to the next level or into work.

Mr Speaker: Time is up for listed questions. We move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Crescent Capital IV Development Fund: Closure

T1. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for the Economy, in light of reports in today's 'Irish News' on the closure of the £65 million Crescent Capital IV development fund, which was a venture capital fund for technology, life sciences and manufacturing businesses, and assertions that those businesses that are currently in receipt of funds have had those funds returned, to state whether this is true, what is going on and what it means for the companies that, in good faith, drew down money from that capital fund. (AQT 1091/17-22)

2.30 pm

Mrs Dodds: My understanding is that, in relation to the fund, no one has any need to fear. The fund manager was unable to get additional private finance and equity realised, and the fund was therefore not sustainable.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for that assurance. However, in the body of the report, with regard to a previous iteration of the fund — it is the fourth iteration that has been cancelled — it states:

"It is understood a number of companies in the third fund have been interviewed as part of a probe into how monies may have been managed."

Are we looking at the son of RHI?

Mrs Dodds: I do not think that the Member should get carried away on this particular issue. All of those issues will be investigated and dealt with in the normal manner etc.

Trading: Post-COVID

T2. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister for the Economy, given that he is sure that all Members will welcome the progress of the roll-out of the vaccine, the reduction of the virus and the return of some young people to school, and in light of the fact that she has published her plan to reopen, recover and rebuild the local economy, whether she agrees that we need to start indicating to local businesses when they will be able to start trading again. (AQT 1092/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. We are indeed ready, when the time is right, to reopen, rebuild and recover the economy. As I have said during this Question Time, nothing is more important to the prosperity and stability of Northern Ireland. I look forward to that being possible very soon. I encourage Members to work with me to ensure that it can happen as soon as possible.

Mr Stalford: Sunday is, obviously, Mother's Day. On behalf of Trinity, Oliver, Cameron and Abigail Stalford, I wish to ask whether they will be allowed to go to the local florist to buy their mother a bunch of flowers on a click-and-collect basis?

Mrs Dodds: Again, I thank the Member for his question. I am glad that we have been able to restore some click-and-collect services to businesses. It is but a very, very limited form of reopening the economy. I would have liked for Trinity and her siblings to be able to purchase flowers

through a local florist. Unfortunately, my proposal on that was not supported at the Executive. That is a pity, because it raises issues around how we treat small, independent retailers and the equity with which we treat them. You will be able to buy flowers in any of the multinationals, but you will not be able to go to a small, independent retailer and use a click-and-collect service. I regret that that is not possible, and I hope that it will become possible very soon.

Wet Pubs Business Support Scheme

T3. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for the Economy whether all payments under the wet pubs business support scheme have been made. (AQT 1093/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I will write to the Member with the exact figures for the scheme. That is one of a number of schemes that we are rolling out. When I last checked the figures for the scheme, I saw that around half of the businesses that we thought were eligible had applied and were being paid. Officials were chasing up some of the other businesses that still had not come forward for the scheme. I will write to the Member with the exact numbers.

Mr McGlone: I very much thank the Minister for that. When will payments commence under the large tourism and hospitality business support scheme?

Mrs Dodds: I signed off on that at the end of last week. My understanding is that they will be paid in the very, very near future, and, of course, they must be completed before 31 March. I am glad to be able to support local businesses in that way. This is a substantial scheme. I know that those businesses have welcomed it, and it will help to sustain them until we can get them reopened and fully functioning.

Economic Recovery Action Plan: Funding

T4. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister for the Economy, after welcoming the publication of the Minister's action plan, which is focused on ensuring that our economy is reopened, whether she agrees that the entire Executive and the Assembly, if they are serious about recovery, need to ensure that adequate and appropriate funding is in place alongside the recovery plan so that the plan can do what it says on the tin, which is aid recovery. (AQT 1094/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. It is really important. We have published our economic recovery plan. We also have a plan for a Northern Ireland skills fund to recover and invest in the skills of our people. It is vital that, as we emerge from this dark place of COVID, we are able to put that stimulus into the economy and to fund economic recovery not for just the immediate term but for the long term.

I look forward to working with the Finance Minister and, indeed, across the Executive, so that we can properly fund the economic action recovery plan, our skills plans and those employability interventions that will be really necessary from the Department for Communities.

Mr Storey: Thank you, Minister. We hope that that will be more successful than the bids that you put in to the Finance Minister, given how they were dealt with in terms of the total number of bids, not just the amount of money. Do you agree that a recovery Budget, alongside the current Budget, which we will complete today, is necessary so that people clearly understand and see where the finances are in how the plan will be delivered?

Mrs Dodds: Yes, it is very important to have transparency in the way that we deal with the Budget. It is important that we are able to separate out the departmental budgets from the actual recovery Budget that we have. Substantial funds have come to us from our national Government to provide that stimulus for economic recovery.

If we are serious about the economy and all that it represents — the jobs, the mortgages and rent it pays, the food on the table and so on — we will fund that economic recovery Budget and get ahead with making Northern Ireland that prosperous place that we all want it to be.

Granville Industrial Estate

T5. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister for the Economy to give a commitment to work with her Executive colleague Nichola Mallon to deal with the absolute mess at Granville Industrial Estate in Dungannon, about which Mid Ulster District Council has written to Minister Mallon. (AQT 1095/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I will be happy to work with any Minister on any difficulties that are faced by businesses. If the Member wants to drop me a note, I will be happy to take it up with her as well.

Ms Dillon: I appreciate that offer, Minister. Thank you. The Mid Ulster District Council area brings to the gross value added (GVA) here over £2 billion, yet Invest NI has not one single piece of land in the whole Mid Ulster District Council area. We are the only council area across the North in that position, which is with no lands for businesses to grow. That is a very serious situation for our council area and constituency. Will the Minister commit to meeting our council officials and me in order to discuss the issues and the challenges that face them in not only that but wider issues with infrastructure in the mid-Ulster area?

Mrs Dodds: I will be very happy to have a meeting. That is never an issue, and I meet a wide variety of people from across the House on all the issues that pertain to their constituencies. I will say two things. We should all be very proud of the manufacturing tradition that is so evident in mid-Ulster. It is an area of Northern Ireland that excels in its advanced manufacturing capabilities and is still investing and creating jobs and so on. I am really pleased to see the developments in relation to city deals and growth deals for the area, and I will work with councils to push the growth deal forward. Invest Northern Ireland has invested significantly in businesses in the area. Just a few months ago, I was with the council chairman at a local business where there had been an investment of over £1 million to push that part of the economy forward. I look forward to engaging with the Member and the council, and I stand ready to help.

Mr Speaker: I call Karen Mullan. Please bring her on-screen. [Pause.] Ms Mullan is not available. I call Sinéad Bradley. Please bring her on-screen. [Pause.] Ms Bradley is not available. I call Andrew Muir.

COVID Disruption Payment

T8. **Mr Muir** asked the Minister for the Economy, after acknowledging that technology is wonderful and expressing surprise at being called to ask a question, whether consideration has been given to offering the

COVID disruption payment that has been awarded to students in higher education in Northern Ireland to further education students. (AQT 1098/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Technology is, indeed, wonderful when it is working and going to plan. Anyway, you got your question in. I am delighted that students who are studying at degree level in further education will be eligible for the COVID disruption payment. Further education students have been eligible for the hardship funds. Just last week, we started to address the very real issue of digital poverty among students in further education, with a specific grant of £60 for the data that they will use at home and the distribution of over 500 devices. No student should be left unsupported in this area, and Northern Ireland has the most comprehensive and generous package of student support anywhere in these islands. I am very proud of that.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her response, but it is disappointing that the grant will not be extended to further education students. Another issue is that higher education students who are studying outside Northern Ireland are not eligible for that support. Will the Minister commit to look at the issue again in order to make sure that those students are eligible for that support?

Mrs Dodds: The Member raises an important issue. We were able to introduce the COVID disruption payment to students who study in Northern Ireland because we were able to pay the institutions in Northern Ireland that are publicly funded in order to support those students. Students from Northern Ireland who live and study in England, Scotland and Wales can avail themselves of the funding that has been made available in those areas in order to support their studies. Just recently, in England, an additional £50 million was advanced to support student hardship. In Scotland, it was in the region of £30 million and, in Wales, it was around £40 million. Northern Ireland students who are studying in GB are absolutely not without support.

Mr Speaker: I call Maoliosa McHugh. The Member will not have time for a supplementary question.

Caravan Sites: COVID-19 Support

T9. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister for the Economy to consider providing a grant scheme for caravan site owners that would allow them either to waive or reduce their fees, given that she will be aware that although caravan parks have been closed for most of the pandemic, people have been expected to pay pitch fees, albeit her Department has returned unspent money from grant schemes and the Finance Minister continues to ask for bids to be made for COVID-related support. (AQT 1099/17-22)

2.45 pm

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. He raised a couple of important issues. I am glad to have the opportunity to talk about them. The reopening of caravan parks is probably the single biggest element of the correspondence that I get from constituents. I hope that we will soon be in a position to ensure that people who are paying site fees will be able to go back and enjoy their caravans in safety in the coming months, as soon as the pandemic allows. It is important to say that. This is important to a large element of the community. Of course, many caravan parks remain open for those who live in

them permanently and for key workers who are shielding. They have availed themselves of the generic funds that have been available either nationally or locally.

Mr Speaker: Time is up. That concludes Question Time. I ask Members to take their ease before we return to the Second Stage debate on the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McGlone] in the Chair)

Executive Committee Business

Damages (Return on Investment) Bill: Second Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

*That the Second Stage of the Damages (Return on Investment Bill) [NIA Bill 16/17-22] be agreed. —
[The Minister of Justice (Mrs Long)]*

Mr Allister: I welcome the introduction of the Bill. My only regret is that it has taken so long to bring matters into better shape for applicants: one could probably go back to at least 2010, when the rates of compensation got out of kilter under the rules that were being applied. In GB, it took until 2017 to rectify that, and it is taking us until 2021. One of the consequences, of course, is that, in the meantime, a backlog has built up of cases, which, consciously and deliberately, have not settled, because, if they settled on the basis of the existing discount, the plaintiffs would be settling way under the rate that they should be getting, and, therefore, their money would not last.

It is important that we all recognise that we are dealing with the most serious of serious injury cases. We are dealing with people who will never work again; people who are severely disabled with a lot of mobility problems. They may be a relatively young person who was riding a motorbike when a car came out in front of them, and they were left with utterly life-changing injuries. They may be aged 18, 20 or 25, and the compensation has to last them for rest of their life. Often, the compensation has to provide for their carers. When a person suffers injuries like that, it is not just about compensating the person but about providing for them, throughout their life, in their family setting, which may change over the years. There has to be adequate provision for the them.

It is a very difficult type of case for which to arrive at the right figure in the best of times. In my time, I was involved in a number of such cases, and it is never an easy science. Indeed, it is probably not a science at all to arrive at the proper range for compensation. If you then beset that with the fact that the compensation figure is based on a fallacy, namely an out-of-date discount figure, you are inevitably faced with an outcome that is not just. It can sometimes be quite an unjust outcome. As the discount figure has been out of kilter, for over a decade, with what is necessary in accordance with current investment levels, if you settle a case at the present time, you are selling yourself substantially short. I understand from talking to legal colleagues that, in consequence, there is a considerable backlog of cases awaiting settlement. Quite rightly, people are not willing to settle them for less than what they would properly need and anticipate. Therefore, it is imperative that we bring this matter up to date, get it sorted and allow the resumption of the normal process of case settlement and delivery for people in those situations.

I welcome the fact that something is now being done. I wish that it had been done sooner. In that context, I am a little disconcerted by the various, almost contradictory, approaches in this debate. Everyone has said, "We need to get it done", and, at the same time, they have said, "But we must not rush it". I am not advocating that we rush it in the sense that we do not do it properly, but it is important that we get it done as expeditiously as possible. Real

people are waiting for this. They are in dire situations that none of us would ever want to be in. The least that we can do is to alleviate that as best we can. I urge the Minister and the Committee to apply all possible expedition to this.

The Bill is on the right tracks when it goes for the Scottish option. I am a little less persuaded about the switch from 30 to 43 years. I am not saying that it is wrong, but it is something that an eye can be kept on. The critical thing about the Bill, for me, is that it quite properly takes it from within to without the political ambit. It removes the ministerial setting of rates and allows an actuary to set them, and that has to be right. We will invite unnecessary pressures and difficulties if we maintain a situation in which it falls to a Minister to do something that will be pressurised from both sides. Objectively, it is far better to have an actuary setting the rate, thereby allowing the situation to move forward in a way that is seen to be independent, which is vital. The Bill is correct in taking that view.

Of course, there will be lobbying on this. Insurance companies do not want an equalisation up in the discount rate, because it means that every settlement will cost them more and, in some cases, quite a lot more. Some settlements could move. Even a middle-range settlement here will probably be at the £6 million, £7 million, £8 million or £10 million rate. You could be talking about the difference between a £7 million rate and £10 million rate, so of course insurance companies will try to resist this as best they can, but that cannot be allowed to happen. It is the same for Departments. There could be circumstances in which, for example, the Department of Health is being sued, and it is the most likely Department to be sued in serious and large cases, so, likewise, Departments cannot be allowed to exercise a vested interest in the quantum of settlements.

As I said during an intervention, it is not just about whether there will be a cost to the public purse. It is about under-settlements — figures that fall short — and that will mean that, instead of a pot of money lasting for 40 or 50 years for the claimant, it will run out after 30 years because it was too low. To where does that debt then fall? It moves on to the state, and that person will be kept and maintained through benefits. It is therefore not always the case that we need to be concerned about whether there is a knock-on effect on departmental expenditure. Yes, there will be an effect, but, by failing to do anything and leaving it too low, there will also be a knock-on effect on the taxpayer, as the benefit payer. It is a question of getting that right.

There is no such thing as perfection. It is something of a crystal-ball exercise, in that it is based on projecting returns on investments etc, but the people to do that are the actuaries, who have the expertise in the area. If things get badly out of kilter again with capacity within the five-year cycles, the Minister can intervene and say, "Give us a fresh look at that".

I hope that the legislation will move forward expeditiously. If it does not, that is when the need to set an interim discount rate arises. I would rather see the matter come to a head before the summer and be resolved. If that cannot be done, there will be a binding duty on the Minister and the Department to strike an interim discount rate, because we cannot go on as we are. The cases are piling up, and there are real people in real need who need to

get their money, so I encourage the House to proceed as expeditiously as possible.

Mrs Long: I thank all Members for their constructive and positive engagement on the Bill today. As it moves through its stages in the Assembly, I hope that we can continue to ensure that this important legislation reaches the statute books as soon as possible.

The current discount rate risks claimants being under-compensated. A new rate, however, set under the Wells v Wells framework — the only option currently available to the Department — would reduce the rate so much that it would most likely result in overcompensation. A new legislative framework will therefore allow a stable discount rate to be set that better delivers the 100% compensation principle and provides fairness to all involved.

3.00 pm

To be clear, 100% compensation is a long-standing legal principle by which we are all bound. In setting the rate, we cannot consider the consequences on or impact of the rate on the insurance sector, the public sector or even the claimants in the system for whom we may have compassion, and a number of cases have been raised today where that is the case. The rate has to be set on the basis of 100% compensation.

I agree with Mr Allister that achieving 100% compensation is never an exact science. However, I am confident and am pleased that he agrees that the Bill provides a methodology for setting the rate that realistically reflects how claimants invest and the average periods over which they invest. That is the objective of the Bill. The Bill clearly specifies the low-risk investments that a claimant is assumed to make and the amount of the deductions to be made. Overall, I consider the basis on which the rate is to be set provided for in the Bill to be fair, balanced and transparent.

Once the method by which the rate is to be set is detailed in legislation, the exercise of applying it to determine the rate is actuarial and is therefore best done by the Government Actuary. However, the parameters for the actuarial exercise will be set by the Assembly through the Bill. Any changes to the parameters that may become necessary in the future, due to changes in the market or in investment advice or behaviour, can only be made by the Department of Justice with the approval of the Assembly.

To try to take this forward, I will respond to specific issues that were raised by Members today. First, Paul Givan, speaking in his capacity as the Committee Chairman, raised a number of issues, queries and questions. I thank him, because he paid tribute to the time that we have already spent in engagement with the Committee in respect of the Bill, as did his colleague, Paul Frew. Whilst we had to wait for the drafting of the legislation to be completed, we nevertheless engaged on the principles and structure of the Bill so that the Committee would have adequate time to consider the questions and queries that came forth from that ahead of the Bill being published. We have endeavoured to reassure members of the Committee, through five sets of correspondence and three appearances, that this is not about trying to limit the scope of their scrutiny or in any way to curtail their freedom to undertake that scrutiny. It is about trying to move this forward as quickly and expeditiously as possible, keeping

in mind those who are waiting for compensation claims to be settled and whose need is extreme.

I will talk about the questions that were asked and some of the issues that were raised by Members. The Committee Chairman asked what the financial impacts of a discount rate set under the proposed new legal framework would be on defendants, including the Department of Health and any other government or public bodies. However, as he will be aware, that is not something that my Department can take account of when setting the rate. We must aim for 100% compensation, and that principle must be maintained throughout, irrespective of the implications for those against whom claims are taken; otherwise, we will be in the invidious situation of undercompensating victims. Mr Allister clearly set out that that too has implications for the public purse. Moreover, it has implications for the dignity of victims, who would then be left reliant on benefits or, in some cases, on charity in order to live their lives with dignity. That should not be the case where there has been a finding of fault against the people from whom compensation is sought. That said, my officials have written to stakeholders to advise them of the introduction of the Bill to the Assembly, giving them notice to identify the financial implications for their liabilities and to plan accordingly. I expect that, like my Department, other Departments and stakeholders will, in due course, consider the potential implications of a discount rate set under a new legal framework. It is also a matter that I have raised with Executive colleagues at every stage of the process, making them aware of the issues. I assure Members that Ministers are in no doubt of the implications of the legislation and of any interim rate on their budget pressures and are acting to address them.

As to why we cannot take account of the costs, particularly to the Department of Health and, indeed, others with the new methodology, it is not balanced against ability to pay. If someone suffers an injury as the result of the negligence of another, it is an established legal principle that he or she is entitled to be fully compensated for the financial losses that arise. It is not open to any defendant, including the health service or any other public body, to argue that they should only partially compensate an injured party because, otherwise, it would be too expensive. I understand that the Department of Finance is engaging with the Treasury on the budgetary implications for the Department of Health, in particular, but, again, that cannot shape our approach to the Bill and the legislation.

Sinéad Bradley raised a number of pertinent points. The main one that I want to focus on is interim payments. As we explained at the Committee, that is a matter for the claimant and defendant and their legal advisers. It would be neither possible nor appropriate for the DOJ or, indeed, anyone else to seek to influence whether interim payments are made. We are, however, aware of some cases where interim agreements have been reached, and, as was referred to, a party can seek a periodical payment order instead of a lump sum or as well as a smaller lump sum to allow them to access those benefits in the short term. Whilst we cannot tell claimants or defendants what to do — it is for their legal advisers to do so — it was, nevertheless, helpful that an awareness of that was raised in the discussions today.

The other point that was raised by Sinéad Bradley, Paul Frew and, indeed, Jim Allister was the 30-year investment

period. I will spend some time outlining exactly why we have come to the conclusions that we have on that. The 30-year period specified in the Scottish legislation is not understood to be specifically evidence-based; rather, it was chosen as a period that was considered neither too short nor too long to cover a broad range of cases with awards of different durations.

Following consultation with the Government Actuary's Department, it was proposed that 43 years was an appropriate period for the purposes of the Bill, as the evidence indicates that that is the average investment period for a claimant with a lump-sum award of damages and, therefore, is an evidence-based approach. The question was reasonably asked whether varying that element of the Scottish model would have implications for overcompensating or undercompensating victims seeking compensation. The answer to that was also sought from the Government Actuary's Department and considered fully. It advised us that, in practice and assuming that all other things were equal, the difference between an assumed investment period of 30 years and one of 43 years was likely to make only a very small difference of about 0.1% or 0.2% to the rate that would be calculated. Since the discount rate is rounded to the nearest 0.25%, the material effect on the rate would either be nil or 0.25%. Therefore, the difference between 30 and 43 years is within the granularity of the scheme and would not routinely lead to overcompensation or undercompensation. I want to reassure Members about that, as it is an important point.

Sinéad Bradley and Jim Allister also raised wider delays in the civil justice system and concerns about the time it takes for cases to be settled. I reassure Members that the Gillen review of civil justice, which made recommendations to make processes more efficient, many of which are for the judiciary and the legal profession, is being taken forward by my Department. The culture of civil litigation and the importance of judicial case management are factors in dealing with delay. I am mindful of the importance of an effective and efficient civil justice system, which, in many cases, can impact more people than the criminal justice system. I expect to say more about my priorities in that area in a statement to the House in the near future.

Other issues were raised by Members that I particularly want to touch on. The first was the purpose of the 0.5% standard adjustment to the further margin. Doug Beattie asked about the impact of that and why the figure of 0.5% was selected. The reduction of 0.5% is a further margin that is sometimes referred to as a margin of prudence. Its purpose is to reduce the risk of undercompensation. There are those who may say that it builds in overcompensation, but we do not accept that and nor, indeed, do the Scottish Government or the Westminster Parliament. This is not an exact science, as I have already said, and the margin simply acknowledges that there is an element of risk in any investment, however prudent the advice that is given.

The evidence basis for the margin of prudence is also something that Doug Beattie asked about. A deduction of 0.5% is applied under the Scottish legislation and was also applied by the Lord Chancellor when setting the rate for England and Wales in 2019. It was based on advice from the Government Actuary's Department

about the percentage likelihood of investment outcomes being enough for a claimant to meet all their needs. It is therefore important, as in all of these issues, that we take the professional advice of the Government Actuary's Department. They are the people who can judge with a long view how investments will be applied, their likely out-turn and the impact that that is likely to have on claimants. On the basis of that advice, in July 2019, the Lord Chancellor concluded that not making any deduction for prudence meant a 50% chance of claimants not being fully compensated. That is why we believe that the margin of prudence is required.

Paul Frew, Sinéad Bradley and Rachel Woods raised the outcome of the consultation on the new legal framework and rightly said that, under the consultation, more people favoured the rate in England and Wales. Far be it for me to suggest that that may be because many of the respondents wish to be able to lobby the Minister around setting the discount rate in future, which, of course, will be precluded by the model that we have set forward in this Bill. However, there are, as Paul Frew specifically asked, more benefits to this than simply transparency and clarity, although I argue that transparency and clarity are important in creating a sustainable position that is predictable for claimants, defendants and, indeed, insurers in these cases, allowing them to predict with a degree of accuracy the longer-term and medium-term horizons for their expenditure and claims. However, the additional benefits are that the Scottish framework removes the need to convene an expert panel to advise on the rate. Any expert panel exercise will add time and cost to the review exercise and the rate-setting exercise in general.

With regard to the time that having an expert panel adds to the review process, it should be noted that, in England and Wales, the discount rate has to be reviewed within 80 days, whereas, in my Bill and in Scotland, the review has to be completed in 90 days. That adds an additional three months to the period of uncertainty when parties may defer settling a case until the revised discount rate is known. Its added value is untested, as the first review of the rate under the England and Wales legislation, in 2019, was carried out without an expert panel, although the next review, in 2024, will require one. I am also aware that a previous expert panel convened to advise on the discount rate failed to achieve consensus. In such circumstances, were we not to follow the Scottish model, it would fall to the Minister or the delegated official to make a judgement on what the discount rate should be. I believe that a decision properly should be taken by the Government Actuary.

Rachel Woods asked a couple of questions specifically on the financial impact of the new discount rate set under the Bill. The Bill is about providing that new framework and ensuring that we get 100% compensation. The only direct financial implications for the Department of Justice relate to the Government Actuary's costs and have been set out in the explanatory and financial memorandum. We estimate between £40,000 and £50,000 for that process.

Of course, as we have all identified in the debate, there are indirect costs. While any change in the discount rate, regardless of whether it is done under my proposed framework, the existing framework or any other framework, may have financial implications for defendants, including government Departments, they arise from a legal liability to pay 100% compensation and thus are unavoidable.

Individual Departments that have the relevant information about personal injury claims being made against them will, no doubt, wish to undertake their own modelling of the impact of different discount rates on their liabilities. Again, I stress that that is not something that I can consider in setting the structure or the rate.

3.15 pm

Members alluded to the financial impact of the new discount rate. Her Majesty's Treasury granted access to Treasury reserves in England and Wales when the discount rate was changed. That came at the end of a process where there was considerable delay. We are the last jurisdiction on these islands to make that change, which others were able to do in 2019 when we did not have an Assembly. However, that is not a matter for my Department, but I know that the Department of Finance officials are engaging with Treasury about funding for additional costs arising from the new discount rate and to ensure that the same provisions are in place in Northern Ireland when our discount rate changes, as would be expected in other jurisdictions.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for giving way. She may not know this, as it is not in her remit, but is it the case that, when England, Wales and Scotland changed their rate, money was put into their systems in order to counter any burden? Did Northern Ireland receive a Barnett consequential at that time? If so, is it right and proper that we ask for further easements for any burden that would be placed upon the Department of Finance?

Mrs Long: The specific negotiations that are taking place are a matter for the Department of Finance and the Treasury, so I am not across the detail of those, nor indeed, should I be, lest it would, even without consciousness, influence my position on them. However, in the rest of the UK, people were granted access to the Treasury reserve as opposed to additional funding being awarded. Therefore, if we were granted the same thing, it would be on the basis of us having made a change. However, the Member is a member of the Finance Committee and will, therefore, be able to probe that further with the Minister of Finance, who, I am sure, will be able to provide further clarity.

General issues were raised by a number of Members. Jim Allister set out, with considerable clarity, the impact of the discount rate on those who are awaiting settlement of their claims. Paul Givan previously engaged with me about his constituent Anastassiya and the invidious position in which she finds herself. All of us in the Chamber recognise that we have constituents and individuals in our community who have suffered a grievous injury that may prevent them working again, being able to support themselves in the future and that may require adaptations to their home or additional equipment in their home that may not necessarily be provided for under the normal processes. Therefore, it is hugely important, as Mr Allister rightly said, that we achieve clarity and a sustainable position and that we do so as quickly as possible. Therefore, I very much welcome his support, as he is someone who has represented claimants, and, I am sure, defendants, for the Scottish model, which we set out in this paper, and his support for expeditious progress in bringing the proposal into law.

Much has been said about overreach by the Executive and people not respecting the role of the Committees. That could not be further from the truth in my case. It is crucial that Committees have an opportunity to properly scrutinise legislation. Although that is not all of their role, it is an important part of their role. Committees have a role in supporting the Department and the Minister in discharging their duties. It is therefore incredibly important. For that reason, the Justice Committee had time to consider the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021. It is considering the Protection from Stalking Bill and the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill, and, hopefully, in around six weeks' time, it will have the miscellaneous provisions Bill on its table as well.

I do not think that any other Minister has brought four Bills to their Committee for scrutiny in this mandate. To suggest that I am trying in any way to prevent the Committee from doing its job or doing it diligently is a false assertion, and nor am I trying to tell the Committee how to run its business. I have been assured by the Chair, the Deputy Chair and members of the Committee that they are more than capable of prioritising and scheduling their business. However, I have a duty as Minister to ensure that I make clear to all those involved in the passage of legislation the imperative for urgency in this case. Whilst it may be desirable from a departmental perspective to have things happen quickly, I have not asked for accelerated passage on any of those other matters because I believe that it is right and proper that, in long and complex legislation, the Committee should have the opportunity not only to take advice and guidance from the Clerk and from officials in the Assembly but to receive expert views on how legislation will impact on their Committee.

As someone who has served on Assembly Committees, I appreciate the fact that Members will want to guard that jealously. However, I cannot abdicate my responsibility as Minister and my responsibility to the Executive, to the public sector and to everyone in the Chamber by understating the Bill's urgency, because the impact that it has and the ongoing delay that it is having on claimants under these issues is significant. Therefore, from that perspective, it is important that we raise the matter.

As Members rightly acknowledged, the issue has implications for other Departments, but it is incredibly technical in that, whichever scheme we choose, we will set out a portfolio. We can either put that portfolio in the Bill or agree that, as in England and Wales, as Minister, I decide the portfolio privately and make such adjustments to it as are required — that is what happens with the Lord Chancellor, and there is very little scrutiny or oversight — or we can decide, as per the Scottish model, that we put the portfolio and the adjustments in legislation. There is then openness and transparency for everyone involved, including for the Committee.

If we decide, because of actuarial advice, that the model or portfolio is no longer appropriate, we must, by law, return to the House and ask for support in order to change it. Therefore, the issues that have been raised on scrutiny, due diligence and all those matters are best dealt with through the Scottish model, because it ensures that I cannot tamper with the rate or the portfolio that leads to the rate without full transparency in this place. That is hugely important and should give all Members reassurance on how the rate will be set, but, most of all, it

should give reassurance to claimants and defendants as to how the rate will be set, and they can then plan for the future adequately.

In addition to those remarks, Mr Allister elucidated the point very well as to why setting the rate is, and should be, an actuarial decision that is not subject to the influence of lobbying or other means. It is important that it is seen to be open, transparent and based on fact and the decision on compensation. That will give them a lump sum, and the discount rate will ensure that that person will receive 100% compensation. It is important that it is open, transparent and not subject to the vested interests of those in the system. Maximising that transparency is critical, and I thank Mr Allister for his support.

A number of other issues were raised. I will not deviate into the issue of accelerated passage, because we have laid that to rest. There is no request for accelerated passage. I have laid out adequately, I hope, the reasons why there is an urgency attached to this Bill. However, I stress to Members that there is no easy way for us to end this impasse without legislating for a new legal framework. As soon as we change the discount rate, it will simply be delay from a different quarter. Until we have a new mechanism in place to set the discount rate, we will not deal with the fundamental problem.

It is, of course, now in the gift of the Committee to move the matter forward as quickly, or slowly, as it chooses. It is right that it should be so, but that does not prevent my having an opinion on which option I, were I a member of the Committee, would choose. I want to be clear that we have asked, and we continue to ask, that the Committee consider a shortened Committee Stage. By finishing the Committee Stage on 30 April, there is certainty that we will be in a position by the summer recess of having legislation in place. That will enable us, while we await Royal Assent, to start to set the rate, and that will allow us, I hope, in a shorter period than the 90-day maximum, to set a rate and allow people to move forward with their lives. That is a sensible request, and it is made in good faith. I know that members of the Committee share my concerns about the impact of the ongoing uncertainty on claimants who have not yet had an opportunity to have their settlements completed.

Two final issues were raised.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for giving way. I am not sure whether the members' pack has been issued, but this will be an item on the Committee's agenda. The Minister is right to say that it will be a matter for Committee members. We discussed this last week. Our report will outline the consequences and implications of complying with what the Executive have asked for, and it gives a wide range of reasons, including the current COVID restrictions and their implications for Committee staff, for not doing so. I am under a duty of care to the people who support the work of my Committee. I am sure that members of other Committees may be willing to give up all their Committee staff to support the Justice Committee. I commend the Minister on bringing forward this legislation. However, that places an onerous responsibility on the Committee. Maybe that responsibility needs to be commensurate with the support that the Assembly wishes to give to the Justice Committee to expedite its duties more efficiently. The report will give members a lot to consider.

I want to be very clear: my party will not support what the Minister requested at the meeting on Thursday. What other Committee members wish to do will be a matter for them, but my party, and my members on the Committee, will not support that, because it is neither realistic nor sensible. I wish to expedite this matter on behalf of claimants. It affects me personally in what I see in my family circumstances. I, maybe more than anybody else in the Chamber, want this matter to be expedited. However, in discharging my duties as an elected Member of the House, I will not do so recklessly.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before the Minister commences her response, I want to point out that we have already had quite a bit of discourse through the day about whether there is to be accelerated passage. I have heard two views at least; probably more. However, we will not put that to bed today. It is a matter for the Committee to decide at Committee Stage. I would appreciate Members' continuing with the discussion on the principles of the legislation, please.

Mrs Long: Thank you for your guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker. However, it would be remiss of me not to press this matter home to the Assembly. Ultimately, the Assembly will grant any extension to Committee Stage, should one be requested. It is important that I press home to the Assembly the implications of any decision in that regard. I am disappointed that the Chairman has taken such a position. I do not believe that a protracted period is required to scrutinise a short and technical Bill. It is simply a matter of focusing on getting it through. The Chair previously assured me:

"With respect, it is not the Department's job to tell this Committee how it carries out its work, so there is no reason why the Department cannot allow us, as a Committee, to manage these pressures."

That is exactly what we are doing: we are allowing the Committee to manage the pressures.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Minister, the point is well made. Perhaps we can move on, please.

3.30 pm

Mrs Long: I want to deal with two other points of substance that were raised. Paul Frew raised the issue of why we would have a review this year and another in three years' time and whether, for example, parties would delay their settlement until 2024 as a result of that. That is very unlikely, given how long cases have already been delayed and when, in the absence of a crystal ball, no one will know whether, in 2024, the rate will have gone up, gone down or stayed the same. The proposed review is different from the current situation. One must bear in mind that people know what the Wells v Wells rate would come out to be, so they know that there will be a particular change in the rate, and they know that, by delaying, there will be an opportunity for them to be able to prevent under-compensation. Equally, if we went with Wells v Wells, there would be those who would be in a position to prevent overcompensation. That is a very different scenario from what we have at the moment.

The proposed review in 2024 is intended to align Northern Ireland with Scotland's five-yearly cycle. The reason for that is that the Government Actuary agreed that there

would be benefits in doing so, as there are advantages for stakeholders in their own planning and efficiencies regarding the data collection review and any consultations that may be required. I also understand that it is unlikely that the rate would change significantly in the three-year period. In fact, it is our hope that the rate would not change significantly in any five-year period. That is why we are building in the routine reviews. We hope that there will be minor adjustments, rather than, as has happened in this case, an adjustment after almost 20 years. Therefore, we will have the opportunity to avoid that concern, which is a reasonable and rational concern to raise.

A number of Members also spoke about oversight and accountability in the Bill. The Bill prescribes the detail of the low-risk investments assumed to be made by claimants, the assumed period of investment and the amount of deductions to be made. Although the Government Actuary is the rate setter, it is not as simple as saying that we are outsourcing departmental duties. They will have to determine the rate according to the methodology prescribed in legislation set by the House. The detail of the statutory methodology by which the rate is to be set by the Government Actuary could only be changed by the Department under secondary legislation that would have to be approved by the Assembly. Moreover, before each review in the cycle of regular reviews that will be established under the legislation, the Department is required to consider whether the portfolio is still appropriate, in accordance with the criteria of the Bill. Once the parameters of how the rate is set are detailed in the legislation, applying them to calculate the rate is an actuarial rather than a political exercise. Obviously, the Government Actuary's Department will publish a report of its review and determination of the rate. Members will be able to scrutinise that report and to understand the detail of the rate setting.

It has been a useful debate. It has provided us with another opportunity to air the challenges around the legislation and the models that are available and to focus on the fact that, fundamentally, whether we use the English model or the Scottish model, the objective of both is the same. Neither is more likely to give us overcompensation or under-compensation, because both are designed to give 100% compensation: nothing more, nothing less. It is not an exact science, but it is important that we move this forward quickly so that claimants who await their payments are able to move forward and live their lives with dignity, with the resources that they require to do so. We should finish with our consideration of those claimants. I leave it in the hands of the Assembly as to whether it passes the Second Stage of the Bill and then in the hands of the Committee as to how quickly and expeditiously it can deliver the Committee Stage.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill [NIA Bill 16/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask Members to take their ease until we move to the next item of business, which is the Final Stage of the Budget Bill.

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

Budget Bill: Final Stage

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That the Budget Bill [NIA Bill 17/17-22] do now pass.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate.

Mr Murphy: Today's Final Stage debate concludes the financial legislative process for the 2020-21 year. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that financial circumstances this year have been unprecedented. The Executive have acted quickly to provide funding, not only to deal with the health impact of the pandemic but to respond to the social and economic impact. We have had to respond to changing circumstances in the face of new restrictions and have had to work quickly to get financial assistance to the health service, schools, businesses and families. Departments have transformed the ways in which they work in order to get that funding to where it was needed.

We are continuing to plan for and respond to the situation. This year to date, the allocations that have been made by the Executive amount to almost £3 billion. That includes over £1 billion of additional in-year funding for the Department of Health to ensure that doctors, nurses and other medical staff have the resources that they need in the fight against the health emergency. It includes over £644 million to the Department for the Economy to support businesses and the further and higher education sector. Over £500 million has gone to my Department to provide rate relief and administer support schemes to businesses. We have allocated over £275 million to the Department for Communities to support councils, vulnerable individuals and the culture, arts and sports sectors. Over £226 million has gone to the Department for Infrastructure to ensure that our transport networks can continue to operate, including Translink, airports, seaports and the taxi, private coach and bus industries. The allocations to Infrastructure are also supporting Northern Ireland Water (NIW). Almost £180 million has gone to the Department of Education to support schools so that they can continue to deliver education for our children and young people safely and provide free school meals. I express my gratitude once again to the Finance Committee, which acknowledged the unique circumstances that we have found ourselves in this year and has worked with us to grant accelerated passage to the Bill.

There will be every opportunity for Members to debate the Executive's 2021-22 Budget plans when I bring the Executive's Budget to the Assembly later this month. There will be a further opportunity when the Main Estimates and Budget (No. 2) Bill come to the Assembly before the summer. The debates on the earlier stages of the Bill and the associated Supply resolutions have been informative. I thank the Committees for the scrutiny that they have brought to the process.

I hope that it is now clear to everyone that this Budget Bill focuses on the 2020-21 financial year. Although it also provides legal authority for Departments to spend into the first few months of 2021-22 through the Vote on Account, that does not constitute the setting of the 2021-22 Budget. The Vote on Account is simply a mechanism that allows

Departments to deliver services at the start of the new financial year, pending the Assembly's consideration of the Main Estimates and Budget (No. 2) Bill. Later this year, that Bill will set out the detail of the 2021-22 spending plans contained in the Executive's 2021-22 Budget.

This is the final stage of our financial legislative process for 2020-21. The legislation has already been the subject of considerable debate. I now look forward to hearing any final thoughts from Members on this important legislation.

Mr Frew (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I wish the Chairperson of the Finance Committee all the best in his recovery. You will note his absence today; he had a bit of a mishap. I am sure that I speak for all Members in wishing him all the best for his recovery.

I will make some remarks on behalf of the Committee for Finance as part of the Final Stage of the Budget Bill. The Committee for Finance enjoys a special position and has unique responsibilities when it comes to the scrutiny of Budget Bills and the associated Supply resolutions. The Committee takes those responsibilities very seriously. Consequently, when members learned, to their great surprise, that the cash advance facility from the Consolidated Fund was close to exhaustion, they felt that action was necessary. The Committee, therefore, agreed to grant accelerated passage to the Budget Bill, despite severe misgivings from most members about the lack of information on the associated public expenditure proposals. That course of action was followed in order to avoid the very real prospect of public services running out of money and stopping near the end of March. That was a surprising and unwelcome development. The Committee expects, in future, to be kept apprised by the Department of the progress of cash advances from the Consolidated Fund.

As was indicated in the previous stages of the Bill, the spring Supplementary Estimates differ greatly from those of previous years. For example, there is now the opportune inclusion of a fuller explanation for sole authority expenditure. That is a positive development and must be welcomed. This year's Estimates also include, very unusually, headroom of £1 billion. It is understood that perhaps £200 million of that — the totality of the available unspent 2020-21 resource — is to be used by the Department of Finance.

The Minister suggested in earlier debates that a further business support payment would follow, to be administered by Land and Property Services. Our hard-pressed businesses could do with more support as they recover from the lockdown and address the post-COVID economic landscape. It is hoped that, today, the Minister will tell us a little bit more about what he has planned in that regard. It is also hoped that, in addition to written statements on those matters, further correction slips might be added to the Estimates in order to close the circle in respect of the allocation of resources when compared with the headroom figures.

We are all aware of the unusual pressures that have accompanied this most difficult of years. It is right that we take a moment to remember the lives lost, the emotional damage and the financial hardship that the lockdown has brought.

It is also right to consider how our institutions have responded to these pressures. How have we treated the most vulnerable in our society? How have we redirected resources to support them in their time of need? On another day in the not-too-distant future, I expect that the House will review that in much more detail. When that day comes, I hope that we will not be found wanting in deliberating on what has come before us.

3.45 pm

For now and in respect of the spending in 2020-21, which is covered by this Budget Bill, I should record the Committee's thanks for the very substantial additional funding that the Executive received from our Government. We should welcome the numerous support schemes for hard-pressed individuals, families and businesses. We should also note with fulsome, though qualified, approval the Executive's financial response to this crisis. There is no doubt that money has got down to many people. There could be a question about the speed, but there is no doubt that money has been received gratefully by many people and businesses.

To be sure, there were issues, not least in Land and Property Services converting itself from a collection to distribution agency, which I earmarked early on. Additionally, there were some schemes where uptake was much lower than expected, and some important sectors and individuals, with some justification, felt overlooked. Nonetheless, the response of our health service, education service and public services generally has been very good indeed. That is a positive takeaway from the pandemic.

As regards the 2021-22 Budget, I think that everyone will welcome the special carry-over arrangements from Her Majesty's Treasury, which will hopefully help to fund aspects of the post-COVID recovery. Although there will be a time when the Committee will want to say a little more about this, I would like to record the Committee's dissatisfaction with delays, both in the spending review and at the Executive, which have eaten into the Statutory Committees' valuable scrutiny time. The Chairperson raised the key points of Committee concern at Second Stage. I will merely indicate that, despite the short timescales, Committees have done their best to interrogate departmental submissions and that much of the feedback refers to unfunded bids and an over-reliance on in-year monitoring.

I thank all the Statutory Committees that responded to the Finance Committee with feedback. I also record a note of sympathy for the Committee for the Executive Office, which, I believe, is still waiting for Budget information. It is vital that that is highlighted at this stage and a marker laid down. I record the Committee's sincere thanks to the Minister and his officials for their oral and written briefings and for their assistance in helping Committee members to better understand all Budget matters.

Notwithstanding the above, Committee members have noted with dissatisfaction this year's Budget scrutiny process. As I indicated previously, it is the Committee's hope that the independent fiscal council, coupled with a new memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the Executive and the Assembly, possibly backed up with legislation, may offer us a new beginning for this important aspect of the Assembly's work. In the meantime, on behalf

of the Committee, I commend the Final Stage of the Budget Bill to the House.

I will now add a few words as a DUP MLA. My concerns around the victims' pension scheme have had an airing at all stages and in other budgetary debates of late. They are also raised in the Finance Committee weekly. We all realise that people have waited far too long for money that is owed to them and that they should have received long ago. That money is required to assist those people in moving forward with their lives after many years of suffering with grievous injuries as a result of terrorism.

I am pleased that, on page 33 of the Bill, in the Department of Justice piece in schedule 3, the costs relating to the Victims' Payments Board and the Troubles permanent disablement scheme are mentioned. On the next page, page 34, in the Executive Office piece, which is also in schedule 3, it states:

"victims and survivors including actions and payments associated with the preparation and implementation of a Victims Payments Scheme for permanent disablement".

That is important content in the Bill, and it gives me hope and assurance that the Executive and the Finance Minister will not be found wanting when victims require the support that they should have got years ago. I know that the Finance Minister is engaged in a process with the Secretary of State. I record my appreciation to him for that, and I support that engagement because the victims who should get the support reside not only in Northern Ireland but all over these isles and maybe even further afield. There is an onus on the Secretary of State and our Government to assist or fund the scheme. However, there is no doubt that there is a legal duty on the Executive to implement it and to ensure that the victims are safeguarded and supported. I hope and pray that those people receive that funding sooner rather than later.

I also want to speak about the media speculation over the past week about a fiscal council. A fiscal council is a good idea to assist the Executive and, indeed, the Assembly on fiscal matters. I do not think that any of us are precious enough to think that we can do it all on our own, and it would help to have a fiscal council for budgetary Bills like this one so that we can be informed to a greater degree. That should be welcomed.

The Minister also brought a paper on a fiscal commission to the Executive. My understanding is that that would be a one-off reporting mechanism to help in the debate about fiscal powers. Devolution is a place where local people make local decisions, but at no time should devolution and the House duplicate bureaucracy. At no time should this place be another layer of bureaucracy, nor should it be another layer of penalty and taxation that will hurt and burden our people, who work hard to earn every penny and pound that they get. Whilst it is good to look at such things and to assess where we are in a fiscal world, I would rather see a pound staying in the pocket of those hard workers than going to a Government who do not necessarily know what the people are going through, as they are not close enough to the ground, and will not spend the pound as effectively and efficiently as the worker. That is why, before any procedures or proposals come forward for further fiscal powers, the Finance Minister will have to convince me and my party that that route is worth travelling. I am

not convinced at this stage that a hike in income tax or any other tax, for that matter, is the right way to go. My explanation for that is that the tax-varying powers that the Executive already have have not been used — they have not really even been looked at — or assessed properly to see how they could assist our economy.

The way in which we lift taxes and rates is one example. It is clear to me from talking to the business community that the way in which rates are collected, calculated and paid is quite brutal. We can see how evolving businesses and economies get round the rates base, especially in the digital world of the internet. That might be one way that, I suggest, the Minister could look at to see how we can broaden the tax base and assist in bringing in more money in a fairer way and through a system that is fair to everyone.

The Minister mentioned rates reviews, and I get that. It is always good to review rates, because the issue leaves a really sour taste in people's mouths, especially when, in a townscape, one street is penalised more harshly than another. It takes some time to review that, and it takes some time to fix and correct the balance. It is a primitive and brutal tool. Is there not a better way to measure and then to pay rates? Someone should take on board that job of work. A fiscal council or even a fiscal commission, if it ever sees the light of day, may well look at that. That is where we should really use our energies in the short term to see what we can do with the tools that we have in order to put in fairer, more efficient and more effective systems to raise tax and revenue that we can then use.

The other side of the coin is where that money goes. How efficient and effective are our systems? How well do they operate for the sake of our people? Massive questions remain over how efficiently and effectively that works, and I would like to see work being done on that. Do not get me wrong: sometimes there is a cost to reviews. Some reviews of late have not worked. Sometimes reorganisation does not work, and sometimes there is a cost. We will have to take all that into consideration before we take any steps and before we include any provision for further taxation or reviews of the Departments that are staffed by our Civil Service and their functions to support businesses and civilians in how they live their lives. One thing is for sure: I want to see smaller government. I do not want to see Governments, be they at Westminster or at Stormont, interfering any more than they have to with people's lives and the money in their pockets. I will leave it there.

Dr Archibald: The Minister will be pleased to hear that, having contributed a number of times already, I intend to keep my contribution short. I have spoken many times — I am sure that the Minister is almost as sick of having to hear me say this as I am of having to say it — about the need to support businesses that have either been excluded from support schemes or have received very little. I know that, last week, he expressed his disappointment, which I share, that a broader hardship scheme has not been developed for those businesses and said that he intended to address that as far as he could through LPS, which obviously means that it will be only for businesses with premises. That was welcome, and I wonder whether the Minister could provide an update on that.

Last week, the Minister also mentioned a potential scheme to support travel agents to be brought forward by TEO. Again, that is welcome and will be welcomed by those

hard-hit businesses, but it is disappointing that it was not brought forward by the Economy Minister, given that tourism and business are within her brief.

Looking forward to the incoming financial year and the additional COVID funding that has been announced, I share the Minister's concerns about the lack of resource budget in order to plan properly for economic and societal recovery, to deal with Brexit and to support businesses and citizens through that. The Economy Minister has published her economic recovery action plan, for which a budget of £290 million has so far been requested. We likely all agree that skills will be an important driver of economic recovery. Yesterday, we had a debate on that issue, and the motion was unanimously supported. The Economy Minister talked about a ring-fenced skills budget. We all look forward to getting a bit more detail on that.

4.00 pm

As we look forward to recovery and coming out of the pandemic, it is important that there is a focus on supporting young people. I urge all Ministers with responsibility across that area to work together, including through allocating COVID funding, to ensure that there are education, training and work supports for young people. Youth unemployment is growing, and we cannot have a situation in which young people, for the second time in little over a decade, face the brunt of an economic downturn. The last recession resulted in a prevalence of low-paid, precarious work for many young people, and things such as owning their own home now seem like a pipe dream to them. That is simply not good enough. We need to address that from all sides to ensure that there are opportunities for young people. We also need to strengthen the rights of workers and put an end to the scourge of poorly paid work. I have said numerous times that implementing the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitments on employment would be a good start.

I will finish, as Mr Frew finished, by welcoming the Finance Minister's initiative on a fiscal commission to look at the powers devolved to the North. I was not sure whether Mr Frew was arguing for or against it, but it has been well rehearsed here on many occasions that the current situation of being at the whim of a British Tory Chancellor does not make for good budgetary planning. If we are to deliver the recovery needed to address the inequalities exacerbated by the crisis, help businesses to rebuild and generally improve people's lives and opportunities, we need the fiscal and borrowing powers to do that. It is about the Assembly and the Executive being able to plan and to respond to the needs and ambitions of people here, to deliver for people here and to encourage investment and job creation here. The current budgetary situation and the lack of meaningful funding to meet current pressures, never mind to deliver on COVID recovery, bring a new impetus to moving forward with that work. When it is raised, we often have quite a narrow focus on the limited revenue-raising powers that we have. Mr Frew referred to that. Beyond rates, those powers amount to the ability to impose usage charges, such as water charges, prescription charges and student fees on citizens and households. Those would all disproportionately impact on those on lower incomes. In the context that we have the lowest household income, less disposable income, lower levels of savings and higher household debt than elsewhere in these islands, a focus on the things that

would hit hard-working families most cannot be the start and end point of the discussion. It is a timely opportunity for this work to take place. It is also a positive debate and discussion to have, and it is one that should be given the space to be properly informed. For that reason, I welcome it.

Mr O'Toole: I start by passing on my good wishes to my Committee colleague Steve Aiken, the Chair of the Finance Committee. I wish him a speedy recovery.

We are here again debating accelerated passage — not accelerated passage; we have already agreed accelerated passage — we are debating the Final Stage of the Budget Bill. This will not be the last Budget Bill that we debate this year, nor will it be the last time that we debate budgeting in general. We have a draft Budget that we will, hopefully, debate in May, when we can have a more systemic, programmatic look at how we are spending, what we are spending it on and what our strategic objectives are as an Assembly and Executive.

The starting point should be that it has been a unique and exceptional year. That goes without saying and is almost a redundant statement. We have seen the most extraordinary year of public health crisis, something that none of us has experienced in our lifetime, with the loss of lives in Northern Ireland, across these islands and across the globe. It is right to pause and reflect on the scale of what our entire public services have been through and to say, "Thank you" to the front-line workers who have helped to get us as a society through COVID-19. It is clearly not over yet, but we hope that we may be nearing the end of the most acute phase of that crisis.

It is also worth paying tribute to the public servants in the Minister's Department and in other Departments who have had to administer this jurisdiction through an extraordinary time. For example, as others have said, they have had to turn Land and Property Services from a rates collection agency into a grant disbursement agency. They have had to design a means of getting new forms of benefits to people quickly and a range of novel schemes to enable our economy and our public services to muddle through this extraordinarily difficult time. I say, "Thank you" to them.

All that being said, the hard work, dedication and sacrifice of our front-line workers and the ingenuity and dedication of individual civil servants is not an alibi for politicians writ large, who have failed to give clear strategic direction for our budgeting. That is, I am afraid, a blunt truth. It is true at Stormont and at Westminster, and I will come on to both in a moment. One of the issues that we have faced this year has been a reliance — it is not a new thing; it has been endemic since the institutions came into existence —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sorry to interrupt you, Mr O'Toole. I ask Members to make sure that their mobile phones are not near the microphones. We are picking up terrible interference. Someone has moved their phone, because the interference has ended.

Mr Catney: Guilty.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It was the Member for Lagan Valley, Mr Catney. You were interrupted by your colleague, Mr O'Toole.

Mr O'Toole: I was just about to say that, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. It is usually those from other parties who

interfere with your remarks and not your party colleagues. I forgive the Member for Lagan Valley.

I will be relatively brief. It has been a unique year, but that is not an alibi for our failure to provide clear strategic guidance. Some of the targets and agreed aims of the 'New Decade, New Approach' document have been fulfilled but many have not. Not only have they not been fulfilled; we have not had clarity about when they will be. We still have a draft Programme for Government from 2016 that exists in the ether. I am not one for religious references — I am very lapsed, I am afraid — but it exists in a state of purgatory where it seems to be gone but floats in the ether, gone but not completely excised. A few Departments say that they are working to the draft Programme for Government outcomes, but their exact status is not clear.

We need much more clarity, and, as I have said in the Chamber before, in the absence of an agreed Programme for Government, for better or worse, our Finance Department and our budgeting process, including Budget Bills, the Budget document itself and the in-year monitoring process, become the Executive's de facto strategic policymaking tools. That means that there is a disproportionate responsibility on the Finance Minister and the Finance Department to deliver a joined-up programme. I have made those points before.

I will go through some of the issues around monitoring and underspends in the past year. I will come to the bigger strategic point about our relationship with Whitehall soon. It is true that allocations were made late and in a way that was not conducive to proper policymaking here. I will grant that, and no one could deny it. It is one thing to express gratitude or supplication for allocations that come via Barnett consequentials, but it is quite another to believe that they come in a way that is useful or helpful. Obviously, it is not conducive to policymaking if a Finance Department official gets an email with an hour's notice that says that there is an extra couple of hundred million quid in the Consolidated Fund but it has to be spent within a few weeks. That said, we knew last summer at the latest that this would be a unique year and that we were going to get additional allocations that would probably come at odd times that suited the English political calendar, so it is highly arguable that we should have been more prepared. There is also a question about why certain bids were turned down, including bids from the Infrastructure Minister, over the summer. Now, obviously, for political reasons, certain parties are choosing to do lots of photo ops next to potholes and are demanding answers as to why late bids are not being made.

As I said, however, we are where we are. This year's monitoring process has not been great. It would be helpful if the Minister could give us an update on precisely where we are with underspends, given that, unfortunately, we are now right in 'Brewster's Millions' territory, with only a few weeks left to get money out the door. It would be helpful if he could give us that update and tell us when he will announce any last-minute schemes so that there are no underspends or so that we can at least get resource spending out the door insofar as we can. I am not sure whether it is possible to do that for capital.

I come on to an issue that both Members who spoke previously mentioned, and on which I have been fairly repetitive as well: the question of a fiscal council and a

fiscal commission. A fiscal council was one promise that is made in New Decade, New Approach. There has also been talk of a fiscal commission. Indeed, my party was among the first to talk about it. I am not claiming credit for my party. The Finance Minister talked about it, too. Broadly speaking, we agree with it.

I will take them in turn. The fiscal council is a body that should give us more clarity and consistency and an external, or semi-external, umpire for how we do budgeting. Frankly, a big part of this is about having a semi-external umpire that is able to say with some credibility to Whitehall, "This isn't good enough. If you want better outcomes from this devolved institution, you have to give it the tools to create better outcomes". It is not simply good enough to show what looks, at times, like borderline contempt for our devolved institutions. Sometimes, I am sure, that contempt is not malicious or premeditated, but that is what it amounts to. It does not enable us to deliver the best possible outcomes for our citizens.

Sometimes, slightly boringly, I refer in the Chamber to my experience. I do, however, speak from experience a bit, because I worked at the centre of government. Whatever your constitutional perspective is, the truth is that Northern Ireland's needs are not ever at the centre of the mind when it comes to fiscal policymaking in Whitehall. It is therefore important that the fiscal council be there to act as semi-external umpire to keep the Executive honest and disciplined in how money is being allocated and spent but also, ideally, to keep Whitehall honest, too.

I have asked the Minister specifically, first, whether a fiscal council will be based in legislation. He said that it will get a trial run and then a judgement will be made about whether to base it in legislation. In the long term, that is the best way in which to give it ballast and long-term credibility. Secondly, I asked the Minister whether it will have its own economic forecasting power and capacity. That it does is critical, because some of the judgements cannot really be made without economists modelling their effects.

The connected point is about the fiscal commission. There was some chatter about that at the weekend. Rather, it was an interview that the Minister gave. I am not calling his interview "chatter": I would not dare say that. There was coverage of it. I have been very supportive of the idea of a fiscal commission. Sometimes, when we talk about this stuff, we instantly reach for the simplistic, "Which tax are you going to put up?" or, "What bit of spending are you going to cut?". When we talk about things such as a fiscal commission, the critical question is not simply about how we raise taxes or cut spending, although taxes and spending are obviously involved. What it should be is a look at the entire financial and accounting functions of a place of government and, in a sense, its broader functioning. It should look at how it sets priorities, how money is matched to those priorities and how the executive wing is held to account for spending that money and delivering on those priorities. Bluntly put, we are terrible at that. That is not a party political statement. We have been bad at it since the institution was created, despite the many good things that have come from this place.

What a fiscal commission should do is look at a baseline. It should take a sort of zero-base look at how we do all of that stuff. That will include how we raise revenue. Raising revenue does not necessarily mean raising income tax.

The Minister was led a little bit up the garden path on Sunday by the interviewer. I have some sympathy, but we should not think about raising income tax, and I speak as someone who is proudly on the centre-left and a social democrat who thinks that we should broaden the tax base. We certainly should not be raising income tax for working people in the middle of one of the biggest recessions in human history. However, in the long term, we do need to look at how we raise revenue in this place.

4.15 pm

It sounded as if Paul Frew wanted to get into this debate. He corrected himself and said that he did not want to talk about this. That is interesting, because there are things that we should be talking about, and that is exactly what we should be talking about. One of the main ways that we raise revenue — one of the few ways that we can raise revenue in this place — is via non-domestic rates.

What has happened in the past year? Our economy has literally transformed. The basis on which lots of economic activity happens — physical premises — has ended or has shifted in a way that normally would have taken a generation. When we reopen, and we all want to reopen safely as soon as we can, and return to greater levels of economic activity, we will, sadly, see a difference on our high streets. The high streets have changed as online shopping has accelerated. I hope that we can stimulate our high streets, but there will still be a shift from certain types of shopping that always happened on the high street to other types of activity. That means that the entire rates base — a source of revenue that local and devolved government rely on — has gone completely. Why would you not want a fiscal commission to look at that? A fiscal commission should look not just at a ledger of how money is raised and spent; it should look at the entire structure of the economy. That would involve what consultants call a "SWOT" analysis: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to an economy.

My party has put out several documents listing what it thinks should be the longer-term priorities for our economy. In the short to medium term, there are some obvious priorities that the Minister and a fiscal commission should be looking at, such as the benefits from our protocol position where we have dual market access. Despite the current controversy, dual market access could be of real benefit to our economy. We know that young people have disproportionately suffered, and allowing them to recover from the enormous COVID crisis should be a priority. Finally, the transformation of our public services, particularly our health service, should be a priority.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. It has been an interesting debate. What are the Member's thoughts on the Programme for Government? It strikes me that if you do not have a Programme for Government, the Budget is adrift. The Budget is floating about without purpose, focus or direction. A Programme for Government should direct the Budget priorities and should weld Departments to work together, which they are not doing at present. Welding Departments together would effect change and save money. Can I ask the Member for his views on that?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before the Member proffers his views on a Programme for Government, I remind the Member that this is a Budget Bill debate. I appreciate that considerable leeway is given in a Budget

Bill debate, and the Member will know that I am not one to stand on formality, but we are veering off the Budget Bill. I am sure that Mr Frew and Mr O'Toole will be able to have many fruitful discussions about the restructuring of government, but not on my time and not in this debate.

Mr O'Toole: I am tempted to say that we have lots of "Frew-full" discussions in the Finance Committee, but I am not one for puns. I was drawing my remarks to close, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Suffice it to say that, yes, I agree. Departments need to work together under joined-up headings. As this debate shows, and as you have just demonstrated, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, in the absence of agreed targets, we are just poking at the past year's allocation, and we do not have an agreed Programme for Government or targets to work towards. With that, I will draw my remarks to a close, but I look forward to debating the draft Budget and further Budget Bills even more aggressively in the weeks ahead.

Mr Muir: I rise to speak on the Budget Bill on behalf of the Alliance Party. Before I start, I offer my thoughts to the Chair of the Finance Committee, Steve Aiken, who is ill after breaking a few ribs.

I broke a few ribs a couple of years ago and decided to do a 10K race afterwards. I learned that it is very sore. I send him my best wishes.

Matthew O'Toole made a point about the resource allocations throughout the year from Treasury. We have to acknowledge that the way in which they were allocated and the very late notice that was given provided a challenge for the Northern Ireland Civil Service in allocating those funds, but it also highlighted a whole issue with the capacity and the capability of the Northern Ireland Civil Service to turn things round at great speed. An awful lot of schemes were turned round at great speed, and we are very grateful for that, but as the COVID allocations were coming through, it showed a stress in certain Departments' ability to turn round that level of support. The Public Accounts Committee, of which Matthew is also a member, is looking into that at present. It is an important issue, and we must look at it with a balanced approach. Yes, the allocations were late in the day, but there was also a capacity issue in turning that round.

The other issue is about the rating system. I think that many people will be very surprised when they go back to their high streets after the pandemic has abated and see the level of vacancies and the devastation that has occurred on those high streets. That is why the review of the non-domestic rating system needs to happen. I had a phone call on Saturday from a constituent who owns a retail premises in Belfast city centre, and he outlined to me the real challenges that he has as a result of being in a city centre that is largely desolate, with very few people around. He has rate relief for this year, but he is still conscious of the fact that he will eventually have to pay non-domestic rate bills. Other businesses are trading from a garage or a warehouse and paying much lower rates, yet he is carrying the full burden. He is determined to reopen, but we need to be conscious that we will have to address that issue in no short order. No sooner had the pandemic come along than Reval2020 came in, but the impact of that has not been felt because of the reliefs associated with the pandemic.

I will turn to the Budget Bill. I recognise that the Bill is to give legal effect to the spring Supplementary Estimates for the remainder of this financial year and to the Vote on Account for 2021-22. It is important to state that budgets and finances over the period ahead need greater focus on reskilling and employment as our economy begins to reopen after being frozen for over a year, as the Chair of the Economy Committee outlined. We must also ensure that there is sufficient support for the welfare system at a time of rising unemployment. Those are the most important financial issues over the next 12 months. Keeping people in jobs, getting them into jobs and supporting those facing hardship is what will define this place.

By the time the furlough scheme is due to close, thousands in Northern Ireland may be at risk of not having any job to go back to. The Finance Minister needs to set aside funds to ensure that suitable training, reskilling and new job opportunities are in place for those whose livelihoods have been taken by the COVID-19 pandemic. The risk is particularly acute for our young people. Without the right response from our Executive, there is a danger that the economic impact of COVID-19 could scar them for years to come. My party is also calling for a reshaping of the high street. As COVID-19 has fundamentally changed our livelihoods, so it has altered the hearts of our towns and cities.

The Alliance Party acknowledges that a flat core resource allocation is disappointing and far short of what Departments need to effectively carry out their day-to-day functions. Some element of that was forgotten in the discussions on the Budget last week. The Alliance Party is disappointed that the Chancellor's Budget did not go further in delivering a much bigger green stimulus, which is something that my North Down colleague Stephen Farry MP has continued to press for at Westminster. If you look at what other Governments are doing across the world, it is clear to see that what the UK Government are planning just does not cut the mustard. We were expecting stimulus around infrastructure investment last week, and that did not happen.

However, rather than pretending that we are entirely at the mercy of decisions made in London, the Alliance Party believes that the Executive could be doing much more to get our own finances in order. As I outlined last week, the cost of division is estimated at over £500 million per year, and it remains largely ignored. Only when we are serious about tackling the cost of division head-on will we fully be able to deliver on the twin challenges of public service transformation and private sector growth in Northern Ireland.

I welcome the proposals to establish a fiscal commission. It has lots to examine and report on. Additional revenue-raising powers will be considered credible and reasonable only if we are prepared to ensure that our current revenue is spent wisely and well.

The reform of the management of Northern Ireland's finances has been far too slow. It has been over a year since we were promised a fiscal council. I understand the challenges that have been experienced thus far, and I am greatly appreciative of the work that officials in the Department of Finance have done. We understand that proposals will be brought to the Assembly in short order, but we still have not seen anything yet. Only when we have the reforms that are needed can we be properly entrusted

with the powers that are required to take greater control of our financial destiny.

The Alliance Party will continue to press for greater resources for Northern Ireland at Westminster, particularly for additional financial firepower to build back better from COVID-19, but, in the Assembly, we must, first and foremost, focus on putting our own house in order. We should not pretend that we are powerless to deliver more jobs and better public services in Northern Ireland.

Lastly, as was referred to in this place yesterday during questions for oral answer to the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Troubles-related-incident victims' payment scheme needs to be delivered. The ongoing foot-dragging by the Secretary of State is wrong, and it must end. It is long past time that he stepped forward to provide the financial support that is deserved but that has been delayed for far too long.

Mrs Cameron: I also convey my best wishes to my constituency colleague Steve Aiken and wish him a speedy recovery from his injuries.

At the outset, I thank the Minister and the departmental officials for their work on the significant administrative task that is the Budget Bill. Just over a year ago, no one could have imagined the world that we are living in today. Sadly, many families are filled with sadness and grief at the loss of their loved ones, and behind every statistic are individuals who are sorely missed. Undoubtedly, brighter days are ahead of us in Northern Ireland, and, as I begin my remarks on the Budget, I pay tribute to everyone who is involved in the roll-out of our vaccination programme. Their professionalism and the speed at which it has been progressed so far has given us all much-needed hope that, finally, an end is in sight.

No one can be in any doubt that all Northern Ireland's Departments have come under extraordinary pressure over the last year in trying to maintain services and address the new challenges that presented themselves. Additional funds that were allocated by Her Majesty's Treasury to help address COVID pressures have been vital throughout. It is obvious that Northern Ireland's high levels of public spending would not have been at all possible without our membership of the United Kingdom. The levels of financial aid for businesses and the self-employed have been unprecedented, although we must fully recognise that further support will be needed throughout this year to help get our economy back on its feet, even after many of the restrictions have been lifted.

Another pressing issue that must be resolved is the Troubles innocent victims' pension. I call on the Executive and the Secretary of State to finalise the scheme urgently. Victims have waited too long, and many deadlines have been missed. That is unacceptable, and there must be no more delay.

COVID-19 not only added greater financial burdens to our Departments but exposed the long-term structural needs of many of our services. I am referring in particular to our health service. We have waited for years to see a substantial transformation of our health service. The pandemic exposed the need for investment in our health service property, areas of high staffing vacancies and an over-reliance on agency staffing. Long-term strategic planning in the health budget is needed to address those problems. I reiterate what I said during the recent debate

on the spring Supplementary Estimates, which is that we must move towards a multi-year Budget, particularly in health. That is not just in the interests of more strategic spending decisions but to allow more effective scrutiny by the Assembly and its Committees.

None of us should be naive enough to think that the problems facing our health service can be resolved quickly. Indeed, many of them predated the COVID-19 pandemic. I share the concerns of the chairs of all the health and social care bodies, who recently highlighted that aspects of the health budget are non-recurrent.

That negatively impacts on our trusts' ability to make long-term plans, including the capacity to recruit staff. A large proportion of the health budget is rightly allocated to COVID recovery, but tackling Northern Ireland's extensive waiting list backlog must be at the forefront of priorities. The Department must also recognise that we still do not fully understand the effects of long COVID. Some people have experienced longer-term impacts from their COVID symptoms, especially with respiratory issues. Many experts expect a growth in demand for funding of services to deal with the long-term rehabilitation of some COVID patients. We need to acknowledge that and be prepared to address it.

4.30 pm

I am far from being the only member of the Health Committee or the Assembly who has continued to express concerns for health service staffing levels, which are under pressure. I appreciate that the NHS pay review body has still to conclude its recommendation for Northern Ireland, and we must wait for that outcome. However, I will make just one point. Safe and sustainable staffing cannot be achieved without fair pay, and I hope that the independent pay review body will recognise that.

I cannot express strongly enough the amount of pressure under which our hospitals and other services have been working, especially during the recent COVID waves. Several hospitals surpassed 100% capacity on multiple occasions. I publicly thank the 110 military medical technicians who have now returned to the military, having served in hospitals here during the post-Christmas surge. Without their professional support, we would have been in a much worse place.

As case numbers and hospitalisation figures stabilise, we must earnestly return as many non-COVID services as possible. I thank the leadership teams across our health and social care trusts who have been involved in this spring planning and for managing their resources to resume normal services as best and as quickly as they can. Reform on how we deliver services in Northern Ireland is needed more than ever. However, a wide range of transformation and New Decade, New Approach commitments remain unfunded. In particular, I hope that finance can be found in the Budget to ensure that we fulfil the pledge for safe staffing, for 900 additional nursing and midwifery students over three years and for funding for up to three IVF cycles. That will take years of hard work and Budget processes to get to where we want to be: a full transformation that sees greater outcomes for patients and better conditions for our amazing healthcare staff.

While I welcome the increased budget for resource and capital spending in Health, I am concerned that any

significant progress on transformation and the New Decade, New Approach commitments will be pushed back further. The public of Northern Ireland expects an efficient and transparent use of resources. Let us ensure that every effort is afforded to using those funds effectively and in a targeted way to help our society to recover and prosper beyond COVID-19.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I want to outline the Committee's position on aspects of the DAERA budget. Overall, on resource DEL, the Committee is aware that DAERA is facing a shortfall of £33.9 million, the majority of which arises from a shortfall in replacement EU funding. The Committee is aware that DAERA has requested additional resource and capital DEL funding from the Department of Finance in order to take forward important work, in particular on the green growth strategy and the bovine TB eradication strategy. The Committee has indicated support for that additional funding.

DAERA has been able to secure additional funding from Treasury for the work on EU exit, as well as water reform and climate change initiatives, and, again, the Committee welcomes that funding. The Committee questioned officials on aspects of EU exit. New responsibilities and functions have now been allocated to DAERA as powers return from the EU. The Department also has to implement and deliver the compliance checks that are now required as part of the protocol. The Committee is concerned that sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) checks at ports and at Belfast International Airport are being funded through a separate exercise with the Treasury, and details of that funding were not included in the Budget documents. The Committee has requested an additional written briefing, which it is still awaiting.

I will turn to the replacement of EU funding by Treasury, as promised in the manifesto commitment. The Committee has registered concerns about the shortfall of around £14.4 million in 2021-22 against pillar 1, pillar 2 and common market organisation (CMO) funding. It has been netted off because it has been carried over from EU funding sources. The Committee is very disappointed by the Treasury's approach. Another shortfall is the £5.1 million obtained from the EU fund for disease eradication. In previous years, this had gone towards the costs of bovine TB. As this funding is not being replaced by Treasury, it represents a shortfall in DAERA's budget requirements. The Committee heard that it is the intention of DAERA to manage shortfalls through internal reallocation or the monitoring round process. The Committee was recently briefed on bovine TB and is aware of the work to develop a new bovine TB eradication strategy. The new strategy would cost more in the short to medium term but should result in a reduction in cost to the taxpayer and farmers in the longer term. Whilst the rates are falling, they could become a barrier to trade. Working towards the eradication of the disease is therefore essential. The Committee is aware that DAERA is in discussion with the Finance Department to secure additional funding requirements.

I turn to the replacement funding for the EU structural funds previously invested in rural development. The Committee is very concerned about the lack of information and clarity on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. In November 2020, the UK Chancellor announced that

£220 million would be allocated in 2021-22 to help local areas to prepare for the introduction of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. Now, it is to be a UK-wide investment framework and will not be devolved to each Administration. The Committee is concerned that there is no detail on the method of allocating the UK Shared Prosperity Fund among the four Administrations. It is also concerned that it appears that the funding will be administered centrally by Whitehall and that there are no guarantees that the funding allocated to here will be ring-fenced for rural development.

Another priority for the Committee is the tackling rural poverty and social isolation programme (TRPSI). Given the positive outcomes for rural communities and the impact that TRPSI has had during COVID-19, the Committee considers that the programme should be a priority for DAERA. In previous years, TRPSI was funded under the confidence-and-supply allocations. Although £1.8 million of funding has not been formally allocated at the draft Budget stage, it is part of the anticipated confidence-and-supply funding that will be allocated to DAERA for 2021-22. The Committee expressed concerns that the TRPSI revenue DEL funding has not yet been allocated and is not baselined. It registered that this is also a concern for DAERA and that discussions are ongoing on this matter.

I turn to the funding for DAERA's arm's-length bodies (ALBs): the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), the Loughs Agency and the Fishery Harbour Authority. Other than some references to capital DEL for AFBI, the Committee noted that it was disappointed that there was no mention of funding required for ALBs. The Committee has requested a written brief on this aspect of the DAERA budget but has not yet received the information.

Woodland creation is another area that the Committee has concerns about. It noted that £3.4 million of the £95.5 million capital DEL is allocated to woodland creation via the Rural Development Programme (RDP) forestry programme. This is to help landowners to plant native woodland, and it is part of the green growth foundation programme. The Committee also noted that £15.6 million of capital DEL is to be allocated to green growth foundation programmes. These are not fully developed. However, these future schemes and projects will fall under the carbon-neutral programme, with the aim of working towards a net zero target by 2050. The Committee is disappointed that no further information on these future schemes is available.

I now turn to climate change. This is a priority for the AERA Committee, which, in July 2020, tabled an Assembly motion calling for the AERA Minister to introduce climate change legislation as a matter of urgency, as per the commitment in New Decade, New Approach. The Committee was briefed by DAERA on its climate change discussion document before that document went out for consultation, which is now closed. The Committee was to be briefed on 18 February on the initial outcome of that consultation and the plans and timescales for climate change legislation. The briefing has not yet happened. Instead, the Committee will be briefed on Thursday 11 March. This means that the already tight plans for getting that legislation through in this mandate have been pushed back. When questioned about the budget allocation to the climate change priority, DAERA staff again referred to the capital allocation of £15.6 million for the green growth

foundation programmes. They stated that proposals were being developed and that the Committee would be briefed in due course. This is not satisfactory to the Committee. Climate change is a priority. However, when we ask about the budget for it, we are constantly referred to the green growth strategy, which is still in development and on which there is little detail.

That is all that I want to say in my position as Chair of the AERA Committee. Before I finish, I want to highlight a few items as the Sinn Féin spokesperson on agriculture and rural affairs.

There are a couple of issues that are extremely important. The first one is Lough Neagh eels. We understand that there is a scheme for Lough Neagh eel fishermen and fisherwomen, and the need for that funding was identified last summer. While the AERA Minister is still considering the scheme's eligibility criteria, nothing has been launched. We feel that that is hugely unfair, and it is a source of ongoing contention, especially given that other sectors of the fishing industry have, quite rightly, received support by this stage. Colleagues in my party and across the parties from the Mid Ulster constituency and other constituencies, in particular those that border Lough Neagh, have been lobbying for that, and it really needs to be addressed.

The second item of major concern to Sinn Féin is the financial impact of Brexit. Last week, the Committee was informed that, between January and the middle of February, our points of entry here processed 5,800 common health entry documents, otherwise known as CHEDs, for products of animal origin, and that 57,000 freight units had passed through during that time. Preparation for that in such a short time frame was no mean task, and Members will be aware that the Command Paper was issued only in May. It is amazing that so much has been delivered in such a short time, and full credit to our hard-working DAERA officials for getting that ready in time for 1 January.

Contractors have been asked to design and build the port expansion project. It will cost in the region of £45 million, which includes £5 million of contingency costs from the British Treasury. DAERA appointed contractors for the design and build scheme on 7 October. However, the unilateral decision of the AERA Minister to order a halt to work has caused a lot of concern as it is a breach of our requirements to implement the protocol but also because it has implications for contractors who are awarded those tenders and have mobilised to commence the works. That issue was raised at last week's AERA Committee meeting with the permanent secretary. We are concerned that there may well be an expensive price tag connected to that decision with regard to contractual obligations.

The other issue that I want to touch on is the EU exit future funding replacement. There is no progress on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. The British Government have netted £34 million from our rural development reserves at a time when our colleagues in the South of Ireland are finalising their national common agricultural policy plan with a confirmed budget of €10.5 billion. We are really concerned that that will create a very uneven playing field for our farmers in the North and the wider agri-food industry. There will not be a level playing field between North and South, and we are extremely concerned about that.

The other aspect that I want to touch on is that DAERA made no bids in the January monitoring round. I quizzed the Department extensively in Committee and across the Chamber, and the Department told us that it had been engaging extensively to determine whether further funding could be used. On behalf of Sinn Féin, my colleagues and I have been pressing the Department to consult and to trawl more thoroughly to identify areas of need. Indeed, I made proposals for bids, such as implementing a single farm payment top-up scheme for farmers in areas of natural constraint whose incomes are already below average due to COVID and other factors linked to the physical restraints of farming in severely disadvantaged areas. I also suggested that January monitoring could be an opportunity to bid for funds to compensate farmers in the Sperrins who were devastated by the 2017 landslide. They have never been compensated and carry a huge financial burden to this day. Despite those proposals and the extensive lobbying, DAERA has said that it cannot identify any demonstrable need for additional funding and is fearful that any additional funding could not be allocated by 31 March. I find that disappointing and frustrating, given that other Departments are in the same position but made bids, and I feel that, in that regard, DAERA has let down rural communities.

The final issue strays slightly outside my brief, but, nevertheless, it is important to budgets. I note and welcome the fact that the first premises — in the Coalisland area of Tyrone — have been connected today through Project Stratum. That is great news. DAERA put in £15 million to part fund that programme.

It is important that we encourage and call on the Economy Minister to keep engaging with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in Westminster to make sure that premises that are not included in the intervention area at this stage can be included in an expanded intervention area funded by DCMS in Britain, capturing up to 20,000 more houses. In previous generations, Administrations and Governments brought water, electricity and other utilities to people's homes; in this generation, we need to bring broadband to them. There is a massive digital divide. This is our opportunity, once and for all, to end that divide and bring thousands of premises, most of them in rural areas, into the 21st century by providing them with proper, superfast broadband.

4.45 pm

Mr Irwin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Final Stage of the Budget Bill. As I have said in earlier contributions, great importance is attached to the Bill, given the current health crisis, from which we are hopefully now emerging. With that emergence will come a great requirement for investment and support for the economy in Northern Ireland in order to kick-start the process of economic recovery.

Many points have been made about the current speed of the relaxation of restrictions and about the lack of dates attached to recent announcements. In my daily work, in my constituency office in Newry and Armagh, I listen attentively to businesses in the community that urgently require clarity. I urge such clarity to be provided by the Health Minister and his advisers as soon as possible. That clarity, when provided, will allow for some preparation to be carried out, with a view to reopening various sectors of

our economy. There is a consistent message coming from our business community that forward notice is required. It is well understood and is the subject of much concern that the ending of the various support schemes will have an impact on the economy, as businesses react to the withdrawal of that support. The impact, which is difficult to measure at this time, must be a full and urgent focus for the Assembly. The clock is ticking on the issue.

Through my constituency work and from countless discussions with businesses and scheme administrators, I know that the sources of finance and other measures, such as rates holidays, have been of immense support. The schemes have kept businesses afloat and allowed staff to be retained. Huge pressure will be brought to bear on finances, and there has been a lot of public debate around allocations to Northern Ireland. Representations for additional resources must be continued. That is in no way to belittle the unprecedented level of assistance that has been provided. As I have said, it has been a lifeline for the Province. It has been well received and is further proof of the value and strength of the Union.

I will focus on agriculture and the environment, and I welcome Minister Poots back to his desk. His obvious enthusiasm for the role is clear for all to see. I trust that he is well recovered from what was significant surgery. I also pay tribute to Gordon Lyons, who stepped in and proved himself to be a capable pair of hands in Minister Poots's absence.

As I said last week, there is an important scheme in preparation. It is the second tranche of tier 2 of the farm business improvement scheme. Given the return of Minister Poots, I urge a renewed effort over the scheme. I have spoken to farmers and those in the manufacturing sector, and there is an enthusiasm around it and an anticipation that funding will be released. I urge a redoubling of efforts to get the fund operational. Former Minister Lyons replied to a recent query of mine about the status of the scheme. He said that it was designed to offer support to on-farm investment projects costing in excess of £30,000, up to a maximum available grant of £250,000, on the basis of robust farm business plans. He further added that its focus was on driving capital investment in assisted farm businesses. There is no doubting the importance of the scheme to the agriculture and manufacturing industries in Northern Ireland at this time. The scheme is also important for assisting farmers to meet their environmental obligations. There are many benefits to be had for the environment, farm businesses and the wider economy. We have important incentives to drive further change, but we need the second tranche to come forward quickly. I look forward to further progress being made and to the finalisation of the scheme's budgetary requirements.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I welcome the opportunity to make some remarks on behalf of the Health Committee before speaking as my party's health spokesperson.

There is no doubt that this has been a difficult and challenging financial year. A considerable amount of planning and priorities have had to be put on the back burner, and budgets have had to be redirected towards fighting the pandemic and its economic outcomes. That has been most evident in the Department of Health, where resources have had to be redirected to care for those most

in need and important services and surgeries have had to be cancelled or deferred.

At that point, I pay tribute again to the Department's greatest resource — its front-line Health and Social Care (HSC) staff. Without their dedication and service, we would be in a very different situation. They have saved many lives with their care, and we thank them for that. However, the pandemic has continued to outline the need for transformation in the health service. We need a health service that is fully staffed and able to support our staff in delivering services to the public. To enable that, we need to move to a multi-year recurrent Budget. While we understand the need for single-year Budgets to address the increasing backlogs in the health system, there needs to be significant investment and a multi-year Budget to allow the Department of Health to plan properly and to prioritise over the coming years. The chairs of the trusts outlined in their response to the draft Budget that their organisations could not continue to rely on in-year, non-recurrent funds and that multi-year Budgets were required to improve financial resilience and planning. I ask that the Executive consider the level of funding available to the health service and that a priority for the Executive should be the delivery of an effective, efficient and suitably resourced health service.

I will now make some remarks as Sinn Féin spokesperson on health. I declare an interest, having worked as a social worker and being on a career break from one of our health trusts. I also have close family who work in health and social care, but that probably applies to most of us. That will be relevant to everything that I say. I will pick up some points to illustrate the scope and range of areas that we are looking at that require multi-year planning, budgeting and recurrent funding. I will touch briefly on waiting lists, workforce, the ageing population, health inequalities, COVID and long COVID, pandemic preparedness and transformation.

Waiting lists will require multi-year funding. The Department estimates that it will take between £750 million and £1 billion over 10 years, so significant new investment is needed. Some 327,000 people are waiting for their first outpatient appointment: that is by far the worst across these islands. As of 21 December, 105,159 patients were waiting to be admitted to hospital for a procedure. That is an increase of 16.2% on December 2019. There has also been a significant drop in hospital activity, partly in response to COVID-19, compared with the period between September and December.

I move now to the workforce. We often hear discussions about building capacity and the transformation and development of Health and Social Care services, but what we are really discussing is staffing and the adequate provision of nurses, doctors, healthcare assistants, cleaners, porters, physios and OTs — the entire range of multidisciplinary experience and skills that it takes to deliver a modern health service. As of December 2020, at the height of the COVID pandemic, there were 5,543 vacancies across our health and social care sector, and the Department was actively recruiting for them. Every one of those posts puts additional pressure on the staff who are trying to work in the health service to deliver health services in the teeth of the pandemic and beyond it. In that context, it is hugely disappointing that the British Government have once again failed to recognise the

huge contribution made by nurses and Health and Social Care staff before, during and after the pandemic with the proposed 1% pay rise. That is simply not acceptable. The British Government must do more, and the British Chancellor needs to engage seriously with the nursing and health and social care unions.

I also welcome the discussion about a fiscal commission and the debate that that opens. Too often, the terms and conditions and pay for Health and Social Care staff are viewed through the prism of being a cost only: they are not. These are real people in a real economy who will spend real money in our businesses. We need to consider things such as social value in terms of health and well-being and outcomes, we need to consider how we can impact on economic inactivity, and we need to ensure that we have a well-resourced and properly paid workforce.

I will move on to talk about the ageing population. Again, to flag up serious concerns, NISRA statistics demonstrate that the population is becoming increasingly older and that the number of people who are over 65 will increase by 50% over the next 25 years. That is a massive responsibility on every one of us to start to plan and prepare for how we will deal with that ageing population. They will have comorbidities. They will live longer, which is to be welcomed, but we have to ensure that we have the health and social care system to meet their needs.

The pandemic that we are experiencing has further exposed the unrelenting nature of the health inequalities that assign health and well-being according to postcode. Indeed, as we in the Chamber all know, there can be several years of difference in life expectancy along the same bus journey in the city of Belfast, depending on where you start that journey. Our more deprived communities continue to be plagued by unacceptable levels of alcoholism, drug addiction and suicide, highlighting the need for significant investment in those services, and that significant investment is lacking.

COVID and long COVID will put additional pressures on core health services and will, if allowed to occur unchecked, fuel further inequalities in our population. We also need to consider seriously how we prepare for future pandemics and work our way out of this pandemic. That needs to be done, along with health transformation, on an all-Ireland basis. We cannot ever again see a situation where we send front-line Health and Social Care workers out to deal with an unknown virus without the proper protective equipment, the proper guidance and the proper support structures that they need. That will also have to be planned and paid for.

Finally, I move on to transformation of our health and social care system. That is absolutely essential to help us to address all of the issues that I have touched on. It is seriously disappointing in that context that funding is not available to significantly advance the urgent need to transform our system to meet our needs. We also need to have an honest and progressive conversation about how we improve and contribute to transformation on an all-Ireland basis. It makes no sense to plan how we retain and expand, for example, the top-performing stroke unit at Enniskillen hospital and other services based there, if we continue to ignore the significant populations to the south, east and west of that hospital. It makes no sense to ignore the potential for an all-Ireland surgical network to address the pressures on waiting lists that we have already

considered and are currently experiencing. It is, Members, nothing short of a disgrace that families of bereaved children in the North have to board a plane to Liverpool with their child's body if they wish to have an autopsy carried out because we could not sustain delivery of that service here in the North. We have to address that.

All of those substantial issues are coming at us and cannot be wished away. We need to take a long-term approach to all of those worrying issues, and we need the funding and longer-term capacity to plan and deliver services into the future. That will require multi-annual and recurrent funding and a realistic progressive tax base in order to deliver on the needs of and potential for our population.

Mr Catney: First, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I apologise to you that my phone sounded. I had the phone on airplane mode, and I hope that you noted that I owned up to it fairly quickly. Having been in the Chamber for about the past year, I have noticed that there is not much that goes past your eyes, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

I wish the Chair of the Finance Committee, Mr Steve Aiken, a speedy recovery. I hope that we will have him back as quickly as possible.

5.00 pm

My speech will be very brief. When I first came in, I saw my colleague Mr Givan. He has not come in. I was afraid of an intervention from him, so I am glad to see that he has left, anyhow.

On Saturday, we went to a little place called Duncan's dam. A community went out together and picked up rubbish. There was one young family there with a 16-year-old and an 11-year-old. I thought about me working in a pub and how difficult it had been. The greatest asset that we have is our community here. A lot of us tried our best — I am not lecturing anyone — during the Troubles. We put our children out to school, and we tried to work and to keep the economy going as best we could. Those are the important things. Those were the winning days. That is how we survived as best we could. We thought, "We will get hope, and things will get better".

On 16 September 1992, which was Black Wednesday, interest rates rose to 21%. Imagine telling some of our children today — those who are paying 2% or 3% on a mortgage — about that. I had just bought Ferguson's pie factory. I am not going on; it is just to let you know. Through no planning for the future, all of a sudden, I found myself with £400,000 of debt to be serviced at 21%. It was impossible. You could not do it, and no business could sustain it. However, we got through it, and we lived to fight another day.

I intend to be brief in case Paul says anything. The lack of consultation has been well rehearsed in the debate, so let me talk about solutions. First and foremost, Budgets need to be better linked to a robust Programme for Government. You can come up with the best strategies in the world — we know that this place needs to work on that — but there are issues if the priorities and outcomes of those strategies are not adequately resourced. I was going to say that they are not worth the paper that they are written on, but these days it is more correct to say that they are not worth the cloud storage that they take up. We need to be sympathetic, with priorities matched to specific lines in the Budget. In fact, the Minister said that, if we take money

away from one Department, we give it to another. We have to make those hard decisions. We need to look at that as best as we possibly can. I joined the Finance Committee thinking that I could come up with some ideas or help the Minister. I was not going in there to make it difficult; I was going in to see what was what. It is difficult and very slow-moving, but we find ourselves moving on anyhow to agree on the Budget that will come forward in the next few months.

In the short term, we need to see real movement on the 'New Decade, New Approach' commitments. Without movement on waiting lists, impactful mental health strategies and victims' pensions, we will all face an electorate that will say to us, "What's the point?". I repeat that they must be impactful. It will be difficult, but those commitments cannot be treated as secondary or a waste of time. That is what we have signed up to do. Not delivering must be out of the question. Where that requires buy-in from Westminster, we must remain persistent. It supported the agreement, so it must also follow through. I know that Claire Hanna and Colum Eastwood have been pushing the Northern Ireland Secretary, but we all must work together in order to make sure that those commitments are met.

We must have long-term strategic thinking about our economy, tackling poverty and climate change. We must realise opportunities in the UK, the EU and further afield. Long-term strategic thinking requires multi-year Budgets. I know that the Minister said that those are difficult to get to, but we long for the day when they are possible. It is not all in his control. Those Budgets must be implemented to allow value for money on long-term Government projects. We need a firm commitment from the Minister that he will implement them.

We must invest in infrastructure. That means roads and active travel. I have already spoken about the key projects in my area: the M1; the A1 link; the extension of the Blaris greenway to allow active travel across the area; and work on the Knockmore rail halt. Investment in infrastructure also means investment in broadband and digital infrastructure. I welcome what was announced this morning on the roll-out of the broadband. The pandemic has changed the world in many ways, but it has also ramped up change that had already begun.

The move to digital has been huge. Without investment in our infrastructure, Northern Ireland will be left behind. The pandemic has speeded up the need to take stock of the skills that we create for young people in the future. We need to consider the gaps, where we are behind the wider world and where we are doing well. A lot of that information already exists, but still we lack a well-funded, coherent skills strategy not only to improve the lives of our young people but to close the gaps between east and west and low and high income.

A future Budget must be ambitious and linked to strategic priorities that have been properly consulted on and scrutinised to make them cost-effective. That is the way forward, and I hope that we get there.

Mr Nesbitt: I welcome the opportunity of this Budget debate, as with all Budget debates, to share some musings on Budgets and what they are there to achieve. I suggest that we need to reflect on the extent to which the spend improves not just the standard of living of our citizens but

their quality of life and sense of well-being, the question of whether everybody wakes up in the morning knowing that they have the same chance of a successful day as the next person, with no discrimination and no inequality.

The Budget's main purpose — I believe that the Minister agrees with me on this — is to bring forward a prosperity agenda. One of the low points of my time as a party leader was the day that David Cameron, as Prime Minister, flew in to Stormont House. I think that he believed that he was there to sign off on a deal, and he quickly realised that he was not. The party leaders had drawn up a document that was basically a series of asks for additional money for various projects. The Prime Minister lit on a demand for money for childcare. He asked a simple question: "What childcare issues do you have in Northern Ireland that we are not struggling with in inner London, in Birmingham, in Glasgow and in Swansea?". The answer, of course, was that there were none. We share the same issues. His implication, of course, was that we had a block grant, to be used to tackle those issues.

I would like us to switch our mentality. I will use two Dickensian quotes. We have to stop being Oliver Twist, holding out the begging bowl and saying:

"Please, sir, I want some more."

We have to become Mr Micawber. The famous quote, because he understood budgets, is:

"Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen and six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery."

It is a prosperity agenda. Remember that, 100 years ago, on this part of the island we were net contributors to the Treasury. We had the biggest rope-works in the world in Belfast. We had a global reputation for textiles, shipbuilding and engineering. Queen's Island was the Silicon Valley of its day. We need to raise our ambitions. We may never again be net contributors, because, since then, we have had the health service and pensions to fund. Demands have changed, but the aspiration is worth it. I remind Members who have been critical of the Treasury and the British Government that the £3 billion-plus that we have received for COVID mitigations illustrates that, financially at least, there has never been a better time for Northern Ireland to be part of the United Kingdom. Whatever your constitutional preference, remember the first rule of marketing: whatever you are selling, make it easy to buy.

Whether you want to continue to sell Northern Ireland to the rest of the United Kingdom or you want constitutional change, surely we can come together in a common cause to say that we need to make Northern Ireland work and make it attractive. The Budget is key to that.

Like many Members, I very much support the idea of a fiscal council. I see no reason that we should be afraid of independent advice. I certainly would not claim to have the fiscal competence that others outside of the Building could bring into play.

I regret that it looks as if the mandate will end without our moving to multi-year Budgets. That move would give certainty not only to the business community, which tells us that it needs certainty, but to the community and

voluntary sector. I will not rehearse the problems; I am well quoted on those in Hansard. We need multi-year Budgets if Robin Swann is to be allowed to implement Bengoa. It is my understanding that there is not a party or individual MLA in the House who does not support the idea of transforming how we deliver healthcare.

Once we come out of the immediate COVID crisis, Robin Swann cannot be attacked in the way that Michael McGimpsey was attacked 10 or 12 years ago when he was Health Minister. If you check what he said in Hansard, you will find that he was prophetic in predicting what would happen if he did not have the funds; he was denied those funds. If we are to transform healthcare, it will stop being simply a sickness service and a service that promotes health. It will no longer simply be the responsibility of the Minister of Health. The Minister of Education will have a role to play, as will the Minister for Communities because good housing is important to good health. DAERA will have a role to play for those living in rural areas, and Infrastructure will have a role.

My other regret is that the Budget simply allocates money to Departments and tells us how it is spent. Going into this mandate, we had decided that doing stuff was not good enough and that we had to think about this other side of the equation: what outcomes are we achieving? We had a draft Programme for Government that had an outcomes-based accountability approach whereby Departments work together, much like in the Children's Services Co-operation Act that Steven Agnew initially introduced as a private Member's Bill in 2015. It put a statutory duty on Departments providing services for children not only to work together but to share resources and pool funds. If we are really going to deliver for our people and get best value for money from our Budget, we have to look at how Departments and agencies cooperate horizontally rather than in the vertical silos that we traditionally operate. In that way, we really will deliver for our people.

I declare that I am a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I repeat my concern about police budgets and their impact on the PSNI headcount. It is well below the 7,500 that I hope that we all wish that it was. The last time that the Chief Constable was in front of the Policing Board, I was struck by his comments that one of his problems is that he has more than one budget. Yes, he has a central budget from the Department of Finance, but there are other one-off pots of money. For example, there is a pot of money for tackling paramilitary crime, a pot of money for legacy perhaps, and a pot of money for Brexit. It is very difficult for the Chief Constable to plan when he is relying on those smaller pots of money, albeit they are multimillion-pound pots, but he does not know whether they will come back next year and the year after and the year after. That does nothing for the headcount.

Those are really my thoughts for the day. Can we think about a prosperity agenda? Can we think about getting out of our silos? If not in this mandate, then in the next mandate, can we work collaboratively on a Programme for Government that is outcomes-based and supported by a multi-year Budget?

5.15 pm

Mr Carroll: I begin by speaking up for all those who have spoken out against the Budget, the draft budgets and the general perspective and strategy of the Executive: the

anti-poverty campaigners, welfare advice groups, people who study inequality, people involved in community groups and trade unions. I hosted a meeting last week, and I wish that the Minister had been in attendance, because the testimonies that I heard were powerful and scathing. Indeed, many of those who were alarmed by the Budget used their voice in the media to condemn the Minister's plans. They submitted responses to draft budgets that contain deeply concerning reductions in core funding for front-line workers, welfare support, homeless services, mental health provision and job training for young people. It seems that their voices are being ignored as every stage of the Budget is rushed through the House with a disgraceful lack of scrutiny and a wilful ignorance of those who try to defend their communities from potential cuts.

So, even though mine is a lone voice, my party will not accept the Budget. Nor will we accept the excuses that we hear every time a Sinn Féin Minister delivers an austerity Budget. Those excuses include, "Our hands are tied". There has been no attempt to implement the radical policies that would address need in our communities. While far too many have suffered because of the mismanagement of the pandemic, the wealth of the 1% has soared. The fallout that we have seen for working-class people and those on the margins of society was certainly not inevitable.

I find it very telling that, once again, as a Budget is being presented that will do nothing to tackle inequality and wealth disparity in our communities, a Sinn Féin Finance Minister and, presumably, his Executive colleagues are to the right of the Tories on corporation tax. An increase in corporation tax could mandate big businesses to pay their way and shoulder more of the burden. However, as the Tories are, according to the 'Financial Times', set to increase corporation tax, the Finance Minister's plan is to kick the can down the road by setting up a fiscal commission to look into Stormont's tax-raising powers. The same article refers to corporation tax powers already being devolved, yet official sources say that devolution of the powers stalled after the collapse of the Assembly. There are varying takes on the current standing of corporation tax devolution. I ask the Finance Minister to come back to that issue in his closing remarks and provide transparency. What is the current standing of the devolution of corporation tax? Will he commit to and fight for an increase in corporation tax in the North? I would appreciate a yes or no answer.

I would like to visit some of the most pressing issues in the Budget. The first is pay for healthcare workers, who have so valiantly battled on the front line during the pandemic. They have worked for years without pay parity and have seen their workloads increase due to cuts being made to services. I pay tribute to all the unions, particularly the RCN, that have criticised the pathetic and insulting 1% pay rise that represents a real-terms cut for most, if not all, healthcare workers. The RCN has rightly called that a slap in the face for healthcare workers. If they decide to take action, including a strike, I will support them all the way.

We should not ignore the part that the Assembly has played in underpaying healthcare workers, including nurses, and underfunding the local health service. As we come through a pandemic during which we have seen the truly damaging impact of such austerity on staff and resources, it is unthinkable that that is not being

addressed. The same, of course, goes for civil servants' pay.

The lack of funding for advice centres and services is also deeply concerning. That is seen as an attack on workers' rights and the rights of those who find themselves looking for help from the Government. As I said last week, welfare advice organisations have been treated disgracefully in this process.

This Budget repeats the failures of the past. It demonstrates the Executive's inability to provide important mechanisms of scrutiny and accountability. It fails the community sector, the public sector and the health service. It has utterly failed, once again, to address the growing levels of unemployment, poverty and child poverty, which were rising before the pandemic. The Budget has been criticised by those who recognise the great need in communities, but the Minister and his Executive colleagues have pushed it through anyway.

I urge others not to support the Budget today. I recognise that they probably will, but it is important to state that for the record. It does not even deliver on the basic promises made by the Executive in 'New Decade, New Approach'. I do not see this as being likely, but the Executive presiding over this Budget should be ashamed.

Mr Beggs: The Finance Minister has been in post for some 14 months since January 2020. We all fully understand why, when presenting the Budget last year, he decided that there was not sufficient time to do anything but implement the Budget that had been handed to him. That was understandable then. We are told that this is a standstill Budget. There has not been, to my mind, effective consultation, and, essentially, we are continuing to implement that decision. That 14-month period has not been used to consider priorities effectively, and choices are not being made. I ask the Minister to ensure that, going forward in this year, we have a more effective Budget process by consulting the community more widely in order to ensure that we reflect community priorities in our investments. The change to the Budget process has been on the cards for almost a decade, and it was an issue way before the current Minister's time, but it is badly outstanding.

COVID-19 continues to affect the Northern Ireland economy, and income to the Executive and other public bodies is likely to be lower, adding stress to public services as we go forward into the next Budget period. We appreciate that additional funds have been provided for COVID, and there may well be more as we work our way out of the pandemic. We are fortunate to have benefited from the significant funds that have been given to the Minister because we are part of the United Kingdom. Thankfully, COVID cases are declining, and the number of people transmitting the virus is also declining. Our population has been benefiting from the vaccination programme. We are starting the process of slowly reducing restrictions and enabling a greater degree of normality. We have to move cautiously, because we do not want any resurgence of the disease.

There are changing patterns as a result of COVID. As others have indicated, there are increasing pressures on our town centres from online retail. Going forward, we cannot, as we once did, think of our town centre businesses as a cash cow. There needs to be a rethink

about the rates levied on our town centres, if we are going to have town centres. That may involve some changes at a national level from HMG to how the Amazons of this world are taxed, and that, in turn, may mean that there are very significant changes at an even higher level, because such companies have very intricate trading arrangements to avoid any form of taxation.

As a member of the Infrastructure Committee, I will largely concentrate my remarks on the Department for Infrastructure. First, the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company, which controls Translink buses and trains, expects to have a lower income until passenger numbers return to pre-COVID levels. That will put pressure on public services going forward.

Public transport has been underfunded during the past few years. I understand that that was a deliberate policy to run down reserves that had been established in Translink. I understand that, but Translink is now down to very basic cash flow operating levels. Unless funding is maintained, services will have to be cut. As my colleague said, decisions have to be taken. Services will have to be either funded or cut. That is the reality. I go back to this: decisions have to be made about what to prioritise.

Another area of important investment for the Department for Infrastructure is in Northern Ireland Water. It is vital that it maintain the quality of the water that comes through our taps but also how waste water is treated before it goes back into rivers and lakes. More than 100 regions are currently restricted in their development as a result of their waste water treatment works being over capacity. That, in turn, is restricting development. Businesses may not be getting planning permission. Residential homes may not be granted planning permission or are set conditions that are expensive to meet, with the developer having to put in generally smaller waste water treatment works, which are very expensive and more difficult to maintain, or having to make a considerably larger investment in large-scale water treatment works.

Northern Ireland is the only region of the UK where the regulator's final determination during the PC15 period from 2015 to 2021 was not funded, with Northern Ireland Water not being able to deliver. That is having knock-on effects. Not only is it affecting businesses and those who may wish to move into a new home but it is significantly affecting our economy.

When development occurs, leverage results from the private money that is brought into the investment. You can get not only the waste water treatment works but money from developers and banks. Jobs are created in construction. Funding is available for quarries, joiners and a wide range of skills in the economy. That is a very important bit of leverage that I do not hear being talked about and reflected to improve the economic situation in Northern Ireland. How are we going to overcome the bottleneck that is preventing such investment in Northern Ireland and inhibiting the economy? I do not see any mention of that in the Budget statement, but it is something that the Executive have to face up to and address.

Significant infrastructure capital investment continues to be prioritised for the A6, and rightly so, so that it is developed speedily. Even in the COVID period, I understand that contractors are largely working to the schedule. We also continue to prioritise the A5. The A5

was developed on the promise of £400 million from the Republic of Ireland, a promise that was later withdrawn. I understand that we got £25 million. If that missing £375 million continues to be ignored, it means that money will have to be drawn in from all other capital projects in the Department for Infrastructure or else affect other Departments. The project was originally going to cost the Northern Ireland Executive £600 million. I understand that it is now nearer £1.1 billion, or possibly £1.2 billion. I am talking about a missing £600 million. If we continue with that project at the same pace without reflecting the fact that that money is missing, it will result in money not being available for waste water treatment works, road safety improvements and perhaps bypasses for areas where there is considerable congestion.

I am disappointed that, in the Budget —

Mr McAleer: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Yes.

Mr McAleer: Does the Member accept that the A5 is an Executive flagship project and crucially important for the development of the west and the north-west? An average of four people die on that road every year, so it is hugely important for road safety as well. Does the Member therefore accept that the A5 project is hugely important for the side of the North that I and others come from?

5.30 pm

Mr Beggs: I appreciate that it is an important project for the Member's constituency; I am not disputing that. I am pointing out that were £600 million available, I would give priority to waste water treatment works, which affect every constituency in Northern Ireland. That could enable considerable improvements and would lever additional moneys to create jobs and new businesses and to build homes. The building of social housing is being delayed as a result of inadequate funding for waste water treatment works. That shortfall is badly inhibiting our entire community — yours and mine — yet there is no plan in the Budget to address the inadequate funding for waste water treatment works.

If the Member had listened carefully to what I said, he would have heard me talk about considering rescheduling, which could also mean looking at alternative plans that focus on the funds that are available. The Republic of Ireland withdrew £375 million of funding, which was a key basis on which the development was originally taken forward.

Mr McAleer: Will the Member take another intervention?

Mr Beggs: I will, certainly.

Mr McAleer: Does the Member accept that while there was a delay in the original funding from the Southern Government, the project has been reprofiled so that the funds from the North can build phases 1 and 1B? Had his former colleague, Minister Kennedy, not dragged his heels for over a year and signed off the draft order, the road would have been built long ago.

Mr Beggs: I am highlighting to the Member that £375 million is missing from what was originally planned for the project and that the costs have increased, as he indicated. It must be remembered that the original planning

permission was quashed by a court order. It was not solely down to the former Ulster Unionist Minister.

I will turn to another road development — the Yorkgate junction. It is mentioned in the departmental briefing on the Budget. That development will be important in addressing one of the biggest transport bottlenecks in Northern Ireland. It adds costs for hauliers as a result of delays. I suspect that the delays are not so significant at present because of reduced traffic levels as a result of COVID. However, as we anticipate a return to normality in the economy, it is important that we invest our money wisely.

I understand that money was earmarked for the Yorkgate junction, but, last summer, the Minister for Infrastructure decided to carry out a swift review of the planning decision to look at alternative plans. That was last summer, but I have heard nothing since. That money was ring-fenced and could provide additional employment and alleviate traffic congestion. Perhaps, even more importantly, it will reduce the static traffic in the middle of Belfast, which contributes to high levels of pollution and adversely affects the residents of nearby housing. It is important that that issue be addressed. Planning permission has been approved, but if it is not going to happen, the Minister for Infrastructure should say so and move speedily to an alternative project. However, as I said, the review commenced last summer: what happened to that speedy review? That is money that could be spent to kick-start the economy and create jobs. It is important that we go forward with it.

Capital expenditure involves choices. Yes, we could spend £1.2 billion on the A5, but might we spread that over a longer period and, at the same time, enable other investment, such as further road safety improvements throughout Northern Ireland? Perhaps we could have more variable 20 mph speed limit message signs adjacent to primary schools.

Road surfacing is not a very highbrow area but is an essential area of public investment that should be treated seriously in the Budget. If there is no investment in road surfacing, it creates problems for the future. I can think of one road that is not too far from my home, Ballyvernstown Road. A number of years ago, around one third of it was resurfaced rather than the whole road. Then, another year, another third of it was resurfaced. Guess what? The other third of it is now heavily decayed and scheduled for resurfacing. It would have been much more efficient to resurface the entire road at the one time if the funds had been available.

When we dedicate huge funds to new roads, it means that there is no capital funding for resurfacing all the existing roads. That is a choice that Ministers have made. I question that choice. I am also highlighting the fact that, when roads are not resurfaced, as well as being more expensive to do them in bits, it is also hugely expensive to continually run back and forth to fix potholes. Frequently, I see potholes with repaired potholes in the middle of them. Some potholes have been repaired two, three and even four times. It is important that major roads are treated with the maintenance that they require, reflecting heavy traffic, to ensure that they are in a fit state. I also support the ongoing expenditure on active-travel options, not only for greater Belfast but other regional towns. It is important that they are not forgotten about.

Turning back to the issue of waste water treatment works, the town of Larne is one area in my constituency where planning permissions are restricted. That inhibits house-building and social-housing development, because one would expect that condition to be placed on social housing. I also want to highlight plans to knock down the last of the three multistorey tower blocks. Residents are, presently, being encouraged to relocate elsewhere. However, there are limited options locally, and they are being encouraged to go further afield. They are asked, "What about Ballyclare? What about Carrickfergus?". That, in turn, will increase pressures elsewhere. Meanwhile, there is that huge site where not one brick has been laid, where, previously, there were three multistorey towers. No additional social housing has been put in their place. That is also adding to the pressures in neighbouring areas. It would be more normal for other housing to be developed so that residents who wished to continue to live in the area would have the option to do so.

I want to highlight that the Riverdale area, which is right on the edge of the town centre and close to the river, river walks and easy-access routes to the train and bus stations, is an ideal location for additional housing development. However, so far, that has not been developed strategically. I understand that there are some feelers out to consider social housing, but, as I said earlier, it would have been more normal to put some houses back in the area to replace the two multistorey blocks that were brought down some time ago, rather than seek the demolition of the third without replacement housing being put in its place.

I will now turn briefly to the New Decade, New Approach aspects of the draft Budget. I see continuing references to NDNA in the draft Budget document and departmental papers. I notice that paragraph 3.18 of the 2021-22 draft Budget document states that:

"With the additional resource DEL Barnett additions being largely offset by the loss of the additional £350 million of New Decade New Approach (NDNA) funding the Executive had received in 2020-21, which, while provided for one year only, was needed to fund ongoing pressures in departments."

I understand from that document that the 'NDNA' funding was provided for one year only. It is, therefore, surprising for me to continue to see references to it. The funding was available for one year only, and it is now gone. There are pressures in Departments. My question to the Minister is this: given that 'NDNA' was never fully funded, how is he managing all those additional projects that are in it? We are making commitments in the Budget, and I see from departmental papers that preference is being given to projects mentioned in 'NDNA' that are unfunded. We are choosing to add pressures to all the normal pressures because of projects that are unfunded. Those projects may well not be continuing priorities, but unless that is addressed, important basic facilities such as waste water treatment works and social housing will not be funded. So, it is important that decisions are taken. I will go back to that again: we are referring to previous decisions and are not reflecting changes that have occurred, and it is important that decisions are taken.

Most people are not too concerned about Boris's bridge because none of it has hit the fan here and taken a big chunk out of our Budget. That would take a very

substantial chunk out of our Budget if it were ever to get to that serious position. Most people recognise that it is a good issue with which to divert people's attention from the realities of the border in the Irish Sea. I would certainly be concerned if we committed capital funds from all the needy projects that we already have to a Boris bridge, which I see as largely pie in the sky. Of course, if the Prime Minister wants to fund the bridge and his roundabout under the Isle of Man, he is welcome to do so. Maybe he does not, because we would all pay for it with our taxes. I do not think that it would be a good idea.

We have to recognise that we should equally ask whether we can afford some projects that are listed in 'NDNA'. The one that stands out in my mind is the Narrow Water bridge. Can we really afford another bridge? We are not putting tarmac on roads, we are not investing in our waste water infrastructure and we are unable to build social housing because of a lack of waste water treatment works, so can we really afford another bridge? Is this really going to benefit our entire community, or is it in the same vein as Boris's fanciful bridge, which, sadly, some people are progressing and continue to reference in departmental documents? I am concerned that we are not making sensible choices, and the sooner that we have someone to look at how we collectively decide to spend on capital infrastructure the better.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he at least acknowledge that the Narrow Water bridge, which is a bridge of maybe 100 or 200 yards — I do not know how wide it will be — is a little different to a bridge going through unexploded Second World War munitions and dodging nuclear subs at a cost of God knows how many millions of pounds over a dozen miles of the North Channel?

Mr Beggs: I fully accept that the bridges are on different scales. However, I view them as fanciful and non-essential. Meanwhile, we have essential services that are not being funded, and that is my issue. We have issues that are stopping development in my constituency and stopping social housing, and we are talking about spending money on another bridge somewhere. I am saying that we need to prioritise how we spend our money and make choices. We have to recognise that you make choices when you spend money somewhere; it means that there is less money that you cannot invest in something else.

I would also like to talk briefly about the growing cost of squeezing the stadium into the Casement site.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Yes.

5.45 pm

Mr O'Dowd: There is a trend developing in the Member's speech. You do not want motorways or dual carriageways going west of the Bann, you do not want bridges North/South, and I suspect that you are about to tell us that you do not want Casement. Can the Member understand why I am somewhat suspicious of his motivations?

Mr Beggs: I have talked about avoiding fanciful bridges. I have also talked about looking at the scale and pace of development in some areas, bearing in mind that some of the road schemes would never have met the normal standards of development. I am mindful that a

previous Assembly visited some aspects of the A5. In fact, I remember that there was a proposal to provide a new dual carriageway even though there are very low traffic volumes in that area. I am conscious that a £1 million roundabout was built at the end of the M1, and the proposal is to bypass it and build another roundabout. I do not know whether the plans have developed since then, but I am saying that there are fanciful plans that you may be able to develop if somebody else is paying for them. Guess what? We will have to pay for that, and I am asking that we look very carefully at the choices that we make as we spend our limited funds.

The costs of Casement have significantly increased given the GAA's determination to squeeze a large stadium into a very restricted site. If that is what the GAA wants, I fully appreciate its right to do that, but I ask this: will it pay the extra costs? Is it right that the public pay the extra costs, or should the GAA, which insisted on building a large stadium for a large number of people at a restricted cost, pay those extra costs? There are choices, and, if the public pay those costs, other things cannot be funded.

I also want to mention pressures on health. COVID will have considerably added to our waiting lists. Will additional funds be available to address those waiting lists? I suspect that, if we are all having a flat budget — that has been the decision with this Budget — the answer will be no, but I ask the Minister to confirm that. Will health transformation be funded?

Mr Catney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Yes.

Mr Catney: I want to bring the Member's attention back to Casement Park. I remember that, some years ago, that stadium for Northern Ireland was going to be built out by Blaris and out by the Maze. That would have been a far better decision than doing up the three stadia — rugby, soccer and GAA — that got the money. If my memory serves me right, your party blocked that stadium.

Mr Beggs: The Member remembers some aspects of it, but it is not relevant to this Budget. There was not agreement — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Beggs is quite right: it is not relevant to the Budget debate. That is not solidarity between Deputy Speakers, I can assure you. We have our own trade union.

Mr Beggs: There were political concerns that the hunger strike memorial would conflict with such a stadium. Shall I put it that way?

Anyway, there is a great need to invest in health and care centres throughout Northern Ireland. Again, I go back to the point that, if we spend money in certain areas, there will be less money available to spend elsewhere. There is no acute hospital anywhere in my constituency of East Antrim. The nearest hospital is in Whiteabbey, and the minor injuries unit there closed some time ago. We do not have that local benefit. On top of that, we do not have a health and care centre or a well-being centre, so, from a health point of view, East Antrim — Larne, Carrick and Newtownabbey — is being deprived of sensible investment to take pressure off our hospitals, to enable earlier intervention and to enable our GPs and others to do more in primary healthcare.

I had to deal with an old rugby injury, so I visited the new health and care centre in Ballymena. I was very impressed. When you go there, you get a very good service. I hope that money will be invested in health and care centres throughout Northern Ireland so that everyone, not just some people, can benefit from them. As I said, the East Antrim area has certainly been deprived of any such local funding, and anyone who might benefit from such services has to travel a considerable distance. Our GP surgeries are antiquated. The population has increased dramatically since they were originally built, and the standard of some of the facilities needs to be greatly improved. There needs to be investment, and I do not see any particular movement in that direction. To my mind, this is an important aspect of transforming healthcare, and I would like to see investment in it.

As I have indicated, when we decide how to spend our limited capital funding, we make choices, so it is important that we make good choices. I would certainly support the development of an infrastructure commission for Northern Ireland so that its expertise, forward planning, forward thinking and long-term decision-making could be taken on board and Ministers could benefit from that. I hope that that becomes reality along with, as others have suggested, multi-year budgets. Multi-year budgets can improve the efficiency of purchasing, lead to better planning and enable projects to move forward much better. It is important that we have multi-year budgeting, but it is also important that we have long-term planning for where we invest our money. Rather than having individual Ministers pushing forward hobby horses that they think will benefit their community, we should seek to benefit all communities in Northern Ireland and ensure that capital investment is done by a mechanism of long-term thinking that will benefit all communities.

Mr Murphy: I am very relieved to be bringing this debate to a close. I think I have heard the same speeches three times over in the last two weeks; I could rehearse them all myself. Nonetheless, it is important that Members get the opportunity to raise issues that they have with the Budget. Some people have been debating next year's Budget, even though we are not debating that today, but that inevitably happens with these particular debates.

At the outset, I join Members in expressing my best wishes to the Chair of the Finance Committee following his accident. I hope that he has a speedy recovery.

Members raised a number of points. The Deputy Chair raised the issue of the, as yet, unspent money. It is my intention to bring a proposition to the Executive Committee this week, if we can get that together. There has been some late movement on the money, but I think we have in the region of £200 million to spend out and allocate to Departments. Of course, I hope that the money that has already been allocated to Departments is fully spent and none of it returns at a late stage. There is some small flexibility, in addition to the flexibility provided by the moneys that we got in late January. We have some small annual flexibility to carry over money, so I hope that we manage to do that.

The Deputy Chair and other Members raised the issue of the victims' payments. Of course, we have already invested money to implement and administer the scheme, and the Executive have agreed to pick up that cost. We want very quickly, and have been making strenuous

efforts, to resolve the issue of the payments themselves. I am hoping that we can make progress on that. I am glad that we have at least had the beginnings of an engagement with the NIO in relation to this. I hope that we get something resolved soon, because the Executive are fully committed, as I am, to ensuring that victims get the payments that they deserve in the time ahead.

The Deputy Chair and a number of others raised the issue of a fiscal commission. I will get on to the matter of a fiscal council later.

Of course, I accept, as others said, that you immediately get into the question of how much tax would be raised. The real question is this: what powers do we have, and what powers do we want to change our circumstances here? Do we want to rely, year-on-year, on a multi-annual Budget, if we are lucky? Do we want to receive, at late notice, an annual Budget with the same amount of cash as we had last year? What power do we want to have over our affairs?

The Member mentioned the limited powers that we have in relation to rates. We already make decisions on rates. We give rates relief. We target rates relief to certain sectors. We take fiscal decisions to forgo money from small business through manufacturing rates relief. We forgo money from rural ATMs to make a contribution to try to ensure that rural isolation does not become an even bigger issue than it is already. We forgo that potential income for the Executive so that we can target certain supports. As is the case with any fiscal lever that we have, the Executive can decide how and whether we use that in the time ahead. We already do that.

I propose that we have a much bigger debate about some of the levers that might be available to us, as Scotland and Wales did, and I hope that others will engage in that debate. I do not think that there is anything to be afraid of. Of course, if the outcome is that people support trying to access power from Westminster and use it in a certain way, that will be a matter for the Executive and the Assembly to decide at a future point. However, engaging in the debate and becoming informed about what may be available and how it may be used should not threaten anyone. It is very short-sighted to refuse to engage in that debate.

Caoimhe Archibald, the Chair of the Economy Committee, asked what funding would be required for the economic recovery action plan that the Department for the Economy will bring forward. I understand that a total payment of £317 million would be required: £286 million resource and £31 million capital. She also asked where we were with the LRSS schemes. From the latest figures that I have, I understand that over 98% of cases have been resolved in one way or another. I also understand that a proposal to assist travel agents is to be brought forward. I am not sure whether it has landed in the Department yet, but we very much look forward to getting that support to people.

I thank Matthew O'Toole for his words of appreciation for departmental officials. I was filled with a warm glow thinking that he might include me in those words, but, in case he went too far, he then very ruthlessly cut me off. *[Laughter.]* Nonetheless, I agree with him about some of the work that departmental officials have been involved in. He was not correct when he said that we should have known more last summer. He will remember that,

last summer, we got what we were told was the Barnett guarantee, and we were told that that was all the money. Since then, we have received a further three or four instalments. We were unable to plan during the summer. We were told that we had a certain amount for the rest of the year, and we welcomed the certainty that that provided. However, that is not how it materialised. I do not begrudge getting more money — of course, we always welcome more money — but our ability to spend in a strategic or planned way was limited.

I agree with Matthew O'Toole's point about the contempt for devolved arrangements and institutions. He will have had some experience of that in his previous position. I think that Declan McAleer, the Chair of the AERA Committee, made the same point, particularly in relation to the replacement of EU funding. That contempt is becoming more and more evident. We have certainly heard very loudly from the Welsh and Scottish Governments that the new funding arrangement to replace EU and other funds will be used centrally in Whitehall, will be set against English priorities and that we will have to bid and compete with everybody else on a case-by-case basis. Also, while Departments would otherwise have spent against their priorities, the funding that comes in will go straight into departmental areas of spend, which in no way respects the devolved arrangements here. The trend that Matthew O'Toole identified when he worked there a number of years ago has become even more pronounced in the last number of weeks. Of course, we will continue to challenge that.

I also agree with Matthew O'Toole that there is a need for the Budget to align with the Programme for Government, which he mentions frequently. Of course, that is exactly where we want to be. Over the past year, we have been trying to manage the challenges of the pandemic. We have to get back, very quickly, to trying to align the two.

6.00 pm

Mr Sheehan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: Yes.

Mr Sheehan: I want to comment on the point about the British Government saying that they were going to replace EU funding. I have seen reports recently about the ERASMUS scholarship, which was stopped by the British Government and was to be replaced by the Turing scholarship. It is now becoming clear that the British Government are not going to fund tuition fees or travel costs for that scheme. Can the Minister confirm that?

Mr Murphy: We will continue to engage around that. One of the biggest difficulties around all of these, including the Shared Prosperity Fund, is a lack of information, so we have been trying to get details. There were some high-level announcements in the Budget last week from the Chancellor but very little detail to underpin any of those. We are still trying to work through exactly what is involved. The common experience is that, first, we are not getting anywhere near what the European Union funding delivered for us. Secondly, we are not getting any measure of control on any of the aspects of funding that we are getting. Both are unacceptable and certainly not what was promised in the Brexit debate.

Andrew Muir raised the issue of the challenges with a standstill Budget. I agree, and I am on the record many times on that.

Pam Cameron and Colm Gildernew, as members of the Health Committee, raised issues about the health budget. We are on a hamster wheel, if you like, where we are treading water to try to catch up with what we need to spend on health, but we never have enough money to invest in transformation. Therefore, we cannot change the circumstances in which health operates. While the NDNA promised and delivered some limited funds for transformation, it is nowhere near what is needed to give effect to that. We are perpetually caught in the cycle of not being able to change the circumstances but needing to change the circumstances to effect better change.

Mr Muir: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: Yes.

Mr Muir: I just want to touch on the health issue. Many of us were waiting for different announcements in the Chancellor's statement last week. One that was clearly missing was an announcement around investment in health. It is a very short-term Budget that, from my perspective, does not understand the need to deal with the waiting lists and all the structural issues with the health service. Does the Minister agree that there was disappointment around that and a real fear that, potentially, later in the coming financial year, we will have further announcements from the Chancellor of additional funding without any planning ahead?

Mr Murphy: We already have some allocation for health, which we know about, for next year, for COVID. Of course, as the Member knows, the COVID spend is in-year spend, which does not allow for investment in long-term transformation. If we have not had money announced for health in our Budget now, we get that kind of annual cycle of money that, as I said, is not possible to use in the longer term. It is concerning that, for all the talk and the Thursday night round of applause, public services are not getting the level of support that they require in the time ahead. While there have been some welcome announcements in the Budget, I fear for the provisions for public services in the time ahead.

Mike Nesbitt raised some similar points. He talked about the lack of investment and about David Cameron saying that we do not have worse childcare issues than in parts of England. David Cameron's Government decided to cut public funding. They brought in austerity. They were supported in their efforts to get into office by the Ulster Unionist Party at the time. They introduced the austerity Budgets, which lasted for nine years and, potentially, will resurface in the time ahead. I have no doubt that areas in Britain suffered as much as us with a lack of investment in childcare. That is no excuse not to invest right across the board in support for public services.

I get the Member's point about the PSNI numbers. It was another NDNA commitment that was not followed through on. While we had some Brexit funding for the PSNI to increase the number of officers, that funding has stopped. We have tried to supplement that from our own Budgets, but, inevitably, the numbers will fall for the PSNI.

Gerry Carroll raised issues around corporation tax. I am sort of concerned that he is taking his lead from the 'Financial Times' on what I think and say, but there you go.

If a corporation tax cut were to be brought in by the Executive, it would inevitably be done on the basis that, first, we think that we can attract enough foreign direct investment to contribute to the economy and create a greater level of prosperity and that, secondly, we think that indigenous companies will use the cut to invest in companies and create more employment. Both are big gambles.

The position on corporation tax when it was originally discussed was to question whether it was affordable and whether the Executive's finances were in a sufficiently healthy state to allow us to cut the rate. It was clearly not considered affordable when a cut to 17% was proposed. If the rate here goes up to 25%, which I have been told could amount to as much as £800 million a year, how a corporation tax reduction here to match what is available south of the border would be affordable for the Executive, I cannot begin to understand. I have never advocated —.

Mr Carroll: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: Yes. I will give way in one second.

I have never advocated that cut. I have always believed that, even back in the original negotiations, the key factor for any Executive in considering a corporation tax cut was affordability. Unlike some other taxes that are cut, the money from corporation tax can be sent directly to where it is intended to go. Cutting the rate of corporation tax is a gamble to attract greater economic activity and to ensure that companies that benefit from it then reinvest that money. I am happy to give way.

Mr Carroll: I admit that I do not read the 'Financial Times' much, but I can agree with its journalistic credibility without agreeing with the politics in it. The same can be said for the BBC, 'The Irish News' and others.

The Minister has outlined his position on not reducing corporation tax, but have his Department or the Executive had the ability since 2015 to increase it? Is that an accurate position for where things are currently?

Mr Murphy: No, they do not have the power to do that. There were two issues. First, the Executive had to consider it to be affordable. Secondly, there were tests that had to be met to establish the financial healthiness of the Executive's funds. When the agreement was made to look at cutting corporation tax, we were straight into a prolonged period of austerity Budgets. It therefore would not have been affordable, nor were the Executive's finances in a healthy enough state to consider such a proposition. We are still in that situation. The move on behalf of the British state to 25% is perhaps an indicator that foreign direct investment is not something that it is concerned will suffer as a consequence of raising the tax.

The benefits were outlined at a time when there was a very substantial boom of economic activity and foreign direct investment across the world. We are not in that situation now, and certainly not post-pandemic. That is my perspective.

The idea of having a fiscal commission was not to look at corporation tax. We proposed the fiscal commission before the move on corporation tax was announced in

last week's Budget. A fiscal commission would look at the broad ambit of fiscal levers available to the Executive and at how, if they were minded, the Executive might use those levers to target them at our own priorities.

On the overall point, the Member is consistent in challenging the Executive, the Budgets over what he says they are doing to ordinary people, and me as a Sinn Féin Finance Minister. He ignores the elephant in the room, however, which is that we do not have control over those affairs, and we will not have control over them in the constitutional framework in which we currently operate. Our lack of control over austerity, over the Budget amount, over the funding envelope and over the time frame for our Budgets are all part of our constitutional framework. The only time that we will have proper control and be able to do something significant about changing the wherewithal of people here is when we are in charge of our own affairs. He reiterated the issue of Advice NI, and I advise him again — if he pardons the pun — that the Communities Minister is on record as saying that she will find the funding to support Advice NI.

Roy Beggs raised a range of issues around infrastructure, perhaps too many to go into. It strikes me that — John O'Dowd touched on this point — we have had all our infrastructure investment. Anything else from here on in is fanciful. East Antrim is in the fortunate position that, over the existence of this state, infrastructure was invested in, for roads, ports and the railway line that he mentioned, whereas large areas west of the Bann had no investment in their infrastructure and no ability to access the economic growth and the location of jobs that such investment in infrastructure brings. It was ignored in substantial chunks. Now his position is, "Well, we have our infrastructure, but now it needs fixed. We would like our roads that we already have to be fixed, and you can't have your roads until ours are fixed".

You can see that it is a chicken-and-egg situation in which a constituency like his, which has benefited over decades from investment in infrastructure, would now like to deprive other constituencies of the same benefit.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for giving way. Will the Minister accept that the investment in the A2 in Carrickfergus was based on traffic numbers, with over 30,000 vehicles a day, and that there was investment in the A8 — the Larne to Belfast road — because it was the only bit of the Trans-European Network (TEN) route between Larne and Cork that was not dualled? Will he accept that the investment that East Antrim got was due to the density of its population and the significance of the transport route that travels through it?

Mr Murphy: Substantial parts of the TEN route that he referenced continue to be in a very poor state. If he were to travel between Sprucefield and Newry, he would see that the dual carriageway, which is on the TEN route, has not been invested in significantly over time, and I know that the Infrastructure Minister would like to do something about the most dangerous aspects of that road.

The Member mentioned the York Street project and the traffic congestion, but people in Strabane, Omagh and Aughnacloy have suffered the effects of traffic congestion and the pollution that it brings for decades and will continue to suffer until the A5 project is completed. The Irish Government have reaffirmed their commitment to £75

million as part of the NDNA project for the A5, and we look forward to that developing.

He quite rightly mentioned the infrastructure deficit for Northern Ireland Water. Last year, the Department for Infrastructure got its biggest budget ever, including its biggest capital budget ever. It is the responsibility of the Department to prioritise, but, in recognising the particular problems that he identifies, which have a multiplier effect with regard to investment, we have looked to supplement, for next year's Budget, which he was referring to, the finances that were available to the Department for Infrastructure through reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing of some £70 million specifically for Northern Ireland Water for investment in sewerage and waste water treatment and water treatment facilities generally.

The same point applies to the Narrow Water bridge. It has been funded by North and South, so why look a gift horse in the mouth, although the southern relief road in Newry will, arguably, provide a much better outcome for the people of Newry, who have suffered for generations with traffic congestion without any relief.

On the Member's point about Casement, the IFA is looking for an additional £20 million from the subregional stadia programme. That is public money, so I wonder whether he will have the same approach to the IFA. It has already had subregional stadia investment and wishes to upgrade, so should it pay for that? I do not think that it should. I think that the public can invest in sporting facilities for all codes, and we should seek to do that because of the long-term benefits that it will bring to society generally.

The Member mentioned deprivation in his constituency. I ask him to look at the deprivation indices of urban and rural wards to see how many are in East Antrim. No doubt, there are pockets of deprivation there that need invested in, but there is substantial documented deprivation across rural and urban wards. My argument is that those are the areas that we should invest in first to change outcomes for people.

It has been a lengthy debate over three stages. I have listened carefully to what Members have had to say. As I said at the outset, this is not next year's Budget; this is the tail end of this year, plus some headroom for Departments to spend out in the early months of next year. It is, nonetheless, important to continue public services, limited as they are, under-resourced as they have consistently been, and it is important that we have the finances available to continue our work in the time ahead. We will come back to a debate on the further Budget for next year in the final Budget document at the end of this month and then in the Estimates in May. I ask for support for this Budget Bill.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister. Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that, because this is a Budget Bill, the motion will require cross-community support.

Question put.

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Carroll: No.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Carroll has placed his opposition to the Bill on the record, and I have now read it into the record. I will put the Question again.

Question put a second time and agreed to (cross-community vote).

That the Budget Bill [NIA Bill 17/17-22] do now pass.

Adjourned at 6.15 pm.

Written Ministerial Statements

The content of these written ministerial statements is as received at the time from the Ministers. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

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Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report April 2019 – March 2020

Published at noon on Wednesday 10 February 2021.

Mr Lyons (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): In accordance with Section 3 (2) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 (The Act), my department laid the Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report April 2019 - March 2020 before the Assembly on 14 December 2020. The report has been published on my department's website and covers the reporting period 1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020.

The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 is a key rural policy tool for my department in supporting rural communities. The aim of the Act is to improve outcomes for rural dwellers by ensuring that the social and economic needs of people in rural areas are given due regard to by public authorities in their decision making processes and to increase transparency on how public authorities consider rural needs when undertaking their functions.

The Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report remains an integral part of the rural needs monitoring process as it provides a formal record of all Rural Needs Impact Assessments undertaken by public authorities. There has been a significant increase in the volume of activities reported on by public authorities in this year's report. The information contained in this report includes a list of activities undertaken by public authorities for which a Rural Needs Impact Assessment has been undertaken and, where appropriate, includes information on (i) the rural needs identified in respect of the activity, (ii) the issues considered in relation to these rural needs and (iii) how the activity had been influenced by these rural needs.

For example, in my own department the Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme 2019 has been designed to address the needs of rural communities by focusing on local issues relating to access poverty, financial poverty and social isolation while DAERA's Forest Park Scheme seeks to promote positive mental health and wellbeing among rural dwellers by investing in forest parks in rural areas to create a welcoming environment for people in rural areas to participate in activities which help to reduce the social impacts of rural isolation.

DAERA has also been working in partnership with the Department for Communities on the Libraries NI 'Out of

Hours Service' which helps address the needs of rural communities by providing extended access to library facilities in six rural areas. NI Libraries has extended the pilot project beyond the six rural areas to include a library in a market town serving an extensive rural hinterland. This project was developed specifically to meet identified rural needs i.e. access to libraries, access to broadband and access to community space.

The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust's Hospital Travel Costs Scheme (HTCS) is available to help people on a low income or income based benefit who may be entitled to reclaim travel costs incurred to and from hospital. The protocol states that the patient will receive one return fare based on the cheapest form of public transport available, which may have a possible negative impact on those living in rural areas with limited access to public transport. The scheme takes account of rural needs by providing for the fare to be calculated on the basis of mileage from the patient's home to the hospital attended where the bus or train fare is not available for patients travelling by car, as may be the case for patients in rural areas.

In the case of many activities no rural needs were identified in the Rural Needs Impact Assessment and therefore the activity was not influenced by rural needs. In some cases a policy was an internal policy which had no potential to impact on people in rural areas while in other cases the policy, strategy, plan or public service was considered not to impact differently on people in rural areas from those in urban areas.

The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 also places additional duties on my department, namely to publish an annual report and to make arrangements with public authorities with a view to securing co-operation and the exchange of information. The Act also requires my department to review, at least every 3 years, the list of bodies and persons set out in the Schedule to the Act. This review will be undertaken during the 2020-21 reporting period.

My department has continued to provide a range of support to other public authorities to help ensure they comply with the requirements of the legislation. This support included the provision of advice on the implementation of the due regard duty, the undertaking of Rural Needs Impact Assessments, the completion of Rural Needs Impact Assessment Templates, engaging with rural stakeholders, monitoring and reporting and the provision of guidance and monitoring.

In September 2019, my department undertook a review of the implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016. The purpose of the review was to assess how the legislation

was being implemented by public authorities and to identify any further support measures that might be introduced to help public authorities comply with the legislation. A Rural Needs Working Group was established for the purposes of taking forward the review consisting of representatives of government departments, district councils, academia, rural stakeholder organisations and the other public authorities listed in the Schedule to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016. As part of the review the working group collected evidence from a wide range of public authorities and rural stakeholders to ensure that the review was evidence-based.

The Rural Needs Working Group produced its report on the review in January 2020 which included 25 recommendations including the establishment of a Rural Needs Network for the purposes of facilitating co-operation and the exchange of information between public authorities, the redesign of my department's Rural Needs website and the development of comprehensive training for Rural Needs Co-Ordinators.

The majority of the recommendations were for my department, and these have been accepted and an Action Plan developed to monitor their implementation. A small number of recommendations were for all public authorities and my department wrote to all public authorities encouraging them to implement these recommendations. Of course, DAERA is not solely responsible for all things rural and all Departments have responsibilities in relation to rural areas. As the Minister with responsibility for rural affairs it remains a key priority of mine to work closely with my Executive colleagues in seeking to ensure that all Departments comply fully with their duties under the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 and that they work collaboratively in seeking to address the needs of people in rural areas.

The introduction of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 was an important milestone in rural life. It is recognised that that policies and strategies often have a different impact in rural areas than urban areas and the Act helps ensure that the particular needs of people in rural areas are given due regard to. Although the Act has only been in operation for a relatively short time, it is clear from the report that consideration of rural needs is now becoming more firmly embedded within public authorities and that is something which I welcome. I would encourage public authorities to continue to engage with rural communities to help understand the challenges they face and in doing so, provide meaningful outcomes for our rural citizens.

I also recognise that there is still scope for more to be done to ensure that rural needs are taken account of in the development and implementation of policy and in the design and delivery of public services. My department will continue to work with public authorities to help them implement the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 effectively and help deliver positive and meaningful outcomes for rural dwellers in the future.

Finally I would like to thank those public authorities who have contributed to this Annual Monitoring Report and I hope that by continuing to work together we can deliver better outcomes for rural dwellers.

Department of Finance

2020-21 Public Expenditure Allocations

Published at 11.30 am on Wednesday 10 February 2021.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I wish to update the Members on the Executive's agreement to further allocations for 2020-21.

Since my statement on 2 February Executive Ministers have continued to develop further ways to utilise additional funding in this financial year and I can announce a number of additional allocations today.

This is being done by written statement in order to confirm the relevant allocations for immediate use and provide members with as much notice as possible of the changes to public spending for the remainder of the financial year. It remains my intention to make an oral statement to the House which will provide the opportunity for Members to ask questions and raise specific issues.

Funding Available

I noted in my previous statement that I was pressing Treasury for flexibility to carry forward unallocated Covid funding to 2021-22.

We are in the process of finalising 2020-21 funding with Treasury and we will be expecting to carry forward any further funding provided into 2021-22, and I will advise the Assembly of the outcome of these discussions when they are concluded. However, we have been advised by Treasury that this will not include flexibility in relation to funding received before Christmas. It is therefore prudent that I now release the £200 million I had held centrally, to allow it to be spent in 2020-21, and Departments are factoring this into their considerations.

I have pressed the Treasury again for further flexibility given the demands on the Health Service and the business support we are providing some of which will inevitably continue into the next financial year.

Departments have declared further reduced requirements of £10.1 million Resource DEL and £30k Capital DEL against previously announced allocations and details are provided in the tables accompanying this statement.

The total funding now available to be allocated this year is £461 million Resource DEL, £25.9 million Capital DEL and £55.7 million Financial Transactions Capital.

COVID Allocations

The Executive has agreed the following allocations details of which are shown in Table B which accompanies this statement.

The Department for the Economy will receive £27.3 million Resource DEL for Student support measures agreed by the Executive last week.

The Department for Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs will receive £9.0 million Resource DEL for Forest Service which will help this newly classified public corporation create some financial resilience with the uncertainty that Brexit may cause.

The Department of Health will receive £175 million Resource DEL for Covid related PPE which will help reduce pressures next year. The Department of Health will also receive £15.2 million Capital DEL for Capital equipment and the procurement of IT Licences.

The Executive Office receives £42k Capital DEL for the Commission for Victims and Survivors.

Outcome

Following these allocations there remains some £249.7 million Resource DEL, £10.7 million Capital DEL and £55.7 million Financial Transactions Capital available for allocation.

I continue to urge Executive Ministers to work on proposals to use this funding, particularly for those who have been unable to access support to date.

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TABLE A Reduced Requirements

TABLE B Allocations

TABLE A : Reduced Requirements (£ millions)

Department	Description	Resource DEL	Capital DEL
DfE	Tourism NI	5.0	
TEO	Historical Institutional Abuse	5.1	
	Capital Grant		0.0
Total TEO		5.1	0.0
Total Reduced Requirements		10.1	0.0

Total may not add due to roundings

TABLE B: Allocations (£ millions)

Department	Description	Resource DEL	Capital DEL
DAERA	Forest Service Reserves	9.0	
DfE	Student Hardship	27.3	
DoH	COVID-19 HSC Trusts Capital Equipment		0.5
	COVID-19 PPE	175.0	
	HSC Trusts Capital Equipment		4.0
	IT Procurement of Licences		10.7
Total DoH			15.2
TEO	Commission for Victims and Survivors		0.0
Total Allocations		211.3	15.2

Total may not add due to roundings

Department of Finance

Connect2 Regional Hubs

Published on Wednesday 17 February 2021.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I wish to update the Members on plans for the establishment of a number of new civil service regional hubs – known as “Connect2 Hubs”.

Regional economic balance

Since 2018, the Reform of Property Management Programme has been focused on making more efficient use of the government estate. To date, the programme has realised circa £14 million in revenue savings through targeted interventions including the acquisition of James House and the rationalisation of leased properties in favour of freehold.

Providing staff with the flexibility to work remotely is an important part of this Programme. Historically, places of work within the civil service have been concentrated in Belfast. Where people work influences where they spend their money, so assisting people to work throughout the region will promote regional economic balance. Long commutes to work mean added expense, and more time spent travelling rather than in work or at home. In addition, more travel means more traffic congestion and more carbon emissions.

Enabling people to work closer to home therefore promotes regional economic balance, reduces carbon emissions, and promotes the work-life balance and health and wellbeing of our staff. I am therefore establishing hubs across the region that will allow civil servants to work closer to where they live subject of course to business requirements.

COVID-19

COVID-19 has seen an unprecedented shift to remote working in the civil service, enabling colleagues to work from home with many public services now being delivered remotely, and I want to give my thanks and pay tribute to all those civil servants who have stepped up in the most amazing way to deliver essential public services across a range of Departments in some of the most challenging circumstances. However, the response to Covid has confirmed that remote working is feasible and productive.

We now have an opportunity to build on these new ways of working that have the potential in the longer term to deliver savings and improve productivity, while supporting the realisation of many cross-departmental and Programme for Government outcomes.

While the current level of remote working is not optimum in the long-term, looking to the future it is evident that some business units will have a significant number of staff working outside of the office on a blended model approach. There is an appetite among staff and departments for a blended approach to remote working.

Regional Recovery and Regeneration

Connect2 hubs will provide strategically located work and collaboration spaces for civil service staff. They will support the new ways of working, allowing staff to work remotely whilst connecting to people, technology and the office.

My Department is working closely with local councils to ensure that the impact of investment best reflects the needs of each region and maximises value to the public purse. Support to date across council Chief Executives has been encouraging.

Staff commuter data was analysed to identify Connect2 locations which would reduce the need for long commutes.

For many if you wanted a job in the Civil Service you had to commute to Belfast. There wasn't the same opportunities in other locations.

An implementation plan is being rolled out. Different locations are at different stages of development.

The first Connect2 Hubs are expected to open in Ballykelly and Downpatrick this year.

Planning has started for facilities in Ballymena, Craigavon, Omagh and the Antrim/Newtownabbey area with their opening planned for 2022.

Locations in Derry, Enniskillen; Newry and the Bangor/Newtownards area are planned for 2023.

Substantial investment is already underway in Derry that will rationalise and modernise our local estate to accommodate the Civil Service within Orchard House. To assist in longer-term regeneration objectives the Programme SRO is in dialogue with the Derry City and Strabane District Council Chief Executive to explore significant plans to include potential facilities to promote local economic recovery and urban regeneration over the next five years.

Conclusion

Given the detrimental impact of Covid-19 on local economies it is imperative that the NICS office estate works to reduce revenue pressure within public spending while maximising the local economic and regeneration benefits in the towns and cities across the region.

The establishment of regional hubs is about taking a balanced approach to investment by working with local councils in order to help address regional imbalance, promote economic recovery and reform across departments.

The opening of these new Connect2 Hubs not only promotes exciting new ways of working for the civil service but presents huge opportunities to make a positive impact on the environment and local economies as well as the health and wellbeing of our staff.

I will keep the Assembly updated as plans for Hubs progress.

Department of Health

Review of Health Protection Regulations

Published at 6.00 pm on 18 February 2021.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Mr Speaker, as Members will be aware the No. 2 Regulations, as amended, required the Department of Health to review the need for the restrictions and requirements in the Regulations on or before 18th February 2021.

That review, the seventh, was guided by the four principles that the Executive agreed in May 2020: focus on purpose; necessity; proportionality; reliance on evidence. The purposes of the Regulations are (i) to protect the health of the population by limiting the spread of COVID-19 infection in order to minimise the numbers of cases and deaths, and (ii) to ensure as far as possible that the health care system has the capacity to care for COVID-19 patients and care for all patients, present and future.

On the basis of this review, taking into account in particular the ongoing (albeit decreasing) hospital pressures and community transmission, the threat of new variants emerging and the as yet partial vaccination coverage, I concluded that the current restrictions and requirements are a necessary and proportionate response to the epidemic at this point in time. This conclusion was supported by the Chief Medical Officer and the Deputy Chief Scientific Advisor. This was subsequently supported by the Executive earlier today.

Based on current data, with the exception of the three amendments highlighted below, it was further agreed by the Executive today to extend the current restrictions for a further 4 weeks, until 1 April, with the next formal review on or before 18 March. The timing of the next formal review will allow the Executive to make decisions well in advance of the Easter weekend.

As the overall situation improves, the need to more frequently revisit the proportionality and necessity of the restrictions increases, bearing in mind that as always we are able to make amendments between the formal reviews if they are indicated based on emerging evidence. This will allow the Executive to consider again additional amendments in advance of the next formal review in four weeks. These proposed timeframes balance the need for caution while also maintaining vigilance on the necessity and proportionality of the restrictions given their wide-reaching impact on the lives of residents of Northern Ireland and on our economy.

The three amendments made to the regulations are summarised below.

'Click and Collect' for non-essential retail

The Minister for Economy made a proposal for the introduction of contactless 'Click and Collect' for non-essential retail businesses. The introduction of limited 'Click and Collect' services from Monday 8th March was agreed for baby equipment shops, clothing and footwear shops, and electrical good shops, recognising that over the course of these protracted restrictions these items have effectively become essential.

Public inquiries

The Department for Infrastructure had requested that an amendment to the regulations be made to allow them to progress a public inquiry in Nightingale Court facilities. The objective of the proposed amendment is to allow the Department for Infrastructure (or any other government department) to recommence face-to-face hearings using Nightingale Court facilities, ensuring that the objectives of the Department's regulatory regime can be restored.

Outdoor gatherings (not in private dwellings)

I was mindful of the need to provide some additional flexibility to the population in respect of outdoor gatherings excluding private dwellings. I therefore recommended that effective from the 8th March the limit of people (including children under 12 years) was increased from 6 to 10, from no more than 2 households. The restrictions on all other outdoor gatherings including sporting events remain unchanged.

Department of Health

The Appointment of Chair of the Southern Trust Urology Public Inquiry

Published at 3.00 pm on 8 March 2021.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): In my oral statement to the Assembly, on 24 November 2020, I advised Members of my intention to establish a Public Inquiry, under the Inquiries Act 2005, into the concerns raised about the clinical practice of a former hospital urology consultant in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust.

It remains my belief that a Public Inquiry offers the most appropriate method to ensure that the full extent of the concerns are identified and for the patients and families affected to be confident that matters are being pursued in a transparent and independent manner.

I am pleased to confirm that I have appointed Christine Smith QC as Chair of the Inquiry, with the aim of getting the inquiry fully underway by summer 2021.

Ms Smith is a very experienced Queen's Counsel with a background in public inquiry work. She is Senior Counsel to the Independent Neurology Inquiry and was Senior Counsel for the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry. She also appeared for the Department of Finance in the RHI Inquiry. I believe that her professional expertise and recent involvement with inquiries equips her to chair the Urology Inquiry.

The next steps will include developing the terms of reference for the inquiry, following engagement with the Assembly's Health Committee and the patients affected by the lookback, and finalise the members of the Inquiry Panel.

The patients and families affected remain my focus as we move to establish the inquiry. I trust that the actions taken here will help to address their concerns and I will endeavour to ensure that they obtain the appropriate treatment, support and the care that they need.

Department of Health

Expansion of the Asymptomatic Testing Programme — Workplace Testing

Published at 10.00 am on 9 March 2021.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Mr Speaker, as the numbers requiring hospital treatment for COVID-19 continue to fall, and as the vaccination programme continues to deliver at scale and pace, it is important that we do not lose sight of the need to continue to control this virus, even as the overall number of cases appears to decrease. As we emerge from lockdown, it is vital that we use every instrument at our disposal to ensure that we can effectively identify and target any outbreaks that may occur across different parts of our society.

The purpose of this statement is to inform the Assembly that my Department is today inviting public and private sector employers from key sectors within Northern Ireland to access the national testing programme as part of a targeted expansion of asymptomatic testing into a range of workplaces.

Lateral Flow Testing

New testing technologies make it possible to test at far greater scale, frequency, and pace than has previously been possible. In this context, the use of Lateral Flow Tests (LFTs) provides an opportunity to expand our approach to testing people who do not display symptoms across a range of settings in Northern Ireland, with the overall objective to ensure as safe a return to as normal a society as possible.

LFTs detect a protein produced by the virus at its most infectious stage. If present in an individual's sample, a coloured line appears on the device after 15-30 minutes. Lateral Flow Tests are simple, easy to use test devices which provide results quickly and which do not require any specialist equipment or a laboratory to deliver. LFTs are not as sensitive as polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests and negative results cannot absolutely rule out that an employee has the virus. It is therefore essential that employees at all times continue to adhere to COVID safe working practices, social distancing, and good hygiene measures. It should also be noted that anyone displaying symptoms of COVID-19 should immediately, self-isolate, and follow the national guidance for booking a PCR test.

Test to Find

The purpose of asymptomatic testing is to identify individuals within the population who are positive for COVID-19 but do not present symptoms. Up to a third of people with COVID-19 are asymptomatic. The aim of this testing is to identify these individuals so they and their close contacts can be advised to self-isolate - therefore breaking chains of transmission in the workplace and beyond. This approach is known as "test to find".

Individuals with positive LFTs will be asked to isolate immediately along with their households. In Northern Ireland it is our policy that all individuals with a positive LFT should book a PCR swab test at their closest test site as soon as possible to confirm the result. Community contact tracing will be initiated on PCR confirmation. If

the result of the PCR test is negative the individual and the household can leave isolation and no further action is required.

It is important that employers and employees are aware of and can access any support if they are required to self-isolate. Further information on the support that is available to individuals and businesses can be found at NI Direct and NI Business Info.

Targeted expansion of the programme - workplace testing

As part of the UK wide procurement of LFTs, Northern Ireland has been allocated a proportion of these tests in accordance with the size of our population. The national programme is overseen by the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) in England. Access to the national programme will be managed through the asymptomatic testing programme team within my Department.

Members will be aware that our approach to asymptomatic testing currently includes testing of frontline healthcare workers, staff and pupils in schools and universities, staff residents and visitors in care homes, and one example of testing in private industry (at Moy Park). With these schemes operating successfully, it is now planned to enable expansion of the asymptomatic testing programme into workplaces across the public and private sectors, and into community settings where infection rates remain stubbornly high.

While there are currently no concerns around the supply of LFTs, it is important that demand is not allowed to outstrip supply. It has therefore been decided that expansion of the programme will be carried on the basis of public health advice and regional strategic priorities.

As a first step, my Department's support for regular asymptomatic testing in the private and public sectors will focus on those workplaces within these sectors which:

- Are performing critical functions or delivering key services;
- Have more than 50 employees who cannot work from home;
- Involve higher exposure to risk of infection for staff or customers.

Private Sector

On the basis of the available evidence on infections in the workplace, the following four sectors or private industry have been prioritised for the first phase of the programme:

- Agri-food;
- Manufacturing;
- Essential Retail;
- Construction.

While bringing as many organisations from these areas onto the national programme, officials will continue to develop proposals for the next phase of the programme.

Public sector

Our initial priorities for the public sector are focused on emergency services and national critical infrastructure. We have already brought Translink NI (working collaboratively with the Department for Infrastructure) and the NI Fire

and Rescue Service on-board the national asymptomatic testing programme. We are currently working with the other emergency services to identify their requirements and will move quickly to bring them on board as this work progresses.

My officials are also working closely with other government departments in order to rapidly identify and prioritise other public sector organisations who may require access to the testing programme. Although not strictly public sector, under this strand the programme team will also consider food supply and distribution companies; logistics and distribution companies; transportation companies and NI Water.

High prevalence council areas

The programme team is also working with local government and public health advisers in order to develop proposals for community testing. In the first instance, this is expected to focus on initiatives to compliment or enhance existing public health testing arrangements, as well as ways of increasing access to testing for smaller businesses and organisations in a community setting. Based on evidence and learning from other jurisdictions it is not currently envisaged that this will involve mass testing sites.

The role of employers

The approach will include working jointly with the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) in England, which operates the scheme at a national level, and engaging with partners and local public health teams to agree and support workplace testing with Northern Ireland businesses and organisations.

The support available for organisations in Northern Ireland to introduce workplace testing will include:

- Facilitation of access to relevant DHSC support materials, including a guidebook and clinical standard operating procedure (SOP);
- Provision, via DHSC, of Lateral Flow Tests from the Northern Ireland allocation for a defined period, subject to contractual arrangements;
- Access to the online workplace testing portal providing digital solutions covering user registration, results capture and delivery guidance;
- Training – online training and information from DHSC. Training opportunities may also be available from local partners and providers.

On being approved by my Department to access the national programme, organisations will work directly with DHSC to develop a plan according the nationally agreed standard operating procedures.

Next steps

Employers have a vital role to play in this next phase, minimising the spread of infection among those who cannot work from home by introducing regular testing for asymptomatic staff. Workplace testing can help to protect staff, helping to give confidence to those who continue to come into work, as well as improving the overall resilience of business operations. It will also help to protect customers where staff are working in public facing roles.

In the early stages of the pandemic, the severity of outbreaks led to some sites being temporarily closed.

The rollout of workplace testing will help to prevent this. Identifying asymptomatic positive cases and informing them to self-isolate will reduce the spread of the virus. This will benefit employers and society as a whole as it will help to keep infection rates down across Northern Ireland.

I would stress that, where organisations do not fall within categories set out in this statement, this does not mean that they will not be able to access the testing programme. It is expected that the programme will evolve rapidly as further information on capacity and uptake becomes available. Further information and contact details for the asymptomatic testing programme team are available on the Department's website.

Department of Finance

Fiscal Council and Fiscal Commission

Published on 12 March 2021.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance):

Introduction

I wish to provide Members with an update on the arrangements I have taken to establish both a Fiscal Council and a Fiscal Commission.

Background

New Decade New Approach (NDNA) included a commitment to establish an Independent Fiscal Council that would “assess and report on the sustainability of the Executive’s finances and spending proposals”.

Separately, no comprehensive formal review of all of our options for further fiscal devolution has ever been completed or published here and we have a very limited suite of fiscal levers in comparison to the other Devolved Administrations. As we seek to rebuild both our economy and wider society as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is now more important that we consider what powers are needed here.

Officials within my Department had therefore begun work early 2020 in examining the options for establishing a Fiscal Council and a Fiscal Commission, but our focus on responding to COVID-19 meant that this work was paused. I am however now pleased to announce the arrangements that have been put in place for these two important bodies.

Fiscal Council Terms of Reference

The Fiscal Council will be a permanent, independent organisation which will bring transparency and scrutiny to the state of the Executive’s finances.

The Terms of Reference for the Council are as outlined in the NDNA document and have been developed in line with the OECD’s Principles for Independent Fiscal Institutions and taking account of the experience of other areas with similar bodies. The initial Terms of Reference are attached to this statement and published on my Department’s website. I expect that these Terms of Reference will develop over time.

Fiscal Council Membership

As the OECD principles state, the right membership with the right leadership is essential if a fiscal institute is to be effective. All members should be independent of political influence, competent, and have a strong government or academic background in economics and public finances.

That is the requirement we set, and I am pleased to announce that Sir Robert Chote has agreed to act as the Chair of the Fiscal Council. Robert was previously Chairman of the OBR – the British Government’s independent fiscal council – for ten years from October 2010 to October 2020. Robert is also the Chair of the external advisory group to the Irish Parliamentary Budget Office.

Robert has agreed to take up this role of Chair for the set up period. He is clearly an outstanding person to Chair the Commission and possesses all the qualities required by the OECD. His experience and expertise will enable the Council to hit the ground running. After the set up period Robert has also agreed to assist with the appointment of a permanent Chair going forward.

Alongside Robert, I am appointing three highly experienced individuals to act as Council members for a three year term. They are:

Dr Esmond Birnie, currently senior economist at Ulster University who will bring to the Council significant research experience on the local economy as well as in budgetary and fiscal matters.

Maureen O’Reilly, an independent economist and current advisor to a number of both private sector and public bodies, who will bring a wealth of experience in economic research and advice; and

Professor Alan Barrett, Chief Executive Officer of the Economic and Social Research Institute in Dublin and previously a member of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council.

Future development of the Fiscal Council

The Council will now be able to begin its work. However going forward, and in line with best practice, I have instructed my officials to examine how the role and standing of the Council can be put into legislation. Other fiscal institutions across these islands have initially been established on a non-statutory basis, but over time evolved into non-ministerial departments or statutory arm’s length bodies. I believe we should do the same here to demonstrate and safeguard its independence. Consideration should also be given to the appointment process for Members.

Fiscal Commission Terms of Reference

Turning now to the Fiscal Commission, given the lead role I have in relation to fiscal devolution and liaison with Treasury on taxation and budgetary matters, I am also separately establishing an independent Fiscal Commission that will examine the tax varying powers available to the Executive.

A considerable amount of work has been taken forward on the possible devolution of Corporation Tax, Air Passenger Duty and also on smaller areas such as Aggregates Levy, Stamp Duty Land Tax and Landfill Tax.

However no comprehensive formal review of all of our options for further fiscal devolution has ever been completed or published here and we have a very limited suite of fiscal levers in comparison to the other Devolved Administrations. Both Scotland and Wales have each have assumed greater powers following the recommendations of independent Commissions which examined the case for greater devolution.

Therefore, I am announcing today that a Fiscal Commission has been established to review the case for increasing fiscal powers to the Assembly. The terms of reference for the Commission are attached and available on the Department’s website.

I envisage that it would take approximately 9 months for the Commission to complete its work. The report will be

provided to me as Finance Minister and published before the end of this mandate.

Fiscal Commission Membership

In terms of Membership, I am pleased to announce that like the Fiscal Council, the Fiscal Commission also has an eminent Chair. Paul Johnson, Director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies has agreed to Chair the Commission.

Paul has worked and published extensively on the economics of public policy, particularly on the areas of income distribution, public finances and tax. He is a high calibre economist who will bring the credibility, expertise and independence required for the important role he will play on the Commission. He will be supported by three other members:

Professor Iain McLean, a Professor of Politics at Oxford University with extensive research interests in public policy and devolution, including related issues in taxation and public expenditure such as the Barnett Formula.

Professor Cathy Gormley-Heenan, currently Deputy Vice-Chancellor at University of Ulster and a serving board member for a number of organisations.

Dr Lisa Wilson, a Senior Economist at the Nevin Economic Research Institute whose research focuses on public expenditure, living standards, income distribution, poverty, and well-being.

Resourcing and support

Both the Council and the Commission will need to be supported by a small secretariat. It will be able to undertake research but also to commission input from external expertise. Staff will initially be seconded from the Civil Service but as the Council moves to a permanent footing I envisage that it would have the ability to recruit its own staff.

It is estimated that the Commission will cost in the region of £400k during the 9 month period it will be set up for. This includes costs for remuneration of members, and its share of the staffing costs for the secretariat, as well as an external research budget.

On a similar basis, the cost of the Council is expected to be in the region of £350k in 2021/22, however, this may increase in subsequent years if the Council's remit is broadened. Costings for both the Council and the Commission are estimates at this stage until all the arrangements are finalised and the members can meet to agree their respective work programmes.

Conclusion

The establishment of both the Fiscal Council and the Fiscal Commission represents a real step forward. We have secured very distinguished Chairs and members for these important pieces of work.

As we hopefully begin to emerge from the pandemic, rebuilding and restoring our economy and wider society is that task in front of us. If we are to deliver on our social and economic priorities, it is vital that we have all the levers we need at our disposal. The work of the Fiscal Commission will inform that important discussion.

And with ever increasing demands on public spending, and in time, increased fiscal powers, the transparency and independent scrutiny of the Executive's finances that the Council will bring is something that I warmly welcome.

Conor Murphy
Minister of Finance

Fiscal Council – Bringing Transparency and Independent Scrutiny to Public Finances

Terms of Reference, March 2021

Mission Statement

1. The Fiscal Council is a permanent body which will bring greater transparency and independent scrutiny to the current and future state of Northern Ireland's public finances.

Principles of Independent Fiscal Organisations

2. In 2014, the OECD set out nine broad recommendations' principles for Independent Fiscal Organisations, drawing on the work of the network of Independent Fiscal Institutions across the organisation's members. This piece of work was partly assessing the nature of these organisations across the world (and acknowledging their heterogeneity) but at the same time coming up with a set of recommendations that all these types of organisations could aspire to.
3. This Terms of Reference for the Fiscal Council has been developed in line with these principles, which are set out in the attached Annex.

Remit

4. The Fiscal Council will have an immediate focus to take forward the New Decade New Approach (NDNA) commitments to:
 - prepare an annual assessment of the Executive's revenue streams and spending proposals and how these allow the Executive to balance their budget; and
 - prepare a further annual report on the sustainability of the Executive's public finances, including the implications of spending policy and the effectiveness of long-term efficiency measures.
5. As per NDNA the membership and terms of reference of the Fiscal Council will be agreed with the UK Government.

Local Ownership

6. The commitment to a Fiscal Council was included in the New Decade New Approach document published alongside the restoration of the political institutions at that beginning of 2020. The Executive has agreed this Terms of Reference setting out the remit of Council on its establishment, and how it will be developed going forward. This has ensured local ownership and that local needs will be met by the functioning of the Council.

Independence and non-partisanship and transparency

7. It will act objectively, transparently and impartially, free from any political perspective, and on the basis of current NI Executive policy. It will examine the impact on the public finances of decisions made by the Executive and have a focus on the sustainability of public finances by considering the Executive's budget decisions in light of its ability to deliver on the

Programme for Government. The Council should not however comment on the merits of individual policies, or examine alternative policy scenarios. This will protect the independence of the Fiscal Council and ensure a clear separation between analysis (which is the role of the Fiscal Council) and policy making (which is the responsibility of the ministers).

8. The Council will publish all the documents it produces in an accessible manner and should comply with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics in line with good practice.

Access to information

9. For the Council to perform its duties accurately and efficiently, close working with the NI Executive and Departments will be essential, as will timely data / information sharing. Arrangements will be put in place to ensure this. Members will also be required to observe the standard confidentiality rules in relation to policy information and data sharing.

Communications

10. Upon establishment, the Chair and members of the Fiscal Council will develop a communications plan to clearly articulate the remit of the Council and engage with relevant stakeholders. This will include a range of consultations with the Executive and MLAs, Government officials, economic commentators including the media, business and their representative bodies, although this is not exhaustive.

Mandate and relationship with the legislature

11. It is expected that the role and Terms of Reference of the Fiscal Council will be expanded once the Council has been established and is delivering on the above requirements. Such a wider remit is anticipated to include economic / financial modelling for example. The expanding nature of Independent Fiscal Institutions can also be seen from experience elsewhere in the UK and internationally where their remit over time has not been static.
12. Like other similar bodies elsewhere, the Council will be initially set up as a non-statutory body. Following its establishment, work will be undertaken to examine how the role and standing of the Council can be further formalised and legislated for on a statutory basis, so that its independence is safeguarded going forward.
13. This will include putting a competitive public appointments process in place to select future members that would maintain the required expertise and independence of the Council, and that would be conducted in line with the CPANI Code of Practice
14. That legislation will need to include how the role of the Fiscal Council interacts with the Assembly and relevant Committees including the Finance Committee where relevant, including on the future appointments process.

Resources - membership and staffing

15. The Fiscal Council will comprise four individuals, including a chair, appointed by the Finance Minister.

Robert Chote will become the Council's Chair for the set up period of around 6-9 months as we seek to formally establish the Council.

16. The other members, who will be appointed for a three year term will be:
- Dr Esmond Birnie, senior economist at Ulster University;
 - Alan Barrett, Chief Executive Officer of the Economic and Social Research Institute; and
 - Maureen O'Reilly, Independent Economist.
17. DoF will also put in place a full time permanent secretariat and support staff who will be recruited purposely to perform that function, headed by a G5 Chief of Staff, As well as supporting the Chair and members, the secretariat would have the capacity to undertake its own research and analysis and also contract out specialist pieces of work to external experts where required.

External Evaluation

18. In line with good practice an independent external evaluation will be conducted four to five years after the Council's establishment. This will include progress towards adhering towards the OECD principles and recommendations on way forward to further aspire to these. This evaluation could be undertaken by OECD or another independent Fiscal Institution which is now well established. Key stakeholders, in particular the Finance Committee, would be consulted on the process for appointing an external evaluator, and the Terms of Reference for the evaluation.

OECD Principles for Independent Fiscal Institutions (IFIs)

Source: OECD, 2014, Recommendations on Principles for Independent Fiscal Institutions - <https://www.oecd.org/gov/budgeting/OECD-Recommendation-on-Principles-for-Independent-Fiscal-Institutions.pdf>

The twenty-two Principles for Independent Fiscal Institutions (fiscal councils and independent parliamentary budget offices) proposed below are grouped under nine broad headings: (1) local ownership; (2) independence and non-partisanship; (3) mandate; (4) resources; (5) relationship with the legislature; (6) access to information; (7) transparency; (8) communication; and (9) external evaluation.

1. Local ownership

1.1. To be effective and enduring, an IFI requires broad national ownership, commitment, and consensus across the political spectrum. While a country seeking to establish an IFI will benefit from the study of existing models and experiences in other countries, models from abroad should not be artificially copied or imposed. Regional or international authorities may provide valuable support and protection.

1.2. Local needs and the local institutional environment should determine options for the role and structure of the IFI. Design choices may also have to take into account capacity constraints, particularly in smaller countries. The basic characteristics of an IFI, including specific protections, should be informed by the country's legal framework, political system, and culture. Its functions should be determined by the country's fiscal framework and specific issues that need to be addressed.

2. Independence and non-partisanship

2.1. Non-partisanship and independence are pre-requisites for a successful IFI. A truly non-partisan body does not present its analysis from a political perspective; it always strives to demonstrate objectivity and professional excellence, and serves all parties. This favours that IFIs should be precluded from any normative policy-making responsibilities to avoid even the perception of partisanship.

2.2. The leadership of an IFI should be selected on the basis of merit and technical competence, without reference to political affiliation. The qualifications should be made explicit – including professional standing and relevant government or academic experience. Qualifications should include proven competence in economics and public finances and familiarity with the budget process.

2.3. Term lengths and the number of terms that the number of terms that the leadership of the IFI may serve should be clearly specified in legislation as should be the criteria and process for dismissal for cause. The leadership's term should optimally be independent of the electoral cycle. Independence may

be enhanced by defining the term span beyond the electoral cycle.

2.4. The position of head of the IFI should be a remunerated and preferably full-time position. Strict conflict-of-interest standards, particularly for institutions with council members employed on a part-time basis, should be applied equally vis-à-vis other employment in the public or private sector.

2.5. The leadership of the IFI should have full freedom to hire and dismiss staff in accordance with applicable labour laws.

2.6. Staff should be selected through open competition based on merit and technical competence and without reference to political affiliation. Conditions of employment should be along the lines of that of the civil (or parliamentary) service.

3. **Mandate**

3.1. The mandate of IFIs should be clearly defined in higher-level legislation, including the general types of reports and analysis they are to produce, who may request reports and analysis, and, if appropriate, associated timelines for their release.

3.2. IFIs should have the scope to produce reports and analysis at their own initiative, provided that these are consistent with their mandate. Similarly, they should have the autonomy to determine their own work programme within the bounds of their mandate.

3.3. Clear links to the budget process should be established within the mandate. Typical tasks carried out by IFIs might include (but are not limited to): economic and fiscal projections (with a short to medium-term horizon, or long-term scenarios); baseline projections (assuming unchanged policies); analysis of the executive's budget proposals; monitoring compliance with fiscal rules or official targets; costing of major legislative proposals; and analytical studies on selected issues.

4. **Resources**

4.1. The resources allocated to IFIs must be commensurate with their mandate in order for them to fulfil it in a credible manner. This includes the resources for remuneration of all staff and, where applicable, council members. The appropriations for IFIs should be published and treated in the same manner as the budgets of other independent bodies, such as audit offices, in order to ensure their independence. Multiannual funding commitments may further enhance IFIs independence and provide additional protection from political pressure.

5. **Relationship with the legislature**

5.1. Legislatures perform critical accountability functions in country budget processes and the budgetary calendar should allow sufficient time for the IFI to carry out analysis necessary for parliamentary work. Regardless whether an independent fiscal institution is under the statutory authority of the legislative or the executive branch, mechanisms should be put in place to encourage appropriate accountability to the legislature. These may include (but are not limited to):

1) submission of IFI reports to parliament in time to contribute to relevant legislative debate; 2) appearance of IFI leadership or senior staff before the budget committee (or equivalent) to provide responses to parliamentary questions; 3) parliamentary scrutiny of the IFI budget; and 4) a role for parliament's budget committee (or equivalent) in IFI leadership appointments and dismissals.

5.2. The role of the IFI vis-à-vis parliament's budget committee (or equivalent), other committees, and individual members in terms of requests for analysis should be clearly established in legislation. Preferably, the IFI should consider requests from committees and sub-committees rather than individual members or political parties. This is particularly relevant for those IFIs established under the jurisdiction of the legislature.

6. **Access to information**

6.1. There is often asymmetry of information between the government and the IFI – no matter how well an IFI is resourced. This creates a special duty to guarantee in legislation – and if necessary to reaffirm through protocols or memoranda of understanding – that the IFI has full access to all relevant information in a timely manner, including methodology and assumptions underlying the budget and other fiscal proposals. Information should be provided at no cost or, if appropriate, sufficient resources should be provided in the IFI budget to cover analysis obtained through government actuarial services.

6.2. Any restrictions on access to government information should also be clearly defined in legislation. Appropriate safeguards may be put in place as regards protection of privacy (for example, taxpayer confidentiality) and of sensitive information in the areas of national defence and security.

7. **Transparency**

7.1. Given that promoting transparency in public finances is a key goal of IFIs, they have a special duty to act as transparently as possible. Full transparency in their work and operations provides the greatest protection of IFI independence and allows them to build credibility with the public.

7.2. IFI reports and analysis (including a full account of the underlying data and methodology) should be published and made freely available to all. As noted in 5.1, all IFI reports and analysis should be sent to parliament in time for legislative debate and the leadership of the IFI should be given the opportunity to testify before parliamentary committees.

7.3. The release dates of major reports and analysis should be formally established, especially in order to co-ordinate them with the release of relevant government reports and analysis.

7.4. IFIs should release their reports and analysis, on matters relating to their core ongoing mandate on economic and fiscal issues, in their own name.

8. **Communications**

8.1. IFIs should develop effective communication channels from the outset, especially with the media, civil society, and other stakeholders. Given that the

influence of IFIs in fiscal policy making is persuasive (rather than coercive by means of legal sanctions or other punitive measures), media coverage of their work assists in fostering informed constituencies that may then exercise timely pressure on the government to behave transparently and responsibly in fiscal matters.

9. External evaluation

- 9.1. IFIs should develop a mechanism for external evaluation of their work – to be conducted by local or international experts. This may take several forms: review of selected pieces of work; annual evaluation of the quality of analysis; a permanent advisory panel or board; or peer review by an IFI in another country.

Fiscal Commission – Options for the Devolution of Taxes

Terms Of Reference, March 2021

Context

1. The Department of Finance has a long standing role to lead the work to consider the opportunities and proposals for further fiscal devolution. A considerable amount of work was taken forward on the possible devolution of Corporation Tax, Air Passenger Duty and also on smaller areas such as Aggregates Levy, Stamp Duty Land Tax and Landfill Tax. However no comprehensive formal review of all of our options for further fiscal devolution has ever been completed and published and we have a very limited suite of fiscal levers in comparison to the other Devolved Administrations.
2. Therefore as we seek to rebuild both our economy and wider society as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is now more important that we consider what powers are needed here. This need has been highlighted again as Budget 2021 has made a significant increase in the rate of corporation tax and led to many calls for our work to devolve corporation tax to be revisited. A review of Air Passenger Duty has also been announced as a means of improving regional connectivity. The Minister of Finance is therefore establishing an independent Fiscal Commission given the lead role he has in relation to fiscal devolution and liaison with Treasury on taxation and budgetary matters.
3. The role of the Commission will be to carry out research and provide independent advice to the Finance Minister on options for the devolution of taxes from Westminster, as well as other revenue raising measures.
4. This will inform the recommendations / proposals the Minister, or future Finance Minister in the next Assembly mandate, could put to the Executive in relation to developing fiscal policy.

Remit

5. The Fiscal Commission should:

“Review the case for increasing the fiscal powers to the NI Assembly, advising the Finance Minister on powers which could enhance the Assembly’s fiscal responsibilities, increase its ability to raise revenues to sustainably fund public services, and provide additional policy instruments. As part of this, the Commission should consider the need for additional budgetary tools to manage any increased financial responsibility.

The Commission should carry out research and put forward recommendations to the Minister of Finance that are realistically implementable within the NI context and drawing from the experience of Scotland and Wales, including what has worked well, and where challenges have been encountered in those administrations. This should include the potential costs incurred and realistic timescales of any of any new powers proposed.

In addition, the Commission should also consider how the spending power of the NI Block can be protected if more powers are devolved.”

6. The Fiscal Commission will be set up for a period of 9 months and will prepare a report with recommendations to be presented to the Minister of Finance within that timeframe. Any recommendations which the Minister of Finance wishes to progress will be brought to the Executive for discussion and agreement as necessary.

Membership and staffing

7. The Fiscal Commission will comprise 4 individuals, including a Chair, appointed by the Finance Minister. Paul Johnson, Director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), has agreed to chair the Commission, which will also comprise:
 - a. Professor Iain McLean, Professor of Politics at Oxford University.
 - b. Professor Cathy Gormley-Heenan, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of Ulster.
 - c. Dr Lisa Wilson, Senior Economist at the Nevin Economic Research Institute (NERI)
8. DoF will also put in place a secretariat and support staff which as well as supporting the Chair and members, would have the capacity to undertake its own research and analysis and also contract out specialist pieces of work to external experts where required.

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 12 February 2021

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) when the Racial Equality Subgroup last met; (ii) whether minutes were taken of this meeting; and (iii) when they will meet again.
(AQW 5176/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The Racial Equality subgroup had its last full meeting on 6 October 2020. Minutes are taken at all full meetings of the subgroup. The subgroup will hold its next full meeting on 10 February 2021 which Ministers will be attending.

The subgroup holds various single agenda meetings throughout the year where members with a particular background or interest can consider individual issues. The last such meeting was on 16 December 2020 where members discussed the Department for Communities work on an Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Ms Anderson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) for an updated timeframe for introducing legislation for the appointment of an Irish Language Commissioner; and (ii) to provide official recognition of the status of the Irish language.
(AQW 7865/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Our officials continue with preparatory work, to legislate for core elements of the Rights, Language and Identity proposals contained in New Decade, New Approach.

We will progress the legislation during 2020/2021 and the creation of the relevant bodies thereafter.

We will of course keep the Assembly updated on progress.

Mr McGlone asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the recent meeting of the UK Government-Northern Ireland Executive joint board, what assessment they have made of the progress being made on transformation in the areas of (i) health; (ii) education; and (iii) justice.
(AQW 10087/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Joint Board received a progress report on the transformation of Health and Social Care services on 14 October. The Board noted that:

- £44 million was secured for New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) Transformation as part of the 2020/21 budget exercise.
- This was supplemented by reprioritised resources from within the Department of Health's own baseline, and a further allocation at June Monitoring, to create a Transformation Fund worth £94.4m in 2020/21.
- This funding has been allocated to meet the inescapable costs associated with existing Health and Social Care (HSC) Transformation projects, created as a result of the two years of Confidence and Supply funding in 2018/19 and 2019/20.
- The onset of a second wave of Covid-19 has the potential to have a significant impact on the continued delivery of Transformation projects.
- The pace, scale and direction of transformation activity, and therefore the associated costs going forward, will be informed by the ongoing work to Rebuild HSC services, while managing the potential impact of a second wave of the virus.

The Board will consider the transformation of education and justice at future meetings.

Mr Muir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps have been taken to ensure that Ministers are declaring substantive discussions with external organisations relating to departmental business at which no officials were present.
(AQW 10250/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive has agreed guidance under which any significant aspects of such discussions should be reported to the Minister's Private Office as soon as possible after the meeting. Compliance with this requirement is a matter for each Minister and the Executive Office does not exercise an enforcement function.

Mr McNulty asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether current restrictions on the hospitality sector applies to Airbnbs.

(AQW 11035/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Under the current restrictions in place since 26 December, hotels, guesthouses, bed and breakfast establishments, hostels and caravan and self-catering accommodation sites are only able to operate on a restricted basis. Airbnbs are classified as self-catering accommodation.

Accommodation can be provided for those already resident; for work-related purposes; for vulnerable people; for those in emergency situations; and people unable to return to their main address.

The same restrictions apply as to a private dwelling.

This means no household mixing inside or in the garden. If the household has formed a bubble with another household, up to 10 people from those two households may gather inside or outside.

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean for business sectors and individuals can be found on nidirect at:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

Ms Sugden asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) for an update of their advice for people planning to socialise with family members over Christmas; and (ii) how and when this advice will be distributed.

(AQW 12142/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Updated guidance on socialising over the Christmas period was published on the nidirect.gov.uk website on 22 December.

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean can be found on nidirect at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

Ms Sugden asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) whether community and voluntary organisations are able to provide mental health and social support services, including youth services, in their premises; and (ii) to detail the current restrictions and guidance for community and voluntary organisations including management meetings.

(AQW 12146/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Voluntary and Community sector organisations can continue to provide mental health and support services in their premises under the current restrictions that came into operation on 26 December. However, all indoor gatherings are limited to a maximum of 15 people with adherence to the public health and social distancing guidance.

A set of stricter measures was in place from 26 December 2020 to 2 January 2021. During this period no indoor gatherings were permitted between 8.00pm and 6.00am.

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean can be found on nidirect at:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

Mr McCrossan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on Ebrington Square, Derry.

(AQW 12147/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Significant progress has been made on the redevelopment of the Ebrington site. All buildings on site have a Lease, Agreement for Lease or a preferred developer identified. Three buildings disposed of by TEO recently completed tenant fit out and opened for business in August and October 2020.

The new site entrance road and installation of the Peace Pledge Tree on site were completed in the last year and infrastructure works, including works to upgrade the water supply, are ongoing alongside continued maintenance and enabling works that will help future proof the site.

Construction of the Grade A office accommodation building is well underway and is due to complete in March 2022.

A brochure is available online and regularly updated which sets out the existing and future developments at Ebrington and is available at <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/publications/ebrington-marketing-brochure>

Miss Woods asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will consider conducting regular youth press conferences as part of their media engagement with the public.

(AQW 12904/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: As part of our ongoing commitment to communicate effectively with young people we take part in a range of engagement activities.

This has included meeting with young people in education settings, community-led projects and events on social media platforms.

Most recently, we participated in an online youth press conference in conjunction with CoolFM. Around 25 young people took part in the event, asking questions on a range of issues important to them in relation to Covid-19. The event was broadcast by CoolFM on Facebook, gaining 141.4K views with an additional 130k views of edited content posted on their social media accounts.

We have also directed the roll-out of a bespoke communications campaign targeting 16-25 year olds using social media platforms including Tik Tok with the average young person seeing this over 15 times.

We will continue to review and reflect on the most effective communications approach with younger people as part of our ongoing efforts to ensure that the public is kept fully informed.

Mr Chambers asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will make a statement on progress around the appointment of a new Victims Commissioner, complete with next steps and timelines.
(AQW 12920/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We have instructed our officials to commence the process for the appointment of a Victims' Commissioner. Detailed documentation is currently being prepared which will include a timeline and appointment plan.

This documentation will soon be submitted to us for consideration to allow us to progress to the next stage of the recruitment exercise. We will make a statement on that in due course.

Mrs Cameron asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the total spend by the Equality Commission on public advertising since January 2020.
(AQW 13029/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Equality Commission has advised that, from January 2020, it spent £984 on public advertising for promotion of rights and responsibilities. During this period the Commission has also incurred advertising costs associated with the recruitment of staff.

Mr McGlone asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what proportion of the vehicles used by their Department on official business are electric vehicles.
(AQW 13426/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive Office has four vehicles which were purchased in 2014. None of these vehicles are electric. When the vehicles are replaced consideration will be given to the use of electric vehicles.

Dr Aiken asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline what engagement they have had with the Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse on the appropriateness of staffing levels within her office.
(AQO 1443/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Fiona Ryan took up the role of Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse (COSICA) on 14 December 2020.

COSICA is a statutory appointment and a fulfilment of one of the recommendations from the report by Sir Anthony Hart following the HIA Inquiry.

We were delighted to meet Fiona on her first day, to wish her well and to offer her our support as she begins what is an important and sensitive role in promoting the interests of all HIA victims and survivors.

In terms of staffing, TEO officials have been working collaboratively with the Commissioner to identify her staffing needs and to assist her in making the appointments to her office.

Nine posts have been identified and agreed with the Commissioner and Human Resources. Support staff from the Interim Advocate's Office have transferred directly to COSICA to fill 3 of these posts.

A phased approach has been agreed to filling the remaining posts with the key positions being filled first. The process to fill the first of these posts has already begun and further posts will follow in the coming weeks.

In the short term further support is being provided by TEO staff.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will consider funding for local councils to boost pollution monitoring outside schools, health centres and hospitals, so that the public have the information needed to protect their health.
(AQW 12917/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): My Department financially supports district councils in monitoring air quality through the Local Air Quality Management (LAQM) grant and has done for many years. Through the LAQM grant scheme, councils can apply annually for financial support in connection with air quality monitoring, reviews, assessments, management and the preparation and implementation of action plans.

Any request for funding for local councils to boost pollution monitoring outside schools, health centres and hospitals, would be considered as part of the LAQM process. A district council would be required to submit a request for my Department to consider in the first instance.

As you are aware, Minister Poots recently launched a twelve week public consultation, The Clean Air Strategy Discussion Document, developed by my Department.

Changes to the way in which grant funding may be allocated, is proposed on page 131 of the Discussion Document (available at: http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/clean_air_strategy_discussion_document). It is proposed that the grant application process will change to allow Local Authorities and also non-governmental organisations or other similar bodies to bid for money to develop projects which demonstrate outcomes where the activities, supported by the grant money, will have a direct impact on the improvement of air quality in the region or location.

The Discussion Document poses a LAQM question:

Q: What are your views on the proposals to change the LAQM process, in particular to grant funding for outcome-based measures as opposed to monitoring?

I would like to encourage you to review the proposed changes put forward and respond to this Discussion Document question, through the formal route using the designated inbox (casni@daera-ni.gov.uk) to help inform the final Clean Air Strategy for Northern Ireland. This will ensure that your important comments, are captured as part of the final assessment.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps he has taken to facilitate the movement of assistance dogs to Great Britain since 1 January 2021.

(AQW 13192/17-22)

Mr Poots: The EU Pet Travel Regulation (Regulation (EU) 576/2013) details the documentary, health and compliance check requirements for the travel of pet dogs (including assistance dogs), cats and ferrets between or into EU Member States (MS) which are needed to avoid the quarantining of animals. The Regulation continues to apply in NI following the end of the transition phase and as a result, there are now additional requirements for pet travel from GB to NI.

In regard to the movement of assistance dogs from NI to Great Britain (GB), there are no documentary or health requirements for travelling with pets (including assistance dogs) from NI to GB. However, following the end of the transition period, all pet moves from GB to NI must adhere to the requirements of the EU Pet Travel Regulation, these include the need to have a pet passport or animal health certificate, and a rabies vaccination with 21 day wait before travel.

After engaging with my officials to find potential flexibilities, and considering pet owners have not had time to familiarise themselves with the new rules, my predecessor Minister Edwin Poots confirmed that DAERA will delay the introduction of any checks on pet travel from GB to NI until 1 July 2021. As a result, there will be no routine checks until then.

I am acutely aware of the impact of what I consider to be completely unnecessary measures, on those travelling with pets within the United Kingdom (UK), and I am particularly concerned at the impact these will have on those travelling with assistance pets.

In the interim, I will continue discussions to urgently seek derogations from these unnecessary medical interventions. Minister Poots also recently wrote to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, George Eustice MP, and to the European Commission, highlighting these issues, and particularly the entirely unjustified requirements for rabies vaccination and tapeworm treatment given that both the UK and the Republic of Ireland (RoI) are considered free from both diseases. Furthermore, he requested that urgent consideration be given to the introduction of a 'Common Travel Area' for pets travelling between GB, NI and RoI.

Officials will continue to discuss with counterparts to progress this matter further and, as highlighted, there will be no routine checks until July 2021, which will permit time for this engagement to be progressed

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what discussions he has had with (i) the UK Government; and (ii) the Irish Government in relation to the outstanding issue of Northern Irish boats being excluded from landing catches in all but two ports in the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 13351/17-22)

Mr Poots: The issue of Northern Irish registered boats being excluded from landing catches in all but two ports in Ireland has been drawn to the attention of the UK Government (UKG). There have subsequently been a number of meetings between my officials and UKG officials in DEFRA in an effort to better understand the situation and to explore a satisfactory resolution. On 18th January 2021 Minister Poots met with DEFRA Minister Prentis and this was one of the issues raised.

In early January Minister Poots instructed officials to request a meeting with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) Minister McConalogue to discuss a range of EU Exit issues, including fisheries issues. On 18th January 2021, DAFM announced an additional five ports to the existing two designated Irish ports (Killybegs and Castletownbere),

to which Northern Ireland vessels can land their fish in Ireland. At a meeting with the Irish Minister McConalogue on 20th January 2021, Minister Poots welcomed the announcement of the additional five ports and requested consideration be given to designating further ports to assist the Northern Ireland fishing fleet in addition to those ports announced on 18th January 2021. Minister McConalogue informed Minister Poots he would continue to monitor the issue.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) what plans he has to publish a new bovine tuberculosis strategy; and (ii) what consultation is taking place with the wildlife and conservation sector in relation to the formation of new policy.

(AQW 13354/17-22)

Mr Poots: The eradication of bTB remains one of my top priorities. I am aware of the devastating emotional and financial impact a TB breakdown can have on farming families across Northern Ireland when disease is found in their herds.

My officials are working at pace to finalise the Strategy and the accompanying business case. Once this work has been completed, a final and informed decision can be made on the elements of the Eradication Strategy which will ensure a holistic approach and address all the key factors in the control and eradication of the disease here in Northern Ireland.

Minister Poots met with wide range of groups in the past year and officials remain in regular contact with key stakeholders including those in the environmental and conservation sector. There was also formal engagement with stakeholders in relation to the strategy development when the previous consultation on the Department's response to the TB Strategic Partnership Group (TBSPG) recommendations was undertaken, in late 2017.

The TB Eradication Partnership (TBEP) was established in 2018 to provide independent advice to DAERA on the development and implementation of the new bTB Eradication Strategy. A key appointment to the Group is Dr Michael Meharg as the member with expertise and experience of environmental and conservation issues. One of TBEP's key roles is to engage with stakeholders and represent their views to the Department on the development of the TB Programme.

Officials are finalising advice but changes relating to wildlife intervention if agreed, would require the introduction of new subordinate legislation and would be subject to further consultation. Stakeholder participation will be a central element of the process.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for an update on the Clean Air Strategy; (ii) how he plans to monitor, assess and take appropriate actions against air pollution; and (iii) whether he has considered a right to breathe policy, to compel local councils or other statutory agencies to inform residents of unsafe levels of air pollution in their area.

(AQW 13519/17-22)

Mr Poots: Former Minister Poots recently launched a twelve week public consultation on The Clean Air Strategy Discussion Document (available at: http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/clean_air_strategy_discussion_document), developed by my Department, which seeks views on a wide variety of matters relating to air quality. It does not set out policy options or indicate a particular policy position at this stage.

As recommendations and public views are sought through this Discussion Document, my assessment at this stage may influence the view of respondents and I do not wish to pre-empt the outcome of this process. I would, however, like to encourage you to formally respond with your views on a introducing a right to breathe and any other relevant comments you may wish to make, through the formal route using the designated inbox (casni@daera-ni.gov.uk). This will ensure your important comments, are captured as part of the final assessment. All comments will be welcome and will strengthen the consultation process.

District councils have a statutory duty to appropriately monitor, assess and to take action on air pollution under Part III of The Environment Order (NI) 2002.

The Local Air Quality Management (LAQM) system has been established for councils to fulfil their statutory duties under the Order and assess compliance with objectives in the UK Air Quality Strategy. At locations where objectives are not expected to be met by the relevant target date, district councils are required to declare an Air Quality Management Area (AQMA) and to develop an Action Plan to address the problem. The Department provides funding to councils under the LAQM grant scheme to carry out monitoring and associated air quality duties.

Further information is available from our website, <https://www.airqualityni.co.uk/laqm>

Current, real-time pollution levels are available from each district council via our website at: <https://www.airqualityni.co.uk/>

With regard to informing residents of unsafe levels of air pollution in their area, you may be interested to know that on 7 May 2020 I launched Northern Ireland's first Air Quality App. The App gives the public up to date information on air pollution levels across Northern Ireland and a five day air quality forecast. Users can set up a push notification to alert them to when levels of elevated pollutants are detected or forecast. Alerts can be further tailored to specific council districts.

An air pollution alert text service is also available. Subscribers can receive high or very high air pollution alerts to their mobile phone, providing notification of when air pollution levels are elevated. To subscribe to the 'Air Aware' service, text AIR to 67300. Alerts are free but text messages to the service cost your normal standard rate. A free helpline providing the latest air pollution information in Northern Ireland is available by contacting the helpline telephone number: 0800 556677.

The public can also access valuable health information through the App on the impacts reduced air quality can have on health, as well as guidance on when to seek medical advice. Health guidance has been developed in partnership with Department of Health officials.

The Air Quality App, Air Aware text service and free helpline allow people to protect their health using reliable, local air quality data. Further information on this, and a host of other excellent air quality information is available from our website at <https://www.airqualityni.co.uk/> and NI Direct at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/air-pollution-and-health>

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of whether an inquiry into the Meendog Landslide is needed to ensure full accountability of all parties involved.

(AQW 13520/17-22)

Mr Poots: As investigations into this incident remain ongoing, it is too early to fully assess whether an inquiry into the Meenbog landslide will be required.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what assessment has been made of the imposition of 2007/25/EC through the NI Protocol on Northern Ireland.

(AQW 13535/17-22)

Mr Poots: There has been no assessment carried out to date. However, 2007/25/EC was already in place in NI at prior to the end of the transition phase.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the planting of 18 million trees across Northern Ireland.

(AQW 13571/17-22)

Mr Poots: 'Forests for Our Future' programme was announced in March 2020 with a target to plant 18 million trees over the next decade. The programme will operate in support of the Green Growth Strategy being developed by the Department. Since its launch Forest Service has validated 670,000 trees to have been planted to create new woodland. These include trees planted by land owners with support from Forestry Grant Schemes and new woodlands on Departmental land.

Additionally, during 2020 forestry grant schemes have been revised and are now operational. These are an updated forest expansion scheme with lower area thresholds for entry into the scheme, and an additional small woodland grant scheme to encourage planting of small native woodland areas integrated within agricultural holdings. I am encouraged to note the positive response to these schemes with applications from landowners this autumn approximately doubling compared with last year. Plans are being developed by government departments and councils via an Afforestation Forum established to promote planting of suitable public and council land.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the introduction of Finn's Law.

(AQW 13572/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am committed to recognising the invaluable work of service animals in Northern Ireland and consider it important that they are provided with the same level of protection here as in England and Wales. Departmental planning for a consultation exercise on the introduction of Finn's Law in Northern Ireland is at an advanced stage. Once completed and consideration is undertaken by the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, I would intend to move forward with its launch as soon as is possible.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when he will make public initial assessment reports of the damage the Meenbog landslide caused to riverways in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 13613/17-22)

Mr Poots: The investigation into this incident remains ongoing. All evidence, and associated materials, from the investigations are treated as if they are 'sub-judice'. As a result, it is not possible to make public any related reports until any legal proceedings have concluded.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the estimated cost of restoration works on the Mourne Beg River and Derg River following the Meenbog landslide.

(AQW 13614/17-22)

Mr Poots: Evidence gathering and planning for any restoration works necessary in the river systems affected by the Meenbog landslide are ongoing, but are at too early a stage to provide an estimate of costs.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the timescale to bring forward a bill to implement Finn's Law.

(AQW 13674/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am committed to recognising the invaluable work of service animals in Northern Ireland and consider it important that they are provided with the same level of protection here as in England and Wales. Departmental planning for a consultation exercise on the introduction of Finn's Law in Northern Ireland is at an advanced stage. Once completed and consideration is undertaken by the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, I would intend to move forward with its launch as soon as is possible.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail any action taken, including fines that have been issued by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, against vehicle tyre suppliers for unauthorised dumping of used tyres. (AQW 13687/17-22)

Mr Poots: End of life tyres are considered controlled waste and are regulated from the point of discard at the tyre retail businesses. The Duty of Care Regulations place a requirement on these businesses to handle the tyres appropriately and only pass the tyres to a suitably authorised facility.

During 2019 and 2020, my officers issued five fixed penalty notices totalling £1,800 to vehicle tyre suppliers for unauthorised dumping of used tyres. One fixed penalty notice of £300 was issued to a tyre supplier for a breach of duty of care in relation to the disposal of used tyres. Additionally, two enforcement notices were issued to tyre retail businesses to remove used tyres to authorised waste tyre facilities during the same period.

NIEA focuses its resources on preventing unauthorised disposal of used tyres. In doing so they carry out visits to tyre retail premises, inspecting waste storage and duty of care documentation to ensure that waste tyres are properly secured, and are being disposed of at appropriately licensed facilities. NIEA completed 168 such inspections in 2019, and 35 by the end of February 2020 before restrictions under Covid 19 constrained this activity.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what measures are in place to monitor the safe disposal of used vehicle tyres from tyre suppliers. (AQW 13688/17-22)

Mr Poots: End of life tyres are considered controlled waste and, as such, are regulated from the point of discard at the tyre suppliers. Tyre suppliers handling waste tyres are subject to Duty of Care Regulations which place a requirement on the operator to handle the tyres appropriately and only pass the tyres to an appropriately authorised facility for treatment or onward disposal.

The movement of waste tyres must be documented and carried out by a registered carrier of waste. The receiving site must be authorised by a waste management licence to accept end of life tyres and the site will be subject to conditions that mitigate the potential impacts from the treatment and handling of the waste tyres. The site authorisation will be subject to risk based site inspections from NIEA officials to ensure the conditions of the authorisation are complied with and the tyres are treated and disposed of appropriately.

In addition, my officers from within the NIEA routinely carry out visits to tyre retail premises, inspecting waste storage and duty of care documentation to ensure that waste tyres are properly secured, and are being disposed of at appropriately licensed facilities. The officers completed 168 such inspections in 2019, and 35 by the end of February 2020 before restrictions under Covid 19 constrained this activity.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment on the merits of introducing a deposit return scheme for single-use drinks bottles. (AQW 13755/17-22)

Mr Poots: Minister Poots committed back in February 2020 to Northern Ireland's continued participation in the development of UK-wide proposals to reform the Packaging Producer Responsibility system and the introduction of a Deposit Return Scheme. We plan to consult on these schemes this year. A Deposit Return Scheme can increase recycling and recyclability of single use drinks containers significantly. It could also result in a substantial reduction in the amount of littering in Northern Ireland.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the Action Plan on Ammonia. (AQW 13756/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department has developed a comprehensive ammonia strategy which I am actively considering. The draft strategy will propose a series of farm measures to reduce ammonia, a cost analysis of these reduction measures, conservation actions to improve the condition of habitats, and a revised operational protocol for the assessment of air pollution effects. The ammonia reduction element of the strategy will build on the significant support provided for low emissions slurry spreading equipment in the recent tranche of Tier 1 of the Farm Business Improvement Scheme (FBIS)-Capital. We intend to publish the ammonia strategy for consultation soon.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, with regard to the Forests for Future pledge, to detail (i) what types of trees will be planted in Northern Ireland as part of this programme; and (ii) whether the Afforestation Forum has been established. (AQW 13770/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department promotes tree planting under the 'Forests for Our Future' programme through two forestry grant schemes: the recently revised Forest Expansion Scheme; and the new Small Woodland Grant Scheme. Since the programme was launched in March 2020, approximately 670,000 trees have been planted, with the species breakdown as follows.

Broadleaf species account for 522,000 trees, or 78% of the total which include oak, birch, alder, hazel, wild cherry, rowan, crab apple, willow, rowan, aspen, field maple, hornbeam, and beech. Conifer tree species account 148 thousand trees, or 22% of the total which include Sitka spruce, Norway spruce, western red cedar, Douglas fir and Scots pine.

This is indicative of the types of trees likely to be planted and grant aided by the Forest Expansion Scheme. The new Small Woodland Grant Scheme, opened in December 2020 by Minister Poots, supports only the planting of native tree species.

The Afforestation Forum of senior council and government department officials was established in 2020 following an invitation from Minister Poots to Council Chief Executives and government department Ministers. The work of the Afforestation Forum commenced in the autumn with a number of members already engaged in developing their plans. In December 2020 the Department hosted an online meeting at which all members could share the experience and approach to developing woodland plans that other members have taken to date.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he plans to put in place a financial support package for egg producers.

(AQW 13802/17-22)

Mr Poots: Since the start of the pandemic Minister Poots and DAERA officials have been meeting with industry stakeholders on a regular basis to hear and discuss their concerns regarding the impact of Covid-10 on their businesses.

I am aware of the impact that Covid-19 restrictions on the hospitality industry have had on the market for eggs. Those producers relying on sales of eggs to food service and in particular for processed egg products, have seen a fall in demand and the price of their produce.

DAERA officials are engaging with egg producers and stakeholders to gather information on verifiable losses and assess the impact on farmer's incomes. At this stage there is insufficient evidence to justify the need to introduce a financial support scheme for producers in this sector. In addition, such an intervention could distort the market and lead to unintended consequences. However, officials will continue to monitor the egg market and liaise with stakeholders to ascertain the prevalence and depth of this issue.

In the interim, egg producers should be encouraged to consider some of the COVID-19 support schemes provided by HM Government and those delivered by the Department for the Economy on behalf of the NI Executive, featured on the NI Business Info website www.nibusbusinessinfo.co.uk. In particular, the 'Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme: Part B', is designed to provide support to those businesses in the supply chain, forced to close or severely limit their operations as a result of the increased Health Protection Regulations. Businesses can apply to the scheme if they meet the eligibility criteria, and those not paying rates such as farm businesses would be eligible for up to £300/week.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for a breakdown of all vacant properties and land owned by his Department; (ii) how long each property has been vacant; (iii) how much has been spent on rates in each of the last five years, per property; and (iv) how much has been spent on maintenance in each of the last five years, per property.

(AQW 13828/17-22)

Mr Poots: The vacant properties owned by my Department are set out in the table below. The table provides details of how long each property has been vacant; and (where available at property level) the rates paid per annum for each property during the last five years and the cost of maintenance for each property incurred in each of the last five years.

It should be noted that while vacant a number of these properties are located within wider Departmental sites which are still operational. Consideration is being given to properties which are deemed by the Department to be surplus to requirements. Where these are deemed appropriate for disposal they will be progressed in line with Land & Property Services' 'Disposal of Surplus Public Property in Northern Ireland' guidance.

Building address	Vacant from	Rates paid per annum over last 5 years	Cost of maintenance per property				
			Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
			Y.E 31.03.20	Y.E 31.03.19	Y.E 31.03.18	Y.E 31.03.17	Y.E 31.03.16
		£	£	£	£	£	
10 Large Park, Hillsborough	2013	1,352 - 1,522	6,615	5,283	2,932	3,831	3,821
11 Large Park, Hillsborough	2013	1,352 - 1,522	1,641	681	354	443	484

Building address	Vacant from	Rates paid per annum over last 5 years £	Cost of maintenance per property				
			Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
			Y.E 31.03.20	Y.E 31.03.19	Y.E 31.03.18	Y.E 31.03.17	Y.E 31.03.16
9 Park Street, Hillsborough	2013	1,893 - 2,131	1,483	4,344	1,478	2,076	1,248
Lindesay Hall & associated buildings, 76 Dungannon Road, Cookstown	2017	Not available at individual property level	4,605	11,637	8,379	18,922	15,887
34 Houston Road, Crossnacreevy, Belfast	2013	913 - 1,027	6	5	5	21	26
38 Houston Road, Crossnacreevy, Belfast	2018	913 - 1,027	0	49	525	312	210
52 Houston Road, Crossnacreevy, Belfast	2013	Not available at individual property level	186	975	828	620	221
Manor House, Loughgall	2018	Not available at individual property level	7,421	9,004	5,541	7,793	6,549
4 Manor Farm, Loughgall	2013	Not available at individual property level	0	0	0	173	77
6 Manor Farm, Loughgall	2017	603 - 666	0	0	0	0	0
8 Manor Farm, Loughgall	2013	804 - 888	0	0	0	0	0
142a Bryansford, Road Newcastle	2014	Not available at individual property level	Not available at individual property level				

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the merits of introducing a ban on black plastic packaging.

(AQW 13861/17-22)

Mr Poots: Black plastic packaging has previously received attention as a problem for recycling facilities. However, since the issue was first identified there have been many changes that would make introducing a ban on black plastic packaging unwise and have a disproportionate impact for a declining problem.

You may already have noticed that a number of manufactures have started to use alternatives to black plastic packaging where possible. Many of the big brand manufacturers and retailers that have signed up to the UK Plastics Pact (representing more than 85% of plastic packaging sold through supermarkets) gave an undertaking to do this by the end of 2019. Black plastic packaging would have represented roughly 7% of packaging in 2016 but this has now fallen to around 3.7% by the end of 2019.

That said, a risk of removing all black plastic could also result in less recycled plastic being used. Black plastic is very good at masking the imperfections that typically occur when plastic is recycled or when coloured plastics are mixed for recycling. However, the industry has looked at solutions to this. Unilever who use black plastic packaging as a “brand signature” for some of their product ranges developed a detectable pigment to add to the black plastic to enable it to be captured and sorted by recyclers and they then made this technology freely available to other manufacturers.

According to the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) who lead on the UK Plastics Pact, the majority of black plastic on the shelves is now made from detectable pigments and an estimated 19,212 tonnes of non-recyclable plastics trays have been removed from shelves in 2019 (equivalent to 23 trays per person in the UK). These have been replaced with clear plastics trays/non-pigmented trays and detectable black pigmented trays.

I hope you are reassured that the issue of recycling of black plastic is being addressed and that a ban would not be appropriate at this time.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps his Department is taking to increase consumer awareness of (i) the impact of degradable plastics on the environment; and (ii) how best to dispose of degradable plastics.

(AQW 13862/17-22)

Mr Poots: DAERA is in the process of developing future plastics policy for Northern Ireland, including a plan to eliminate plastic pollution and is working with the other UK administrations to determine the best approaches and the most sustainable methods of consumption, recycling and disposal of plastics for the whole of the UK.

My Department is partnering with Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful (KNIB) and Sustainable NI in a Tackling Plastic project that is working with schools, businesses, councils and with the public sector on raising consumer awareness and changing behaviours around all types of single use plastics. Whilst bio-plastics may have less impact on the environment, they still use resources and remain part of the plastic pollution problem.

As a member of The UK Plastics Pact DAERA is working with industry partners across the supply chain to eliminate problematic and unnecessary plastic packaging items and working to deliver on 4 key commitments for change by 2025. Although bio-degradable plastics are generally not designed for home composting, these commitments should help develop infrastructure to provide solutions to ensure bio-degradable plastics can be collected and composted. Life cycle analyses of biodegradables and alternatives to plastic are also being worked on by officials to ensure that we are making the right decisions and promoting resources that are truly sustainable in the long term.

I am working with my officials to introduce measures for Northern Ireland for the removal of 9 different single use items (including oxo-degradable plastics) in line with other UK administrations and it is my aim to bring the measures before the Assembly within the current mandate. Officials are also looking at resourcing work on further measures to address the impacts of plastics in line with significant elements of the EU Single Use Plastic Directive all of which will support the New Decade, New Approach commitment on plastics.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when the Northern Ireland Peatland Strategy will be out for consultation.

(AQW 13864/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am currently developing a Peatland Strategy for Northern Ireland which will provide a framework for conserving our intact semi-natural peatlands and restoring degraded semi-natural peatlands.

The Northern Ireland Peatland Strategy is being taken forward under the auspices of the UK Peatland Strategy and I intend to publish the strategy for consultation soon.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will introduce a support scheme for egg producers whose businesses are impacted by COVID-19 due to the closure of hotels and the hospitality sector.

(AQW 13914/17-22)

Mr Lyons: Since the start of the pandemic Minister Poots and DAERA officials have been meeting with industry stakeholders on a regular basis to hear and discuss their concerns regarding the impact of Covid-19 on their businesses.

I am aware of the impact that Covid-19 restrictions on the hotel and hospitality sector have had on the market for eggs. Those producers relying on sales of eggs to food service and in particular processed eggs, have seen a fall in demand and the price of their produce.

DAERA officials are engaging with egg producers and stakeholders to gather information on verifiable losses and assess the impact on farmer's incomes. At this stage there is insufficient evidence to justify the need to introduce a support scheme for producers in this sector. However, officials will continue to monitor the egg market and liaise with stakeholders to ascertain the prevalence and depth of this issue.

In the interim, egg producers should be encouraged to consider some of the COVID-19 support schemes provided by HM Government and those delivered by the Department for the Economy on behalf of the NI Executive featured on the NI Business Info website www.nibusbusinessinfo.co.uk. In particular, the 'Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme: Part B', is designed to provide support to those businesses in the supply chain, forced to close or severely limit their operations as a result of the increased Health Protection Regulations. Businesses can apply to the scheme if they meet the eligibility criteria, and those not paying rates such as farm businesses would be eligible for up to £300/week.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether a Northern Ireland registered fishing vessel is free to fish throughout Lough Foyle without any registration with Sea Fisheries Protection Authority in the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 14003/17-22)

Mr Lyons: A fishing vessel issued with a sea fishing licence by DAERA or any UK licensed sea fishing vessel does not require an EU fishing authorisation to fish for sea fish in the UK waters of Lough Foyle. The UK Government's stated position remains that the whole of Lough Foyle is within the UK.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what is the current jurisdictional position of (i) Carlingford Lough; and (ii) Lough Foyle.
(AQW 14006/17-22)

Mr Lyons: There has never been a formal agreement between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland on the jurisdictional position of Carlingford Lough and Lough Foyle. The jurisdictional issue is a reserved matter and is not within the competence of the Northern Ireland Assembly or the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Any articulation of the jurisdictional position of both Loughs is a matter for the UK and Irish Governments: the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in London and the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, as a result of staff being withdrawn from ports, for his assessment of the impact subsequent delays of physical checks will have on animal welfare.
(AQW 14088/17-22)

Mr Lyons: The Department continues to carry out physical inspections on any live animals arriving in our ports. These checks have been conducted in our Larne port facility for many years and are a critical element in the protection of the health of animals here and in safeguarding the welfare of animals during transport. Animal welfare is a priority for my veterinary staff and consignments of live animals are always prioritised for inspection to avoid delay or unnecessary suffering.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what engagement his Department is having with the British Government to address the Brexit issues faced by members of the Northern Ireland Budgerigar, Zebra Finch and Foreign Bird Society who wish to be represented at cage bird shows in Great Britain.
(AQW 14167/17-22)

Mr Lyons: Caged Birds can continue to move from Northern Ireland (NI) to Great Britain (GB) as per existing arrangements. I am, however, fully aware that there are significant changes to the requirements which must be met for cage and aviary birds moving from GB to NI or returning to NI from GB following the end of the transition period.

The new requirements are set out in European Commission Decision 2007/25/EC which details the veterinary certification requirements for the introduction of live pet birds accompanying their owners into the European Union from Third Countries (which is how the EU now considers Great Britain), and provides the template for the Export Health Certificates (EHC) that must accompany cage and aviary birds such as budgerigars and finches during such movements.

Minister Poots previously wrote to the Commission on the issue of EHCs and officials continue to raise on a regular basis the concerns with the additional requirements in an effort to seek flexibilities or derogations where possible.

Be assured that I too intend to continue to engage with Ministerial colleagues across the UK to seek flexibilities for what I consider to be the unnecessary additional requirements for movements of caged birds within the UK.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when his Department will update its Audit of Inequalities Report and Action Plan 2011-2016.
(AQO 1545/17-22)

Mr Lyons: My officials are currently processing the updates of the Audit of Inequalities Report and Equality Action Plan for publication later in the year.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what investment plans he has to improve and enhance the environmental, natural and built heritage of Belvoir Forest Park.
(AQO 1546/17-22)

Mr Lyons: I am very aware of the popularity and importance of our forests to local people and visitors. Our forests are a fantastic natural resource and make a major contribution to biodiversity, tourism and recreation in addition to many health and well-being benefits. Belvoir Forest is one of our most popular sites attracting approximately 215,000 annual visits.

All our forests are managed in line with best practice sustainable forest management standards. This requires our forests to have forest management plans which provide an appropriate balance between economic, environmental and social objectives. The long term management plans for Belvoir are to develop a predominantly broadleaf woodland using natural regeneration and supplementary planting to re-establish the woodland enhancing its biodiversity value while safeguarding the natural and built heritage features of the forest. The management plans for forests in County Down will go through a formal review process in 2021 and this will provide an opportunity for both strategic and local consultation on our plans for Belvoir forest.

In the delivery of forest management plans, most of us will have seen the positive out-workings of effective partnerships between Forest Service and other organisations in recent years. This has proved instrumental in improving and enhancing

the environmental and social benefits of many forests across Northern Ireland. An example of this is the partnership working arrangements already in place at Belvoir forest between my Department and the Lagan Valley Regional Park. This work is focussed on protecting and enhancing the biodiversity value of the veteran oak trees at Belvoir forest with an overall objective of improving the condition of the Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) in the Belvoir forest area.

Forest Service is also continuing to liaise with Belfast City Council and RSPB at Belvoir ensuring any future plans are consistent with sustainable forest management principles as well as supporting Council tourism and recreation priorities.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many applications have been received under the latest tranche of Tier 1 of the Farm Business Improvement Scheme, particularly for Low Emission Slurry Spreading Equipment.

(AQO 1547/17-22)

Mr Lyons: Over 3,800 applications were received under the third tranche of Tier 1 of the Farm Business Improvement Scheme – Capital. This includes 1,567 applications for Low Emission Slurry Spreading Equipment, as well as applications for a wide range of other items of equipment from across the list of eligible Tier 1 items. I am delighted to say that Letters of Offer have now started to issue. Letters of Offer will continue to issue over the next weeks until the budget of £15million is fully allocated.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps have been taken to support the pork sector during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQO 1548/17-22)

Mr Lyons: Since the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic Minister Poots has been meeting with a range of industry stakeholders on a regular basis to discuss their concerns and proposals on how sectors should be supported.

In December he met with representatives of pig producers supplying Cranswick Country Foods and recognised the financial impact that the temporary closure of this processing plant had on their businesses. To offset the losses incurred by these farmers during the time it took for pig processing to return to normal, Minister Poots announced support of up to £2.2m from the Covid-19 fund.

This financial support will address the effects of the temporary loss of the lucrative Chinese export market, additional penalties on overweight and overfat pigs, and the price impact of alternative pig marketing arrangements.

When the scheme opens, eligible farmers will be contacted and asked to complete a simple application form to claim their payments. Further details and explanatory information will be published on the DAERA website at that time.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs why no support package is in place for Lough Neagh inland fishermen, whose income has been impacted adversely by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQO 1549/17-22)

Mr Lyons: I fully recognise the pressures faced by the Lough Neagh fishing industry as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In my new role as the AERA Minister, I am familiarising myself with aspects of the proposed Scheme and once I am satisfied with the details of how the Scheme can be administered, I will be in a position to make a further announcement.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs given their current inability to buy juvenile eel from, and sell their catch to, the GB market as a result of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, to outline any discussions he has had with Her Majesty's Government regarding support for eel fishermen.

(AQO 1550/17-22)

Mr Lyons: The European Union's policy of not allowing the trade of eels out of or into the EU market and the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol has significantly impacted on the Northern Ireland Eels trade.

Minister Poots raised the issue at an Inter-Ministerial Group for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs meeting on 25 January 2021 and my officials continue to engage with the UK's Department for Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) regarding the loss of trade in adult eels from NI to GB and juvenile eels from GB to NI for restocking.

My Department continues to review ways of supporting the fishing industry in Northern Ireland during these difficult times.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the publication of his Department's draft ammonia strategy.

(AQO 1551/17-22)

Mr Lyons: My Department has developed a comprehensive ammonia strategy which I am actively considering. The draft strategy will propose a series of farm measures to reduce ammonia, conservation actions to improve the condition of habitats, and a revised operational protocol for the assessment of air pollution effects. The ammonia reduction element of the strategy will build on the significant support provided for low emissions slurry spreading equipment in the recent tranche of Tier 1 of the Farm Business Improvement Scheme (FBIS)- Capital. We intend to publish the ammonia strategy for consultation soon.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps he is taking to increase, in real terms, the Rural Development Programme (Pillar 2) budget to reflect pre-European Union exit levels.

(AQO 1552/17-22)

Mr Lyons: The UK Government's 2019 manifesto committed to maintain the current annual budget to farmers in every year of this parliament. However, the HMT approach has been to use the 2014-2020 Pillar 2 funding from a prior period to reduce the level of funding it should be receiving in the coming budget period. Since the Spending Review announcement on 25 November 2020, Minister Poots has stated that he fundamentally disagrees with the approach used by HMT to allocate funding.

Funding issues are regularly discussed at Ministerial level at the Inter-Ministerial Group for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and every opportunity is taken to ensure that the UKG has a full understanding of Northern Ireland's priorities and challenges in an effort to ensure that Northern Ireland can fully benefit from the opportunities that will arise as a result of the UK leaving the EU.

Department for Communities

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities what rights and control will tenants and employees have in the new mutual replacing the Housing Executive.

(AQW 10943/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): My revitalisation plans are at an early stage, but I want to reassure tenants and staff that I am committed to a co-design approach in developing options. Engagement with tenants and staff including their representatives and Trade Unions will be central to this process.

My officials have commenced work to assess options and I intend to bring proposals to the Executive before the end of this mandate.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities whether the data that will be transferred to the Department of Health on those in receipt of Carers Allowance will confirm any details about the person for which they care.

(AQW 13011/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department will work with the Department of Health to support the COVID-19 vaccination programme and will facilitate any request that is made to transfer data about those in receipt of Carers Allowance, or the people being cared, in line with GDPR.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities when the data transfer to the Department of Health will take place, confirming the list of Carers in receipt of Carers Allowance, to ensure there is no delay in those Carers defined in Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation group 6 from receiving the COVID-19 vaccine in Phase 2 roll-out.

(AQW 13012/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department will work with the Department of Health to facilitate any request that may be received to transfer data to ensure there is no delay in those Carers defined in Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation group 6 from receiving the COVID-19 vaccine in Phase 2 roll-out.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities what is the current legislative impediment to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive building houses.

(AQW 13027/17-22)

Ms Hargey: There is currently no legal impediment to the Housing Executive building houses.

The reason why the Housing Executive does not build houses is value-for-money related to the ability to borrow. Housing Associations (HA) can borrow and the Housing Executive cannot. This means a social home built by a HA can be part-funded by public money (otherwise funded by HA borrowing) while a social home built by the Housing Executive must be fully funded.

What this means in practice is that were the Housing Executive, instead of Housing Associations, to build our new social homes on a fully-funded basis, we would build about half the number we currently build through our Social Housing Development Programme.

In November 2020 the then-Minister for Communities set out plans to change the Housing Executive in order to enable it to borrow to invest in homes, both old and new.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities (i) for an update on the welfare reform mitigations package review; (ii) how the co-design process is incorporated to ensure people impacted directly by social security cuts are meaningfully involved; (iii) whether welfare reform mitigation legislation is to be introduced in this Assembly mandate; and (iv) what mitigations will be covered, and by what means.

(AQW 13244/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am committed to progressing the review of welfare mitigation measures and my Department is currently finalising proposals for the format of the review. An announcement on the way forward will be made at the earliest opportunity.

I can provide an assurance that a key element of the review will be direct and meaningful engagement with people who have been affected by changes to the social security system. It is important that their voices are heard on these important issues. I will also be inviting representatives of customer representative groups to participate in the delivery of the review.

It is not currently possible to provide a definitive date for the introduction of the legislation to extend and strengthen the welfare mitigation schemes. However, it is expected that it will be progressed during the current Assembly mandate.

The review will consider each of the proposed new mitigation measures included in the report "Cumulative impact assessment of tax and social security reforms", which was published by the Human Rights Commission in November 2019. In addition it is expected that consideration will be given to the need for additional support for people in the private rented sector who are on low income and for people making a new claim to Universal Credit

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities what an appropriate consideration payment is in respect of the extension of 50 year leases on properties bought under the Right to Buy scheme.

(AQW 13268/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has advised the Department that the introduction of a new policy enabling leaseholders to purchase extensions to their lease was approved by its Board on 28th October 2020. Work has now commenced on the development of the policy, and procedures and discussions are ongoing with Land & Property Services.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities whether she has any plans to review access to services provided to those living in neighbourhood renewal areas, given that many families in receipt of welfare live outside these areas and cannot access services such as SureStart and Early Years Education.

(AQW 13292/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department is developing an Anti-Poverty Strategy that aims to address inequalities directly affecting the everyday lives of the most vulnerable people in society and will bring focus to identifying and addressing the issues, barriers and disadvantages that undermine equality of opportunity. This work is being undertaken using a co-design approach, with involvement from stakeholders at all stages of the process. This will help ensure that actions arising from the Strategy will impact all those who are most in need of support. It is planned that the Anti-Poverty Strategy will be published in December 2021 subject to Executive approval

Access to Sure Start and Early Years Education programmes is a matter for the Minister for Education.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities what financial and childcare support exists for single mothers residing outside of neighbourhood renewal areas who are unable to work due to maternity-related illness.

(AQW 13293/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Where single mothers are unable to work due to maternity-related illness, they may be eligible for Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) from their employer where they meet the qualifying conditions. SSP is paid from the fourth day of sickness for absences not related to COVID-19 at £95.85 per week for up to 28 weeks in any one period of entitlement. Some employers may decide to pay more, or for longer, through Occupational Sick Pay.

Those who are not eligible for SSP and the self-employed may be eligible for new style Employment and Support Allowance, depending on their personal circumstances.

In addition, where the person's income is reduced while off work sick and they require further financial support, they may be able to receive Universal Credit, depending on individual circumstances.

Where a person receives both SSP and Universal Credit, SSP will be taken into account when calculating the Universal Credit payment. Also, where a person receives new style Employment and Support Allowance and Universal Credit, new style Employment and Support Allowance will be taken into account when calculating the Universal Credit payment.

Financial support towards the costs of childcare is available through Universal Credit, Tax Credits, Tax-Free Childcare or Childcare Vouchers (if the parent is already in the Scheme).

Universal Credit pays up to 85% of childcare costs up to a monthly limit of £646.35 for one child or £1108.04 for 2 or more children subject to satisfying the eligibility criteria. Under Universal Credit childcare costs in payment before the period of sickness, will continue to be paid for an existing childcare place while the parent is receiving SSP: they will be treated as in paid work whilst not working.

For those in receipt of Tax Credits administered by HMRC, up to 70% of eligible childcare costs are provided through the childcare element of Working Tax Credit. The childcare element can be payable for the first 28 weeks off sick.

Relevant information is available on the Employers for Childcare website, who offer a very useful Family Benefits Advice Service. This service can offer parents tailored advice on the best form of financial support with childcare costs. Employers for Childcare can be contacted on 0800 028 3008 or by accessing the website on <https://www.employersforchildcare.org/parents/family-benefits-advice-service/>.

Advice and support for parents on finding a suitable childcare place, and the financial support available, can also be accessed on the Family Support NI website at the following link: <https://www.familysupportni.gov.uk>.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the support her Department provides for fuel poverty in West Tyrone.

(AQW 13298/17-22)

Ms Hargey: In the West Tyrone area my Department provides support through the Affordable Warmth Scheme which is the Executive's main fuel poverty scheme and is delivered in partnership between the Department, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and the Housing Executive. It has a targeted approach, aimed at private sector households most at risk of fuel poverty with an annual household income of less than £20,000. Details can be found at the following link:

<https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Housing-Help/Affordable-Warmth-Boiler-Replacement/Affordable-Warmth-Scheme>

The Boiler Replacement Scheme provides help to home owners with an annual income of less than £40,000 to replace old and inefficient boilers that are more than 15 years old. Details and how to apply can be found at the following links:

- <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Housing-Help/Affordable-Warmth-Boiler-Replacement/Boiler-replacement-Scheme>
- <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Housing-Help/Affordable-Warmth-Boiler-Replacement/Boiler-replacement-Scheme/How-to-apply-for-Boiler-Replacement-Scheme>

The Winter Fuel Payment is a tax free and non means tested benefit which is paid yearly to eligible older people. The payment is payable to people born on or before 5 October 1954 and the rate payable is between £100 and £300 depending on personal circumstances, to help people pay their heating bills.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities what plans she has to continue the Women Involved in Community Transformation Programme when funding ends on 31 March 2021.

(AQW 13331/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Funding for The Women Involved in Community Transformation Programme is provided to my Department through the cross-Executive Tackling Paramilitarism and Organised Crime Programme.

Funding for Phase One of the programme is due to finish on 31 March 2021 and whilst the Executive has agreed to a three year period for phase 2, this is dependent on match funding from the British Government. At this stage, the British Government has not committed to providing funds for the Programme.

My officials continue to liaise with Department of Justice on the budget position, as this will determine any future delivery model.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities, given the funding programme runs out on 31 March 2021, what progress has been made to date with tender documents for the continuation of the Women Involved in Community Transformation Programme.

(AQW 13332/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Funding for The Women Involved in Community Transformation Programme is provided to my Department through the cross-Executive Tackling Paramilitarism and Organised Crime Programme.

Funding for Phase One of the programme is due to finish on 31 March 2021 and whilst the Executive has agreed to a three year period for Phase Two, this is dependent on match funding from the British Government. At this stage, the British Government has not committed to providing funds for the Programme.

My officials continue to liaise with Department of Justice colleagues on the budget position and next steps for delivery of the project.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for Communities what her Department's statutory responsibility is to rural areas; and for her Department's definition of rural.

(AQW 13336/17-22)

Ms Hargey: In accordance with the statutory responsibilities placed on all Government Departments through the Rural Needs Act 2016, my Department ensures that rural proofing is an ongoing and integral component of the policy development cycle.

Rural proofing activity is reported to Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) on an annual basis and also included in the Department's annual report and accounts.

For the purposes of defining the operational area for its urban regeneration programmes, the Department uses the NISRA default urban-rural classification that defines settlements of over 5,000 people as urban and those below that figure as rural.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities how many people from the East Belfast constituency, due to no suitable public sector housing being available, have been allocated hostel or bed and breakfast accommodation over the last 24 months.

(AQW 13339/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has statutory responsibility for homelessness and has provided the information in this reply. The Housing Executive does not record the information in the requested format with all placements for Belfast recorded for the council area as a whole, rather than individual constituencies or areas within the city. The table below outlines the number of placements in hostels and non-standard accommodation (B&B/Hotels) over the past 24 months for Belfast Council area.

Type of Placement	1st January 2019 to 31st December 2019	1st January 2020 to 31st December 2020
Hostels	895	1,282
Non-standard (B&B/Hotels)	179	2,498

It should be noted that the table above refers to the number of placements provided by the Housing Executive and that a number of households may have availed of more than one placement. The table above also reflects the significant impact of the ongoing pandemic on demand for temporary accommodation. In some cases, capacity within hostels has reduced to accommodate social distancing and/or self-isolation. The Housing Executive has sought to mitigate this reduction through the provision of a range of alternative measures such as the use of additional single lets, block booking arrangements for non-standard accommodation and the use of vacant Housing Executive properties for temporary accommodation.

The measures above are part of the Housing Executive's ongoing response to the pandemic and further details can be found in 'The Way Home – Homelessness response to Covid-19' which can be found on the link: www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Homelessness/homelessness-reset-plan-the-way-home.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to detail the Housing Executive maintenance schemes planned for the Strand area of Holywood, over the next two years.

(AQW 13383/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive maintenance schemes currently programmed for the next two years for the Strand area of Holywood are set out in the table below.

It should be noted that the delivery of these schemes in the years intended will be subject to a number of factors including the necessary scheme design work being completed and approvals obtained, sufficient funding being available and, potentially, the impact of an ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown on construction work.

Scheme	Type of Work	Year
Strand (AQW 13383)		
Hollywood Estates	Heating	21/22
High Street / Strand Avenue	Bathroom/Kitchen/Rewire	22/23

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to detail the Housing Executive maintenance schemes planned for the Breezemount area in North Down over the next two years.

(AQW 13384/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive maintenance schemes currently programmed for the next two years in the Breezemount area in North Down are set out in the table below.

It should be noted that the delivery of these schemes in the years intended will be subject to a number of factors including the necessary scheme design work being completed and approvals obtained, sufficient funding being available and, potentially, the impact of an ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown on construction work.

Scheme	Type of Work	Year
Breezemount (AQW 13384)		
Bangor Estates	Heating	21/22
Bangor Estates	Heating	22/23
Breezemount / Conlig DGL	Windows	21/22

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities to detail the average waiting times for applicants between making an application for Personal Independent Payment and the first award being paid, in each of the last 24 months.

(AQW 13401/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The information requested is set out in the table below and is calculated from the most recent statistics, published on 25 November 2020.

The average time taken to process a PIP claim from the point of registration through to payment being made includes the time taken for a claimant to return their Part 2 'How your disability affects you' form, which they are given up to 6 weeks to complete, or longer if additional time is requested by the claimant or their representative.

Average (Median) Monthly Registration to Payment times for PIP - September 2018 to August 2020

Month	Average (median) time taken from Claim Registration to Payment (Weeks)
September 2018	15
October 2018	14
November 2018	14
December 2018	14
January 2019	15
February 2019	16
March 2019	17
April 2019	16
May 2019	19
June 2019	19
July 2019	19
August 2019	18
September 2019	15
October 2019	14
November 2019	13
December 2019	12
January 2020	13
February 2020	14
March 2020	14
April 2020	15
May 2020	17
June 2020	19
July 2020	19
August 2020	14

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities to detail the co-design stakeholders contacted as part of the review of Welfare Reform mitigations; and to provide a copy of the minutes of the meetings since 2020 with those stakeholders.
(AQW 13402/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Due to the ongoing need to prioritise my Department's response to the pandemic the progress the review of welfare reform mitigations has been hindered. The review will include a range of interest groups so that their voices are heard on these important issues. Details of the format of the review, including engagement with stakeholders, will be shared with the Committee for Communities at the earliest opportunity.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Kickstart Scheme she is developing for Northern Ireland; and how her Department's scheme differs to the Kickstart Scheme in Great Britain.
(AQW 13408/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The JobStart Scheme will help young people (16 – 24 year olds) at risk of long term unemployment get into the job market by providing government funding for employers to create six-month job opportunities with nine-month opportunities available for those young people who would benefit from having a longer period of time to settle into the job opportunity, and to allow adequate time for reasonable adjustments to be addressed.

The eligibility criteria for the JobStart Scheme includes any young person aged 16-24 on a working age benefit who is work ready, as well as those leaving care, those with disabilities and returning citizens who are ready for work.

Key Differences between Kickstart and JobStart

When Kickstart launched, employers could only submit a bid for funding if they were creating 30 or more jobs. This would have proved difficult to implement here as we have a higher proportion of small businesses. My Department's intention has always been for employers to approach the Department for funding from the JobStart Scheme even if they wish to create just one opportunity.

Gateway organisations who act on behalf of small organisations receive funding of up to £9,000 per batch of 30 jobs from DWP. As my Department will not be using Gateway Organisations to 'batch jobs', our approach will save money for the taxpayer and make more funds available to help our young people.

Kickstart is limited to Universal Credit claimants whereas JobStart has been opened up to a wider group of young people including those on Job Seekers Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance and Income Support legacy benefits and those young people who fall into the 'Not In Education, Employment or Training' (NEET) category.

I have also given permission for the JobStart scheme to be extended from 6 months to 9 months for those with disabilities to allow these young people a longer period to settle into the job opportunity, and adequate time for reasonable adjustments to be addressed.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities whether she will issue guidance to personal independence payment and employment support allowance assessors on applicants presenting with long COVID.

(AQW 13423/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and Employment Support Allowance (ESA) assessments are not condition based, but are instead intended to establish the individual's level of restriction. Assessors are required to explore all conditions and the impact of symptoms, including Long COVID.

Guidance for assessors is contained within the PIP Assessment Guidance and Work Capability Assessment Handbook, both of which are published documents. Providers continue to deliver assessments utilising this guidance which is kept under continuous review.

My officials are actively engaging with Assessment Providers and DWP on the issue of Long Covid and take account of NICE guidelines to ensure that guidance for Assessors is reflective of emerging evidence.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities, given the funding programme for the Women Involved in Community Transformation programme runs out on 31 March, what consideration has been given to interim continuity funding in circumstances where the tender process may not be completed on time.

(AQW 13456/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Funding for The Women Involved in Community Transformation Programme is provided to my Department through the cross-Executive Tackling Paramilitarism and Organised Crime Programme.

Funding for Phase One of the programme is due to finish on 31 March 2021 and whilst the Executive has agreed to a three year period for Phase Two, this is dependent on match funding from the British Government. At this stage, the British Government has not committed to providing funds for the Programme.

My officials continue to liaise with Department of Justice colleagues on the budget position as this will determine what is deliverable.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the (i) number; and (ii) origin of referrals of people placed in temporary accommodation in Derry city, during the period of 1 April 2020 and 31 December 2020.

(AQW 13459/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has statutory responsibility for homelessness and has provided the information in this reply. The Housing Executive does not record placements made in Derry city as an identifier on its Housing Management System. However, the table below sets out temporary accommodation placements from 1st April 2020 to 31st December 2020 within the BT47 and BT48 postcodes. A total of 1,401 placements have been identified, along with the origin of these referrals.

Placements from Housing Executive Area Offices	No of Placements made to BT47 & BT48
Belfast	241
Causeway	87
Lisburn & C'reagh	28
Mid & East Antrim	69
Mid Ulster	40
North Down	19
South	27

Placements from Housing Executive Area Offices	No of Placements made to BT47 & BT48
South Antrim	9
South Down	22
South West	29
West Area	830
Total	1,401

It should be noted that the table above outlines the number of placements and some households may have been provided with more than one placement.

As part of the ongoing pandemic response there has been a significant increase in demand for temporary accommodation. While demand has increased significantly, in some cases capacity within hostels has reduced to accommodate social distancing and/or self-isolation and the Housing Executive has sought to mitigate this reduction through the provision of a range of alternative measures such as the use of additional single lets, block booking arrangements for non-standard accommodation and the use of vacant Housing Executive properties for temporary accommodation.

The measures above are part of the Housing Executive's ongoing response to the pandemic and further details can be found in 'The Way Home – Homelessness response to Covid-19' which can be found on the link: www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Homelessness/homelessness-reset-plan-the-way-home

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities when Fresh Start funding will be released for the Programme for Women Involved in Community Transformation Programme, so that it can continue operating beyond its current contract end of 31 March 2021.

(AQW 13473/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Funding for The Women Involved in Community Transformation Programme is provided to my Department through the cross-Executive Tackling Paramilitarism and Organised Crime Programme.

The Programme is currently due to finish its phase one funding period on 31st March 2021. While the Executive has agreed to a three year period for Phase Two, this is dependent on match funding from the British Government. At this stage, the British Government has not committed to providing funds for the Programme.

My officials continue to liaise with Department of Justice, as the availability of budget will determine the scope and scale of what can be delivered.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 12912/17-22, (i) which organisations in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area are working in partnership with her Department to deliver the Warm, Well and Connected programme; (ii) what support they are delivering; and (iii) what criteria they are using to identify recipients of that support.

(AQW 13474/17-22)

Ms Hargey:

In Derry City and Strabane District Council area, RAPID NI (Rural Area Partnership in Derry), the Old Library Trust, Bogside and Brandywell Health Forum and Derg Valley Healthy Living Centre are delivering wellbeing projects as part of the Warm, Well and Connected initiative.

Councils has also received £60,331.10 to directly target designated Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, Areas at Risk and Small Pockets of Deprivation.

Bryson Care and Advice NI are providing fuel support to those who are unable to heat their homes and cannot access other means of support.

The following groups are being targeted for support:

- Children and Young People
- Older People, particularly living alone
- Disabled People and their carers
- Those who have lost income as a result of the pandemic
- Clinically Extremely Vulnerable
- People from Ethnic Minority Communities

In addition to providing evidence that they fall into one of these categories, a recipient must also demonstrate loss of income or affordability issues directly linked to the pandemic in order to access fuel support.

This programme is just one small element of support within an extensive suite of Covid-19 responses which the Department has brought forward to support a wide spectrum of needs associated with the impact of the pandemic.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities how her Department can reduce the waiting period for Universal Credit claims to be processed.

(AQW 13478/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The five week waiting period for the first Universal Credit payment as it is bound by legislation.

Each week approximately nine hundred (900) new claims for Universal Credit become due for their first payment, with over 95% of these paid at the end of that first five-week period.

Anyone suffering financial hardship during this five-week period can apply for a non-repayable grant through the Universal Credit Contingency Fund. This is unique support, only available to people claiming Universal Credit here.

Information about the Contingency Fund grant is provided to everyone making a claim through a welcome message on their on-line journal account. This message also includes a link to the Contingency Fund application form. Further additional financial support is also available through a repayable new case Advance Payment.

While the five-week period is bound by legislation, there have been a number of improvements to support people during their first Assessment Period, such as removing waiting days and paying anyone moving from Housing Benefit onto Universal Credit a two week 'transitional housing payment'.

This extra two weeks of Housing Benefit is to help with housing costs while the person waits for their first payment of Universal Credit.

In addition, from July 2020, people who are currently claiming Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance or Employment and Support Allowance will receive a two-week 'run-on' of their benefit when they make a new Universal Credit claim.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities what her Department can do to prevent pay back of Advanced Payments, especially if the claim for Universal Credit is approved.

(AQW 13479/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Anyone suffering financial hardship when making their Universal Credit claim can apply for a non-repayable grant through the Universal Credit Contingency Fund. They do not need to take an Advance Payment before claiming the Contingency Fund grant. This is unique support, only available to people claiming Universal Credit here.

Information about the Contingency Fund grant is provided to everyone making a claim through a welcome message on their on-line journal account. People are advised of the Contingency Fund grant before any reference to the Advance Payment option. The message also includes a link to the Contingency Fund application form.

With respect to the Advance Payment, currently people have up to 12 months to pay back the advance payment. This can be extended to 15 months if a person is experiencing financial difficulty. The repayment period will be extended to 24 months for all claims from October 2021.

It is not possible for my Department, as these are advances of a person's Universal Credit award, to prevent pay back of Advanced Payments.

However, my Department is sympathetic to the needs of people who come to us seeking assistance. Anyone experiencing financial hardship in repaying an Advance Payment can contact the Department's Debt Management team, on 0800 587 1322, to discuss the options available to them.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities how her Department can promote awareness of the Contingency Fund.

(AQW 13480/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Universal Credit Contingency Fund is very actively promoted to people claiming Universal Credit and, more widely, through the NI Direct website.

Everyone who makes a claim to Universal Credit is informed about the Contingency Fund through a personal welcome message on their online journal. This message includes signposting to the Finance Support Freephone and Textphone numbers, as well as a link to the online claim form if they wish to enquire further, or apply directly, to the Contingency Fund.

Our staff also promote the Universal Credit Contingency Fund to anyone contacting them to report financial hardship. The Department also uses its social media channels to highlight the existence of the Contingency Fund, and our partners in the Advice Sector also actively promote its existence.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities why the Cost of Work Allowance scheme was not brought into Northern Ireland to help lone parents and childcare costs.

(AQW 13481/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group recommended the introduction of a Cost of Work Allowance as part of the package of welfare mitigation measures.

The Working Group recommendation was for payments to be available to people claiming either Working Tax Credit or Universal Credit with a special weighting for lone parents taking account of the cost of childcare. The scheme was to be delivered over a three year period ending on 31 March 2020.

When developing the Cost of Work Allowance policy the Department was advised by HMRC that payments would be treated as taxable income. Notification of this decision was received in the period when the Assembly was suspended. In view of the estimated impact of personal taxation on the value of Cost of Work Allowance payments to individuals it was the Department's assessment that the scheme could not be progressed until the return of the Assembly.

The introduction of a Cost of Work Allowance scheme for low-income working families is expected to be included in the forthcoming review of welfare mitigation measures. Details of the review will be announced in due course.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities how allocations of the Warm, Well and Connected programme are made; and to detail the criteria for allocation.

(AQW 13484/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Minister Ni Chuilín announced an investment of £3m in a Warm, Well and Connected initiative in December 2020.

The aim of the initiative is to offer wellbeing support to those most acutely impacted by the pandemic over the winter period. To address the ongoing and newly emerging needs faced by communities due to the pandemic, the Department has allocated the £3m to enhance and boost services aimed at providing practical support for people experiencing:

- Loneliness and Isolation
- Emotional wellbeing issues including anxiety
- Wellbeing issues related to cold conditions and an inability to heat their home

The following guiding criteria has been agreed to help community partners and advice organisations identify those in most impacted and in most extreme need in our communities:

- Children and Young People
- Older People, particularly living alone
- Disabled People and their Carers
- Those who have lost income as a result of the pandemic
- Clinically Extremely Vulnerable
- People from Ethnic Minority Communities

In addition to providing evidence that they fall into one of these categories, a recipient must demonstrate urgent need, loss of income and/or affordability issues directly linked to the pandemic in order to access fuel support. There is no automatic entitlement to fuel support.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities for how long the Warm, Well and Connected programme will continue to issue support.

(AQW 13485/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The aim of the £3m Warm, Well and Connected initiative is to offer wellbeing support to those most acutely impacted by the pandemic over the winter period. It is funding community wellbeing projects addressing loneliness, isolation, connectedness, emotional wellbeing, the promotion of physical activity and eating well.

The initiative includes a very small element of direct fuel support for those unable to afford the cost of heating their homes sufficiently, where no other benefit support is available and there is an emergency need.

The community wellbeing projects will run until the end of March 2021. There is a budget of £750,000 for direct fuel support and a flexible approach is being taken as to the timing of this expenditure to ensure that support best

meets needs; however it will not run beyond March 2021.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities whether capacity has been increased to the COVID-19 community helpline.

(AQW 13486/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The COVID-19 Community Helpline is supported by a capacity tool to calculate resource needs based on demand and daily monitoring allows forecasting to be carried out.

Following a surge in calls in January additional internal operators have been deployed. Alongside this, there is a cohort of reserve volunteers who can be deployed to the Helpline as required.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities how the Sports Hardship Fund applications will be assessed and administered.

(AQW 13488/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Sports Hardship Fund applications are currently being assessed and administered by Sport NI in line with the Sport NI Guidance Document set out at the website link below: -

<http://www.sportni.net/sportni/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/V4-SEPT-20-NEW-CRITERIA-FINAL-Sport-Hardship-Fund-Guidance-Notes1.pdf>

The third round of the Sports Hardship Fund closed for applications on the 5 November 2020. As of 29 January a total of £1,895,000 has been paid in grants to 986 applicants. Sport NI publish weekly updates on the number and value of applications processed - <http://www.sportni.net/funding/our-funding-programmes/sports-hardship-fund-2/sports-hardship-fund-dashboard-reporting/>.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Communities whether she has had any engagement with the Department for Work and Pensions on the subject of raising Statutory Sick Payment levels to provide adequate support for COVID-19 self-isolation and shielding.

(AQW 13498/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I have written to Therese Coffey, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to request that urgent consideration be given to increasing the rate of Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) to ensure that:

- i individuals are properly financially supported during the pandemic and
- ii. all those who are ill or self-isolating do not continue working thereby potentially endangering the health of others and further spreading the virus.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities to detail the successful appeal rate to Personal Independence Payment reviews by claimants residing in the Strangford constituency, in each year since its introduction.

(AQW 13505/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department does not hold information on the number of Personal Independence Payment appeals per constituency or the success rate of appeals per constituency or town. However, the table below details the total number of successful and unsuccessful Personal Independence Payment appeals, in each year since its introduction.

PIP	Successful	Unsuccessful	Success Rate
1 April 2016 – 31 March 2017	9	16	36%
1 April 2017 – 31 March 2018	1,467	1,348	52%
1 April 2018 – 31 March 2019	3,091	2,083	60%
1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020	3,768	2,192	63%
1 April 2020 – 31 January 2021	478	285	63%

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the number of official errors that took place in welfare provision; (ii) number of times discretionary waivers were implemented; and (iii) the total value of the waivers, in (a) 2018/19; (b) 2019/20; and (c) the first three quarters of 2020/21.

(AQW 13506/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department holds data on the number of official errors that occurred as a result of overpayment of benefit. Data is not captured on underpayments as when an error is detected in a case that results in underpayment, the proper benefit award is made by the benefit branch and if appropriate an arrears payment made. Estimates on the value of underpayments due to official error are published in the Department's Annual Report and Accounts.

The table overleaf sets out the number of overpayments due to official error in all social security benefits for the period requested including both non-recoverable and recoverable overpayments. A waiver is only appropriate for consideration where an overpayment is deemed recoverable.

Table 1: Benefit Overpayment Data – 1 Apr 2018 to 31 Dec 2020

Year	Number of official error overpayments	Number of waivers implemented	Value of waivers implemented £,000
2018/19	7,585	98	439
2019/20	10,719	165	535
April 2020 to 31.12.2020	8,438	45	88

I fully understand and appreciate the difficulties some people may be experiencing at this time and I am committed to protecting vulnerable people in these difficult and uncertain times.

My Department has well established processes in place to help people who are experiencing financial hardship, or having difficulty repaying loans or benefit overpayments. A range of steps have been taken to ensure people are aware that they can contact the Department if they are experiencing any difficulties with repayment rates including publishing information and guidance on NI Direct and on the Department for Communities website.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities whether the recommendations made in the Women's Support Network report entitled Consortium for the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas - The Impact of Universal Credit on Women, are being brought forward as part of the considerations for Welfare Reform Mitigations for 2021; and to list the stakeholder reports and documents being considered as part of her Department's considerations on welfare reform.
(AQW 13507/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The New Decade, New Approach Deal includes a commitment to complete a review of the welfare mitigation measures. While the specific issues that will be considered as part of the review have not been finalised, I am committed to the principle of co-design and that due regard should be given to all appropriate evidence and to a full range of stakeholder input while taking into account the availability of funding.

On this basis it is likely that the Women's Support Network report will be included for consideration in any review of future mitigation measures.

Other such reports that may be considered for evidence to inform the review into future mitigation measures would include:

- Human Rights Commission report "Cumulative Impact Assessment of tax and social security reforms" and the NIHRC Annual Statement 2020
- The UN Concluding Observations from their Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- Cliff Edge Coalition report "Welfare Reform: Mitigations on a Cliff Edge"
- Audit Office Personal Independence Payment Review
- Advice NI Briefing Paper – Safeguarding Vulnerable Social Security Benefit Claimants

This is not an exhaustive list and further reports/documents may come into consideration. It should also be noted that any proposals for new mitigation measures will also need to take into consideration the availability of funding

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities whether she will ensure the Contingency Fund is offered to Universal Credit applicants before any advance loan; and that a link to the application process for the Contingency Fund is provided to all new applicants of Universal Credit.

(AQW 13508/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Arrangements are already in place to ensure that the Universal Credit Contingency Fund is offered to Universal Credit applicants before any advance loan, through the personal welcome message that customers receive on their online journal when they make their claim. This message includes signposting to the Finance Support Freephone and Textphone numbers, as well as a link to the online claim form if they wish to enquire further, or apply directly, to the Contingency Fund.

Staff also promote the Universal Credit Contingency Fund to anyone contacting them to report financial hardship. The Department also uses its social media channels to highlight the existence of the Contingency Fund, and our partners in the Advice Sector also actively promote its existence.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the support her Department is providing to GAA clubs who have been financially impacted due to Coronavirus restrictions.

(AQW 13521/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department and Sport NI have provided both financial and practical support to the sports sector, including the GAA, during the Coronavirus restrictions. The ongoing support has included advice on accessing Covid related relief programmes, maintaining the health and wellbeing of members, and on putting together specific protocols for a safe return to sport.

In terms of financial support I can confirm that Sport NI immediately, at the outset of the pandemic in March 2020, paid the Ulster GAA and other sports organisations grants due under its existing lottery programmes.

In addition, interim Minister Ni Chuilín made the case for sports clubs to be included in the eligibility criteria for the £25K Hospitality, Retail, Leisure and Tourism scheme administered by the Department for Economy. A number of GAA clubs have benefitted from that scheme.

In April 2020 the Department and Sport NI launched the Sports Hardship Fund for £1.245M to help sports clubs and organisations meet essential maintenance costs for sports facilities during lockdown and also to help clubs and organisations with the hire of sports facilities as sport returns.

A further £2M was secured in the June Monitoring round which has been allocated between the Sports Hardship Fund and a Covid Safe PPE Programme for clubs. As of 29 January, 183 GAA clubs have received funding under the Sports Hardship Fund whilst just over 200 GAA clubs will receive Covid Safe Sports Packs.

Finally, the £25M Sports Sustainability Fund which closed for applications on 20 January, is being administered by Sport NI to sustain eligible sport governing bodies and their affiliated clubs. Sport NI has received an application from the Ulster GAA, made on behalf of all elements of gaelic games, including affiliated clubs who have incurred covid related losses. Sport NI expects to begin making payments through the Ulster GAA towards the end of February.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Communities whether her Department is examining the possibility of bringing personal independence payment assessments in-house instead of outsourcing them to private sector companies; and what is the timeframe for its implementation.

(AQW 13525/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department is currently developing a Business Case that will appraise all of options for the future delivery of health assessment services from August 2023, including in-housing the service. It is estimated that this appraisal will complete by Spring 2021.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AWQ 12438/17-22, how many payments have been made in each constituency from the COVID-19 Discretionary Support Fund.

(AQW 13526/17-22)

Ms Hargey: This grant is being paid through the Discretionary Support service. System limitations mean the level of data requested is not currently readily available from March 2020 and resources are being prioritised at this time in delivering frontline Discretionary Support services to people in need.

However, my officials have analysed data available for quarter ending December 2020 and I can provide the following information relating to Self-Isolation grants broken down by constituency for that period.

	No. of payments	Amount paid £
Belfast East	57	£8,158.61
Belfast North	172	£23,485.58
Belfast South	71	£10,417.71
Belfast West	266	£35,336.93
East Antrim	39	£5,377.50
East Derry	144	£21,084.74
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	17	£1,844.53
Foyle	216	£30,262.28
Lagan Valley	38	£4,998.69
Mid Ulster	75	£11,066.77
Newry & Armagh	96	£25,507.56
North Antrim	40	£6,372.07
North Down	30	£3,468.46
South Antrim	37	£5,849.52
South Down	53	£8,782.67
Strangford	30	£5,437.58
Upper Bann	56	£9,486.65
West Tyrone	56	£7,137.12

The management information included in this response while accurate at the time it was provided may change when subjected to final reconciliation/verification checks prior to publication as applicable.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AWQ 12611/17-22, what criteria her Department applied in determining the distribution of funds to each Neighbourhood Partnership Board.

(AQW 13527/17-22)

Ms Hargey: You will be familiar with my Department's People and Place Strategy which aims to bring together the work of Government Departments in partnership with local communities to tackle disadvantage, deprivation and build communities that are confident, vibrant and sustainable.

There are 36 Neighbourhood Renewal areas which have the highest level of deprivation and my predecessor, Carál Ní Chuilín MLA prioritised a range of new culture, arts and heritage projects developed and delivered at community level with significant emphasis on inclusion within these areas.

In seeking applications from community organisations, Neighbourhood Renewal Area Partnerships prioritised applications from organisations who have minimal grant funding who can bring forward proposals that:

- a) address short term need and impact;
- b) Empower and connect grassroots community based organisations' engaging in arts, culture and heritage activities;
- c) Have a clear social impact, and that enable those who do not usually have access to arts activities to have this access and opportunities;
- d) Work both within and across traditional community boundaries.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AWQ 12611/17-22, for a breakdown of how the funding received by each Neighbourhood Partnership Board has been spent.

(AQW 13528/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As you know my Department allocated £0.535 million to 36 Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships during December 2020 and they subsequently invited applications for funding with a closing date of 6 January 2021. These applications are still being assessed.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities what conditions were attached to expenditure of the Community Support Fund monies released to local councils; and what oversight her Department has of this spending.

(AQW 13529/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The COVID-19 Community Support Fund is released to Councils subject to an agreed Memorandum of Understanding setting out the conditions attached to the expenditure of the Fund, including the timeframe for expenditure. Conditions include:

- The funding must align to the Community Support Programme objectives and support actions in line with the following interventions:
 - **Financial** - to those on low income and at risk due to financial stress.
 - **Food** - access to food (whether due to cost or availability) for those most in need.
 - **Connectivity** - to those living alone or in rural and border areas that are likely to experience greater challenges in accessing services.
- The funding should be also be targeted where possible in line with my priorities of targeting target objective need, tackling poverty and embedding a rights based approach.

My officials are in regular contact by phone and email with councils and receive both verbal and written updates on the allocation and the impact of the Community Support Fund.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister for Communities how many Housing Executive applications were (i) made; and (ii) granted for Full Duty Applicant status, by both parents, in cases of a relationship breakdown where equal shared access has been granted to children, within each management area, in (a) 2018/19; and (b) 2019/20.

(AQW 13537/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive, which has statutory responsibility for homelessness, does not hold this information. While applications may be processed for both parents, in any applicable cases the Housing Executive does not have any means by which both applications will be linked as they will be considered as individual applications in their own right.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities whether she will seek the use of accelerated passage to extend and strengthen welfare mitigations beyond March 2021.

(AQW 13539/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The New Decade, New Approach Deal included a commitment to extend the welfare mitigation schemes that my Department currently delivers. This was to ensure continued assistance for vulnerable people who have lost benefit due to welfare reform.

I can confirm that I intend to introduce new primary and subordinate legislation to provide for an extension of the existing welfare mitigation schemes. I am personally committed to introducing this legislation as a matter of urgency. The approach to take with the passage of the legislation remains under consideration.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities why legislation to extend and strengthen welfare mitigations has not yet been introduced.

(AQW 13540/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I can confirm that a draft legislation to provide for the extension of the existing welfare mitigation schemes has been prepared and will be introduced in due course.

I am personally committed to exploring all options to strengthen the welfare mitigation package. This is complex work and any new legislation to provide for further mitigation measures will be brought forward after completion of the forthcoming review of welfare mitigation measures. I will make an announcement on plans for the review at the earliest opportunity.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities whether she intends to amend her Department's advice on home moving during the pandemic to include the mandatory wearing of face coverings when entering a property for viewings.
(AQW 13563/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department's home moving advice document now strongly advises the wearing of face coverings when entering a property for viewing. It is not possible to mandate the wearing of face coverings through such guidance. This can only be mandated through the relevant health regulations, which fall under the remit of the Department of Health. My Department's guidance document will continue to be reviewed regularly to ensure that it is consistent with the regulations and any relevant public health advice.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities how many people are currently awaiting the result of a personal independence payment appeal.
(AQW 13570/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As at 31 December 2020, there were 6,039 personal independence payment appeal cases awaiting a final determination.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Communities to detail the level of financial support in COVID-19 recovery funds her Department has given to each individual council since the start of the pandemic.
(AQW 13583/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department has been allocated £85.3m from the Executive for councils to alleviate projected financial losses and COVID-19 costs during 2020-21. To date £40.3m has been paid to councils in total.

Allocations of the remaining £45m funding will be confirmed once final information has been provided by councils and due diligence considered. All funding will be released to Councils before the end of March 2021.

My Department also activated the Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance (SEFA) - COVID-19 for the period 3 April 2020 to 3 October 2020, and then from 4 October 2020 to 31 March 2021 to reimburse councils with other costs due to the COVID-19 crisis. My Department has allocated £86k to councils under this scheme.

Councils have also received funding from my Department of £6m for a COVID-19 Community Support Fund through the existing Community Support Programme.

Payments totalling £12m for the COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme have been made to councils by my Department to provide much needed support to local businesses as they recover and adapt to the impact of COVID-19.

I have, and will continue to press for funding for councils for 2021/22 so that they can continue to deliver vital public services and ensure that there are not substantial rate increases for businesses and households as we continue to respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

A Task & Finish Group (TFG) has been established as a subgroup of the Partnership Panel and one of their main priorities is local government finance. The first meeting of the TFG took place on 12 January 2021 and involved Departments, SOLACE, NILGA and the Association of Local Government Finance Officers (ALGFO).

Details of the allocations to each council are shown below:

Council	COVID-19 Allocation	SEFA	Community Support Fund	Recovery Revitalisation Scheme
Antrim & Newtownabbey	£2,421,837	£4,812.63	£314,689.32	£507,000
Ards & North Down	£3,227,422	£3,464.48	£330,120.09	£1,118,000
Armagh, Banbridge, Craigavon	£3,536,026	£6,037.00	£517,207.74	£1,340,000
Belfast	£9,610,616	£5,214.48	£1,735,568.00	£3,286,000
Causeway Coast & Glens	£3,567,614	£24,416.86	£404,544.99	£779,000
Derry & Strabane	£3,115,933	£16,104.34	£1,003,928.00	£1,095,000
Fermanagh & Omagh	£2,101,064	£3,004.77	£312,318.98	£616,000
Lisburn & Castlereagh	£2,998,705	£7,369.43	£294,800.00	£670,000
Mid & East Antrim	£3,974,542	£5,646.06	£337,414.00	£881,000

Council	COVID-19 Allocation	SEFA	Community Support Fund	Recovery Revitalisation Scheme
Mid Ulster	£3,558,182	£6,795.84	£282,953.64	£691,000
Newry Mourne & Down	£2,188,059	£3,555.55	£467,100.49	£1,018,000
Total	£40,300,000	£86,421.44	£6,000,645.25	£12,001,000

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities how many people are waiting for a Personal Independence Payment appeal hearing in each constituency, broken down by each month since 1 March 2018.

(AQW 13601/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department does not record information either on a constituency or month to month basis. However, the table below details the total number of active Personal Independence Payment appeals in each town at 31 July, broken down by each year since 1 March 2018.

Town	July 2018	July 2019	July 2020
Armagh	102	122	72
Ballymena	240	396	281
Ballymoney	89	138	87
Banbridge	96	160	105
Belfast	2,485	3,491	2,827
Coleraine	245	248	197
Cookstown	51	86	40
Craigavon	247	313	221
Derry	330	238	182
Downpatrick	284	421	289
Dungannon	205	179	118
Enniskillen	168	146	94
Limavady	40	35	40
Magherafelt	73	74	51
Newry	298	396	295
Newtownards	317	408	337
Omagh	192	145	132
Strabane	88	71	72
Total	5,550	7,067	5,440

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities when the decision on the Work Ready Employment Service tenders will be made and successful applicants notified.

(AQW 13602/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Award of contracts in relation to Work Ready Employability Service tenders is currently paused while the Department assess the Draft Budget for 2021-22. If the contract is not awarded by 4 February, tenderers will be asked to confirm if they wish their tenders to remain valid for consideration.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities on what date Supporting People contracts are due to complete in 2021; and when she will invite stakeholders to co-design and co-produce the next Supporting People programme.

(AQW 13603/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive have confirmed that Funding Agreements are renewed with service provider organisations annually. Current Funding Agreements are due to expire on 14 March 2021 and will be extended to 13 March 2022 where applicable.

I have asked the Housing Executive to consider using a co-design / co-production approach in developing their 3 year Strategy to ensure the views and ambitions of Provider organisations are fully represented. The Housing Executive have agreed to draw up a high level plan setting out key steps and associated timescales.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities whether she has made a bid for money to further support the Arts, Events and Sports sectors from the end of year amounts identified by the Minister for Finance.
(AQW 13605/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My officials continue to engage with delivery partners who are assessing the financial requirements across these sectors to determine the need for and extent of any further bids to the Department of Finance.

It is my intention that all eligible financial need assessed across these schemes will be supported in full.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Communities how many families are impacted by the two-child limit in relation to (i) Child Tax Credit; and (ii) Universal Credit.
(AQW 13616/17-22)

Ms Hargey: At August 2020, it is estimated that 2,730 Universal Credit households were impacted by the two-child limit.

As my Department is not responsible for the payment of Child Tax Credits we are unable to provide the above requested information. All statistical data related to Tax Credits can be obtained through HMRC.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Communities to detail the timeframe for introducing a strengthened mitigations package to provide protections for families impacted by the two-child limit in relation to (i) Child Tax Credit; and (ii) Universal Credit.
(AQW 13617/17-22)

Ms Hargey: It is not yet possible to provide a definitive timeline for the introduction of a strengthened mitigations package. While all of the specific issues that will be considered as part of the review of welfare mitigation measures have not been finalised I can confirm that the priority consideration will be support for families affected by the "two child" policy in Universal Credit, Child Tax Credit and Housing Benefit.

Details of the format of the review, including engagement with stakeholders, will be shared with the Committee for Communities at the earliest opportunity.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Communities how many children live in households affected by the two-child limit in relation to (i) Child Tax Credit; and (ii) Universal Credit.
(AQW 13618/17-22)

Ms Hargey: At August 2020 it is estimated that 2,730 Universal Credit households were impacted by the two-child limit. Within these households, 1,950 households had three children, 550 households had four children and 220 households had five or more children.

It is important to note that these figures do not detail how many children may be deemed ineligible by the two child limit policy i.e. a household with five children could have one child ineligible, two children ineligible etc.

As my Department is not responsible for the payment of Child Tax Credits we are unable to provide the above requested information. All statistical data related to Tax Credits can be obtained through HMRC.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Communities whether her Department will engage with housing associations to address the need for bungalow properties within Antrim town.
(AQW 13621/17-22)

Ms Hargey: On 1 April 2007 the Department introduced restrictions on the building of bungalows where there is not a clear identifiable need.

I should stress that the development of bungalow accommodation is not prohibited, but rather is more strictly controlled. Should the Housing Executive or Housing Association identify a specific need that cannot be met through the normal provision of general lifetime homes or where local council planners impose restrictions on the type of dwellings that can be built, my Department will support this and funding will be provided.

During the year 2019/20 there were 11 bungalows delivered in Antrim town via the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP). Apex Housing provided 10 bungalows at Fennel Road as Council Planners stipulated single storey dwellings at this location. A further bungalow was purchased at Massereene Gardens by Choice Housing

Within the current SHDP 2020/21-2022/23 there are 116 social housing units programmed to start in Antrim town. Whilst only one bungalow is planned within these schemes, there are 60 apartments for active older people and 11 wheelchair accessible properties programmed to start (4 of which are designed to be suitable for older people). I have included at Table 1 below details of these schemes and the current proposed housing mixes. Please note that programmed schemes may be lost or slip to future programme years for a variety of reasons e.g. relating to delays in acquiring sites and/or failure to secure Planning Approval.

Table 1: Social housing schemes programmed to start in Antrim Town 2020/21 – 2022/23

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Units	Current Housing Mix	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Choice	Dublin Road	Antrim	New Build	32	29 x 2-bed apartments for active older people; 3 x 2-bed wheelchair accessible apartments (for older people)	2021/22	2023/24
Choice	Stiles Way/ Fountain Hill	Antrim	New Build	33	2 x 1-bed apartments for active older people; 2 x 2-bed apartments for active older people; 21 x 2-bed houses for general needs; 5 x 3-bed houses for general needs; 1 x 2-bed wheelchair accessible apartment (for an older person) 1 x 2-bed wheelchair accessible house; 1 x 3-bed wheelchair accessible house	2021/22	2023/24
Clanmil	Deerpark Hotel	Antrim	New Build	35	11 x 2-bed apartments for active older people; 2 x 1-bed apartments for general needs; 13 x 2-bed houses for general needs; 8 x 3-bed houses for general needs 1 x 3-bed wheelchair accessible bungalow	2021/22	2023/24
Radius	5-9 Riverside	Antrim	New Build	16	2 x 1-bed apartments for active older people; 14 x 2-bed apartments for active older people;	2021/22	2023/24

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the welfare mitigations being considered by her Department.
(AQW 13628/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department is not yet in a position to provide details of each specific area of the social security system that will feature in the review of welfare mitigation measures. However, I can confirm that the priority consideration will be support for families affected by the “two child” policy in Universal Credit, Child Tax Credits and Housing Benefit.

The review will also consider each of the proposed new mitigation measures included in the report “Cumulative impact assessment of tax and social security reforms”, which was published by the Human Rights Commission in November 2019. In addition it is expected that consideration will be given to the need for additional support for people in the private rented sector who are on low income and for people making a new claim to Universal Credit.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities what steps she has taken to provide temporary accommodation for those who are homeless .
(AQW 13629/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Housing Executive has statutory responsibility to provide interim and/or permanent accommodation for certain homeless households, dependent upon investigations and assessment of their circumstances.

The increase in demand for temporary accommodation as a result of the ongoing pandemic is evident from the provision of 7,230 placements in temporary accommodation from 1st April 2020 to 31st December 2020 which compares with 3,096 placements in the equivalent period in 2019. While demand has increased significantly, in some cases capacity within hostels has reduced to accommodate social distancing and/or self-isolation and the Housing Executive has sought to mitigate this reduction through the provision of a range of alternative measures such as the use of additional single lets, block booking arrangements for non-standard accommodation and the use of vacant Housing Executive properties for temporary accommodation.

The measures above are part of the Housing Executive's ongoing response to the pandemic and further details can be found in 'The Way Home – Homelessness response to Covid-19' which can be accessed via:

www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Homelessness/homelessness-reset-plan-the-way-home.

The Housing Executive's approach to assisting those who are homeless or threatened with homeless is outlined in the Homelessness Strategy 2017-22 which can be accessed via: www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Homelessness/homelessness-strategy-northern-ireland-2017-2022.

The Strategy outlines how, in order to prevent homelessness, Housing Solutions staff will provide person centred services which are tailored to meet the needs of individual customers and support them to achieve sustainable housing solutions and how the Housing Executive seek to address homelessness when it cannot be prevented. Staff in Housing Solutions and Support Teams will work with customers and call upon the necessary support from other agencies to support clients. This support can include floating support to prevent homelessness or temporary accommodation in cases where emergency accommodation is required.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail her Department's budget forecast contained within the 2021-2024 budget exercise provided to the Department of Finance for (i) regional stadia programme; and (ii) sub-regional stadia programme.

(AQW 13630/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department submitted the information contained in the table below to Department of Finance as part of the Budget Information Gathering exercise.

	2021-22 £'000	2022-23 £'000	2023-24 £'000	2024-25 £'000
(i) Regional Stadia Programme – Casement Park Project	20,000	50,000	27,000	4,500
(ii) Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer	0	5,000	20,000	11,000

This information was based on best estimates at September 2020 and will be subject to business cases being prepared as the programmes progress.

This baseline profile is conditional upon:

- The timing of the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) grant of Planning Permission;
- Any potential Judicial Review proceedings that may be sought in relation to a grant of Planning Permission; and
- My approval of the expenditure within the Casement Park Stadium Full Business Case and the Executive's approval of an increase to the project budget.

Any deviation from the above may extend the period of spend and result in adjustment to the baseline profile.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the 800 plus social housing new starts which were not achieved in the 2019/20 financial due to the impact of COVID-19; and whether they are in addition to the 2020/21 new starts target.

(AQW 13631/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic had a major impact on the delivery of the Social Housing Development Plan (SHDP) during the final quarter of 2019/20. The Housing Executive is working closely with housing associations and Council Planning departments to secure starts in February and March 2021 for the 'carry-forward' schemes for which construction has yet to commence.

The new social housing starts for the 2020/21 year will be delivered through a combination of 'carry-forward' schemes from 2019/20 and new schemes for the 2020/21 year. Although the final out-turn will not be confirmed until after year-end, it is currently anticipated that the 1,850-unit starts target for the 2020/21 year will be exceeded.

There were a total of 29 schemes representing 891 unit starts for which an on-site start was delayed in the final quarter of 2019/20 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Of these, 20 schemes are now on site representing 337 unit starts, 6 schemes representing 274 unit starts are expected to start in February/March 2021, 2 schemes await planning approval representing 267 unit starts and 1 scheme representing 13 unit starts has slipped to 2021/22.

I have at Table 1 below provided details of those schemes. An update on the current status of each scheme is also included.

Table 1: Schemes for which an on- site start was delayed in the final quarter of 2019/20 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Units	Current Status
Apex Housing	Galliagh Ph5, Derry	28	Started 2020/21
Apex Housing	Southern Galliagh Infill site, Derry	9	Started 2020/21
Apex Housing	Hass Road, Dungiven Ph3	22	Started 2020/21
Apex Housing	Craigmore Way, Newry	255	Planning Approval awaited
Apex Housing	Bishop Street, Derry	9	Started 2020/21
Ark	125-139 Strand Road, Derry	27	Started 2020/21
Ark	Derrytrasna Road, Lurgan	14	Started 2020/21
Ark	Rourkes Link, Ballyhornan	13	Slipped to 2021/22 – conveyancing delays
Ark	58 Hillsborough Road, Lisburn	12	Planning Approval awaited
Ark	42 Main Street, Strabane	12	Started 2020/21
Choice	Cairnmartin, Belfast Ph2	26	Started 2020/21
Choice	Moyard Playpark, Belfast	14	Started 2020/21
Choice	Ashley Avenue, Belfast	23	Expected to start February 2021
Clanmil	186 Ballynamoney Road, Lurgan	3	Started 2020/21
Clanmil	Glenbryn Ph3, Belfast	12	Started 2020/21
Clanmil	Sloane Crescent, Killyleagh	5	Expected to start February 2021
Clanmil	Lands at Foxhill, Derry	3	Started 2020/21
Clanmil	Castlewellaan Road, Newcastle	11	Started 2020/21
Clanmil	Pound Lane, Downpatrick	66	Expected to start February 2021
Connswater	Rathmullan Drive, Newtownards	9	Started 2020/21
Connswater	Milewater Drive, New Mossley	50	Started 2020/21
Habinteg	Adria Factory, Strabane	150	Expected to start March 2021
Habinteg	8 Letterkenny Road, Derry	24	Expected to start March 2021
Radius	Hopewell Crescent, Belfast	18	Started 2020/21
Radius	Gardenmore Road, Belfast	14	Started 2020/21
Radius	Ebrington PS, Derry	49	Started 2020/21
Radius	158 Tassagh Road, Keady	1	Started 2020/21
Rural	Clonmeen Drive, Strathfoyle	6	Started 2020/21
Rural	14 Main Street, Doagh	6	Expected to start February 2021

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Communities for an update on Public Land for Public Housing.
(AQW 13635/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department's Public Land for Housing Project has identified and secured the release of the following ten public sector sites for housing, meeting its Programme for Government (PfG) target.

- 1 Glenbryn Drive, Belfast
- 2 Galliagh Linear Park, Derry
- 3 Ballynamoney Lane, Craigavon
- 4 Former Newtownabbey High School
- 5 Lisniskey Lane, Craigavon
- 6 Former Catering College, Cecil Street, Newry

- 7 North Street, Newry
- 8 Norfolk Court, Antrim
- 9 Craigmore Way, Newry
10. Talbot Street, Newtownards

It should be noted, however, that there are a number of factors outside the control of the Department that may limit or preclude development on any site such as environmental factors, ground contamination, financial viability or planning constraints.

As well as achieving the PfG target the work of the project has been successful in terms of:

- Developing a digital map of DfC assets which has been published online on the Spatial NI platform;
- Providing the baseline data for the Land and Property Services (LPS) Government Land and Property Register (GLPR) project; and
- Developing new collaborative cross departmental partnerships to explore the release of unused land across the public sector.

The Project Team found that most public sector land is currently being used, or has a use planned for it. As other government Departments and public bodies are responsible for managing their own land portfolios, with their own strategic priorities for the land under their control, DfC does not have authority to compel them to release land for housing.

The availability of quality data in an accessible format was a significant barrier to achieving all of the initial objectives of this Project. Until more enhanced digital data from other departments becomes available and is mapped by the GLPR project, there is likely to be very limited opportunity to identify sites which could be used for housing and will have significant impact on housing supply in areas of high need or address housing stress.

Officials are currently considering how best the Department can continue to build on this work beyond March 2021.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 9343/17-22, for an update on the review of the Adviser Discretion Fund.
(AQW 13665/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department, as part of the labour market response to the Covid-19 pandemic, has carried out a recent review of the Adviser Discretion Fund (ADF) and recommended that costs should be increased.

The Executive's draft Budget 2021-22 present significant challenges for the Executive and across departments with a constrained Spending Review outcome. However, no decisions on the final outcome have been made yet. The Executive's draft Budget 2021-22 is currently subject to consultation and all responses will be taken into account when finalising the Budget.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities whether she plans to reopen the Pavement Café Scheme, given the ongoing restrictions related to COVID-19.
(AQW 13702/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As the Pavement Café Scheme falls under the remit of DfC I am providing answer to this question.

Under the Licensing of Pavement Cafés Act (NI) 2014 (the Act), it is the responsibility of each district council to design a pavement café licensing regime appropriate to their area and the Act contains a significant degree of flexibility for councils to respond to local circumstances.

At present, hospitality venues are not permitted to offer outdoor seating for those availing of takeaway services. The current regulations are in place until 5 March 2021. It would be a matter for each district council to then consider whether or not to open any such licensing scheme.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Communities (i) for a breakdown of all vacant properties and land owned by her Department; (ii) how long each property has been vacant; (iii) how much has been spent on rates in each of the last five years, per property; and (iv) how much has been spent on maintenance in each of the last five years, per property.
(AQW 13717/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The answer to the above question comprises a considerable amount of information and detail. Therefore we have provided this for deposit in the Assembly Library for your convenience.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 12497/17-22, what consultation her Department has had with residents in the Holylands and Lower Lisburn Road areas of Belfast in the review of the Houses in Multiple Occupation Licensing Scheme.
(AQW 13725/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The current review of the implementation of the Houses in Multiple Occupation licencing scheme has sought responses from a range of stakeholders including Councils, Landlords, Managing Agents and Tenants of Houses in Multiple Occupation through Tenants Advocacy Groups.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities for an update on work to revitalise the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.
(AQW 13733/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My revitalisation plans are ongoing. Officials have commenced work to update the financial analysis and will then engage using a co-design approach to assess options.

I intend to bring proposals to the Executive before the end of this mandate.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities what engagement her Department has had with Office of National Statistics regarding the revitalisation of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

(AQW 13734/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My revitalisation plans are at an early stage. I have committed to a co-design approach and my officials will engage with stakeholders in due course. As the independent statistical authority, ONS is responsible for decisions on classification and therefore does not participate in policy development on issues affecting classification. Notwithstanding this, the recent engagement with ONS in relation to its reclassification of our registered Housing Associations is useful experience.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities whether a tenant ballot will be conducted on any proposals as part of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive revitalisation.

(AQW 13735/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My revitalisation plans are at an early stage, but I want to reassure tenants that I am committed to a co-design approach in developing options. Engagement with tenants and their representatives will be central to this process.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the timeline for engagement with tenants of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to reclassify the organisation as a cooperative or a mutual body.

(AQW 13736/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My revitalisation plans are ongoing. I have assured tenants that I am committed to a co-design approach in developing these options. Engagement with tenants and their representatives will be central to this process.

My officials are working on updating the financial analysis, in order that the scale of the investment challenge is clearly understood.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities who set the policy and eligibility criteria for the COVID-19 heating payment which is being administered via Advice NI.

(AQW 13737/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The aim of the initiative is to offer wellbeing support to those most acutely impacted by the pandemic over the winter period. It includes a very small budget of £750,000 as part of the overall Wellbeing support to provide fuel support to those whose wellbeing has been impacted by not being able to afford to heat their homes. This is separate from the Covid 19 Heating Payment, which will be paid automatically to those in receipt of qualifying benefits. Rather, this fund is aimed at supporting those who have not been able to access support from other sources and who are in extreme financial need.

The following guiding criteria has been agreed to help community partners and advice organisations identify those in most extreme need in our communities, given the very limited budget:

- Children and Young People
- Older People, particularly living alone
- Disabled People and their Carers
- Those who have lost income as a result of the pandemic
- Clinically Extremely Vulnerable
- People from Ethnic Minority Communities

In addition to providing evidence that they fall into one of these categories, a recipient must demonstrate loss of income or affordability issues directly linked to the pandemic in order to access fuel support. There is no automatic entitlement.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of people in each constituency (i) on the housing waiting list; (ii) living in housing stress; and (iii) who have 30 or below housing points.

(AQW 13741/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has provided the following table detailing the number of people in each parliamentary constituency (i) on the housing waiting list; (ii) living in housing stress; and (iii) who have 30 or below housing points.

Parliamentary Constituency	Total Number of Applicants	Housing Stress (30 points or more)	<30 Points	Allocations to Applicants
Belfast East	2023	1370	653	360

Parliamentary Constituency	Total Number of Applicants	Housing Stress (30 points or more)	<30 Points	Allocations to Applicants
Belfast East/South*	401	264	137	45
Belfast North	4314	3235	1079	651
Belfast South	2668	1964	704	267
Belfast South/Strangford*	122	101	21	<10
Belfast West	3727**	2986	741**	401
Belfast West/North*	128	87	41	16
Belfast West/South*	22	22	-	<10
East Antrim	1643	1131	512	265
East Derry	2327	1271	1056	292
Fermanagh South Tyrone	1886	1248	638	253
Foyle	4314	3262	1052	532
Lagan Valley	1968	1410	558	339
Mid Ulster	1209	695	514	161
Newry & Armagh	2228	1641	587	220
North Antrim	2101	1330	771	417
North Down	1821	1284	537	305
South Antrim	1603	1225	378	208
South Down	2010	1529	481	178
Strangford	1605	1112	493	326
Upper Bann	2823	1679	1144	297
West Tyrone	1722	1072	650	203
Grand Total	42665	29918	12747	5746

*The following CLA Areas cross Parliamentary Constituency Boundaries:

**Housing Executive CLA
Parliamentary Constituency**

Cregagh Castlereagh	Belfast East/South
Willowfield/Upper Castlereagh Road	Belfast East/South
Carryduff	Belfast South/Strangford
Ainsworth	Belfast West/North
Twaddell/Upper Woodvale	Belfast West/North
Hamill St / John St	Belfast West/South
Carrick Hill / Unity Flats	Belfast West/North
Bridge End / Rotherdam Court	Belfast East/South

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities to detail the total departmental funding for the independent advice sector for the 2020/21 financial year; and whether she intends to submit a bid to the Minister of Finance for the future funding of the independent advice sector in the next financial year.

(AQW 13771/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department provides significant annual funding in the region of £6.4million for the provision of independent community based advice services, including appeals and help with problem debt.

To address the impact of COVID-19 on increasing levels of debt, an additional ring fenced debt levy investment of just over £1million was allocated for 2020/21 for the provision of free debt advice and financial wellbeing support for citizens. This additional funding, which is being directed through regional and local delivery partners, will enable more people whose finances are impacted by COVID-19 to access the debt advice service. It will also support debt preventative and financial wellbeing measures.

The Executive's Draft 2021-2022 Budget is currently out for consultation and all responses will be taken into account in finalising the Budget. No decisions on the final outcome have been made yet.

Protection of services to vulnerable groups will be a key consideration in my Department's final budget decision.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities whether Areas at Risk funding will continue in the next financial year.
(AQW 13787/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I wrote to representatives of each Areas at Risk project in February 2020 advising that the budget for Areas at Risk would be protected for the 2020/21 and 2021/22 years.

My officials at a local level continue to engage with our delivery partners and we are currently finalising applications for the 2021/22 financial year.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities whether Neighbourhood Renewal funding will continue in the next financial year.
(AQW 13788/17-22)

Ms Hargey: In recognising the significant impact funding has in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas and the communities we seek to support, I wrote to all Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership chairs in February 2020 advising that the budget for Neighbourhood Renewal would be protected for the 2020/21 and 2021/22 years.

My officials at a local level continue to engage with our delivery partners and we are currently finalising applications for the 2021/22 financial year.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities whether Small Pockets of Deprivation funding will continue in the next financial year.
(AQW 13789/17-22)

Ms Hargey: In February 2020 I announced that the budget for programmes supported through People and Place a Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, including Small Pockets of Deprivation (SPODs) would be protected for the 2020/21 and 2021/22 years.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities, further to her update to the Assembly on 19 January 2021, when she expects to bring a paper to the Executive to approve changes to the Special Rules for Terminal Illness in social security law.
(AQW 13795/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I have highlighted previously that additional recurring costs resulting from any option to change the special rules for terminal illness, that breaks social security parity with Britain, will need to be borne by the Executive's block grant.

I am committed to supporting those in most need, including those requiring access to Special Rules for Terminal Illness. I also welcome the Assembly supporting this position.

When final decisions have been taken in relation to the 2021/22 budget, the Department will consider the available options.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities how her Department will progress reform to the Special Rules for Terminal Illness in social security law following the unallocated £2 million funding bid in the 2021/22 Executive Budget outcome.
(AQW 13798/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As you know additional recurring costs resulting from any option to change the special rules for terminal illness, that breaks social security parity with Britain, will need to be borne by the Executive's block grant.

I am committed to supporting those in most need, including those requiring access to Special Rules for Terminal Illness. I welcome the Assembly supporting this position also.

When final decisions have been taken in relation to the 2021/22 budget, the Department will consider options available.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities what action she has taken to ensure that payment of COVID-19-related support grants to workers is not included in assessments of income for the purpose of Universal Credit.
(AQW 13825/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I have taken a number of steps to ensure that COVID-19 payments are not included when calculating a person's Universal Credit entitlement.

The Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS) for self-employed workers affected by Covid-19, which is administered by HMRC, interacts with Universal Credit in that grants are treated as self-employment earnings and are taken into account in the month that they are received.

SEISS grant payments are taken into account following a deduction for allowable expenses, and contributions, plus any tax and National Insurance contributions that have been paid to HMRC in that month. Of the amount left, 63% is taken into account in the Universal Credit calculation.

In addition, those with children or who have (or their partner) been found unfit for work, will also have part of their earnings, including the SEISS grant, disregarded under the work allowance.

Payments from the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme are not taken into account as earnings for a self-employed person, where that person has applied to the scheme to secure support for their employees and where payments are to be passed on to those employees.

Where a self-employed person receives coronavirus support via a loan or grant to help aid their business, those support payments are not taken into account as income and are instead treated as capital to be disregarded for 12 months for the purposes of Universal Credit.

In addition, the following COVID-19 payments will not be taken into account as income in the Universal Credit award -

- one-off grant payments under the Department for Economy's New Self-Employed Support Scheme, which provides financial support to newly self-employed people whose business is impacted by Covid-19 and who have not been able to access support from the SEISS;
- one-off payments under the Department for Infrastructure's Taxi Driver Financial Assistance Scheme provided to help with directly incurred overhead costs and expenses;
- a grant payment made under the Department of Education's Childcare Sustainability Support Fund which provides help with additional costs of operating within Covid-19 guidance and provides financial support to childcare providers operating with reduced demand for services; and
- help from charities to those who have been unable to access either the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme or SEISS, for example freelance screen industry workers.

I have also written to Thérèse Coffey, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions requesting that urgent consideration is given to ensuring that the proposal by the Department of Health to make a one off payment of £500 to key workers in recognition of the vital role they are playing in response to the Covid-19 outbreak, is disregarded from social security benefits.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister for Communities what fire safety checks have been carried out on cladding that is being installed in some Housing Executive properties in the East Londonderry area.

(AQW 13839/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As part of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) funded thermal improvement scheme in the Heights estate in Coleraine, the Housing Executive propose to install an External Wall Insulation (EWI) system to low rise dwellings.

Contractors are responsible for making sure the design and installation are in accordance with the criteria and standards and that the completed installation will be covered by a 25 year 3rd party guarantee. The Housing Executive have advised that they ensure that the proposed system meets their specification and they also employ Clerks of Works on site during the construction phase to maintain quality control. The majority of the proposed systems consist of enhanced expanded polystyrene, all encapsulated by a reinforced render system with fire breaks between each dwelling.

To offer reassurances in relation to fire safety, the Housing Executive have confirmed that there is no void between the insulation and the existing wall and it is not a rain screen system similar to that installed at Grenfell.

When the scheme is completed, a Health & Safety file is provided for each dwelling which contains all of the approved materials, guarantees and compliance certificates.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities for an update on her engagement with HM Treasury regarding the requirement of the Housing Executive to pay corporation tax.

(AQW 13842/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department is continuing to work with officials from DoF, HMRC and Treasury to investigate the options available to release the Housing Executive from its existing tax liabilities, although no decision has yet been made.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the timeline for the proposed reclassification of the Housing Executive.

(AQW 13843/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Officials have commenced work to update the financial analysis and assess options to revitalise the Housing Executive.

I intend to bring a recommendation to the Executive before the end of this mandate which will include details of the timescales and budget for implementation.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities how much of the recently announced Housing Executive revitalisation work is able to commence in the absence of the £3.5 million bid for in the 2021/22 budget.

(AQW 13844/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The draft budget presents very significant challenges for the Executive and across departments with a constrained Spending Review Outcome.

The draft is currently out for consultation and it is important to note that no decisions on the final outcome have been made yet.

I will work hard to ensure the necessary resources are targeted towards those most in need.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail any alternative options her Department is exploring to reform the Special Rules for Terminal Illness in social security law; and when these changes will be delivered, following an unallocated funding bid in the Department's 2021/22 Budget.

(AQW 13845/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As you know additional recurring costs resulting from any option to change the special rules for terminal illness, that breaks social security parity with Britain, will need to be borne by the Executive's block grant.

I am committed to supporting those in most need, including those requiring access to Special Rules for Terminal Illness. I welcome the Assembly supporting this position also.

When final decisions have been taken in relation to the 2021/22 budget, the Department will consider options available.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities what additional assistance she intends to provide to those terminally ill welfare claimants who cannot reasonably meet the 6-month life expectancy criterion, given the abolition of this rule is not included in the current draft budget despite the 8 July 2020 High Court ruling that it was discriminatory.

(AQW 13851/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As you know additional recurring costs resulting from any option to change the special rules for terminal illness, that breaks social security parity with Britain, will need to be borne by the Executive's block grant.

I am committed to supporting those in most need, including those requiring access to Special Rules for Terminal Illness. I welcome the Assembly supporting this position also.

When final decisions have been taken in relation to the 2021/22 budget, the Department will consider options available.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the impact of the Executive's draft Budget 2021/22 on her Department, and the commitments made in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 13869/17-22)

Ms Hargey: It is clear that the draft budget presents very significant challenges for the Executive and across departments with a constrained Spending Review outcome.

No decisions on the final outcome have been made yet. The Executive's draft Budget 2021-2022 is currently subject to consultation and all responses will be taken into account when finalising the Budget. Now is the chance for people to shape the final outcome through their contributions to the consultation exercise.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities what discussions have taken place with the Minister for Infrastructure to ensure that investment being made into wastewater treatment works can assist her Department achieve its housing target.

(AQW 13901/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As announced by Minister Ní Chuilín in her statement of 3rd November, I have begun the process of developing a fundamental housing supply strategy. The strategy will look at some of the major barriers to supply, which will include water and wastewater infrastructure. I wrote to the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) Minister on 2 December 2020 to request representation from DfI on the Strategy project board. I am pleased that DfI is now represented on this board and also on the Virtual Housing Panel, which acts as an ongoing reference group of sector specialists as the Strategy progresses.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) any engagement or correspondence with councils relating to their work with local volunteer centres; and (ii) any matters raised.

(AQW 13984/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My department provides funding to Volunteer Now and six independent Volunteer Centres under its longstanding Volunteering Infrastructure Support Programme to provide advice and support to organisations involved in supporting Volunteering, including Councils.

In December 2020 a distinct Volunteering Fund was distributed to Councils as part of the Department's Access to Food COVID Emergency Response.

Council representatives were involved in design workshops in December and also in individual meetings to outline the nature of the support available through the Fund. The Memorandum of Understanding for this funding specifies that Volunteer Centres and Volunteer Now should connect into local responses where possible. It also highlights the range of support that these organisations can offer to Councils in relation to Volunteering.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities (i) to detail any changes to the Volunteer Infrastructure Strategic Group; (ii) whether partners within the strategic group are treated and considered equally; (iii) whether any partner within the strategic group is providing a specific service for her Department; (iv) to detail the procurement process for this service; and (v) how this service has been communicated to other partners within the group.

(AQW 13986/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department provides funding to Volunteer Now and six independent Volunteer Centres under its longstanding Volunteering Infrastructure Support Programme.

The relationship between the Department and the seven organisations within the Group is governed by agreed delivery objectives around the shared service they provide. There is no organisation that provides a specific service for the Department.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) her Department's current budget allocation for this financial year for welfare mitigations; (ii) her Department's expected budget allocation for the next financial year for welfare mitigations; and (iii) whether her Department will receive any additional funding through Barnett consequentials, given the increase allocated to the Department for Work and Pensions for 2021/22 in the HM Treasury Spending Review 2020.

(AQW 14022/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department's budget allocation for 2020/21 was agreed at the Executive on 30 March 2020 and announced in the Assembly on 31 March 2020. The budget included £40.3 million for the continuation of the existing welfare mitigations.

The Executive's draft Budget 2021/22 was announced by Finance Minister on 18 January 2021. Draft allocations propose for my Department include £42.8 million for the continuation of the existing welfare mitigations in 2021/22.

The Executive's draft Budget 2021/22 is currently subject to public consultation. The Executive will determine any additional Barnett consequential allocations to departments in the final outcome.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities why her Department is cutting funding to Advice NI.

(AQW 14036/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The draft budget presents very significant challenges for the Executive and across departments with a constrained Spending Review outcome.

However, no decisions on the final outcome have been made yet. The Executive's draft Budget 2021-2022 is currently subject to consultation and all responses will be taken into account when finalising the Budget. Now is the chance for people to shape the final outcome through their contributions to the consultation exercise.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for Communities what additional financial support, other than grants from SportNI, will be provided for sports clubs who have a licence to sell alcohol.

(AQW 14118/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department has implemented a number of schemes to support and sustain the sports sector during the restrictions, including the Sports Sustainability Fund and the Sports Hardship Fund.

At the end of 2020, Minister Ní Chuilín secured £25million for a Sports Sustainability Fund in order to provide support for the sports sector who are experiencing financial hardship due to Covid-19.

The Sports Sustainability Fund which closed for applications on 20 January, is being administered by SportNI to assist eligible sport governing bodies and their affiliated clubs. The Fund recognises that hospitality is an important income stream for many sports clubs and the application process included the provision for clubs to submit details on Covid losses based on information on income and expenditure relating to their social club bars and food provision.

The Sports Sustainability Fund complements the Department of Finance's Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) which can provide support for:

- an independent business, such as a restaurant or shop, which has been restricted by the Health Regulations and which occupies part of sporting premises; and
- social clubs which are associated with or affiliated to a sports club but which are legally separate and managed independently.

The NI Business Info website has provided details of support available to businesses, including how to access the support that has been made available, who is eligible, when the schemes open and how to apply - Coronavirus business Support | <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/business-support/coronavirus>

The need for further funding for the sports sector will be kept under review as the impact of the pandemic and the ongoing restrictions evolve.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Communities whether she will commit to a meeting, in person or virtually, with MEA United to discuss the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer funding.

(AQW 14120/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As part of the ongoing refresh and re-engagement of the Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer my Department has undertaken a range of engagements with key stakeholders from soccer involving governing bodies and councils including meeting with MEA United. I am happy to meet with stakeholders, including MEA United, at the appropriate point in the development of the programme.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities to detail any further bids she has made for support for the arts, entertainment, events and sports sectors since the publication of the Draft Budget 2021/22.
(AQW 14173/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I have made no further bids at the time of writing. However, my officials continue to engage with these sectors to identify any additional financial need which can be addressed in the current year.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities whether consideration has been given to increasing payments made under the Sports Sustainability Fund, particularly for sporting clubs that operate restaurants and licensed premises.
(AQW 14292/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The £25 million Sports Sustainability Fund closed for applications on 20 January. Sport NI is currently assessing a total of 38 applications from sports governing bodies, which includes claims for funding for their affiliated sports clubs.

The Fund recognised that hospitality is an important income stream for many sports clubs and included provision for clubs to submit details of the income and expenditure from their social club bars and food provision.

The Sustainability Fund aims to cover the net losses which clubs have faced and there are no plans to increase payments beyond this.

Sport NI expect to commence making payments to successful applicants from the end of February.

Department of Education

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to detail the methodologies and techniques adopted during the current phase of remote learning, including details of schools providing zoom classes and pre-prepared work books, broken down by school.
(AQW 12850/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Access to Devices at Home to Support Online Learning

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the groups of children eligible to access devices at home to support online learning; (ii) how these can be requested; and (iii) any plans to extend the scheme to more pupils reporting a need for these resources.
(AQW 13420/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have invested significantly in the provision of laptops and other IT equipment. Up to the 5 February 13,924 new devices have been provided by the Education Authority (EA) to lend to pupils. A further 17,700 additional devices have been procured and the EA has started to allocate these to schools.

As with any finite budget, resources have to be targeted where the need is greatest. To ensure this is achieved, priority has therefore been given to children who are entitled to free school meals, and either have special educational needs, are newcomer children or are children looked after or otherwise vulnerable in year groups 12, 14, 7, 4, 11 and 13.

Where devices are available, there is no bar to young people from outside the year groups I have identified and who are entitled to free school meals from applying for a device. The additional devices will allow the scheme to extend to pupils in the remaining year groups.

In July 2020, I announced that free Wi-Fi and mobile connectivity will be provided to children and young people, including those in rural settings, who may not have had access to digital technology. To date this support has included 5500 WiFi vouchers for disadvantaged children with up to eight month's internet access and 1600 Mi-Fi devices, a mobile connectivity solution to support those children who are not within a BT Wi-Fi hotspot.

If a parent or carer wishes to make an enquiry, they should contact the school in the first instance and ask them to consider their request. Schools can explain the process to parents, including whether their child is eligible under the agreed criteria, and support parents to make a request through the EA's C2K Exchange.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education what investigations or complaints procedure exists with regard to conduct of members of the Board of the Education Authority Northern Ireland.
(AQW 13466/17-22)

Mr Weir: Under the Education Act 2014, twelve Board members are appointed by the Department of Education with the remaining eight Board members appointed directly by political parties in accordance with the D'Hondt principles.

Matters pertaining directly to members of the Education Authority Board should be addressed in the first instance through the Education Authority Board Members' Code of Conduct.

A copy of the Education Authority's Code of Conduct for Board members will be made available in the Assembly Library.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education what financial support his Department is providing to schools to ensure physical education is continuing to be taught remotely by schools during the current restrictions.

(AQW 13500/17-22)

Mr Weir: All grant aided schools are funded under the Common Funding Scheme (CFS) in accordance with the Local Management of Schools arrangements. One of the key principles of the Scheme is that the formula should support schools in delivering the curriculum including Physical Education. Schools are therefore responsible for meeting the cost of delivering the curriculum from within their delegated budgets.

To help schools to address many of the new pressures arising as a result of COVID-19, I outlined a significant package of funding, which included funding allocated to schools to mitigate the additional costs associated with COVID-19.

In conjunction with the Education Authority, I will continue to monitor our schools' funding requirements for the remainder of the financial year, and as the pandemic progresses in order to seek adequate funding to protect our children and young people.

In addition my Department funds a Sports Programme delivered in partnership the Ulster Gaelic Athletic Association and the Irish Football Association. Both organisations provide a significant amount of online material, including video clips, to support the physical health and wellbeing of young people who are learning remotely.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Education what his Department is doing to ensure that conversion therapy is not part of any teaching, both curricular and extra curricular, in any education settings, including the Education Authority.

(AQW 13543/17-22)

Mr Weir: Conversion therapy is not part of any aspect of the Northern Ireland Curriculum and the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), which supports schools and teachers by developing curricular resources, does not produce any curricular or extra-curricular resources related to conversion therapy.

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is a statutory component of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. To support schools in the delivery of RSE, CCEA has developed a 'Hub' which provides an online repository of information for schools, teachers, children and young people and parents. The Hub facilitates access to a range of resources which provides age-appropriate support and guidance to schools in their delivery of RSE including in relation to healthy, positive sexual expression and relationships and LGBTQ+ matters. The focus in all of the resources is on the importance of building healthy positive relationships, understanding diversity and developing respect for all.

My Department's guidance, "Safeguarding and Child Protection in Schools - A Guide for Schools" provides that, "all pupils have the right to learn in a safe and secure environment, to be treated with respect and dignity, and not to be treated any less favourably due to their actual or perceived sexual orientation" and Boards of Governors of all publicly funded schools have a duty to promote equality, good relations and diversity and to comply with education and employment legislation and anti-discrimination, human rights and equality legislation.

Additionally, section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires public authorities, including the Education Authority, to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations across the range of categories outlined in the Act.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Education whether he will make a bid for surplus funds to be made available for the purchase of laptops for teachers who do not have this equipment.

(AQW 13600/17-22)

Mr Weir: The business case for a significant procurement to refresh teachers' laptops is anticipated to be with the Department (DE) before the end of this financial year. When this has been through the normal approval channels within DE and the Department of Finance the procurement process will be initiated. It is anticipated that the initial tranche of laptops will become available for distribution in the first half of the 2021/22 financial year.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether special schools have received guidance from his Department on opening times.

(AQW 13612/17-22)

Mr Weir: Guidance for Special Schools issued by the Department on 21 January is designed to allow Special Schools and staff to adopt approaches that best suit their local circumstances and the needs of their pupils.

The Education Authority (EA) also have a number of resources for staff available at <https://www.eani.org.uk/covid-faqs-and-guidance>

The Guidance will be kept under continual review by the Department and the EA and updated as appropriate to reflect relevant public health advice.

Schools must engage with the Education Authority (EA) before there is any reduction to in school provision to ensure that all mitigating actions have been exhausted. Decisions to reduce in school provision must be recorded and reviewed weekly to ensure that full provision is restored as soon as it is safe to do so.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education whether contingency plans are in place for transfer tests due to take place in the next academic year in order to prevent the confusion faced by this year's P7 students.

(AQW 13620/17-22)

Mr Weir: The post-primary transfer tests are organised and operated by private providers and I understand that, to date, only the Association for Quality Education Ltd (AQE Ltd) has indicated its intention to initiate preparations for proceeding with tests in the next academic year. I will be engaging with AQE Ltd on these arrangements. However, it is vital that AQE Ltd also engage with pupils, parents and other stakeholders sooner rather than later about how the tests will be conducted including their approach to the safety of pupils.

When the Post Primary Transfer Consortium outlines its proposals similar engagement will be taken forward at that point.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 13289/17-22, why the opening of special units attached to mainstream schools is an operational matter for the school, but the opening of special schools generally is not an operational matter for those schools.

(AQW 13705/17-22)

Mr Weir: As I announced in my statement to the Ad-Hoc Committee (6 January) the decision that all pre-school education settings and schools were to open from 8 January to accommodate supervised learning for children of key workers; and vulnerable children and young people and that Special Schools and EOTAS were to open for in-person provision of education, was taken by the Executive informed by judgements based on the scientific and public health advice available.

The operation of special units attached to mainstream will be determined by the School based on the number of children or young people attending for supervised learning and the resources available to the school. The Education Authority (EA) has advised schools that where there are a number of children attending from a Learning Support Class, the school should work to maintain their routine environment.

Special Schools are to provide in person learning and access to additional therapeutic interventions for their pupils and as such must work in conjunction with the EA and Allied Health Professionals to ensure that any operational matters that might prove a barrier to this are addressed.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to what extent have pandemic-related problems led to delays in planned capital projects; and whether his Department will spend all its earmarked capital budget on new school builds as planned.

(AQW 13813/17-22)

Mr Weir: While there have been delays experienced on major capital projects due to the pandemic, they have not had a significant impact on progress.

After approximately six weeks downtime at the start of the pandemic, contractors returned on site and continue to operate within government guidelines of social distancing and health and safety.

The current spend projection for major works at year-end is £34.6m against an initial allocation of £36m.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has developed a plan to utilise the flexibility that the Reinvestment and Reform Initiative borrowing or the Financial Transaction Capital could bring.

(AQW 13814/17-22)

Mr Weir: Department of Education (DE) officials are currently working with officials in the Department of Finance to identify opportunities to make use of borrowings under the Reinvestment and Reform Initiative to augment DE's allocated capital budget for the 2021/22 financial year. Details of any projects that may benefit have yet to be confirmed.

Financial Transactions Capital is not considered applicable to fund typical DE projects.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has devised any mechanisms to incentivise spending and reduce bureaucratic impediments to spending in the new normal while appropriately protecting public money.

(AQW 13815/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department and its Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) are required to ensure that any expenditure incurred, or funding that is sought, represents value for money, and is affordable. In line with Department of Finance (DoF) guidance, the principles of economic appraisal and evaluation must be applied, with proportionate effort, to every expenditure proposal. The 'new normal' to which the question refers does not alter my Department's and its NDPBs' obligations in this respect.

In addition, where the Department and its NDPBs procure goods and/or services, they are required to comply with Northern Ireland Public Procurement Policy. In doing so, they must follow the procedures and principles governing public procurement and contracts, including adherence to Procurement Guidance Notes issued by DoF's Construction and Procurement Delivery (CPD) branch. Again, the current circumstances do not alter my Department's and its NDPBs' obligations in this respect.

Notwithstanding these requirements, my Department and its NDPBs have moved at pace to ensure that a range of COVID-19 related initiatives have been delivered this year.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, in light of funds relating to the New Decade, New Approach agreement, Confidence and Supply, and City Deals having yet to be formally confirmed by the Secretary of State as being part of the block grant for 2021/22, to detail (i) the consequences for his Department if these funds are not delivered; and (ii) whether he has any contingency plans in place to take account of this possibility.

(AQW 13816/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Draft Budget 2021-22 consultation document available on the Department of Finance website sets out the anticipated funding that departments can expect to receive as part of the 2021-22 in-year process. This funding relates to the New Decade, New Approach agreement, Confidence & Supply funding, and funding for City Deals. Of these three funding streams, Confidence & Supply funding is the only category applicable to my Department.

The consultation document goes on to advise that, although these funding streams have not yet been formally confirmed by the Secretary of State, the Executive anticipates that the funding, including the Confidence & Supply funding, will be formally confirmed in due course. I am therefore content that it is not necessary, at this stage, for my Department to put contingency plans in place in relation to the Confidence & Supply funding.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, as the EU Structural Funds will not be available in 2021/22, and the replacement UK Shared Prosperity Fund may not be in place on time to provide resources, to detail (i) for his assessment of the consequences for the lack of these funding streams for education; and (ii) whether his Department has any any mitigations planned to deal with this.

(AQW 13817/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) I do not anticipate a loss of funding for my Department, and
- (ii) I do not anticipate discontinuing any projects.

The only European funding that my Department is currently in receipt of is Peace IV funding. The Peace IV Programme has received extensive support and commitment from all of the partners involved, (i.e. the UK Government, the Government of Ireland and the EU) to ensure that it can be continued until its conclusion in 2023. This commitment has been included within the Withdrawal Agreement between the UK and the EU.

The Peace IV Shared Education Programme is a cross-border initiative financed through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). My Department and the Department of Education in the Republic of Ireland provide match funding for this programme.

The forthcoming Peace Plus Programme is a single successor programme to Peace IV for the period 2021 to 2027. Commitment to this Programme and its funding is also set out within the Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration. The New Decade, New Approach document also references Peace Plus amongst the Irish Government's commitments.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Education (i) what bids he made in the January monitoring round; (ii) what funds he surrendered as part of January monitoring; and (iii) for what purpose the surrendered funds were originally earmarked.

(AQW 13850/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) £18.1m of capital pressures and £11.9m of resource pressures were submitted to the Department of Finance (DoF) at January Monitoring as detailed in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1

Capital Pressures	£m
Education Authority Minor Works	9.0
Voluntary/Maintained Minor Works	4.8
Voluntary/Maintained Minor Works - Primary	1.3
Education Authority ICT	3.0
Total Capital Pressures	18.1

Table 2

New COVID-19 Response and Restart Pressures	£m
Restart - Schools (teacher sub fund, Restart, in-year growth & VG/GMI lost income)	2.1
Response - COVID-19 Contingency St John Baptist	0.2
Response - Educating Through COVID-19	4.6
Response - Holiday Pay Accrual*	4.3
Response - Entitlement Framework - additional costs for Further Education collaborative courses due to COVID-19.	0.4
Response - Special Schools Lost Learning Programme	0.3
Total Pressure for return to DoF	11.9

*The £4.3m holiday pay accrual was funded from HM Treasury for all departments. As such, in reporting the outcome of January Monitoring, DoF has reported that the Executive has met £7.6m in Education bids. That is, £11.9m less £4.3m.

All pressures were fully met in January Monitoring.

Further pressures were requested from departments by DoF on 21 January. DE identified a pressure of £35.4m for Teachers' Pay which has also been approved by the Executive.

- (ii) The Department submitted £15.7m of reduced requirements at January Monitoring.
- (iii) Table 3 below provides a breakdown of the funds surrendered.

Table 3

COVID-19 Restart/Response Reduced Requirements	Reduced Requirement
	£m
Restart - Personal Protective Equipment	8.1
Restart - Grounds Maintenance	1.1
Restart - Free School Meals	2.7
Response- Free School Meals (Holiday Hunger)	2.6
Response - Free School Meals	0.2
Response - VG/GMI Lost Income	0.1
Response - Schools Maintenance	0.2
Response - COVID-19 Response Measure Quarter 1 Block Grant	0.2
Response - School Meals Loss of Income - Circuit Breaker	0.1
Response – Pathway Fund	0.1
Response - COVID 19 interventions to support children & learning - Summer Schools, Virtual Learning and Engage	0.3
Total Reduced Requirements	15.7

Further to the amounts listed above, Schools surpluses of £16.2m have been declared to DoF at January Monitoring. This transaction is treated as a reduced requirement for budgeting purposes. January Monitoring is the Department's last chance to declare the schools' surplus position for the year.

An easement of £5m against the ring-fenced Fresh Start Agreement funding has been notified to DoF as this is ring-fenced funding and cannot be used to address other pressures within the DE capital budget.

Additionally, excess receipts of £1.3m have been identified. As these are receipts above the permitted threshold, they must also be surrendered to DoF.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education (i) what bids he made in the January monitoring round; (ii) what funds he surrendered as part of January monitoring; and (iii) for what purpose the surrendered funds were originally earmarked. (AQW 13908/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) £18.1m of capital pressures and £11.9m of resource pressures were submitted to the Department of Finance (DoF) at January Monitoring as detailed in Tables 1 and 2 below.

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Additionally, excess receipts of £1.3m have been identified. As these are receipts above the permitted threshold, they must also be surrendered to DoF.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 13115/17-22, and given the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on the mental health of young children, whether his Department will be investing in more educational psychologists to meet the demand needed when children return to the school setting.

(AQW 13910/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department funds the Doctorate in Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology (DECAP) course which is located within the School of Psychology at Queens' University Belfast (QUB). The rationale for funding this course is to ensure a sufficient pool of suitably qualified Educational Psychologists (EPs) to enable the Education Authority (EA) to meet its statutory obligation to provide psychological advice, in specified circumstances, in line with Special Educational Needs (SEN) legislation and the SEN Code of Practice and Supplement to the Code.

Increases were made to the student intake to the DECAP course from 6 to 8 trainees in 2019/20, and from 8 to 10 trainees in the current 2020/21 academic year. Future intakes are kept under review by the Department, the EA and QUB.

Those successfully completing the course are obliged to take up employment in the EA for at least 3 years after they qualify.

The Psychology Service also completed a recruitment exercise in July 2020 when the Service successfully recruited 8 EPs.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education what work has been undertaken to address the cost of division in education, as identified by the Department of Finance commissioned Ulster Economic Policy Centre independent audit, to be up to £95 million per year.

(AQW 13915/17-22)

Mr Weir: The 2016 Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) report on the Cost of Division identified the number of surplus schools places in Northern Ireland as a potential area of duplication and estimated the cost at £14.3m for the lower bound and £92.8m for the upper bound. It is important to highlight that schools are funded on the basis of their actual enrolment number and not approved enrolment number and, as such, "surplus places" are not funded.

The Department's second Annual Report (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/annual-report-area-planning-201819>) on Area Planning identifies system wide available places to be 16.9% for the 2018/19 year. Work is progressing

to streamline the change process for right-sizing/regularising school admissions and enrolment numbers where they have been operating over a period of time at a level consistently below their approved numbers.

The Department is in the process of supporting the lead planning and managing authorities in the process of looking forward to the development of the next Strategic Area Plan with a renewed emphasis in creating a network of educationally and financially sustainable schools across Northern Ireland.

The central tenet to area planning is to have a sustainable network of schools in which all children can access a broad and balanced curriculum and that we have the right number of schools of the right type and size in the right location

The second area identified in the UUEPC report under the Education sector relates to teacher training, this is a matter for the Department for the Economy.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Education whether he will consider implementing the data voucher scheme for all students who do not have access to proper broadband services, and therefore cannot currently study at home.

(AQW 13948/17-22)

Mr Weir: In July 2020, I announced that free Wi-Fi and mobile connectivity will be provided to children and young people, including those in rural settings, who may not have had access to digital technology. To date this support has included 5500 WiFi vouchers for disadvantaged children with up to eight month's internet access and 1600 Mi-Fi devices, (a mobile connectivity solution to support those children who are not within a BT Wi-Fi hotspot). Both Wi-Fi vouchers and MiFi devices are being issued to disadvantaged and vulnerable learners in all year groups.

As with any finite budget, resources have to be targeted where the need is greatest. To ensure this is achieved, priority has therefore been given to children currently who are entitled to free school meals, and either have special educational needs, are newcomer children or are children looked after or otherwise vulnerable.

To compliment the WiFi and MiFi initiative, officials are working on a strategy to provide a data allowance scheme. The aim would be to identify the potential of free data upgrades for identified families and groups, in agreement with mobile phone providers.

I am conscious that all households do not have the same level of access to resources, particularly internet connection and devices such as tablets and laptops. In considering the most appropriate means of delivering remote learning, schools are mindful of the need to ensure the availability of resources for pupils who may experience difficulty with online access, including through the distribution of hard-copy packs.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the new grading system, in cases where there is insufficient evidence to come to a grading decision, how grades will be awarded.

(AQW 13973/17-22)

Mr Weir: Following my announcement of 2 February 2021, the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) will be providing detailed guidance to examination centres on the processes to be followed to determine grades for CCEA GCSEs, AS levels and A levels. CCEA will be providing assessment resources to centres, which are optional, but may be used to generate evidence where insufficient evidence already exists.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education how Fresh Start capital has been spent in the 2020/21 financial year; and whether it has all been spent.

(AQW 13990/17-22)

Mr Weir: Up to the end of January 2021, £5.8m of the final Fresh Start capital allocation of £7.1m for the 2020/21 financial year has been spent on the design and construction of the announced projects.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education (i) what experience and expertise the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) has to enable it to inspect the rapidly developing area of ICT generally and remote learning in particular; and (ii) how the ETI keeps itself updated in the understanding of these areas.

(AQW 13991/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) The NI Curriculum identifies ICT as one of three statutorily assessed cross-curricular skills. Therefore Inspectors within the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) have experience and expertise in the evaluation of the evolving use of ICT to promote effective learning and teaching both in relation to their own specialism and across all educational phases. The distinct role of an inspector is to identify and evaluate high quality learning in all of its forms, to promote improvement in equality of access, engagement, well-being, children's progress in line with their ability and safeguarding.

Throughout the period of the Pandemic, Inspectors have worked with and alongside schools identifying, documenting and disseminating effective practice in remote learning as it has emerged.

While inspection remains paused, in Autumn 2020, ETI was commissioned to use its experience and expertise in ICT to carry out external, independent evaluations of remote learning by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) in the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE,) and by the Department of Education, Ireland (DE) in relation to its innovative Gaeltacht e-Hub Pilot Project. ETI is combining the knowledge gained through these formal evaluations, with its ongoing work in schools, to inform the development and co-design of quality indicators for the effective delivery of remote learning.

All inspectors are required to undertake professional development individually and corporately on a regular basis. During September 2020, all ETI inspectors completed a two-week remote learning training programme 'Learning Leadership:

- (ii) Promoting Effective Online and Blended Learning and Teaching Through Self-evaluation Leading to Improvement' with expert colleagues from Stranmillis University College.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education to detail the rationale and legality behind the use of feeder schools in the admission criteria for Foyle College in Derry.

(AQW 13994/17-22)

Mr Weir: Article 16 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 requires Boards of Governors of individual schools to draw up and from time to time amend the criteria to be applied in selecting pupils for admission to their school in the event of the school being oversubscribed with applicants.

My Department provides schools with guidance on the post-primary admissions process, including on the use of recommended and not recommended criteria, however the content of a school's admissions criteria is solely a matter for Boards of Governors.

The use of a feeder primary school is listed as a recommended criterion in my Department's guidance, however it is up to Boards of Governors to determine which schools it considers as feeder primary schools. I wrote to post-primary schools in January 2021 to advise them that they may wish to take legal advice in respect of their admissions criteria.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education to detail the schools which have been issued with a failed emergency lighting certificate in the last three years.

(AQW 14004/17-22)

Mr Weir: In the current financial year 2020-21, the Education Authority (EA) Maintenance Service team have received 121 Emergency Lighting remedial recommendations for which 45% have been completed and the remaining 55% are either in progress or are programmed to commence as part of the statutory remedial programme of works.

Extracting the requested information for prior years would require disproportionate effort.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Education whether school transport staff will be considered for vaccination in the forthcoming vaccination roll-out for special schools' staff.

(AQW 14026/17-22)

Mr Weir: As you can appreciate the prioritisation of the rollout of the vaccine is carried out at a UK level by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). Northern Ireland, along with the other Devolved Administrations, will adhere to the JCVI advice on prioritisation of the vaccine.

JCVI have advised that "the first priorities for any COVID-19 vaccination programme should be the prevention of COVID-19 mortality and the protection of health and social care staff and systems. Secondary priorities could include vaccination of those at increased risk of hospitalisation and at increased risk of exposure, and to maintain resilience in essential public services."

Phase 1 of the programme will therefore offer vaccination to care home residents and staff, frontline health and social care workers, and those 80 years of age and over.

JCVI indicated on 6 January that they are considering under the next priority phase of vaccinations, those at increased risk of exposure to SARS-CoV-2 due to their occupation.

I am keen for the Executive to prioritise vaccinations for all education staff who are in face to face engagement with children and young people and would hope that first priority is given to staff within Special Schools who carry out close personal care and that these discussions are ongoing and guidance will be updated once a decision has been made.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether there has been any change to policies or directives in relation to heating schools at any stage during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 14050/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Restart guidance issued to schools in response to the Covid-19 pandemic has been updated regularly to reflect our growing understanding around transmission in educational settings, while ensuring the general safety and wellbeing of staff and students.

The latest version of the guidance was issued on 8 December 2020 and this includes specific guidance on heating and ventilation. This can be accessed through the Department of Education website at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Coronavirus%20Guidance%20for%20Schools%20and%20Educational%20Settings%20-%20December%202020.pdf>.

The guidance remains under continual review and any further updates will be notified to schools as and when the guidance is issued.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education for an update on the implementation of all Education Authority audits, reviews and their recommendations.

(AQW 14068/17-22)

Mr Weir: There are a total of 53 separate Audits in the agreed re-prioritised overall 2020-21 Education Authority (EA) Internal Audit Plan. 21 (40%) of the audits have been progressed to either draft or final report stage as at 18 January. A further 24 (45%) of the audits are on-going. It is expected that the majority of the audits currently in the re-prioritised 2020-21 plan will be completed to at least draft report by the end of the year.

Of the final reports issued this year to date by EA's Internal Audit, management has accepted all 67 recommendations.

All External Audit recommendations made by the Northern Ireland Audit Office are routinely monitored by EA and reported to its Audit and Risk Assurance Committee.

The Department is due to undertake a review of the Education Authority – often referred to as a ‘Quinquennial Review’. While the timetable has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department is committed to completing the Review as soon as is practicable. Terms of Reference have been developed and they will be shared with the Assembly’s Education Committee. Work is underway to appoint a project team. It is anticipated that once the project team is in place, the review will take no longer than six months to complete. The report will be published on the DE and Education Authority websites.

The Review will consider the effectiveness and governance of the Education Authority including the extent to which the organisation is delivering against NI Executive/its priorities. In line with Cabinet Office guidance it will examine the extent to which the organisation is well governed, and observes high standards of transparency and efficiency.

- The review will seek to avoid duplication with:
The Review of Arm’s Length Bodies. This Review is being led by the Department of Finance and DE is awaiting sight of its report.
- The planned overarching review of education provision within the wider education sector, envisaged in the New Decade, New Approach agreement;
- A planned review of the Education Authority by the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

The EA’s internal audit of practice of the Statutory Assessment and Statementing process in relation to provision for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) made ten recommendations in 2020 which the EA took forward in seven workstreams. Each workstream is nearing completion and the few actions that remain are more focused on longer term outcomes such as new/improved digital solutions, improving the use of data and putting in place resilient staffing structures.

Significant progress has been made in reducing the backlog of cases waiting on a statement and on completion within the statutory 26 week timeframe. In January 2020, 7% of statements were completed within 26 weeks; this has improved to 40% being completed in January 2021.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the Summer 2021 public examinations statement made on 2 February 2021, (i) whether private tutors will be employed to carry out assessments at the examination centres identified by the Education Authority; and (ii) whether funding will be provided to cover any additional costs incurred for private candidates taking public examinations this year.

(AQW 14097/17-22)

Mr Weir: As I announced on 6 January 2021, CCEA examinations have been cancelled this year for all candidates. On 2 February 2021 I outlined to the Assembly the alternative arrangements for awarding CCEA qualifications this year. The Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) will be providing guidance and support to examination centres in respect of arrangements for CCEA qualifications in due course.

The operation of alternative awarding arrangements are a matter for each examination centre working with the relevant examination body. It is the responsibility of the private candidate or appropriate responsible adult to liaise with the relevant examination centre in relation to the alternative awarding arrangements for qualifications offered by that centre in Summer 2021.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) his decision to turn down Strangford Integrated College’s development proposal; and (ii) why Judge Treacy’s rulings, that emphasised integrated education is a standalone concept and applications for growth ought not to be considered in light of falling numbers in catholic maintained or controlled schools, was not followed.

(AQW 14146/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) My decision, and the rationale for it, is published in full on the Department’s website and is accessible at the following link: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/dp-622-strangford-integrated-college-0>
- (ii) As my decision makes clear, impacts on other schools was not the sole reason not to approve the Development Proposal. I also referenced future population numbers as a factor and use of Temporary Variation arrangements to manage any required changes.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education (i) for an update on the Education Authority’s new funding scheme for regional and local voluntary youth organisations; (ii) what bids his Department has made for the 2021/22 financial year in relation to this scheme; and (iii) whether an Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out in relation to the new scheme.

(AQW 14199/17-22)

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education (i) how many regional youth organisations were funded under regional legacy funding; (ii) how many regional youth organisations have been funded under the Education Authority’s new funding scheme; and (iii) how many regional youth organisations have been unsuccessful in funding under the Education Authority’s new funding scheme.

(AQW 14200/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- i 36 youth organisations were previously funded under legacy arrangements.
- ii & iii. The process of application and award of funding in respect of the regional funding streams under the Education Authority's New Funding Scheme has not fully concluded and therefore I am unable to provide this information at this time.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of subjects impacted by the decision not to end the use of WJEC for A level subjects; (ii) the number of students who completed examinations in each subject by WJEC during the last three academic years; and (iii) how he intends to fill the void left by the WJEC's absence.

(AQW 14233/17-22)

Mr Weir: Details of the specifications impacted by the decision to withdraw approval for WJEC qualifications with effect from September 2022 are provided in the table below. The table also details the number of students who completed each of these specifications during the last three academic years.

The withdrawal of WJEC specifications will not reduce curriculum choice. The same or similar specifications are offered by a number of other awarding organisations. WJEC offer similar specifications under their Eduqas banner which are regulated by Ofqual, and remain available to schools in NI. A small number of schools here already take Eduqas qualifications. There is an Edqas specification for almost every WJEC specification.

Table - Candidates entered in NI for WJEC AS and A level cash-ins - 2018 to 2020

WJEC Subject	Level	Candidates entered		
		2018	2019	2020
Art and Design	A Level	29	42	35
	AS	50	37	58
Biology	A Level	16	10	16
	AS	14	10	20
Business	A Level	49	59	48
	AS	85	71	80
Chemistry	A Level	39	42	35
	AS	48	49	45
Computer Science	A Level	70	48	83
	AS	70	94	112
Design and Technology	A Level	30	24	15
	AS	30	19	20
Drama and Theatre	A Level	88	119	126
	AS	130	147	207
Economics	A Level	0	0	0
	AS	0	0	3
Electronics	A Level	12	0	0
	AS	0	0	0
English Language	A Level	0	0	0
	AS	0	0	13
English Literature	A Level	35	45	44
	AS	75	64	53
Film Studies	A Level	25	4	0
	AS	3	0	0
Geography	A Level	6	0	0
	AS	0	0	0

WJEC Subject	Level	Candidates entered		
		2018	2019	2020
Health and Social Care (Double Award) (Pilot)	A Level	8	0	0
	AS	0	0	0
Health and Social Care (Pilot)	A Level	5	0	0
	AS	3	0	0
ICT	A Level	64	50	49
	AS	22	66	71
Law	A Level	1	0	0
	AS	0	0	0
Media Studies	A Level	423	323	332
	AS	524	484	360
Music	A Level	0	2	1
	AS	3	2	4
Physical Education	A Level	177	206	280
	AS	229	290	307
Psychology	A Level	0	13	30
	AS	16	37	55
Sociology	A Level	298	401	372
	AS	510	570	527
Travel and Tourism (Pilot)	A Level	67	0	0
	AS	8	0	0
Total	A Level	1,442	1,388	1,466
	AS	1,820	1,940	1,935
	Total	3,262	3,328	3,401

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the recent appointment of Paul Kavanagh to the Education Authority.

(AQW 14241/17-22)

Mr Weir: Mr Kavanagh's recent appointment to the Education Authority (EA) Board is as a 'Political Member', selected by the Nominating Officer of the political party, as detailed in the constitution for the Board (Schedule 1 of the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2014). Political members are not ministerial appointments and as such neither the Department nor I have any role in the nomination process.

All EA board Members, including the political appointees, share the EA's corporate responsibilities and, in particular, responsibility for ensuring that the EA fulfils its aims and objectives, strategic plans and targets as approved by the Department. Members are required to comply at all times with the Code of Conduct for board Members and abide by the Seven Principles of Public Life, set by the Committee on Standards in Public Life.

As this is an issue that may affect public appointments across Departments, I intend to take a paper to Executive colleagues on the matter seeking legislative change.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 13921/17-22, how many students received free school meals in the academic years (i) 2019/20; and (ii) 2020/21.

(AQW 14263/17-22)

Mr Weir: Data relating to the uptake of free school meals for 2020/21 are not yet available. It is anticipated that the information will be available via a statistical bulletin in April 2021.

Data relating to uptake of free school meals for 2019/20 is set out below.

Free schools meals taken by pupils 2019/20

Year	Number of free school meals taken on census day
2019/20	77,210

Source: NI school meals census

Note:

- 1 The figure includes free meals taken on census day by pupils in nursery schools, primary schools (including nursery units, reception and years 1 – 7), post primary schools and special schools.
- 2 Census day for school meals 2019/20 was 11th October 2019,

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education what allowances or other payments are made to members of the Education Authority.

(AQW 14270/17-22)

Mr Weir: An annual remuneration rate of £8,800 is paid to EA Board Members – the positions are not pensionable. In carrying out their duties as a Board Member they are entitled to claim travel and subsistence allowances necessarily incurred on Education Authority business, including mileage, where appropriate, at rates agreed by the National Joint Council for Local Government Services.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education whether he will move to amend the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 to prohibit anyone with a serious criminal conviction being permitted to serve on the Education Authority.

(AQW 14274/17-22)

Mr Weir: Under Schedule 1 of the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 ('the Act'), the Chairperson and 12 Board Members are appointed by the Department of Education with the remaining 8 Board Members appointed directly by political parties in accordance with the D'Hondt principles.

For those appointments made by the Department, and in line with our other public appointment procedures, individuals may be required to have a criminal history record check undertaken – to confirm whether, under the Rehabilitation of Offenders (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 (as amended), they have any 'unspent' criminal convictions.

Under the Act, Political Members are not ministerial appointments and as such neither the Department nor I have any role in the nomination process.

As this is an issue that may affect public appointments across Departments, I intend to take a paper to Executive colleagues on the matter seeking legislative change.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether he has powers under the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 to remove individuals from the Education Authority Board if they act in a manner that shows prejudice.

(AQW 14314/17-22)

Mr Weir: Under Schedule 1 of the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2014, the Education Authority Board (EA) is constituted with a Chairperson and 12 Board Members by the Department of Education with the remaining eight Board Members appointed directly by political parties in accordance with the D'Hondt principles.

Under Schedule 1, 4(4), the Department may by notice in writing remove a person from office as Chair or Appointed Member if satisfied that the person—

- (a) has, without reasonable excuse, failed to discharge the functions of the office for a continuous period of 6 months,
- (b) is the subject of a bankruptcy restrictions order (or interim order) or a debt relief restrictions order,
- (c) has failed to comply with the terms of appointment,
- (d) has been convicted of an indictable offence, or
- (e) is otherwise unable, unfit or unwilling to perform the functions of the office.

The Act does not provide for the removal of Political Members from the Board.

Any matters pertaining directly to members of the EA Board should be addressed in the first instance through the EA Board Members' Code of Conduct. This Code provides that members must at all times observe and comply with the Seven Principles of Public Life drawn up by the Committee on Standards of Public Life (the Nolan Committee).

In addition to the Seven Principles of Public Life, the Northern Ireland Assembly identified 5 further principles with which Members must also comply:- Equality; Promoting Good Relations; Respect; Good Working Relationships between Members; and Good Working Relationships with Employees of the NDPB.

A copy of the Education Authority's Code of Conduct for Board Members is available in the Assembly Library.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education to detail his plans for keeping schools open during the February half-term for the children of key workers, given that the usual childcare options, such as grandparents, relatives and childcare providers will be unavailable for many.

(AQW 14335/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department wrote to schools on 5 February to advise them that following consultation with the Department for Health, it is the Department's expectation that all schools will take their scheduled holidays over the February mid-term and Easter breaks, when parents would be expected to have made their normal arrangements for childcare.

Resumption of the arrangements for key worker and vulnerable children will continue once the February mid-term holidays are over until March 5th, and will be reviewed as part of the wider consideration of restrictions by the Executive.

Special schools and EOTAS Centres will continue following the planned breaks as normal for face-to-face teaching for the remainder of the school year or until their planned summer holiday period.

Department of Finance

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Finance to detail the amount of funding he anticipates will be sent back to the Treasury from all Executive budgets in this financial year.

(AQW 13299/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): As set out in my January Monitoring statement significant funding remains to be allocated in this financial year. I have asked my Executive colleagues to bring forward further proposals for the use of this funding and am exploring the further support my department can deliver. As a result I do not anticipate any funding being lost to the Executive.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the priorities of the newly reconstituted Procurement Board, particularly on setting out a new policy on social value and ensuring that social value is a mandatory component of procurement exercises.

(AQW 13371/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Procurement Board was reconstituted with experts from the public and private sector to bring a co-design approach to procurement policy. The immediate priorities for the Board include an improved focus on social value and improved access to procurement opportunities for SMEs and VCSE organisations.

Once agreed I will bring the new policies to Executive colleagues for approval.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance to detail the unspent money returned to the UK Treasury for the 2019/20 financial year.

(AQW 13380/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I can confirm that the Non Ring-fenced Resource DEL position for 2019-20 was a net overspend of £189.3 million as a result of some £221.9 million of COVID-19 funding provided in 2020-21 being spent in the last financial year. Treasury was aware that this funding was being accessed in 2019-20 and the 2020-21 funding allocation will be adjusted accordingly

For Capital DEL the total underspend reported by the Executive was £102.3 million, the ability to spend this funding in the last months of the year having been impacted by COVID-19. The majority of the CDEL underspend related to a delay in the award of an IT contract by DoH due to unforeseen circumstances. With the Budget Exchange limit set at £21.2 million funding returned to Treasury amounted to £81.1 million. My department has sought permission to carry this unspent funding forward into future years.

Ring-fenced Resource DEL funding can only be used for the non-cash costs of depreciation and certain types of impairment. The total underspend reported by the Executive was £56.6 million. The budget exchange limit set for all Ring-fenced Resource DEL was £3.8 million, meaning that £52.8 million of the available budget was not accessed. This does not represent a loss in spending power as this ring-fenced funding cannot be used for cash related expenditure..

For Financial Transaction Capital DEL the total underspend reported by the Executive was £92.0 million. With the Budget Exchange limit set at £20.0 million funding returned to Treasury amounted to £72.0 million. My officials continue to liaise with the Strategic Investment Board to examine ways to fully utilise Financial Transaction Capital funding.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance to detail any financial commitments made to each Growth Deal to date; and how much he anticipates the Executive having to commit to each Growth Deal.

(AQW 13396/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In May 2020 I announced that the Executive had agreed to match the British Government's contribution to the City/ Growth Deals programme. This commits the Executive to providing the funding set out in the table below.

Deal	£ million			
	Executive Funding			Deal Total (inc British Govt Funding)
	City/ Growth Deals	Inclusive Future Fund	Total	
Belfast Region City Deal	350	0	350	700
Derry City Strabane District Council City Deal	50	55	105	210
Mid South West Growth Deal	126	0	126	252
Causeway Coast and Glens Growth Deal	36	0	36	72
Total	562	55	617	1234

The Executive also agreed to a £100 million Complementary Fund, similar to Derry City and Strabane District Council's Inclusive Future Fund. In the agreed Executive Paper dated 4 May 2020, it stated:

"Given that other areas [than Derry City and Strabane Council] may also have additional complementary projects it is proposed that the Executive allows the other City/Growth Deal areas to bid for additional funding where the partners can demonstrate a viable capital project which is complementary to the City/Growth Deal proposals and is aimed at bringing greater prosperity and social benefits to the whole community.

It is proposed that this additional Executive fund be limited to a maximum of £100 million over the same timescale as the City/Growth Deals i.e. 10-15 years. This is not part of a match funding arrangement, rather a standalone Executive Fund. Actual allocations will depend on the strength of the proposals.

As with all City/Growth Deals and IFF funding, the release of funding will be subject to expenditure approval through the business case process."

This represents a total City/ Growth Deals investment of £1,334 million, £717 million from the Executive and £617 million from the British Government.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the impact of leaving the EU on Northern Ireland's draft (i) Resource; and (ii) Capital budgets for 2021/22.

(AQW 13469/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Spending Review sets the Resource and Capital envelopes for the Executive Budget. The envelope is dependent on spending decisions made in Whitehall and it is therefore not possible to determine the precise impact of leaving the EU on the Spending Review outcome for the Executive.

However, I am disappointed by the level of replacement funding currently proposed by Treasury across a number of areas, including farm funding and the Shared Prosperity Fund. I have been engaging closely with my counterparts in Scotland and Wales who share these concerns. I will continue to press Treasury for an improved settlement that provides full replacement of EU funding lost due to leaving the EU.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Finance to detail the recent agreement by HM Treasury to fund Department for the Economy and InvestNI Expected Credit Losses, and a Financial Transactions Capital loan write-off, totalling £31 million.

(AQW 13697/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The agreement to fund the Department for the Economy and Invest NI Expected Credit Losses totalling £31 million was as a direct result of the implementation of accounting standard IFRS 9. This standard applies to all Executive departments.

As is usual for a change in accounting treatment, Treasury provided additional budget cover for the initial period following implementation. The level requested by DoF was informed by engagement with departments. Treasury has provided the full level of additional budget cover requested for both 2019-20 and 2020-21. This funding is ring-fenced for the purpose provided.

There was no agreement or funding for a Financial Transaction Capital loan write-off as referred to in your question.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance to detail the circumstances in which a golf club or business attached to a golf club is eligible for the Local Restrictions Support Scheme.

(AQW 13701/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Sports Clubs are not eligible for the Local Restrictions Support Scheme. The Department of Communities has policy responsibility for sport and it has put in place the Sports Sustainability Fund to provide financial support to sports clubs affiliated to governing bodies recognised by Sport NI. The Sports Sustainability Fund provides tailored support for each organisation by assessing its expenditure, income and losses. This assessment can cover loss of income from the provision of hospitality by the club. Applicants to the Sports Sustainability Fund must declare income from any other Covid related

schemes, including LRSS, for consideration in the assessment of their award. Since there would be no net benefit to clubs from applying to both schemes, the appropriate approach was for sports clubs to apply to the Sports Sustainability Fund.

As sports clubs, golf clubs themselves are not eligible for support from the LRSS and should have accessed support from the Sports Sustainability Fund through their recognised governing body.

A business attached or located within a golf club's premises, such as a shop, bar or restaurant business, which is owned by an operator who is independent of the golf club, and which is restricted by the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions), is eligible to apply for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Finance (i) for a breakdown of all vacant properties and land owned by his Department; (ii) how long each property has been vacant; (iii) how much has been spent on rates in each of the last five years, per property; and (iv) how much has been spent on maintenance in each of the last five years, per property.

(AQW 13718/17-22)

Mr Murphy: A breakdown of all vacant properties and land owned by the Department of Finance; how long each property has been vacant; how much has been spent on rates in each of the last five years, per property; and how much has been spent on maintenance in each of the last five years, per property, is detailed in the table below.

Vacant Property	Date Property Became Vacant	Financial Year (FY)	Rates in FY Before Vacant (Full FY Costs) £	Maintenance in FY Before Vacant (Full FY Costs) £	Rates from FY When Vacant (Full FY Costs) £	Maintenance from FY When Vacant (Full FY Costs) £
Cookstown SSO	01/12/2018	2015/16	21,871	56,760		
		2016/17	18,219	9,473		
		2017/18	20,550	35,028		
		2018/19			17,049	29,393
		2019/20			9,181	2006
Courier HQ, Stormont Estate	09/10/2017	2015/16	01	2,490		
		2016/17	01	1,501		
		2017/18			01	3,674
		2018/19			01	808
		2019/20			01	432
Downpatrick SSO	01/05/2018	2015/16	25,138	35,194		
		2016/17	25,589	37,007		
		2017/18	26,110	11,595		
		2018/19			16,935	4,965
		2019/20			13,601	1,223
Groundsman's House, Ballymena County Hall	01/02/2018	2015/16	880	3,219		
		2016/17	892	1,336		
		2017/18	910	2,373		
		2018/19			944	761
		2019/20			976	0
Villa 1, Stormont Estate	November 2012	2015/16			1,177	2,722
		2016/17			1,196	489
		2017/18			1,217	0
		2018/19			1,259	2,666
		2019/20			1,304	6,776

Vacant Property	Date Property Became Vacant	Financial Year (FY)	Rates in FY Before Vacant (Full FY Costs) £	Maintenance in FY Before Vacant (Full FY Costs) £	Rates from FY When Vacant (Full FY Costs) £	Maintenance from FY When Vacant (Full FY Costs) £
Villa 2, Stormont Estate	09/01/2017	2015/16	02	628		
		2016/17			02	2,506
		2017/18			1,291	4,697
		2018/19			1,335	3,029
		2019/20			1,382	3,566

- 1 Courier HQ rates are included in the rates for an adjacent Annex on the Stormont Estate.
- 2 The Assembly paid the rates for Villa 2 in the 2015/16 and 2016/17 financial years under the occupancy agreement.

In addition, James House is currently under refurbishment and unable to be occupied. It was occupied prior to refurbishment and will be occupied immediately after the works are completed.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme is open to restaurant and takeaway businesses which have had to limit operations and experienced a downturn in trade.
(AQW 13775/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) provides financial support to restaurants for the periods they are closed or severely curtailed in the service they may provide by the Health Protection Regulations. The scheme does not provide support to businesses that have been permitted to remain open. Take-away food businesses that have had some limitations in their opening hours for certain periods but have otherwise been able to remain open by the Health Protection Regulations are not eligible for LRSS payments.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance, in light of the change to the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme to allow self-catering properties registered with Tourism NI to apply, whether a similar amendment will be made to enable sporting social clubs to apply to the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.
(AQW 13779/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Self-catering establishments registered with Tourism NI were restricted from 26 November 2020 by the Health Protection Regulations (Amendment No. 17). Such businesses consequently became eligible to apply for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS), given that Scheme was established to provide financial support to any business specified in the Health Protection Regulations which has been required to close or severely curtail the service it may provide.

A separately constituted 'social club' that is associated with or affiliated to a sports club would not be eligible in its own right for the Department for Communities Sports Sustainability Fund. Therefore, a social club may be eligible for the LRSS if they meet the other conditions of the scheme and there is no need for an amendment to be made to the LRSS scheme.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance (i) to detail the number of applications received by his Department to its Localised Restrictions Support Scheme for social clubs or bars attached to (a) GAA clubs; (b) rugby clubs; (c) soccer clubs; and (d) other sports clubs; and (ii) how many were (a) approved; (b) rejected; and (c) still under consideration.
(AQW 13804/17-22)

Mr Murphy: LPS has received 467 applications where the property has a sport and recreation distinguishment on the valuation list. LPS valuation records do not categorise the sport and recreation facility by the type of sport.

Of the total applications received for all sport and recreation properties, 201 have been approved, 244 have been rejected and 22 remain unprocessed.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance to detail the Executive's fraud adverse measures.
(AQW 13810/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There are various measures in place across the Public Sector to detect, report and prevent fraud.

Managing Public Money Northern Ireland (MPMNI) provides guidance to departments and their Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs) on preventing, countering and dealing with fraud, and all departments are required to develop anti-fraud strategies, including the following measures:

- Developing a Fraud Policy Statement and a Fraud Response Plan;
- Developing and promoting an anti-fraud culture;

- Allocating responsibilities for the overall management of fraud risk;
- Establishing cost-effective internal controls to detect and deter fraud;
- Developing the skills and expertise to manage fraud risk effectively;
- Establishing well publicised avenues for staff and members of the public to report their suspicions of fraud;
- Responding quickly and effectively to fraud when it arises;
- Establishing systems to monitor the progress of investigations;
- Tracking all fraud cases and drawing on Internal Audit experience to strengthen control to prevent repetition;
- Taking appropriate action (criminal, disciplinary) against fraudsters and seeking to recover losses;
- Continuously evaluating the effectiveness of anti-fraud measures; and
- Working with stakeholders to tackle fraud through intelligence sharing, joint investigations, etc. and the results of data matching under the National Fraud Initiative.

In addition to MPMNI, guidance is also available to departments on managing the risk of fraud, tackling external fraud, and raising concerns, as well as general guidance on good corporate governance.

NICS departments are required to report immediately, to the Department of Finance (DoF) and the C&AG, all frauds (proven or suspected), including attempted fraud, which affect their departments or the agencies and ALBs sponsored by them. Departments are also required to submit an annual return to DoF in respect of each financial year, giving details of all discovered cases of suspected and proven fraud (including attempted fraud). These departmental annual returns then form the basis of the Annual Theft and Fraud Report, which is published each year.

NICS departments also have departmental Fraud Working Groups, who meet regularly to consider issues in relation to fraud, raise awareness of anti-fraud measures and disseminate information pertinent to the prevention and detection of fraud.

DoF are committed to working with departments and our colleagues in the NIAO to ensure a coordinated approach to fraud prevention and management is implemented across the public sector.

A NICS Fraud Forum was established in March 2005 as a best practice advisory group. The Forum is chaired by the Treasury Officer of Accounts (DoF) and includes departmental, PSNI and NIAO representation. The group meets 2-3 times per year and is responsible for developing practical ways to promote an anti-fraud culture using existing best practice from within departments and other sources. A representative from the NICS Fraud Forum also attends the Criminal Finances Sub Group of the Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF), ensuring there is an appropriate link between the work of the OCTF and the NICS Fraud Forum.

Whilst responsibility for the detection and prevention of fraud lies with departmental management, Internal Audit also have a role in considering fraud risks when carrying out reviews, and the Fraud Investigation Team of Group Internal Audit and Fraud Investigation Services will conduct investigations (at the request of management) once a fraud has been identified.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Finance what discussions his Department has had in relation to business rates relief for the fiscal year 2021/22; and when an announcement on business rates relief for 2021/22 will be made.

(AQW 13967/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My officials are working closely with the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre to identify those business sectors most severely impacted by the economic consequences of the pandemic. This work, which is now at an advanced stage, will allow me to determine how additional business rate relief can be applied to best effect to support local businesses in the year ahead. I have also announced my intention to freeze the Regional Rates in 2021/22 for both business and domestic rate payers.

I fully appreciate that businesses need as much clarity as possible on costs such as rates to assist with their financial planning. I will clarify the position as soon as possible.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance how the award of a new contract to Premier People for agency staff fits with his Department's plans of allowing parity pay and annual leave.

(AQW 13971/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The contract awarded to Premiere People on 25 January 2021 stipulates that agency workers who begin an assignment in the NICS will be entitled to parity of pay and annual leave from day one of their assignment.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance to detail the number of lung disease deaths in each of the last five years linked to past exposure to substances whilst at work, broken down by condition.

(AQW 13972/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) collates data on registrations of death.

The deaths information that NISRA produces is based on data recorded during the death registration process as captured by General Registrar's Office. The location of where the exposure happened is not included. However, the number of deaths involving asbestos or mesothelioma related conditions can be provided. The most up to date estimate is for 2018, so the table below contains the 5 years up to 2018.

Primary/secondary cause

Registration Year	Mesothelioma without asbestosis	Asbestosis* without mesothelioma	Mesothelioma and asbestosis*	All primary or secondary cause
2014	39	22	2	63
2015	43**	24	3	70
2016	45	17	1	63
2017	47	30	-	77
2018	49	13	1	63

Notes:

Table includes any death registered that had mesothelioma mentioned on the death certificate or ICD10 code 'C45' applied; and any death registered that had asbestos/asbestosis mentioned on the death certificate or ICD10 code 'J61' applied.

* For certain years these figures also include a small number of other asbestos related chest diseases and pulmonary fibrosis where there was coexisting asbestos exposure

** In 2015 there are two mesothelioma cases included that were abdominal and testicular related.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance (i) how many deaths by suicide has there been for each week since the start of lockdown in March; and (ii) how this compares with similar periods in each of the previous four years.

(AQW 14009/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) collates data on death registrations.

There are some situations where the registration of the death can be delayed, specifically where the death has been accidental, unexpected or suspicious, and must be referred to the Coroner, only to be registered after completion of the investigation. Such deaths may not appear in published statistics until at least six months after the death occurred. Suicides registered during a particular time will therefore not be reflective of suicides that actually occurred in that period.

At present, NISRA recommends that users of suicide statistics refer to the subset of 'self-inflicted injury' as the most accurate count in relation to trends. This is due to an ongoing review of the coverage of the sub-category 'undetermined intent'. Further information on the review is available in the guidance note provided at <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/suicide-statistics>.

Data on number of deaths are available up to the end of the 3rd quarter of 2020 at Registrar General Quarterly Tables 2020 | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (nisra.gov.uk). Information is not readily available by week, and given the relatively small numbers, it would be extremely resource intensive to obtain. With this in mind, the table provides the number of deaths as a result of self-inflicted injury (ICD code X60-X84 & Y87.0) in each of years 2016 to 2020 from 28th March (beginning of the first lockdown) up to 30th September. Data for the years 2016 to 2019 are final, whereas 2020 data are still provisional.

Period	Number of Death Registrations due to self-inflicted injury(1)
28th March to 30th Sep 2016	74
28th March to 30th Sep 2017	80
28th March to 30th Sep 2018	81
28th March to 30th Sep 2019	89
28th March to 30th Sep 2020	94*

(1) Deaths by self-inflicted injury are a sub-set of suicide deaths; deaths of undetermined intent are excluded.

* provisional

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Finance how many people who had no previously identified underlying health conditions have died of COVID-19.

(AQW 14016/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) has published an analysis of the presence, number and type of pre-existing conditions associated with Covid-19 related deaths. The analysis was based on the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (MCCD), which forms part of the death registration. The statistical report is available at: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/covid-19-related-deaths-and-pre-existing-conditions>

In the period March to November 2020, there were 1,406 deaths registered where Covid19 was mentioned anywhere on the death certificate. Of these 1,406 Covid19 related deaths, 114 deaths (8.1%) did not have any pre-existing conditions, i.e.

Covid19 was the only cause mentioned on the death certificate, or where other causes mentioned are known to be the direct result of Covid19.

An updated report covering the period March 2020 to January 2021, is due to be published on 31st March 2021.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Finance to detail the number of people under the age of 60 years who have died of COVID-19.

(AQW 14017/17-22)

Mr Murphy: NISRA has interpreted your question as requesting the number of deaths among those aged under 60 where Covid-19 was the underlying cause of death i.e. Death was 'due to' Covid-19.

Cause of death information is coded to ICD-10, which allows for analysis and is published by NISRA on a quarterly basis, one quarter in arrears. This means that the latest data available are up to the end of September 2020, where deaths with Covid-19 as the underlying cause involving people under the age of 60 totalled 28. Data for Quarter 4, 2020 will be published on 24th March 2021, in line with our standard release schedule, available at: https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/Vital%20Stats_Publication_Schedule_0.xlsx

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance when will he make an announcement on the Northern Ireland Civil Service pay award for this year.

(AQW 14114/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The negotiations on pay are underway and I am keen to agree the pay offer as soon as possible. An announcement to staff will accompany any pay offer to unions.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Finance when the remit will be agreed in order for Northern Ireland Civil Service pay negotiations to commence for the financial year 2020/21.

(AQW 14198/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The initial remit was agreed in October and several pay negotiation meetings with unions have taken place in respect of the Civil Service pay award for 2020/21. I am keen to agree the pay offer as soon as possible.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance whether he will publish details of the appeals process for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme, including the timeframe within which appeals are expected to be processed and how decisions will be taken; and whether a principles-based approach will be taken in the interpretation of the regulations to ensure that support is available.

(AQW 14209/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Localised Restriction Support Scheme was put in place by the Executive to support those businesses that were specifically required to close or severely curtail their normal business model by the Health Protection Regulations. A reconsideration process has been put in place for applicants to request a review of a decision to reject their application.

When a request for reconsideration is received, the application is referred to a caseworker who was not involved in the original assessment of the application. The caseworker will review the evidence submitted by the applicant and contact the applicant for further information if necessary. The caseworker will make a decision on eligibility and pass this to a manager for approval.

LPS are dealing with reconsideration cases as a priority and other staff are being redirected to the reconsideration team to enable cases to be reconsidered as quickly as possible.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the 2020 Pay Award for Northern Ireland Civil Service staff.

(AQW 14294/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The initial remit was agreed in October and several pay negotiation meetings with unions have taken place in respect of the Civil Service pay award for 2020/21. I am keen to agree the pay offer as soon as possible.

Department of Health

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 683/17-22, for an update on the intention to launch an independent investigation on the adult learning disability underspend in the Western Health Social Care Trust.

(AQW 6114/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Further to my answer to AQW 683/17-22, while work underway within my Department was paused earlier this year due to COVID-19, I remain committed to considering how best to progress this matter at the earliest possible opportunity, informed by the views of families affected. However, while COVID-19 presents significant challenge to Health & Social Care there is limited scope to progressing this at a Departmental level.

The Western Trust have advised that they continue to work towards the commitment given in 2016 to invest an additional £8m in their learning disability services, with spending plans for the remaining £3.2m over the period 2020/21 – 2021/22 agreed in conjunction with families through a Personal & Public Involvement (PPI) Advisory Group. While Trust engagement with families was also temporarily paused, the Local Involvement Groups have refocused in the autumn months to re-establish meetings although attendance has been challenged by the need to move to more remote access formats. The Trust have also appointed two Personal and Public Involvement (PPI) facilitators, and this, along with the appointment of a Project Business Manager, demonstrate the commitment of the Western Trust to the engagement process regarding the future design and delivery of services for adult learning disability in the Western Trust.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health how many people are working as contact tracers as of 23 September 2020; and how this compares with each of the previous three months.

(AQW 7536/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Public Health Agency has advised that at 23 September there were 115 staff available to work as contact tracers; 100 staff available in August; 84 staff available in July and 70 staff available in June.

As at Friday 29th January 2021, the Contact Tracing Service had 339 trained contact tracers comprising 47 full time staff; 115 part time staff; and 177 on a bank basis.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health to detail any funding his Department has paid to the Rainbow Project, in each of the last 3 years; and the purpose for which the money was awarded.

(AQW 7915/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has paid the Rainbow Project a revenue core grant of £24,333 in each of the last three years. The grant is in respect of 62.7% of the Director's annual salary.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on the average length of time it takes to reach contacts via tracing of someone testing positive for COVID-19.

(AQW 8232/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Public Health Agency has confirmed that the average time taken in the month of January to reach contacts via tracing of someone testing positive for COVID-19 is 6.3 hours

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how the provision of abortion services is a matter for the Executive.

(AQW 8555/17-22)

Mr Swann: Abortion is a human rights issue and it involves the potential for criminal offences. It is therefore a cross cutting and self-evidently controversial matter.

The Ministerial code requires me to bring to the Executive Committee any matter which cuts across the responsibilities of two or more Ministers or is significant or controversial and is clearly outside the scope of the Programme for Government.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health when he will answer AQW 7536/17-22.

(AQW 8748/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Public Health Agency has advised that at 23 September there were 115 staff available to work as contact tracers; 100 staff available in August; 84 staff available in July and 70 staff available in June.

As at Friday 29th January 2021, the Contact Tracing Service had 339 trained contact tracers comprising 47 full time staff; 115 part time staff; and 177 on a bank basis.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health how many abortions have been carried out in the John Mitchel Place Health Centre, Newry, since March 2020.

(AQW 9272/17-22)

Mr Swann: Since 31 March 2020, regulation 10 of the Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations 2020 requires a notice of each termination to be sent to the Chief Medical Officer. Notifications have been counted but not otherwise processed, so no further breakdown is available.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health which Health and Social Care Trust facilities are being used for surgical abortions under the Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No.2) Regulations 2020.

(AQW 9309/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information currently available to my Department does not distinguish between medical and surgical abortion.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health what earmarked resources were made available specifically for the implementation of the objectives of the 2012-18 strategy for maternity care in Northern Ireland, broken down by year.

(AQW 9885/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is not possible to provide an annual breakdown of the costs of implementing the Maternity Strategy 2012-18. As there were no additional ring-fenced resources, the Health and Social Care Board worked with the Public Health Agency and Trusts to identify funding opportunities from within existing funding sources in order to progress implementation of the strategy's 22 objectives. A post strategy outcome report has indicated very positive progress against many of the objectives but acknowledges that some work remains to be done.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health what steps his Department is taking to (i) re-establish access to specialist neurology services for Parkinson's patients; and (ii) provide guidance to services on prioritising urgent patient unmet need.

(AQW 9939/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Regional Review of Neurology Services is tasked with identifying the optimum configuration of neurology services for the next 10-15 years. As outlined in the Review's interim report a work stream has been established to improve care pathways for people with long term neurological conditions, including Parkinson's. Whilst work on the Review has been unavoidably paused due to the need to redirect resources to respond to COVID-19, I am acutely aware that neurology services are in need of reform and will give careful consideration as to how best we can move forward with the Review as soon as it is feasible to do so.

In the meantime, the Strategic Framework for Rebuilding Health and Social Care services aims to incrementally increase service capacity as quickly as possible across all programmes of care, including for Parkinson's and other neurological specialties, within the prevailing COVID-19 conditions.

The healthcare system in Northern Ireland is facing unprecedented levels of demand for treatments and pressure on its limited resources. The Health and Social Care Board continues to work with Trusts to ensure the application of good waiting list management practice, including assessing and treating urgent cases first on a regional and equitable basis, and thereafter seeing and treating people in chronological order.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the formally established condition specific networks that exist across Health and Social Care; and when these networks were formed.

(AQW 10474/17-22)

Mr Swann: A range of networks currently operate across Health and Social Care for both specific conditions and broader clinical specialties or services. These are listed below with their formation date where known.

- | | |
|--|---|
| ■ All Island Congenital Heart Disease Network (2015) | ■ Frailty Network (2019) |
| ■ Cancer Network (2004) | ■ Major Trauma Network (2016) |
| ■ Cancer Trials Network (2007) | ■ Modernising Radiology Clinical Network (2013) |
| ■ Cardiology Network (2006) | ■ Neonatal Network (2013) |
| ■ Child Health Partnership (2019) | ■ Palliative Care in Partnership Programme (2016) |
| ■ Clinical Research Network (2008) | ■ Pathology Network (2009) |
| ■ Critical Care Network (2007) | ■ Physical and Sensory Disability (2012) |
| ■ Diabetes Network (2016) | ■ Regional Trauma Network (In development - not yet launched) |
| ■ Eyecare Network (2018) | ■ Stroke Network (2015) |
| ■ Forensic Network | |

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health (i) how many residential respite and short breaks hours have been provided by each Health and Social Care Trust in each of the last 18 months; (ii) to detail the current provision in each of the residential settings under the control or provided on behalf his Department; and (iii) what plans he has, including a timeframe, for the reopening of respite and short break facilities.

(AQW 10503/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) and (ii) The Department does not hold this information, however I am aware that provision has reduced since March 2020 due to the impact of COVID.
- (iii) Limited provision of services recommenced in July 2020 across all Trusts in line with a regionally agreed recovery framework, developed by the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB), aimed at restoring services in a consistent manner, taking account of learning/new ways of working developed during lockdown. Services are provided subject to adherence to Infection Prevention Control (IPC) and social distancing guidelines with service levels also dependent on the current COVID surge level rather than a set timeframe.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of sexual health education in schools around the issue of sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS.

(AQW 11364/17-22)

Mr Swann: The current curriculum offers opportunities for schools to include education on sexual health issues including sexually transmissible infections (STIs) within the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) statutory area of learning under Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) in the primary curriculum; Personal Development and Home Economics at Key Stage 3; and the Personal Development strand of Learning for Life and Work (LLW) at Key Stage 4. There are also a range of qualifications that provide further opportunities for exploring sexual health education within LLW, Biology and Science.

The context of the learning in these areas requires young people to understand the importance of protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and the consequences of unhealthy sexual relationships.

To support teaching, the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment has produced a range of age appropriate guidance and resources for their RSE hub around personal development including sexually transmitted diseases such as the HIV virus. The RSE hub also signposts to local organisations that can offer confidential advice, treatment and support to young people, including information and support on STIs and recognising the prevalence and characteristics of STIs and their treatment.

New resources currently being developed and which will be added by the end of March 2021 include, how to identify the ways different STIs are transmitted including HIV/AIDs; how to reduce the risks through safer sex; taking control of my health and well-being; and how some STIs damage fertility and where to get help and support.

It is important to note that the curriculum here is not made up of a mandatory list of subjects or subject content that every school must teach. Instead, subject to meeting minimum requirements in Areas of Learning across all Key Stages, it is designed to give schools flexibility to adapt what they teach and use a variety of approaches and curricular resources that reflect, and are responsive to, the learning needs of their pupils.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health for a breakdown of the number of intensive care unit nurses paid under band 5 grade.

(AQW 11774/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is currently a skills mix of band 5 and band 6 Nurses within Intensive Care Units across the HSC; at May 2020, 55% (378) of nursing staff within ICU were at Band 5 while 45 % (313) were Band 6.

I have recently approved proposals for temporary promotion arrangements for ICU and Respiratory nursing staff who meet agreed regional criteria.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Health how many Assembly Written Questions his Department received during the period 2 March 2020 to 30 November 2020; and to detail the total cost of responding to these questions.

(AQW 11917/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department received a total of 1977 Assembly Written Questions during the period 2 March – 30 November 2020.

The information sought in relation to cost is not readily available, however I can confirm it has been placed significant additional demands on the time of officials.

Whilst I note and value the importance of Assembly Questions I would encourage Members to first consider whether the information being requested is already widely available elsewhere.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health why he has not replied to my letter dated 11 September 2020 (ref SD/09/20/BB/AW/WMcC) despite four reminders having been sent to him.

(AQW 12003/17-22)

Mr Swann: I can advise that a response was issued on 28 January 2021.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health at what stage in the COVID-19 vaccination programme will those who volunteer as Meeters and Greeters in hospitals be vaccinated.

(AQW 12066/17-22)

Mr Swann: Vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which advises the 4 UK Health Ministers.

JCVI has advised that the first priorities for the COVID-19 vaccination programme should be the prevention of mortality and the maintenance of the health and social care systems. As the risk of mortality from COVID-19 increases with age, prioritisation is primarily based on age.

Priority Group 2, which includes health and social care workers, has now largely been offered vaccination. If a volunteer has not been offered a vaccination by the Trust, they will be vaccinated when their appropriate cohort of the population is called to be vaccinated.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health whether each Health and Social Care Trust is using their current vaccine teams to distribute the Pfizer vaccine or are they putting together separate teams.

(AQW 12111/17-22)

Mr Swann: Vaccine is distributed from the NI Hub to Trust sites. If the vaccine is required to be distributed onwards from Trust sites, Trust personnel are used.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health when he expects the Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine to be rolled out to GPs across North Down.

(AQW 12370/17-22)

Mr Swann: As the member will be aware, the GP led element of the vaccination programme commenced across NI on 4 January. All GP practices in North Down will therefore have been receiving the appropriate allocation of Oxford –AstraZeneca Vaccine.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health (i) how many staff have now been trained to deliver the COVID-19 vaccinations; and (ii) how many staff there will be overall.

(AQW 12371/17-22)

Mr Swann: Over 1,200 individuals' submitted application forms to help as vaccinators. Several hundred of these have been processed and their details are now with the Trusts who will be able to deploy them at the vaccination centres as required.

The PHA will continue to process the remaining application forms and these staff will be deployed as required at Trust sites or in support of GPs. At present vaccine supply rather than the availability of vaccinators has been a rate limiting issue.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health where on the list of nine groups for the vaccination programme does it include prisoners in Northern Ireland; and whether Health and Social Care Trusts will be administering the vaccine to prisoners.

(AQW 12407/17-22)

Mr Swann: Vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which advises the 4 UK Health Ministers.

JCVI advice on prioritisation of the vaccine was published on 2nd December 2020 (and updated on 30th December). The ranking of priorities is a combination of clinical risk stratification and an age-based approach, which should optimise both targeting and deliverability:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/priority-groups-for-coronavirus-covid-19-vaccination-advice-from-the-jcvi-30-december-2020/joint-committee-on-vaccination-and-immunisation-advice-on-priority-groups-for-covid-19-vaccination-30-december-2020>

JCVI has advised that the first priorities for the COVID-19 vaccination programme should be the prevention of mortality and the maintenance of the health and social care systems. As the risk of mortality from COVID-19 increases with age, prioritisation is primarily based on age.

The vaccination programme is therefore based on the prioritisation list as set out below:

- 1 residents in a care home for older adults and their carers
- 2 all those 80 years of age and over and frontline health and social care workers
- 3 all those 75 years of age and over
- 4 all those 70 years of age and over and clinically extremely vulnerable individuals
- 5 all those 65 years of age and over
- 6 all individuals aged 16 years to 64 years with underlying health conditions which put them at higher risk of serious disease and mortality
- 7 all those 60 years of age and over
- 8 all those 55 years of age and over
- 9 all those 50 years of age and over

Northern Ireland has been planning for the deployment of the COVID-19

vaccine for many months. This has involved collaborative working across the Health and Social Care system in conjunction with our wider stakeholders and partners.

Prisoners will be vaccinated according the priority group for their age in accordance with JCVI guidelines. There is no specific priority cohort for prisoners.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Health how many first time cancer patients are currently waiting to see a consultant. (AQW 12418/17-22)

Mr Swann: Table 1 below provides the number of cancer patients waiting to be seen by a consultant. This information is based on patients who were triaged as suspect cancer and does not necessarily mean that the patient is a confirmed cancer patient. It includes those with a GP red flag referral or a consultant upgrade to red flag. Those with a booked appointment date are included.

Table 1

HSC Trust	Number of patients waiting
Belfast	621
Northern	2,157*
South Eastern	1,084
Southern	1,831
Western	398

*Until patients have been seen and diagnosed as cancer, we are unable to identify if it is a new cancer or a recurrence.

This will include patients downgraded e.g. following QFIT.

There are 646 referrals from Other sources of referral waiting for first appointment.

i.e. Action Cancer, Breast Screening, Other Consultants, Nurse Specialist.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health why specialised dementia units within acute care are not included in the first phase of the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out. (AQW 12479/17-22)

Mr Swann: Vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which advises the 4 UK Health Ministers.

JCVI advice on prioritisation of the vaccine was published on 2nd December 2020. The ranking of priorities is a combination of clinical risk stratification and an age-based approach, which should optimise both targeting and deliverability:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/priority-groups-for-coronavirus-covid-19-vaccination-advice-from-the-jcvi-30-december-2020/joint-committee-on-vaccination-and-immunisation-advice-on-priority-groups-for-covid-19-vaccination-30-december-2020>

The JCVI specifically advises that:

“the first priorities for any COVID-19 vaccination programme should be the prevention of COVID-19 mortality and the protection of health and social care staff and systems. Secondary priorities could include vaccination of those at increased risk of hospitalisation and at increased risk of exposure, and to maintain resilience in essential public services”

JCVI acknowledges that the single greatest risk of mortality from COVID-19 is increasing age and that the risk increases exponentially with age. There is clear evidence that those living in care homes for older adults have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 as they have had a high risk of exposure to infection and are at higher clinical risk of severe disease and mortality. Given the increased risk of outbreaks, morbidity and mortality in these enclosed settings, these adults are considered to be at very high risk as are care home workers who are therefore considered a very high priority for vaccination.

JCVI has advised that the first priorities for the COVID-19 vaccination programme should be the prevention of mortality and the maintenance of the health and social care systems. As the risk of mortality from COVID-19 increases with age, prioritisation is primarily based on age. The vaccination programme will therefore be based on the prioritisation list as set out below:

- 1 residents in a care home for older adults and their carers
- 2 all those 80 years of age and over and frontline health and social care workers
- 3 all those 75 years of age and over
- 4 all those 70 years of age and over and clinically extremely vulnerable individuals
- 5 all those 65 years of age and over
- 6 all individuals aged 16 years to 64 years with underlying health conditions which put them at higher risk of serious disease and mortality
- 7 all those 60 years of age and over
- 8 all those 55 years of age and over
- 9 all those 50 years of age and over

The vaccination programme will take time to ensure it is implemented safely. It remains entirely dependent on the continued availability of sufficient supplies of vaccine. Looking forward however, and based on the vaccine that should be available by late January and throughout February, I am confident we will see rapid progress through the first 4 groups recommended by JCVI for vaccination - care home residents and staff, the over 80s, HSCWs, those aged 70 years and over as well as all those classed as clinically extremely vulnerable individuals, including those living with dementia.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health whether teachers are considered essential workers; and where they will be on the vaccine roll-out.

(AQW 12482/17-22)

Mr Swann: The original definition of essential or key workers at the beginning of the pandemic was based on childcare requirements to enable as many people as possible to get back to work, and covered health and social care roles and a small number of other public sector workers, including teachers, police and prison officers.

Vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which advises the 4 UK Health Ministers.

JCVI advice on prioritisation of the vaccine was published on 2nd December 2020, and updated on 30 December 2020. The ranking of priorities is a combination of clinical risk stratification and an age-based approach, which should optimise both targeting and deliverability:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/priority-groups-for-coronavirus-covid-19-vaccination-advice-from-the-jcvi-30-december-2020/joint-committee-on-vaccination-and-immunisation-advice-on-priority-groups-for-covid-19-vaccination-30-december-2020>

Many groups and professions have been in touch requesting that the vaccination programme is extended to them. At this stage, due to vaccine availability we have to stick closely to the priority groups as recommended by JCVI but as the programme continues to be rolled out there may be scope to widen it to others.

JCVI has not recommended prioritisation by occupation. At present, therefore, teachers will be vaccinated along with the relevant cohort of the population they belong to.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to have mass vaccination sites as is the case in England; and what sites are being considered.

(AQW 12483/17-22)

Mr Swann: In Northern Ireland there are currently 7 Trust vaccination sites operating. These sites are located at: Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast; Ulster Hospital, Dundonald; South Lakes leisure centre, Craigavon; Seven Towers Leisure Centre, Ballymena; Foyle Arena, Londonderry, Omagh Leisure Centre, Omagh; and Lakeside leisure centre, Enniskillen.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Health how many cancer patients are awaiting (i) surgery; and (ii) treatment.

(AQW 12487/17-22)

Mr Swann: Table 1 below which provides the number of cancer patients waiting for (i) surgery and (ii) treatment. This information is based on patients who were triaged as suspect cancer and does not necessarily mean that the patient is a confirmed cancer patient. It includes those with a GP red flag referral or a consultant upgrade to red flag. Those with a booked appointment date are included.

Table 1

HSC Trust	Number of patients waiting for surgery	Number of patients waiting for treatment
Belfast	284**	69**
Northern	37	17
South Eastern	81	45
Southern	18	*
Western	55	25

*Unable to provide this as do not hold a waiting list for patients awaiting treatment

**Includes 54 patients who have been referred for radiotherapy and are not experiencing any delays. Patients are being scheduled in accordance with clinical guidelines and concurrent treatments. All emergency/urgent cases start immediately. This number only refers to patients who are yet to be scheduled for treatment and does not reflect the number of patients scheduled for treatment awaiting treatment to commence.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Health when teachers in all schools are going to be included in the COVID-19 vaccination programme.

(AQW 12488/17-22)

Mr Swann: In line with JCVI recommendations, throughout January 2021 Trusts and GPs largely completed the vaccination of those people in Priority Groups 1 & 2. The programme has now moved on to vaccination of those people in Priority Groups 3-5 (65-79 and clinically extremely vulnerable).

JCVI has not recommended occupational prioritisation to date. Therefore, anyone not within the Priority Groups above will be offered a vaccination when their relevant age cohort or priority group falls to be vaccinated. At present, therefore, teachers will be vaccinated along with the relevant cohort of the population they belong to.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health whether key public service workers, such as those who work in public transport, will be considered as a part of the priority list for the COVID-19 vaccine.

(AQW 12516/17-22)

Mr Swann: In line with JCVI recommendations, throughout January 2021 Trusts and GPs largely completed the vaccination of those people in Priority Groups 1 & 2. The programme has now moved on to vaccination of those people in Priority Groups 3-5 (65-79 and clinically extremely vulnerable). The purpose of this approach is to save as many lives as possible.

JCVI has not recommended occupational prioritisation to date. Anyone not within the Priority Groups above will be offered a vaccination when their relevant age cohort or priority group falls to be vaccinated. At present, therefore, public transport workers and other public servants will be vaccinated along with the relevant cohort of the population they belong to.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health whether he will consider giving vaccination priority to undertakers.

(AQW 12526/17-22)

Mr Swann: Funeral directors, morticians, embalmers and funeral workers have already been given priority for access to vaccination as frontline healthcare workers.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 6423/17-22, for an update on the funding to support recurrent investment for the PrEP service.

(AQW 12546/17-22)

Mr Swann: The current PrEP service is funded until 31 March 2021. Work continues to secure funding to support recurrent investment.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health how many inpatient beds were unavailable in December 2020 due to staff absences related to COVID-19.

(AQW 12572/17-22)

Mr Swann: Data related to bed shortages due to staff absences is not currently held. However the Health and Social Care Trusts have provided the following information on beds unavailable due to COVID-19 during December 2020.

Belfast HSC Trust advised that during December 2020 an average of between 10 and 30 beds per day within Unscheduled Care were made unavailable due to COVID-19.

Northern HSC Trust advised that four beds had been made unavailable due to COVID-19 on the 8th December 2020 and were subsequently made available on the 14th December 2020.

Southern HSC Trust provided information that on average 12 to 18 beds daily were unavailable at Craigavon Area Hospital in December 2020. The Non Acute Hospitals, which include Lurgan Hospital and South Tyrone Hospital, stated that at times during December 2020 there were beds closed as a result of dealing with COVID-19.

South Eastern and Western HSC Trust advised that no beds were made unavailable during December 2020.

Further information on current available and occupied beds can be found on the COVID-19 Daily Dashboard at the following link <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/covid-19-daily-dashboard-updates> . It must be noted however there is also no information held on bed shortages as result of staff absences due to COVID-19 on the Dashboard.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health whether there have been any cases reported of the two new COVID-19 mutated strains reported in England.

(AQW 12576/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is estimated that between 40% and 70% of the latest Covid-19 cases in Northern Ireland relate to the variant of the Covid-19 virus first identified in England.

The high degree of uncertainty is due the current estimates being based on a proxy indicator and the results for a small number of samples that are not representative of the overall population.

There have been no confirmed cases in Northern Ireland in respect of variant first identified in South Africa.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health whether he has any plans to submit a business case to prioritise key workers (i) in essential retail; (ii) living in rural areas; (iii) in private residential and care homes; and (iv) with underlying medical conditions, within the COVID-19 vaccination programme.

(AQW 12604/17-22)

Mr Swann: Vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which advises the 4 UK Health Ministers. JCVI have not recommended occupational prioritisation other than Health & Social Care Workers at Priority Group 2. The rate limiting factor for deployment of the vaccine is the availability of vaccines. The purpose of this approach is to save as many lives as possible with the available vaccine.

Retail workers and those living rurally will be vaccinated in line with priority group they belong to as outlined by JCVI and in the published vaccination plan. Care home workers were vaccinated as part of priority group 1. Those people with underlying medical conditions which render them clinically extremely vulnerable are being vaccinated as part of priority group 4 and those clinically vulnerable will be vaccinated as part of priority group 6.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health for an update on the uptake of the care partner scheme in care homes.

(AQW 12673/17-22)

Mr Swann: As from the 20th January 2021, all care homes are asked to self-report via the RQIA Care Homes web portal detailing the type of visiting each Care Home facilitates and the number of Care Partners introduced. It is not possible to provide details on the number of care partner arrangements currently in place as the data is undergoing a validation exercise to assess the accuracy and reliability of the information reported. However we will continue to progress this work with a view to producing relevant information on care partners and visiting arrangements in place across the care home sector.

It remains my position that care home visiting and the subsequent implementation of care partners can be safely facilitated through compliance with the regional principles for visiting in care settings clearly set out in the existing guidance.

Health and Social Care Trusts have been asked to work with Care Homes to provide the support they might require to move forward with dynamic risk assessments that facilitate safely managed and meaningful visiting arrangements and implementation of the care partner concept. They have also been asked to provide assurance to my Department, through the Chief Social Work Officer and Chief Nursing Officer, that Care Homes are implementing the visiting guidance appropriately. HSCB and PHA are involved in coordinating this work and providing any necessary regional support to Trusts.

To help ensure the right balance is being struck by individual care homes, in line with regional guidance, the RQIA will assess the approach being used when undertaking inspections of residential and nursing homes, and considering compliance with the relevant care standards.

Support and funding continues to be available to help homes implement the approach set out in regional guidance. Trusts have been asked to assure themselves that care homes that accommodate their clients are operating in accordance with guidance and have implemented a dynamic risk assessed approach to visiting at their premises. In addition, Trusts continue to provide support and advice where there are difficulties to navigate.

We continue to live and work with the threat of Covid-19. While we wait as the vaccination programme is rolled out it is still important to take measures to minimise risks of spread of infection alongside providing safely managed but meaningful visits for residents with their loved ones.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health whether a payment is made to those administering each dose of the COVID-19 vaccination; and (ii) how much is this payment.

(AQW 12724/17-22)

Mr Swann: Most of those who have come forward to volunteer to administer the vaccine for the Covid-19 Vaccination Programme are paid the standard rate of a Band 5 nurse.

Doctors and Dentists get a pro-rata higher rate. Agreement has been reached with GPCNI at a rate of £12.58 per dose.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health how many children and young people in North Belfast are on the waiting list for an appointment with the child and adolescent mental health team.

(AQW 12729/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are 68 children and young people in North Belfast on the waiting list for an appointment with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Team, 47 waiting less than 9 weeks and 21 over 9 weeks.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what funding and support is available to (i) students; (ii) existing Health and Social Care workers; and (iii) retraining Health and Social Care staff, for the provision of uniforms and other essential items.

(AQW 12809/17-22)

Mr Swann: I can respond as follows:

- (i) Students are provided with uniforms by their university, and where required, SCRUBS are provided for students as they are for all HSC staff. Students are provided with PPE training by their university and they have full access to all appropriate PPE within clinical and care settings. My Department has also provided funding for additional uniforms and SCRUBS for Nursing, Midwifery and Medical students, to reflect additional requirements resulting from the COVID-19 protocols.
- (ii) Health and Social Care Trusts comply with the Regional HSC Uniform Policy for all staff. Where uniforms are required, these are supplied by the Trust at no cost to employees. All other items, including equipment, PPE and consumables that are essential to allow staff to deliver safe and effective services, are provided by HSC Trusts.
- (iii) Staff returning to the HSC to support the response to the COVID-19 pandemic will have access to the same and all available support provided to existing HSC staff.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health whether a mental health counsellor is considered part of the cohort of health and social care staff who are entitled to a vaccine in phase 1 of the COVID-19 vaccination programme.

(AQW 12814/17-22)

Mr Swann: Frontline health and social care workers were offered the vaccine first however within a number of weeks the programme was extended to the wider health and social care community sector as more vaccine became available. As mental health counsellors may work in a variety of different roles, including in the public and private sector, it is impossible to provide a definitive answer without additional information

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether his Department's supply of vaccines has been ordered through the World Health Organisations COVAX programme.

(AQW 12829/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) has led on the procurement of the Covid-19 Vaccine, on behalf of the 4 Nations. Northern Ireland is then allocated a portion of the overall UK supply based on the Barnett formula.

UK as a whole has signed up to the World Health Organisations COVAX programme.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health what consideration has been given to the provision of COVID-19 vaccinations to the volunteer search and rescue sector.

(AQW 12877/17-22)

Mr Swann: Vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which advises the 4 UK Health Ministers.

JCVI has advised that the first priorities for the COVID-19 vaccination programme should be the prevention of mortality and the maintenance of the health and social care systems. As the risk of mortality from COVID-19 increases with age, prioritisation is primarily based on age.

The vaccine was initially targeted at those considered most at risk or HSCWs working closely with those considered most at risk. Since that initial phase the programme has moved on to other priority groups at 3- 5 in the vaccination programme.

Many groups and professions have been in touch requesting that the vaccination programme is extended to them. At this stage, due to vaccine availability we have to stick closely to the priority groups as recommended by JCVI but as the programme continues to be rolled out there may be scope to widen it to others. Ultimately it is expected that most adults over the age of 18 will be offered the vaccine in due course and we hope to complete the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme as quickly as possible.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health whether those who have received their first anti-coronavirus injection have a scheduled date for any necessary second injection.

(AQW 12897/17-22)

Mr Swann: Those who have booked in for their first dose automatically receive a date for the second dose.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health what consideration his Department is giving to allowing final year student nurses to undertake work to support the Health Service in its response to the pandemic.

(AQW 12914/17-22)

Mr Swann: Nursing students continue to contribute to the delivery of care as part of their training requirements during the Covid -19 pandemic. It is my priority to support their learning, protect their supernumerary status, and enable them to successfully complete and join the nursing workforce as registrants.

I have agreed that nursing students who have recently completed their pre- registration training can be paid at Band 4 (Agenda for Change) within Trusts, whilst awaiting registration with the Nursing and Midwifery Council.

Nursing students who wish take up part time employment in addition to undertaking their training programme, can do so via the Trust Bank systems. Many are contributing valuable support as nursing assistants during this time.

In recognition of their contribution to the pandemic response, I have approved a one off payment of £2000 for non-salaried nursing students on commissioned programmes from 1 October 2020 to 31 March 2021

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what specific support is being given to people with dementia living in care homes, given their particular circumstances, including with reference to care partners.

(AQW 12943/17-22)

Mr Swann: All individuals with or without a dementia residing in care homes have individual care and support plans in place which continue to be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure it meets individual assessed need.

Residents living with a dementia in care homes are a particularly vulnerable population given the impact of the pandemic on their routine.

There are a number of regional supports available to care homes with dementia units. These include staffing and financial support where enhanced staffing assists with maintaining residents' social distancing, regular hand hygiene and provision of individual activity and meaningful occupation. The Northern Trust for example has provided additional bespoke one to one care for those residents with dementia who have been required to self-isolate as per covid regulations and who could not do so by themselves due to cognitive impairment.

Extra training and education sessions related to supporting dementia residents and care staff to understand and respond to changes in behaviour in people with dementia during the COVID-19 pandemic have been provided on a regional and Trust basis. This includes sessions on the importance of activity and meaningful occupation.

Additional written information and handouts relating to managing and communicating with residents during the covid pandemic have also been forwarded to care homes by each Trust.

There are also a number of ongoing initiatives by individual Trusts. These include:

- The NHSCT commencing to pilot a service into 3 care homes in the East Antrim locality from 18/02/21 until 31/03/21. This service will utilise a multi-disciplinary approach to unwell residents and assess for early detection of frailty and decline in their residents. An element of this service will be psychological care and assessment provided by a clinical psychologist who will review residents exhibiting distressed behaviours. They will also be reviewed alongside the associated AHP's to provide a comprehensive clinical care plan and interventions for these identified residents, including a medication review by the Pharmacist.
- The NHSCT Responsive Education and Anticipatory Care for Care Homes team (REaCH) in conjunction with the East Antrim GP Federation have 2 Clinical Nurse Specialists appointed and aligned to the East Antrim locality to undertake Nurse Led Community Anticipatory Care Plans (NLCACP) in care homes. They will review residents within the care home setting with a focus on residents and families wishes and plans for future care needs. This will include the discussion and support required for those residents who have palliative care needs.
- Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the SHSCT have facilitated a regular virtual Care Home Managers Meeting, as well as an Extension of Community Healthcare Outcomes (ECHO) Education programme. Both of these forums have afforded the opportunity for ongoing support and education to Care Home Managers and their staff in relation to the care of people living with dementia.

The impact of restrictions on visiting and contact with families has been recognised and the Trusts are working in partnership with families and care homes to ensure contact is being maintained between residents and relative in line with regional visiting guidance.

It remains my position that care home visiting and the subsequent implementation of the care partner role is of critical importance to the health and wellbeing of care home residents and in particular those with a dementia.

Care partner contact is in addition to visits to a resident which are organised according to the care home's visiting policy and the DoH Covid-19 regional principles for visiting.

The increase to Level 5 visiting restrictions will not prevent care partners from being permitted access to care homes. Care homes are being actively encouraged to adhere to all aspects of the revised visiting guidelines, including the introduction of care partners, and care partner contact can continue providing that visits are aligned with infection prevention and control measures. In addition, my Department is currently undertaking work to facilitate the testing of care partners as part of the care homes staff testing programme.

Trusts will continue to engage with care homes to reinforce the Care Partner message. Key workers are also ensuring in family communications that they are aware of this role and offering support to families to help them set up the role when they identify a need.

The Care Home Manager is still responsible for permitting visitors into a home on a day to day basis and there may be, of course, circumstances where visiting may be restricted further. In such cases the full visiting guidance should be referred to. As well as Trusts, the HSCB and PHA are working with those homes who are finding implementation more challenging – identifying and sharing good practice.

We continue to live and work with the threat of Covid-19. While we wait as the vaccination programme is rolled out, it is still important to take measures to minimize risks of spread of infection alongside providing safely managed but meaningful visits for residents with their loved ones.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Health what priority is being given to essential retail workers, who are in the front line of serving the public, and therefore at risk, within the COVID-19 vaccination programme.
(AQW 12948/17-22)

Mr Swann: GP Surgeries, North Belfast: Coronavirus Vaccination

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health why some GP surgeries in North Belfast are not yet vaccinating their vulnerable patients, including those who are housebound.
(AQW 12961/17-22)

Mr Swann: The vaccination of priority groups 1 and 2 has largely been completed and the GP programme will now move to the vaccination of priority groups 3- 4 those aged 70-79 as well as those individuals deemed clinically extremely vulnerable. GPs will be in touch to invite individuals in groups 3 and 4 to come in to receive the vaccine.

Plans are in place for District Nurses to call with housebound patients.

I am not in a position to comment on individual GP Surgeries.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Health whether funeral directors will be included on the priority list for a COVID-19 vaccination.
(AQW 12962/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member will be aware that funeral directors, morticians, embalmers and funeral workers have been given priority for access to vaccination.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what measures have been put in place to ensure that those who are homebound are guaranteed access to the Coronavirus vaccine.
(AQW 12975/17-22)

Mr Swann: The vaccination of priority groups 1 and 2 has largely been completed and the GP programme will now move to the vaccination of priority groups 3- 4 those aged 70-79 as well as those individuals deemed clinically extremely vulnerable. GPs will be in touch to invite individuals in groups 3 and 4 to come in to receive the vaccine.

Plans are in place for District Nurses to call with housebound patients.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what guidance his Department has provided to health and social care staff administering the Coronavirus vaccine to blind and partially sighted people.
(AQW 12976/17-22)

Mr Swann: Covid-19 vaccinators are drawn from health care professional groups (including Doctors, Pharmacists, Nurses, Dentists and Allied Health Professionals) who are experienced in administering vaccinations to all of the eligible population.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health what plans are being developed to administer COVID-19 vaccinations at home to people who are eligible for vaccination but are housebound and therefore unable to travel.
(AQW 13061/17-22)

Mr Swann: The vaccination of priority groups 1 and 2 has largely been completed and the GP programme will now move to the vaccination of priority groups 3- 4 those aged 70-79 as well as those individuals deemed clinically extremely vulnerable. GPs will be in touch to invite individuals in groups 3 and 4 to come in to receive the vaccine.

Plans are in place for District Nurses to call with housebound patients.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Health what steps his Department is taking to improve the delivery of vaccines for GP practices.
(AQW 13062/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department has been working closely across the Health and Social Care system in conjunction with our wider stakeholders and partners to ensure the timely delivery of all available vaccine supplies.

The rate limiting factor for volume of deliveries to GP practices is the availability of vaccine.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health what information his Department holds on the (i) number; and (ii) proportion of women who gave birth in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years who were experiencing problems with (a) alcohol; and (b) drugs.

(AQW 13063/17-22)

Mr Swann: Please see below the requested information in tabulated form on women who have given birth in Northern Ireland between 2015/16-2019/20 who also received a diagnosis of a problem related to alcohol or drugs. The ICD-10 codes used to denote an alcohol or drug problem have also been provided. It should be noted these figures do not account for women who have drunk alcohol during their whole pregnancy, but only those whose consumption was severe enough to require diagnosis and constitute an alcohol problem. It should also be noted that these figures also do not include women who smoked tobacco during pregnancy but only illicit drugs and substance abuse. For information on smoking during pregnancy please see the Health Inequalities Annual Report 2020 publication at the following link:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/hscims-report-2020.pdf> The proportion of women who gave birth and also received a diagnosis related to an alcohol or drugs problem has also been provided.

Women who have given birth¹ with an alcohol or drug related diagnosis 3 2015/16-2019/20.

Year	Alcohol Problem	Drug Problem	Total	All Births	Proportion of women with Alcohol or Drug problems
2015/16	<5	14	14	23,729	0.06
2016/17	5	16	21	23,280	0.09
2017/18	<5	10	10	22,280	0.04
2018/19	<5	12	12	22,104	0.05
2019/20	<5	11	11	21,743	0.05

Source: Hospital Inpatient System, Hospital Information Branch, Information & Analysis Directorate, Department of Health, NI.

- Figures do not include mental health or learning disability programmes of care which account for less than 1% of all hospital admissions. The ICD-10 code "Z37" was used in all 17 diagnostic fields to denote women who have given birth.
- Figures of <5 have been revised to maintain anonymity.
- The following ICD-10 codes were used to denote Alcohol and Drug related problems in the 15 secondary diagnostic fields:

Drug problems

ICD-10 Code	Narrative
F11.0-F11.9	Mental and behavioural disorders due to use of opioids
F12.0-F12.9	Mental and behavioural disorders due to use of cannabinoids
F13.0-F13.9	Mental and behavioural disorders due to use of sedatives or hypnotics
F14.0-F14.9	Mental and behavioural disorders due to use of cocaine
F15.0-F15.9	Mental and behavioural disorders due to use of other stimulants
F16.0-F16.9	Mental and behavioural disorders due to use of hallucinogens
F18.0-F18.9	Mental and behavioural disorders due to use of volatile solvents
F19.0-F19.9	Mental and behavioural disorders due to multiple drug use and use of other psychoactive substances
O35.5	Maternal care for (suspected) damage to fetus by drugs
T40.0	Poisoning by opium
T40.1	Poisoning by heroin
T40.2	Poisoning by other opioids
T40.3	Poisoning by methadone
T40.4	Poisoning by other synthetic narcotics
T40.5	Poisoning by cocaine
T40.6	Poisoning by other and unspecified narcotics
T40.7	Poisoning by cannabis (derivatives)

ICD-10 Code	Narrative
T40.8	Poisoning by lysergide [LSD]
T40.9	Poisoning by other and unspecified psychodysleptics [hallucinogens]

* Codes within category F19 may be assigned due to a combination of two or more 'recreational' drugs where the drugs have not been specified, it is not know which drug the patient is dependent on or the clinician is not able to identify which drug is contributing most to the disorder. This combination of 'recreational' drugs may include alcohol.

Alcohol Problems

ICD-10 Code	Narrative
E24.4 **	Alcohol-induced pseudo-Cushing Syndrome
E51.2 + G32.8* **	Wernicke encephalopathy
F10.0-F10.9	Mental and behavioural disorders due to use of alcohol
G31.2 **	Degeneration of nervous system due to alcohol
G62.1 **	Alcoholic polyneuropathy
G72.1 **	Alcoholic myopathy
I42.6 **	Alcoholic cardiomyopathy
K29.2 **	Alcoholic gastritis
K70.0 **	Alcoholic fatty liver
K70.1 **	Alcoholic hepatitis
K70.2 **	Alcoholic fibrosis and sclerosis of liver
K70.3 **	Alcoholic cirrhosis of liver
K70.4 **	Alcoholic hepatic failure
K70.9 **	Alcoholic liver disease, unspecified
K85.2 **	Alcohol-induced acute pancreatitis
K86.0 **	Alcohol-induced chronic pancreatitis
O35.4	Maternal care for (suspected) damage to fetus from alcohol
Q86.0	Fetal alcohol syndrome (dysmorphic)
T51.0	Toxic effect of ethanol
T51.9	Toxic effect of alcohol, unspecified

** These codes should have a code from category F10 assigned directly following to show that the condition is due to a current issue with 'mental or behavioural disorder' with alcohol. If a code from category F10 has not been assigned the patient either no longer has a current 'mental or behavioural disorder' with alcohol or that the condition was not caused by a 'mental or behavioural disorder' with alcohol.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health whether she plans to increase financial support for students who are currently on placement within the health service and subsequently working on the frontline during the COVID-19 pandemic.
(AQW 13072/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is beyond dispute that the current pandemic presents unique and unprecedented challenges for these students as they undertake their clinical placements, which are an essential element of their pre-registration training. I have accordingly decided that a special recognition award of £2,000 should be paid to all qualifying students on certain pre-registration programmes over the period 1 October 2020 to 31 March 2021. The qualifying courses are the nursing and midwifery, AHP, Social Work and Physician Associate pre-registration programmes commissioned by my Department from Queen's University Belfast and the Ulster University.

All healthcare students are currently entitled to free public transport and hospital carparking where relevant.

The general support provided by my Department is extensive and varies depending on the course being studied. This includes the following:

The Nursing and Midwifery bursary scheme provides for access to accommodation and travel expenses under certain conditions. This may include accessing free hospital accommodation or the use of NI Tourist Board approved B&Bs

NI-domiciled Social Work students can access a non means-tested Student Incentive Scheme for each year of their course. They also have access to £500 per year to cover expenses whilst on Practice Learning Opportunity placements. This is in addition to any Student Finance support applied for through the relevant Education Authority.

While these support arrangements are kept under continuous review, I have no current plans to increase these payments.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health what steps his Department is taking to communicate guidance during the pandemic with asylum seekers and others who do not speak English.

(AQW 13080/17-22)

Mr Swann: In addition to English, the Department, as part of its translation policy in healthcare, has translated the COVID-19 Restrictions guidance into Arabic, Mandarin, Romanian, Lithuanian, Portuguese and Polish as the 6 most spoken ethnic minority languages in Northern Ireland. These translations are up to date and are available on the DoH website. The Department can translate the guidance into other languages on request.

The Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts continue to do extensive work in respect of others who do not speak English, including production of COVID-19 information in other languages.

An Interpreting Service across HSC provides “remote bookings” (e.g. via video conferencing facilities) together with increased telephone interpreting during the pandemic.

The Department also works closely with the Public Health Agency (PHA) which continues engagement with Vulnerable Groups and the BAME population on COVID-19. The Contact Tracing Vulnerable Groups Action Plan was developed to facilitate this engagement. It recognises the increased risks for specific vulnerable groups within the Northern Ireland population. Measures have been put in place to support pro-active and responsive steps targeting vulnerable groups, which includes various ethnic background groups, to optimise testing, tracing and compliance with PHA COVID-19 Guidelines and to promote uptake of the vaccine.

A particular focus on early intervention, prevention and reacting quickly to outbreaks within vulnerable groups is vital to reduce the numbers testing positive for COVID-19 and subsequent potential deaths.

The PHA Action Plan is divided into three sections:

- Early Intervention/Prevention;
- Reaction to Identification of Clusters
- Other Factors e.g. racism, ethnic monitoring, sensitivities in local communities.

An associated Action Log is updated on a weekly basis to highlight progress on key activities.

Some of the key activities undertaken to date include:

- Mandatory wearing of face coverings in shops - messages disseminated in different languages via community and voluntary sector social media and shared with other organisations who support BAME.
- Active support and input to Incident Management Teams through follow up communication with target groups ensuring appropriate information and links with community organisations.
- Links established with CYPSP (Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership) and NICVA (NI Council for Voluntary Action) to share PHA messages.
- Identification of avenues for further dissemination of information to target populations through the workplace e.g. Health Improvement Workplace contacts; Health and Safety Executive.
- BrowseAloud instructions translated into 22 languages in December 2020. The Browsealoud instructions supporting the translation of information is available on the PHA website¹ The Link has been shared with BAME regional contacts for sharing with relevant contacts and service users.
- There is continued regional dissemination of PHA messages relating to COVID 19 through STEP via consortium members, the Inter Ethnic Forum staff, and local BAME communities and via e-alerts. www.strongertogetherni.org The Charity and Voluntary BAME sector also use social media, WhatsApp, voiceovers, zoom etc. to communicate with target groups. This has included recent dissemination of travel restrictions regarding South America.

The PHA will continue to work with partner organisations to take account of the different challenges presented to vulnerable groups, including the BAME population through the pandemic and beyond. Translation of PHA vaccine information into different languages is being progressed and will shortly be available on the PHA website. There are ongoing discussions with BAME stakeholders and a Vaccine Communications plan is being developed to address concerns and myths and promote uptake of the vaccine in BAME communities. Progress is underway to expand and develop the existing Contact Tracing Plan to a wider Health Improvement Action Plan for the BAME population. This includes the extension of funded programmes to address the Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing needs of the BAME population.

1 <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/2020-12/Browsealoud%20instructions%20FINAL.pdf>

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Health how long it has taken the Public Health Agency to review existing standards on mental health first aid; and what the cost of the review has been.

(AQW 13095/17-22)

Mr Swann: Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) International has the responsibility for updating MHFA Standards for all licensed countries worldwide. The Public Health Agency (PHA) license allows local adaptation of course materials to ensure content is reflective of the needs of the local population.

PHA have updated the NI MHFA course materials to meet new research and evidence standards as provided by MHFA International. The review of the MHFA course materials started in 2015 and was completed 2020.

In 2019, £16,800 was awarded to co-ordinate, lead and update course materials through the MHFA Steering Group.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the number of vacancies for intensive care unit nurses in each Health and Social Care Trust; (ii) how long the posts have been vacant; and (iii) the recruitment process to fill these vacancies, including the timeline.

(AQW 13142/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts have provided the following responses.

The Belfast HSC Trust currently has 11.38 WTE critical care nurse vacancies which have been vacant since October and November 2020. The recruitment process is ongoing with 4 critical care nurses commencing post in February 2021.

The Northern HSC Trust currently has no permanent vacancies in Intensive Care Units (ICU).

The South Eastern HSC Trust currently has 13 vacant ICU nursing posts. Having been advertised by the BSO Recruitment Shared Services Centre in November and December 2020, these posts need to be shortlisted prior to being called for interview. This is currently underway although has been delayed due to the extreme work pressures currently caused by COVID-19. It is hoped this will be progressed in the coming weeks with a view to filling these vacancies in the following month, subject to completion of satisfactory pre-employment checks.

The Southern HSC Trust currently has 2 vacant posts for ICU nurses, totalling 1.80 whole time equivalent. These posts have been vacant since 6th March 2020 and 26th October 2020 respectively. The Trust maintains an open advertisement for Band 5 Registered Nurses across all specialties and interviews are carried out on a regular basis, approximately fortnightly. Applicants are matched to suitable vacant posts according to their preferences. It is therefore not possible to be prescriptive about a timeline to fill the above vacancies.

The Western HSC Trust is currently recruiting to one temporary Band 5 ICU nurse which is to cover a sick leave absence. The Trust currently has no other ICU nursing vacancies.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of calls made to the suicide prevention helpline Lifeline in (i) 2018; (ii) 2019; and (iii) 2020, broken down by the constituency from which the calls were made.

(AQW 13166/17-22)

Mr Swann: The below tables provide a summary of all active calls answered by the Lifeline Crisis Response Service during financial years 2018-19 and 2019-20, broken down to Client and Third party Calls by Constituency.

Answered Calls

Constituency	Year		Total Calls
	2018/19	2019/20	
Client	23555	25638	49193
Belfast East	1975	1918	3893
Belfast North	2287	2493	4780
Belfast South	1754	2144	3898
Belfast West	1473	2257	3730
East Antrim	1044	1301	2345
East Londonderry	1319	1091	2410
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	946	956	1902
Foyle	1290	1493	2783
Lagan Valley	859	843	1702
Mid Ulster	1179	1305	2484
Newry and Armagh	943	1287	2230

Constituency	Year		Total Calls
	2018/19	2019/20	
North Antrim	1291	1391	2682
North Down	1258	1353	2611
South Antrim	1058	872	1930
South Down	1089	976	2065
Strangford	1074	1238	2312
Upper Bann	1282	1561	2843
West Tyrone	1091	1006	2097
Unknown	343	153	496
3rd Party	5732	5255	10987
Belfast East	484	464	948
Belfast North	758	755	1513
Belfast South	484	521	1005
Belfast West	643	672	1315
East Antrim	303	250	553
East Londonderry	228	173	401
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	192	156	348
Foyle	274	213	487
Lagan Valley	259	206	465
Mid Ulster	177	135	312
Newry and Armagh	146	161	307
North Antrim	242	222	464
North Down	236	228	464
South Antrim	265	195	460
South Down	233	192	425
Strangford	231	265	496
Upper Bann	253	221	474
West Tyrone	231	155	386
Unknown	93	71	164
Total Calls	29287	30893	60180

Third party calls refer to calls made to the Lifeline Crisis Response Service by an individual who is not a Lifeline client. These calls relate to an individual client and are made by a third party, such as a GP or the emergency services.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether his Department will review the personal protection equipment provision for ambulance staff attending to COVID-19 call-outs.

(AQW 13203/17-22)

Mr Swann: Personal Protection equipment is reviewed and updated on a regular basis.

The NIAS operational guidance on Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) for staff is set out in NIAS Guidance – Incidents Involving COVID 19 (<http://www.nias.hscni.net/download/NIAS-Guidance-incidents-involving-COVID-19-v10.1.pdf>). This document re-frames the Public Health England (PHE) Specific Ambulance Service COVID -19 Guidance into a format that is familiar to clinically facing NIAS staff.

The PHE Ambulance Service Guidance was drawn up by the National Ambulance Service Infection Prevention and Control (NASIPC) Group, in consultation with NHS England, NHS Improvement, Public Health England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the National Ambulance Resilience Unit. The latest iteration of this guidance was published on 21st January 2021.

The NIAS Operational Guidance is reviewed whenever the PHE guidance is reviewed and is updated as appropriate, where and when required.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether vaccine priority is to be given to funeral directors and embalmers. (AQW 13205/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member will be aware that funeral directors, morticians, embalmers and funeral workers have been given priority for access to vaccination.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Health to detail the processes followed in circumstances where a medical professional makes a mistake resulting in the death of a patient. (AQW 13218/17-22)

Mr Swann: All HSC Trusts are bound by the guidance provided in 'Maintaining High Professional Standards Framework' (MHPS) issued in 2005. This document provides a framework for handling concerns about the conduct, clinical performance and health of medical and dental employees in the HPSS'. HSC Trusts also follow the coronial guidance in relation of referring deaths to the Coroner for coronial review and/or inquest. They are supported by external independent advice from NHS Resolution. Advice is also sought from the GMC Employment Advisor on any potential regulatory issues that need considered by the General Medical Council. Trusts have the ability to determine if a doctor needs to be excluded under the provisions of the MHPS Framework.

In addition the General Medical Council (GMC) may consider concerns regarding a doctor and within their own procedures impose an Interim Order of Suspension from the medical register, while their investigation is undertaken. The GMC is separate and independent from the HSC. The British Medical Association (BMA) is a Trade Union representing doctors and would not be expected to investigate concerns about doctors.

South Eastern HSC Trust have advised that any harm or error should be reported through to the Trust incident reporting system (DATIX), all incidents are graded, reviewed and approved and where appropriate an investigation is undertaken to identify learning to prevent a recurrence. Some incidents will be investigated as a Significant Event Audit (SEA) or Serious Adverse Incident (SAI). In regards to the medical practitioner - a risk assessment is carried out to determine if there is an on-going patient safety risk or potential impairment of a doctor's fitness to practice. This assessment will determine if the doctor needs to be excluded, placed on restricted duties or if they need to be placed under supervision for an agreed period. Support will be provided to the practitioner as necessary. This process will often involve consultation with the Practitioner Performance Service (formerly NCAS), who will also advise in regards to whether a formal MHPS investigation is required.

Belfast Trust advise that in circumstances in which a medical professional makes a mistake resulting in the death of a patient it would be expected to be reported as an incident and reviewed within the serious adverse incident procedure if known in the first instance. This procedure requires a review to be conducted with the intention of identifying systems learning and safety improvement. This is achieved by identifying the circumstances surrounding incidents and the systems-focused, interconnected causal factors that may appear to be precursors to patient safety incidents. These factors must then be targeted using strong (effective) system improvements to prevent or measurably reduce repeat patient safety risks and incidents. Such reviews are not intended to apportion blame or determine liability, preventability or cause of death. In addition, all deaths occurring in secondary care are reviewed at regular mortality & morbidity reviews and any learning identified is shared among the relevant healthcare staff. The Trust confirmed that any decision to exclude a doctor is taken within the MHPS Framework.

Southern Trust provided the following response. When a potential preventable adverse effect of care is identified, whether or not it was or harmful to the patient, the Trust conducts an adverse incident review. If the event meets thresholds as set out in the Regional Procedure for the 'Reporting and Follow up of Serious Adverse Incidents (SAI)' November 2016, a SAI review will be initiated to identify contributory causes and where possible take actions to minimise the potential recurrence.

If at any stage concerns are identified regarding a doctors professional competence that may result in potential patient harm a range of options are considered by the Trust, these include; immediate consideration of risk to patients –which may lead to immediate exclusion of the practitioner, additional supervision and/or transfer to another non-patient facing area until the investigation is completed. The screening of the concern in line with MHPS Framework to determine if an investigation is required; and/or carry out a full investigation in line with the Framework.

Western Trust have advised that when a patient dies following a mistake by a medical professional the incident would be reported and investigated under the Trust's incident reporting and investigation system and the 'Reporting and Follow up of Serious Adverse Incidents (SAI)' November 2016, this will provide a mechanism to identify systems learning with a focus on patient safety. Where there are professional concerns regarding a doctor's performance following the death of a patient the Trust will also consider this in terms of the MHPS Framework.

Northern Trust have provided the following response. Any death occurring as a result of clinical error must be reported to the Coroner. All concerns raised regarding a doctor's clinical performance are managed within the MHPS framework so that they can be properly investigated to establish the facts. This would include considering any immediate actions if required to ensure patient safety. The outcome of any investigation can lead to a series of actions such as: a clinical performance panel; referral to the General Medical Council (GMC) or the Practitioner Performance Advice (PPA) service in NHS Resolution; restriction or exclusion from practice; Occupational Health referral; or indeed no further action required.

I trust you find this a detailed enough response to your question.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of staff in each Health and Social Care Trust (i) redeployed to deal with COVID-19; and (ii) furloughed.

(AQW 13229/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) There are no central figures recorded of redeployment across the Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts due to Covid-19. Staff throughout the HSC Trusts have been deployed flexibly within their Directorates/Divisions and across the HSC Trusts to meet the demands of Covid-19. As surge demand has impacted on different parts of our health and social care services, the HSC Trusts have had to respond flexibly and at pace. As services have experienced peaks of Covid-19 surge, the HSC Trusts have redeployed staff to areas of greatest pressures including acute inpatient wards caring for Covid-19 patients, Intensive Care Units, community services, support to independent sector care homes and the vaccination programme. On occasions, this has been accommodated by down turning services or a reduced level of some services and redeploying staff.
- (ii) There are no staff furloughed in HSC Trusts.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has a protocol in place to vaccinate hospital inpatients.
(AQW 13302/17-22)

Mr Swann: Trusts are currently planning for the vaccination of hospital inpatients with the help of hospital pharmacies.

Trusts will be receiving a quantity of the AstraZeneca vaccine to enable them to vaccinate all long term patients aged 65 years and over.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health what additional mental health support is being provided to help people cope with COVID-19 lockdown.

(AQW 13306/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am fully aware of the impact lockdown has had on people's mental health, especially those already suffering from mental illness during Covid-19 restrictions. Since the beginning of the pandemic I have been mindful that the measures that we have needed to impose to control the spread of the virus need to be mitigated as much as possible in order to protect from the effect of restrictions, including self isolation, on people's daily lives. I have also clearly indicated, along with my Executive colleagues, that mental health is a priority, and that the restrictions will not be kept in place for any longer than is absolutely necessary.

To mitigate the effect of restrictions including self isolation, a mental Health and Resilience Strategic Working group was established to coordinate, support and drive the short, medium and longer term response to the psychological impact of the pandemic.

In acknowledgment of the extra pressure placed on the population's mental health during the pandemic, I published the Mental Health Action Plan on 19 May. I included a dedicated Covid-19 Mental Health Response Plan. This plan set out the mental health response to the pandemic and outlined specific actions, such as:

- public health messaging to support people to look after their mental wellbeing while staying at home, and the provision of updated mental health support and advice on the mindingyourhead.info website;
- the development of an online apps library to help and support self-help;
- rollout of psychological first aid training to staff and volunteers on the front line;
- provision of free Stress Control classes online, which have been available since May and will continue to be available until the end of the year;
- bereavement guidance; and
- a workforce wellbeing framework and dedicated psychological helplines for front line staff.

This support remains in place as we continue to battle Covid-19 and the impact of the pandemic on our communities' mental health. A key element of responding to the emerging mental health need resulting from the pandemic is the implementation of the Mental Health Action Plan, including the development of a new Mental Health Strategy. On 21 December 2020, the public consultation was launched on the draft Mental Health Strategy; it will run until 5pm on 26 March 2021.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health when he will arrange for an updated shielding letter to be sent to all those who are clinically extremely vulnerable to COVID-19, given the last one was specific for a six-week time frame.

(AQW 13316/17-22)

Mr Swann: All those who are clinically extremely vulnerable in relation to COVID-19 have been advised by the Chief Medical Officer not to attend the workplace from 26th December 2020 if they are unable to work from home.

The Chief Medical Officer has written to all those identified as clinically extremely vulnerable to set out this advice. This letter is evidence for an employer that the person is advised not to attend the workplace. If there is a delay in receiving the letter,

the original 'shielding letter' can be used as evidence. It is up to the individual to decide if they wish to follow the Chief Medical Officer's advice. Anyone who is clinically extremely vulnerable and who chooses not to attend work due to the Chief Medical Officer's updated advice is eligible to apply for support.

The letter from the Chief Medical Officer noted that the advice regarding those who are clinically extremely vulnerable attending the workplace would be in place for six weeks initially, with a review after four weeks in line with the review of restrictions more generally.

This advice has now been reviewed and it has been agreed that it will continue to be in place until 5 March. The advice will be reviewed again by 18 February in line with the review of restrictions more generally. The guidance on the NIDirect website for those who are clinically extremely vulnerable has been updated to reflect this position. There are no plans to issue new letters. Any future changes to this advice will also be updated on the NIDirect website which can be accessed at:

Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance for 'clinically extremely vulnerable' and 'vulnerable' people | nidirect

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to detail the (i) incidence rate of mesothelioma; and (ii) number of people currently living with the condition in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 13317/17-22)

Mr Swann: Full registration of all cancer patients in Northern Ireland (NI) is currently only available from the NI Cancer Registry (NICR) up to the end of 2018.

(i) Incidence rate of mesothelioma

During 2014-2018 there were 243 new cases of mesothelioma diagnosed. This is an incidence rate of 2.6 cases diagnosed each year per 100,000 persons in Northern Ireland.

(ii) Number of people currently living with the condition in each Health and Social Care Trust

Mesothelioma has a very poor survival rate (approximately 5%, five years from diagnosis). Thus at the end of 2018 there were only 53 people resident in Northern Ireland who had a diagnosis of mesothelioma in the 26-year period from 1993 to 2018. The number of residents in each Health and Social Care Trust at the end of 2018 can be found in table 1 below.

Table 1. Number of residents in Northern Ireland with a diagnosis of mesothelioma at the end of 2018.

Health and Social Care Trust of residence at the end of 2018	Number of survivors*
Belfast HSCT	18
Northern HSCT	13
South-Eastern HSCT	12
Southern HSCT	9
Western HSCT	6
Northern Ireland	58

* Patients diagnosed during 1993-2018 who were still alive at the end of 2018

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Health, in circumstances where a medical professional is under investigation by the GMC or BMA, (i) who determines whether they should be subject to a precautionary suspension while the investigation is undertaken; and (ii) how the decision is made.

(AQW 13330/17-22)

Mr Swann: All HSC Trusts are bound by the guidance provided in 'Maintaining High Professional Standards Framework' (MHPS) issued in 2005. This document provides a framework for handling concerns about the conduct, clinical performance and health of medical and dental employees in the HPSS'. HSC Trusts also follow the coronial guidance in relation of referring deaths to the Coroner for coronial review and/or inquest. They are supported by external independent advice from NHS Resolution. Advice is also sought from the GMC Employment Advisor on any potential regulatory issues that need considered by the General Medical Council. Trusts have the ability to determine if a doctor needs to be excluded under the provisions of the MHPS Framework.

In addition the General Medical Council (GMC) may consider concerns regarding a doctor and within their own procedures impose an Interim Order of Suspension from the medical register, while their investigation is undertaken. The GMC is separate and independent from the HSC. The British Medical Association (BMA) is a Trade Union representing doctors and would not be expected to investigate concerns about doctors.

South Eastern HSC Trust have advised that any harm or error should be reported through to the Trust incident reporting system (DATIX), all incidents are graded, reviewed and approved and where appropriate an investigation is undertaken to identify learning to prevent a recurrence. Some incidents will be investigated as a Significant Event Audit (SEA) or Serious Adverse Incident (SAI). In regards to the medical practitioner - a risk assessment is carried out to determine if there is an on-going patient safety risk or potential impairment of a doctor's fitness to practice. This assessment will determine if the doctor

needs to be excluded, placed on restricted duties or if they need to be placed under supervision for an agreed period. Support will be provided to the practitioner as necessary. This process will often involve consultation with the Practitioner Performance Service (formerly NCAS), who will also advise in regards to whether a formal MHPS investigation is required.

Belfast Trust advise that in circumstances in which a medical professional makes a mistake resulting in the death of a patient it would be expected to be reported as an incident and reviewed within the serious adverse incident procedure if known in the first instance. This procedure requires a review to be conducted with the intention of identifying systems learning and safety improvement. This is achieved by identifying the circumstances surrounding incidents and the systems-focused, interconnected causal factors that may appear to be precursors to patient safety incidents. These factors must then be targeted using strong (effective) system improvements to prevent or measurably reduce repeat patient safety risks and incidents. Such reviews are not intended to apportion blame or determine liability, preventability or cause of death. In addition, all deaths occurring in secondary care are reviewed at regular mortality & morbidity reviews and any learning identified is shared among the relevant healthcare staff. The Trust confirmed that any decision to exclude a doctor is taken within the MPHS Framework.

Southern Trust provided the following response. When a potential preventable adverse effect of care is identified, whether or not it was or harmful to the patient, the Trust conducts an adverse incident review. If the event meets thresholds as set out in the Regional Procedure for the 'Reporting and Follow up of Serious Adverse Incidents (SAI)' November 2016, a SAI review will be initiated to identify contributory causes and where possible take actions to minimise the potential recurrence.

If at any stage concerns are identified regarding a doctors professional competence that may result in potential patient harm a range of options are considered by the Trust, these include; immediate consideration of risk to patients –which may lead to immediate exclusion of the practitioner, additional supervision and/or transfer to another non-patient facing area until the investigation is completed. The screening of the concern in line with MHPS Framework to determine if an investigation is required; and/or carry out a full investigation in line with the Framework.

Western Trust have advised that when a patient dies following a mistake by a medical professional the incident would be reported and investigated under the Trust's incident reporting and investigation system and the 'Reporting and Follow up of Serious Adverse Incidents (SAI)' November 2016, this will provide a mechanism to identify systems learning with a focus on patient safety. Where there are professional concerns regarding a doctor's performance following the death of a patient the Trust will also consider this in terms of the MHPS Framework.

Northern Trust have provided the following response. Any death occurring as a result of clinical error must be reported to the Coroner. All concerns raised regarding a doctor's clinical performance are managed within the MHPS framework so that they can be properly investigated to establish the facts. This would include considering any immediate actions if required to ensure patient safety. The outcome of any investigation can lead to a series of actions such as: a clinical performance panel; referral to the General Medical Council (GMC) or the Practitioner Performance Advice (PPA) service in NHS Resolution; restriction or exclusion from practice; Occupational Health referral; or indeed no further action required.

I trust you find this a detailed enough response to your question.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health what his Department's projection for COVID-19 deaths was at the beginning of the pandemic.

(AQW 13341/17-22)

Mr Swann: The best judgement of the Covid-19 modelling group at the end of March 2020 was that there could be up to 3,000 deaths under a reasonable worst case scenario during the first 20 weeks of the epidemic. This figure was subsequently reduced to 1,500 in April 2020 following a review of the additional information that had become available.

The modelling work is not a prediction or forecast, rather a model of potential scenarios for planning purposes.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health what methodology of modelling his Department has used to project 3000 COVID-19-related deaths by April 2021.

(AQW 13343/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Health has not modelled the projected number of Covid-19 deaths by April 2021.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health whether he will increase student bursaries for students who are currently on placement within the Health Service and working on the frontline during the pandemic.

(AQW 13359/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is beyond dispute that the current pandemic presents unique and unprecedented challenges for these students as they undertake their clinical placements, which are an essential element of their pre-registration training. I have accordingly decided that a special recognition award of £2,000 should be paid to students on the nursing and midwifery pre-registration programmes over the period 1 October 2020 to 31 March 2021 commissioned by my Department from Queen's University Belfast and the Ulster University.

More generally, the evidence shows that the current bursary arrangements in Northern Ireland continue to be very effective in attracting and retaining high quality nursing and midwifery students. We have increased the number of places on the pre-registration nursing and midwifery programmes commissioned annually by this Department by 87% since the 2015/16

academic year to a record high of 1,325 this year. Despite this substantial increase the local universities continue to receive multiple applications for each place across all their programmes. They also report very low levels of attrition out of these programmes.

While these support arrangements are kept under continuous review, I have no current plans to increase the bursary.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health why he has not included dementia patients, such as those in the Waterside Hospital in Derry, in the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out; and to include such patients in the vaccine roll out.

(AQW 13374/17-22)

Mr Swann: Trusts are currently planning for the vaccination of hospital inpatients with the help of hospital pharmacies.

Trusts will be receiving a quantity of the AstraZeneca vaccine to enable them to vaccinate all long term patients aged 65 years and over

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health what treatment and support is in place for people diagnosed with mesothelioma.

(AQW 13376/17-22)

Mr Swann: All mesothelioma patients in Northern Ireland are referred for review and discussion at their local Trust lung cancer multi-disciplinary meeting. A treatment plan which includes surgical and oncology representation is agreed with the full multi-disciplinary team. If a patient is considered a suitable candidate for immunotherapy, they are referred to their local oncology team to discuss treatment options and their subsequent treatment plan. All National Institute for Healthcare and Excellence approved therapies are available to all patients as appropriate.

In 2016, the Health and Social Care Board joined in partnership with Macmillan to fund a Clinical Nurse Specialist Expansion Plan. This plan aimed to bring Northern Ireland average caseloads across all tumour sites in line with the rest of the United Kingdom.

All mesothelioma patients therefore have access to the lung cancer Clinical Nurse Specialist. This specialised nursing has the necessary expertise to provide care, information and support to patients as part of their individual care pathway. These lung cancer nurse specialists will refer patients onwards to other sources of non-clinical support, including, financial advice, work support and support groups.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health (i) what processes he has put in place to establish the impact of Long COVID; (ii) what information has been provided to GPs and medical professionals on how to deal with this condition; and (iii) whether he has held any discussions with the Minister for Communities with the view to recognising the condition when assessing for Personal Independence Payment, Disability Living Allowance, Universal Credit and Employment Support Allowance.

(AQW 13399/17-22)

Mr Swann: The long term effects of Covid-19 is at present a relatively poorly understood phenomenon with limited evidence available. Although the recording of data on the condition has recently commenced in Northern Ireland, it is too early to conduct meaningful analysis.

Research to evaluate the long-term health and psychosocial effects of COVID-19 in affected persons is ongoing. The Official for National Statistics has announced plans for research into 'Long Covid' to provide robust evidence on the prevalence of these symptoms or conditions with which to inform government policy and treatment provision. Other major studies include the Post-Hospitalisation COVID-19 study which is a consortium of researchers and clinicians from across the UK working together to understand and improve long term health outcomes for patients who have been in hospital with COVID-19. Northern Ireland clinicians are actively engaged in this study.

The National Institute for Care and Health Excellence (NICE) published a rapid guideline on the management of the long-term effects of Covid-19 on 18 December 2020.

The guideline addresses, among other things, formal definitions of the phases of the condition, how to identify on-going symptoms and a definition of best practice investigation and treatment options to support the management of the condition.

This guideline has been automatically accepted for Northern Ireland and will now be applied across the Health & Social Care sector.

The assessment of eligibility for social security benefits is a matter for the Department for Communities.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the aims and timeframe for completion of the Public Health Agency's Walking In School cross border trial.

(AQW 13476/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Walking In ScHools (WISH) Study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of a novel, low-cost, peer-led school-based walking intervention, delivered across the school year, at increasing physical activity levels of adolescent girls in schools within NI and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland.

WISH commenced in April 2019 and, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and related school closures, it is now due to complete in May 2023 (having required a 12 month extension).

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 5023/17-22, whether he (i) has made any bids in previous monitoring rounds; or (ii) is developing any bids in future monitoring rounds, to invest in walking strategies and programmes to support physical exercise and mental health.

(AQW 13477/17-22)

Mr Swann: “A Fitter Future for All”, the obesity prevention strategy for Northern Ireland, seeks to promote greater participation in all forms of physical activity, including walking and cycling, as physical activity plays a key role in improving population health and well-being. In support of “A Fitter Future for All”, the Public Health Agency (PHA) commissions a suite of programmes to increase participation in physical activity.

As per the position in June 2020, at present, the PHA has not made any bids and are not currently developing any bids to invest in walking strategies and programmes to support physical exercise and mental health. The PHA is collaborating with other organisations to explore the development of a “Walking for All” programme across Northern Ireland.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health to detail the increase in the number of intensive care unit beds since 2019.

(AQW 13550/17-22)

Mr Swann: The critical care resource has remained static at 106 available beds since July 2017. However, it is important to note that the number of beds actually available for use at any given time in ICU is managed dynamically in accordance with Unit need; hospital bed stock is managed in line with best practice infection control as well as the number of ICU beds needed based on the stage of surge being experienced by any Trust or hospital.

The number of available ICU beds has been collected from Critical Care Network NI on an almost daily basis since the beginning of the pandemic to monitor the additional stresses on hospital services. ICU beds continue to be managed operationally as described above. This information can be found on the DoH COVID-19 Dashboard at the link below:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/covid-19-daily-dashboard-updates>

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health to detail the average bed capacity in each hospital in (i) 2015; (ii) 2016; (iii) 2017; (iv) 2018; (v) 2019; and (vi) 2020.

(AQW 13551/17-22)

Mr Swann: Please find in tabulated form below the data regarding the average bed availability for years 2015-2020 by hospital. This data was sourced from aggregate statistical returns from Trusts to the Department and, as such, it is not comparable to the data presented currently on the COVID-19 Daily Dashboard. For the most recent information on occupied and available beds as well as occupancy please see the following link: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/covid-19-daily-dashboard-updates>.

Average Available Beds in HSC Hospitals in Northern Ireland, 2015-2020^P

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020P
	Average Available Beds	Average Available Beds	Average Available Beds	Average Available Beds	Average Available Beds	Average Available Beds
Belfast Trust						
Acute Mental Health Inpatient Centre	0	0	0	0	42	80
Belfast City	429	422	412	384	365	350
Cancer Centre	69	67	67	62	61	56
Knockbracken Healthcare Park	139	118	118	118	101	77
Mater Infirmorum	239	230	237	250	207	218
Muckamore Abbey	122	117	106	94	72	58
Musgrave Park	260	256	239	264	250	249
RBHSC	94	94	94	96	96	97
Royal Maternity	117	110	107	110	107	109
Royal Victoria	675	687	677	670	674	677
School of Dentistry	0	0	0	0	0	0
Young Peoples Centre	30	31	31	31	31	28

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020P
	Average Available Beds	Average Available Beds	Average Available Beds	Average Available Beds	Average Available Beds	Average Available Beds
Northern Trust						
Antrim	506	517	525	529	544	533
Braid Valley	0	0	0	0	0	0
Causeway Hospital	233	238	241	240	230	210
Dalriada	24	32	32	32	32	24
Holywell	120	121	116	117	117	110
Mid Ulster	21	22	22	22	22	37
Moyle	16	16	17	18	17	17
Robinson Memorial	21	21	21	21	21	17
Whiteabbey	44	43	44	44	44	40
South Eastern Trust						
Ards	20	20	20	20	19	17
Downe	42	42	43	43	43	42
Downshire	71	71	72	72	72	71
Lagan Valley	89	93	93	90	90	83
Lagan Valley PNU	36	36	36	36	36	37
Thompson House	36	36	36	36	36	36
Ulster	611	620	639	628	627	576
Ulster MHU	24	24	24	24	24	24
Southern Trust						
Banbridge	0	0	0	0	0	0
Craigavon Area	476	485	492	478	494	516
Craigavon Area PNU	94	94	94	94	94	94
Daisy Hill	212	215	215	217	220	213
Lurgan	51	51	51	53	53	50
St Lukes	25	24	24	24	19	18
South Tyrone	38	36	36	36	36	28
Western Trust						
Altnagelvin Area	478	481	477	465	472	450
Gransha	52	39	30	30	30	28
Lakeview	16	9	10	10	10	10
Omagh Hospital & Primary Care Complex	0	0	20	41	41	41
South West Acute	219	226	224	226	226	214
Tyrone County	36	36	20	0	0	0
Tyrone & Fermanagh	74	62	66	65	61	55
Waterside (Ward 1-4)	64	63	65	65	65	69

Source: KH03a returns.

P Data for 2020 is provisional.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health to detail overall intensive care unit capacity in each hospital in each day of (i) November; (ii) December; and (iii) January in (a) 2015; (b) 2016; (c) 2017; (d) 2018; (e) 2019; and (f) 2020.

(AQW 13552/17-22)

Mr Swann: The critical care resource has remained static since 2015, with the exception of 2 additional L3 beds in the Intensive Care Unit of the Royal Victoria Hospital in July 2017.

There were a total of 104 ICU beds from 2015 to June 2017 and 106 ICU beds from July 2017 to October 2020 (see Table 1 below). It is important to note that the number of beds actually available for use at any given time in ICU is managed dynamically in accordance with Unit need; hospital bed stock is managed in line with best practice in infection control as well as the number of ICU beds needed based on the stage of surge being experienced by any Trust or hospital.

The number of ICU beds has been collected from Critical Care Network NI on an almost daily basis since the beginning of the pandemic. The number of ICU beds available on a given day is managed operationally as described above. This information can be found on the DoH COVID-19 Dashboard at the link below:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/covid-19-daily-dashboard-updates>

Table 1: The number and location of critical care beds available from 2015 – 2020

Intensive Care Unit	2015 – June 2017		July 2017 – October 2020	
	Total Bed Spaces	L3 Acuity* Bed Spaces	Total Bed Spaces	L3 Acuity* Bed Spaces
Altnagelvin	10	8.5	10	8.5
Antrim	8	7	8	7
Belfast City	9	7	9	7
Causeway	4	3	4	3
Craigavon	8	7	8	7
Mater	6	4.5	6	4.5
Royal Victoria	25	21	27	23
South West Acute	6	4	6	4
Ulster	10	8	10	8
General Adult Total	86	70	88	72
Cardiac ICU	18	14	18	14
Adult Totals	104	84	106	86

Source: Critical Care Network Northern Ireland

* L3 Acuity- This is reflective of patient who requires 1:1 nursing care to meet their clinical need and is a subset of the total.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health why the (i) Southern Health and Social Care Trust; (ii) South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust; (iii) Belfast Health and Social Care Trust; (iv) Northern Health and Social Care Trust; (v) Western Health and Social Care Trust; and (vi) Business Services Organisation, were found to have paid staff less than minimum wage.

(AQW 13554/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer the member to my response to AQW 12367/17-22 which was answered on 08/01/2021.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health how he will improve the provision of care for those living with dementia, both in the care home sector and the wider community.

(AQW 13567/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has provided funding to support the roll out of actions from the Delivering Social Change Dementia programme. This has included the appointment of:

- Ten (10) Dementia Service Improvement Leads (two per Trust – one each in Community and Hospital settings). The work plan includes working to ensure the implementation of the Regional Dementia Care Pathway and implementing recommendations from the Delivering Social Change Phase 2 Dementia Programme together with a range of hospital, community and care home initiatives that will enhance the quality of care and treatment available to people with a dementia and their carers.
- Ten (10) Dementia Navigators (in addition to the 6 previously in place) whose role is to provide support, information and advice to people with a dementia and their carers throughout the dementia journey from initial enquiries and diagnosis to palliative and end of life care.

- Forty Four (44) Dementia Companions (Hospitals) whose role is to provide support to persons with a dementia during their stay in hospital ensuring their safety and well-being and provide support and reassurance in what can be perceived as an intimidating and unfamiliar environment.

The new Regional Dementia Care Pathway addresses many of the outstanding recommendations from the Regional Dementia Strategy (2011) and when implemented will cover all aspects of care and treatment from raising awareness and promoting public health messages through providing timely diagnosis and post diagnosis support to palliative and end of life care.

Full implementation across all Trusts is expected to take at least 3 years but will also depend on the availability of funding.

With regard to work to be undertaken in Care Homes and in the wider community, this includes the following:

- Awareness raising, campaigns, information and support to the general public.
- Training and development programmes and other support networks for all staff across all sectors.
- Training and support programmes for carers.
- Engagement with and support to the Community and Voluntary sector.
- Development and delivery of flexible carer supports (short-breaks) similar to those piloted in the Delivering Social Change Dementia Programme.
- Working specifically with informal carers and staff in care homes and other settings to help manage behaviours which carers find difficult to understand.
- Supporting the roll-out of products and findings from the Delivering Social Change Phase 2 Programme (e-health, data analytics and research) which includes:
 - Dementia Apps <https://apps4dementia.orchs.co.uk>
 - E-Learning (including ECHO)
 - Application of research findings to practice
 - Service improvements to the care of people with a learning disability and dementia
 - Technological developments that will enhance practice records, data and service planning and delivery
 - Developing appropriate service responses to those people with a dementia and their carers from marginalised or excluded groups
- Promotion of Dementia Friendly Communities and Environments.

The speed and progress of these planned activities will also depend on future funding from the Executive

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health whether the legislation on children who are looked after or in care will change to extend the age of young people to ensure that the statutory criteria continues to support these young people after they turn 18. **(AQW 13634/17-22)**

Mr Swann: Under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts already have a statutory duty to prepare looked after children for leaving care and to provide services to them when they have left care in order to improve their life prospects as they make the transition to independent living. Such services are provided up to the age of 21, and up to age 24 if they are still in education or training.

The draft Adoption and Children (Northern Ireland) Bill will: extend to age 25 (from age 24) support provided to care leavers engaged in education or training; enable a care leaver to pursue a new course of education or training or to request support and advice between the ages of 21 and 25; and enable a Trust to provide advice and support beyond age 25 if it is considered necessary. The Bill also includes a power for the Department to extend the age limit of 25 further at some stage in the future.

I intend to seek the Executive's agreement to introduce the Bill in the Assembly in the current mandate.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health how many health staff are self-isolating; and how many of these staff have tested positive for COVID-19. **(AQW 13647/17-22)**

Mr Swann: On 29 January 2021 the number of health staff recorded as absent due to self-isolation was 719 and the number of staff recorded absent with COVID-19 or COVID-19 symptoms was 563.

Notes:

- 1 The number of health staff recorded as absent due to self-isolation refers to staff who were self-isolating due to family members showing symptoms or were a close contact of a confirmed case or were shielding, therefore, not showing COVID-19 symptoms.
- 2 Staff who were self-isolating or tested positive for COVID-19 and were well enough to work from home, are not included in these figures.
- 3 Staff from the following organisations are included in these figures; all HSC Trusts, NIAS, BSO, HSCB, PHA, NIGALA, NIMDTA, NIPEC, NISCC, PCC, RQIA and NIFRS.
- 4 Figures exclude Bank Staff and Staff on Career Break/Seconded out of the Trust.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health what assessments have been made to measure the impact that restrictions have had on (i) mental health; (ii) obesity; and (iii) substance abuse.

(AQW 13649/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department continues to monitor the population health impact of COVID-19 and the related regulations which are in place to reduce virus transmission. This includes looking at international, national and local evidence and research, and this emerging evidence is considered as part of the ongoing reviews of the regulations and informs decision making.

There are indications that while there are some positive trends in areas such as air quality and smoking, in the main, population health is being negatively affected by the wider impacts of the COVID-19 restrictions. In particular there are concerns about the impact on mental health, diet and nutrition, and alcohol consumption. However, evidence is still emerging and the impact differs between sub-sets of the population – in particular we are monitoring the impact on existing health inequalities.

The Public Health Agency are working with key partners, both within the health sector and with other sectors, to provide information to the public on how to look after and improve health and wellbeing during the current restrictions.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health how many people applied for Return To Practice Nursing in (i) 2019; and (ii) 2020.

(AQW 13652/17-22)

Mr Swann: The total number of people who applied in 2019/ 2020 for Return to Practice Nursing programmes.

1 2019 = 49

2 2020 = 87

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the process involved, including the expected timeframe for completion, of a Return to Practice applicant.

(AQW 13653/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Ulster University Programme is advertised twice yearly. Following receipt of applications, the University will determine whether the candidates fulfil the criteria and if so invite them for interview and allocate places on the programme.

The programme takes 14 weeks to complete followed by a time for the university examinations and the approval by the Nursing and Midwifery Council. A student who starts the programme in September will complete 6 months later.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health how many applicants have applied for Return to Practice in 2020 and are awaiting registration.

(AQW 13654/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of students who applied in 2020 who are awaiting registration are:

12 students who commenced in September 2020 are due to go through the University Board of Examiners on Thursday the 4th of February 2021 and progress with re-registration with the NMC.

26 students who applied in 2020, have commenced the January 2021 Return to Practice Programme and upon successful completion will progress through the June 2021 Board of Examiners.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health how many applicants have withdrawn from the application process of Return to Practice.

(AQW 13655/17-22)

Mr Swann: How many applicants have withdrawn from the application process of Return to Practice programme. In 2020 a total of 45 applicants withdrew.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Health whether taxi drivers will be included in the vaccination programme alongside teachers, as many transport children to special schools.

(AQW 13661/17-22)

Mr Swann: Vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which advises the 4 UK Health Ministers.

The rate limiting factor for deployment of the vaccine is the availability of vaccines. JCVI has advised that the first priorities for the COVID-19 vaccination programme should be the prevention of mortality and the maintenance of the health and social care systems. As the risk of mortality from COVID-19 increases with age, prioritisation is primarily based on age. JCVI did not recommend the prioritisation of any other professions apart from Health and Social Care workers.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health whether reported problems in the online booking system for 65 to 70 year olds to receive COVID-19 vaccinations have been resolved; and why individuals under 70 have been able to be vaccinated before many over 70 year olds.

(AQW 13671/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Covid-19 vaccination online booking system saw high demand in the first days of service, with the result there have been some initial issues with access, which my officials are working hard to resolve. More than 60,000 appointments have been booked by those aged 65-69 at date of writing. In the meantime a dedicated NI Direct telephone line has been established for those in the 65-69 age group.

Building on the success of the NI vaccination programme to date, a twin track approach has been initiated – with both GP practices and the regional vaccination centres vaccinating members of the public from prioritised groups. This expansion of the programme covers everyone aged 65 – 79 and over and those who are clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) to Covid-19.

The ultimate aim of the programme is to protect those most at risk from the virus as quickly and safely as possible, and with the minimum of waste. All plans are subject to the availability of vaccine supplies from manufacturers.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how much has been spent on taxi hire by each Health and Social Care Trust, in the last two years.

(AQW 13677/17-22)

Mr Swann: Expenditure on taxi hire by each Health and Social Care Trust, in each of the last two financial years, is set out in the table below.

	2019/20 £'000	2018/19 £'000
Belfast Health and Social Care Trust	1,685	1,490
Northern Health and Social Care Trust	1,782	1,923
South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust	1,400	1,289
Southern Health and Social Care Trust	1,579	1,495
Western Health and Social Care Trust	822	601
NI Ambulance Service Health and Social Care Trust	208	224
Total	7,476	7,022

*Source: Health and Social Care Trusts

The use of taxis by HSC Trusts is planned and monitored, and taxis are only used in exceptional circumstances when it is not economically viable or appropriate to use Trust transport.

Taxis are used by Trusts for a variety of reasons. Most of the expenditure is incurred on the transport of vulnerable patients and clients, particularly children in care and adults with a physical or learning disability.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health when childcare workers will receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

(AQW 13690/17-22)

Mr Swann: Vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which advises the 4 UK Health Ministers.

Other than health and social care workers identified at priority group 2, JCVI has not recommended prioritisation linked to occupation. Therefore, childcare workers will be vaccinated in line with the general population group they belong to. The rate limiting factor for deployment of the vaccine is the availability of vaccines. The purpose of this approach is to save as many lives as possible with the available vaccine.

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Health whether routine DPD, also known as DPYD, testing has commenced in Northern Ireland for all cancer patients starting chemotherapy.

(AQW 13722/17-22)

Mr Swann: Having a deficiency in the DPD enzyme could make the side effects of certain chemotherapy drugs worse. For some people, these side effects can be life threatening. DPD testing means that patients who may take a serious reaction are spared a potentially life threatening event. I can confirm that DPD testing commenced for all cancer patients starting chemotherapy in Northern Ireland on 4th January 2021.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health, given recent issues with food availability following the UK's withdrawal from the European Union and consequent arrangements, what changes his Department is making to ensure greater and more effective use of dietetic support to address issues arising from lack of supply of certain products.

(AQW 13723/17-22)

Mr Swann: Dietitians continue to work across the Health and Social Care (HSC) sector and in collaboration with government departments, local councils, community and voluntary groups to address inequalities in health related to food, such as food poverty and access to healthy food alongside their work in the design and delivery of health improvement programmes.

With regard to food supply to the HSC sector, I understand there have been no significant disruptions to food supply, and no outages, since EU Exit. Current contracts allow for flexibility and substitution and suppliers have been asked to hold 4-6 weeks of stocks, in addition to regional stockholding of 4-6 weeks. Trusts stand ready to change menus should that be required, in conjunction with nutritionists and dieticians at local level.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what discussions he has had with Executive colleagues concerning potentially acting on a right to be forgotten law, enabling people who have been declared cancer-free to access services, including insurance, on the same basis as everyone else.

(AQW 13726/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have had no discussion with Executive colleagues on the issue of commercial companies providing services based on a patient's previous medical history.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health whether student doctors will receive the Health Service recognition payment.

(AQW 13739/17-22)

Mr Swann: On 11 September 2020 I announced approval of up to 80 additional medicine undergraduate places at Queen's University Belfast spread across their 2020 and 2021 intakes. This has enabled offers to be honoured to students in the exceptional circumstances created by last year's A-level re-grading decisions.

QUB will be able to offer up to 50 additional places for their September 2021 intake.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health to detail the funding provided by his Department to the Public Health Agency; and how tendering, procurement and commissioning will be accessible to all groups, regardless of the size of their financial reserves.

(AQW 13740/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Health provided revenue funding totalling £109,793,002 to the Public Health Agency (PHA) in the 2019/2020 financial year.

In developing any tender, the PHA reviews the financial criteria set to ensure that the criteria are proportionate and reasonable, based on the scale of funding to be awarded and the nature of the services being commissioned.

For tendering, procurement and commissioning of services, the PHA complies with the Northern Ireland Public Procurement Policy (2014), as approved by the Executive and the Public Contract Regulations (2015). The Agency ensures that all public funding is managed in line with the principles set out in the document 'Managing Public Money Northern Ireland' (2008).

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what alternative arrangements he has introduced to replace the Cross Border Healthcare Initiative to ensure that patients can access cross-border healthcare.

(AQW 13751/17-22)

Mr Swann: EU Directive 24/2011 on Cross-Border Healthcare allowed Northern Ireland patients to obtain treatment in an EEA country, pay for the treatment up front and then claim reimbursement from the Health and Social Care Board.

The EU Directive 2011/24 scheme is linked to the free movement of services. It has always sat separately from the social security coordination rules that provided for reciprocal healthcare with EU Member States. It therefore does not form part of the social security coordination protocol within the Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the UK and the EU and neither the UK Government nor the EU felt the scheme should continue.

In the UK the Cross-Border Healthcare Scheme closed down on 31 December 2020 and there is currently no alternative scheme available.

However, transitional arrangements for patients from Northern Ireland whose treatment had been, applied for, authorised or commenced, on or before the end of the transition period have been provided for and they will be able to complete their treatment and seek reimbursement.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Health how many mothers in each Health and Social Care Trust have given birth without a partner present due to the pandemic.

(AQW 13767/17-22)

Mr Swann: As birth partners are not patients, this information is not recorded. However, across all five trusts, the policy during the pandemic has been that all women are facilitated to have one birth partner of their choice present during established labour or whilst undergoing Caesarean section. If the woman's chosen partner is unavailable due to receiving a COVID-19 positive test, displaying COVID-19 attributed symptoms or to having a requirement to self-isolate, she is encouraged to choose an alternative birth partner.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to detail the cost of the army medical assistance.
(AQW 13796/17-22)

Mr Swann: In response to COVID-19, the estimated costs of military aid to date are:

Assistance type	Timeframe	Estimated cost excl. VAT (£)
4 x patient transfers from NI to GB for specialist treatment (includes flights, specialist cleaning, airfield fees)	April – June 2020	139,784
Storage of PPE	June – September 2020	3,417
122 staff to support Health and Social care (includes allowances, accommodation, transport, catering, miscellaneous costs)	January – February 2021	255,884
Total Estimated Cost (excl. VAT)	N/A	399,085

All costs are marginal only, in line with the rest of the UK. To date, final invoices have not yet been received.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether mental health nurses who enrol in February 2021 will be able to avail of the special recognition payment.
(AQW 13797/17-22)

Mr Swann: I can confirm that student nurses who commence their programme in February 2021 will be eligible for the special recognition payment I announced on 25 January 2021.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether he will be introducing any additional travel restriction measures, including public health passenger locator forms, for travel to and from Britain.
(AQW 13857/17-22)

Mr Swann: People are being advised to avoid travelling in and out of Northern Ireland as much as possible in light of the continuing COVID-19 threat. They are also advised that they are subject to the rules of where they are travelling to and from.

If arriving into Northern Ireland from within the Common Travel Area (CTA) with the intention to remain here for at least 24 hours, people should self-isolate upon arrival for 10 days in the same way as international arrivals. This is guidance rather than regulation and information on this is provided separately on NIDirect.

People who routinely cross the border (from either Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland) for essential purposes are not subject to these requirements. The online guidance outlines what these essential purposes include.

I have no current plans to implement a Northern Ireland specific passenger locator form for travel to and from Great Britain.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for an update on the reform of adult social care, including a timeframe for the publication of his Department's transformations proposals.
(AQW 13858/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have asked Departmental officials to bring forward proposals for my consideration in line with the key objectives for Adult Social Care Reform as proposed in the 'Power to People' report. However, you will appreciate that this work has been significantly interrupted during the COVID-19 response and progress in 2020/21 has been delayed.

The Project Board has been scheduled to reconvene, and will meet for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic on 23rd February. My Officials are also continuing to develop a series of engagement papers, linked to each of the Reform Project's strategic priorities. This work will inform the development of policy options for the future reform of Adult Social Care, which officials will submit for my consideration by the summer, after which, a public consultation will take place.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many nursing vacancies there are in the Health Service.
(AQW 13873/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of nursing and medical vacancies actively being recruited to is published on a quarterly basis at the following link: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/staff-vacancies>.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Health for an update on the number of international nurses recruited during the last 12 months.

(AQW 13879/17-22)

Mr Swann: International Recruitment for Nursing commenced in January 2016 as one approach to address the escalating Registered Nurse (Adult) vacancies across the five Health and Social Care Trusts.

As at 31 January 2021, the project has recruited 711 Nurses of which 658 still remain in post.

On 23 March 2020 all international nurse recruitment was suspended in order that HSC resources could be directed towards managing COVID-19. On 3 September 2020 the suspension on international recruitment was lifted and HSC Trusts were able to resume their recruitment plans.

Within the 20/21 financial year to date (1 April 20 to 31 Jan 21), 218 nurses have been recruited with the potential for a further 188 arrivals in Feb and Mar subject to travel restrictions.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Health for an update on the progress of the Protect Life 2 – Suicide Prevention Strategy since its implementation in 2019.

(AQW 13903/17-22)

Mr Swann: A broad range of actions are being progressed since the launch of Protect Life 2 in September 2019, including: Lifeline 24/7 helpline, self-harm support, training, counselling support, resilience building, awareness raising campaigns and bereavement support. Over 90% of commissioned suicide prevention services have continued during the pandemic.

An update on the implementation of the Strategy is available on the Department of Health website and a further update will be provided in March:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/actionplanataglance-aug2020.pdf>

The Public Health Agency (PHA) has responsibility for procurement of services under Protect Life 2. Procurement will commence following a process of extensive involvement/engagement. PHA seek to meaningfully involve service users and carers, stakeholders and the general public in this process to build consensus and support for how future services are shaped and commissioned with the levels of investment available.

To ensure appropriate input a process of involvement commenced in December 2020 through Stakeholder Engagement to gain an understanding of the evidence of current services provided.

This will be carried forward through a 3 stage approach which will reflect on feedback from previous involvement processes and consider future models of delivery of Protect Life 2 actions which the PHA have responsibility for.

A pre consultation process will commence in February 2021 and will last for a period of 8 weeks. Following the pre-consultation period, a discussion paper will be developed outlining the feedback from the pre-consultation involvement events and the considerations being made ahead of the next consultation period. This will be a public document available online with the opportunity to feedback comments.

Subsequently, a 12 week consultation process will take place from November 2021 following which a procurement stage will commence.

Services currently funded through Protect Life 2 will continue to be delivered while this process is being carried out.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the disruptions faced by suicide prevention services due to COVID-19 and restrictions on face-to-face contact.

(AQW 13904/17-22)

Mr Swann: As far as possible services have continued to be provided in recognition of the impact of the pandemic on mental health and wellbeing. The Protect Life 2 Steering Group chaired by the Chief Medical Officer has continued to meet remotely and the Executive Working Group on Mental Well-being, Resilience and Suicide Prevention has also continued to meet to provide strategic direction.

Over 90% of contracted services continue to be delivered during the pandemic with adaptations to delivery model. Service providers utilised remote working to continue to provide services by telephone call or video delivery individually and in groups.

Additional resources were provided to services indicating increased demand. Anecdotal feedback from some service providers said they had seen a decrease in the number of clients who did not attend their sessions/programmes due to the different methods of engagement.

Where face to face contact was permitted services were delivered as required through COVID safe practice determined by local risk, infection prevention and control protocols and use of PPE.

A number of additional initiatives and resources were developed during COVID, including:

- 2 Specific Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Campaigns have been delivered through COVID.
- Specific COVID Take 5 messaging resources and toolkits developed and promoted.
- Revamped 'Mindingyourhead.info' website containing the new COVID wellbeing hub

- Free Psychological First Aid E- learning module and guidance
- Free online Stress Control classes over 100,000 people have participated in the programme
- Helplines NI website updated to include new COVID-19 related helplines resulted in a 7 fold increase in people making contact.
- Lifeline NI 24 hr Crisis counselling helpline have had over 25,000 calls from April 20- Dec 20
- Mood Matters student sessions were delivered in Dec 20 and another planned for Feb 21.
- Mindset programmes – 20 Mindset Adolescent programmes have been delivered to 177 young people aged 14-17yrs.
- 52 Mindset Adult programmes have been delivered to 419 adults.
- 43 Connection suicide awareness programmes will be delivered by March 2021.
- Community services have also been enhanced through a short term funding programme across the region of approx. £1m investment in 334 grant awards

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Health what steps and initiatives his Department is taking to intervene with patients showing signs of suicidal behaviour since the pandemic began.

(AQW 13905/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are a wide spectrum of services available to persons showing signs of suicidal behaviour.

The Lifeline 24/7 crisis response helpline is available. Anyone who is in distress or despair can contact the 24/7 Lifeline Helpline on 0808 808 8000. If there is an immediate risk 999 and Emergency Departments are also available.

Mental Health services are available in the community setting for those who require help, through GPs, and Crisis Services are also provided on a regional basis across Health and Social Care Trusts. The Community Crisis Intervention Service is also available in Londonderry.

The Multi Agency Triage Team (MATT) pilot is available in Belfast and South Eastern HSC Trust areas where Police Officers, a Community Mental Health Practitioner and a paramedic work together to respond to people experiencing a mental health crisis, aged 18 and over, who have accessed the 999 or 101 system.

The Self Harm Intervention Programme (SHIP) receive referrals of people aged 11+ who have engaged in self harm either currently or in the past.

A review of crisis services across Northern Ireland is also ongoing as part of the Mental Health Action Plan and Strategy, and it is hoped that this will report in April to inform future delivery of these critical services.

A range of services funded under Protect Life 2 are also provided by community and voluntary groups. These services include counselling, training, resilience building, awareness raising and bereavement support.

In response to the impact of the COVID 19 Pandemic, I also initiated a dedicated COVID-19 Mental Health Response Plan, as part of the Mental Health Action Plan, in order to mitigate the profound impact of the pandemic and the lockdown on mental health. This outlined specific actions such as the development of an online apps library to help and support self-help; provision of free Stress Control classes online; the rollout of psychological first aid training to staff and volunteers on the front line; and a range of other online resources to support staff, children and young people, students joining the workforce early, and those bereaved during this time.

Information on looking after mental health and the support which is available across Northern Ireland can be found at www.mindingyourhead.info. The Minding Your Head website also contains a directory of services of local community and voluntary groups who are available to help with a range of issues.

The site also provides a link to Covid Wellbeing NI, an online hub to support the mental and emotional wellbeing of people across Northern Ireland during and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Zero Suicide online training package 'Suicide Let's Talk' has been circulated to all MLAs and enables people to identify when someone is presenting with suicidal thoughts/behaviour, to be able to speak out in a supportive manner and empower staff to signpost the individual to the correct services and support such as the Lifeline helpline. It is my intention that this training will be rolled out across the Northern Ireland Civil Service and across other public bodies in the future.

It is important to acknowledge that although some services had to adapt their delivery methods due to social distancing requirements caused by COVID-19, services remained available throughout the pandemic.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health why a mobile service provided by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust in the Downe Hospital, which included diabetic eye tests, ceased; and whether this service will be resumed.

(AQW 13920/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Diabetic Eye Screening Programme (DESP) was delivered by the Belfast Trust via a mobile screening service to GP practices, in the South Eastern; Southern and Northern Trusts. DESP screening that was delivered on the Downe Hospital site was carried out in association with the on-site GP practices, rather than as a local South Eastern Trust- delivered service.

In 2019 a public consultation was undertaken regarding the future model of DESP service delivery, with the recommendations being that the screening programme should move to a smaller number of fixed sites. Plans were being developed to implement this project when the first surge of COVID emerged in Northern Ireland, and as a result the DESP clinics were paused from April 2020 to August 2020, with the exception of high risk pregnant patients only being screened. The sites for the new model have not been agreed.

From August 2020 the screening programme has recommenced albeit with reduced capacity due to COVID safety requirements. The programme is currently using a risk stratification approach to invite people for screening appointments.

As normal access to GP practices has not been available to the programme during COVID, a range of temporary fixed facilities are being used to offer screening to those most at risk of sight threatening retinopathy. Within the South Eastern Trust area, current sites being used are in Clough, Bangor and Lisburn.

DESP continues to work hard to see as many patients as possible in the current situation and within the limited capacity available.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 12726/17-22, what his plans are to reduce the 7,111 people from North Belfast who are on a waiting list for surgery.

(AQW 13927/17-22)

Mr Swann: The pandemic has had a serious impact on already unacceptable waiting times. The HSC is currently working to prioritise the care needs of patients and also to ensure that all available capacity is utilised as effectively and equitably as possible across the region, including in the independent sector.

My Department is currently working to develop a plan to rebuild elective care as quickly as possible across Northern Ireland as we come out of this surge. However, addressing lengthy waiting lists will not be possible without sustained and substantial investment and additional staffing.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health to detail any discussions he has had with the Minister for Infrastructure in relation to suicide prevention measures on bridges.

(AQW 13928/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Public Health Agency have commissioned work to consider potential interventions in relation to bridges along the M2 corridor. A report from this work will be presented at the next meeting of the Executive Working Group on Mental Wellbeing, Resilience and Suicide Prevention, which is planned for 3 March, and Ministers will discuss future steps at that stage. This work will have applicability for other bridges across Northern Ireland.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health how his Department's workforce planning will address the gaps and inequalities for staff in Health and Social Care.

(AQW 13929/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department's Health and Social Care Workforce Strategy 2026: Delivering for Our People includes a commitment to effective workforce planning.

Despite the pressures created by Covid-19 emergency, my Department is proceeding with its comprehensive programme of long-term, HSC-wide strategic workforce reviews to ensure that we have an appropriately sized and skilled workforce.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health what discussions he is holding with the private health sector to ensure those patients awaiting elective surgery or semi-elective surgery will get the necessary operations.

(AQW 13937/17-22)

Mr Swann: Given the impact of COVID-19 on health service operating capacity, I have made it clear that all possible sources of additional capacity should be utilised. This has included securing theatre capacity from local independent sector healthcare providers. To date, this has allowed many hundreds of the most urgent and time critical patients to be treated. From April to December 2020 approximately 3,900 patients have been treated by local HSC consultants in the three local independent sector providers.

Provision for continued access to the three independent hospitals has been made to 31 March 2021 and will continue for the foreseeable future. In addition, capacity has been secured from RoI private clinics and discussions are ongoing with NHS England for in-house and IS capacity for Northern Ireland patients.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health to detail the eligibility criteria for unpaid carers to receive a COVID-19 vaccine, including in which phase of the vaccination roll-out they are placed.

(AQW 13939/17-22)

Mr Swann: As per the JCVI recommendations, carers will be included as part of priority group 6. Details of how eligible carers will be identified are currently being finalised.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the COVID-19 variants currently in circulation, including the relevant prevalence for each since 1 January 2021.

(AQW 13944/17-22)

Mr Swann: The only variant of concern (VOC) or variant under investigation (VUI) of the Covid-19 virus that has been confirmed to be in circulation in Northern Ireland is variant B.1.1.7 (VOC 202012/01) which was first identified in Kent/England. It is estimated that between 50% and 70% of new Covid-19 cases in Northern Ireland currently relate to variant B.1.1.7.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Health what provision his Department is making to vaccinate informal carers that provide care for clinically extremely vulnerable family members.

(AQW 13946/17-22)

Mr Swann: As per the JCVI recommendations, carers will be included as part of priority group 6. Details of how eligible carers will be identified are currently being finalised.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health how he will ensure that mental health services are available in a timely manner to all individuals seeking care, with specific reference to (i) new mothers, particularly inpatient services for mothers with newborn babies; and (ii) children and young people, including trauma from COVID-19.

(AQW 13947/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) Women in the antenatal period who have presenting mental health issues and are known to a community mental health team will continue to receive support in conjunction with the maternity staff in the hospital.

If the new mother develops post-partum mental health issues following the birth of the baby, the hospital staff and the community mental health team work together to provide support during inpatient stay and on discharge from hospital.

I recently confirmed the allocation of funding to establish a new specialist perinatal mental health community service model for Northern Ireland. This new service will provide new multidisciplinary community perinatal mental health teams in each of the five Health and Social Care Trusts and will include a new stepped care model to ensure regional consistency. My officials are working closely with the Public Health Agency to finalise plans for delivery.

A Business Case for a dedicated Mother and Baby Perinatal Mental Health Inpatient Unit is still under development.

- (i) Mental Health services for children and young people (including trauma from Covid-19) continue to be available in a through the provision of a five stepped Care Model. Service provision, during the pandemic has shifted to a blended approach of face to face and virtual sessions and this provision has ensured that support/services have been offered to those that require it.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether any commissioned services or programmes use a psychological autopsy approach.

(AQW 13955/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department is not aware of any commissioned services or programmes that use psychological autopsy.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether there are any legal barriers to commissioning a psychological autopsy, separate from a Serious Adverse Incident process.

(AQW 13957/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department is not aware of any legal barriers, however there is no intention to commission psychological autopsy at present.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many vacancies for doctors there currently are in hospitals in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 13962/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of nursing and medical vacancies actively being recruited to is published on a quarterly basis at the following link: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/staff-vacancies>.

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Health why reablement team support workers working in the Fermanagh and Omagh Trust area are on a Band 2 salary, whilst those with the same training in the Belfast Trust are being paid as Band 3.

(AQW 13981/17-22)

Mr Swann: Reablement was introduced within the Western Trust in 2012. At the time, Reablement was developed from within the established Homecare workforce. The Trust implemented a skill-mix approach to frontline service delivery with a number of Band 3 Reablement Team Leads working alongside Band 2 Reablement Support Workers.

The Band 3 staff have additional Reablement responsibilities, whilst the role of the Band 2 Reablement Support Worker is not substantively different to the role and responsibility of the Homecarer which has always been Band 2. All posts were matched

prior to, or shortly after the service commenced within the Trust's job evaluation process which confirmed the respective bandings. Band matching, which is underpinned by the Agenda for Change terms and conditions, is specific to roles and responsibilities of a post, and not necessarily training undertaken.

The implementation of Reablement within the Trust was part of the wider reform of the Homecare services which was underpinned by ongoing engagement with staff and Trades Unions during the planning and implementation process.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health to detail hospital bed occupancy in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust for weeks 45 through to 52, broken down by week.

(AQW 14007/17-22)

Mr Swann: Please see below presented in tabulated form the average available beds, average occupied beds and occupancy for Northern Health and Social Care Trust quarter ending December 2020. To note, hospital beds occupancy data is supplied on a quarterly basis rather than a weekly basis and, as such, it is not possible to provide a weekly breakdown. The period covered by these figures is from week 40 (1st October 2020) through to week 53 (31st December 2020). It should also be noted this occupancy data will not be comparable with the beds occupancy data presented on the COVID-19 Daily Dashboard. For the most recent information on available beds, occupied beds and occupancy please find the COVID-19 Daily Dashboard at the following link: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/covid-19-daily-dashboard-updates> .

Average available beds, average Occupied Beds and occupancy in Northern HSCT hospitals in Northern Ireland, quarter ending December1 2020^P

	QE Dec 2020P	QE Dec 2020P	QE Dec 2020P
	Average available Beds	Average occupied Beds	Occupancy (%)
Northern Trust	989	755	76

Source: KH03a returns.

P Data for 2020 is provisional.

1 Beds data is reported on a quarterly as opposed to a weekly basis, with these figures reflecting the position at the end of each quarter (QE).

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health what research his Department has carried out on the benefits of Vitamin D in building our immune systems; and whether he intends to promote the benefits of Vitamin D in public health messaging in response to the pandemic.

(AQW 14025/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has a formal link with the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) under which NICE Clinical Guidance is reviewed locally for applicability in Northern Ireland. Where guidance found to be applicable is endorsed by the Department for implementation within Health and Social Care (HSC). NICE Covid-19 rapid guidelines are automatically endorsed as applicable in Northern Ireland from the date of publication by NICE in accordance with HSC Circular (SQSD) (NICE Covid-19 Procedures) 12/20 which is available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/HSC-SQSD-12-20.pdf>

On 17 December 2020 NICE published COVID-19 rapid guideline NG187, available at <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/NG187>, following a review of the current available evidence. This review concluded that there was insufficient evidence of benefit to support the use of vitamin D to prevent or treat COVID-19, outside a clinical trial setting.

In light of this, I can advise that the Department does not intend to promote or make vitamin D available for the treatment or prevention of COVID-19 at this time, however this position will be reviewed in future should further evidence become available that would support its use for this reason.

It remains the case that Vitamin D products continue to be prescribed to vulnerable patients in Northern Ireland in circumstances where it is deemed clinically appropriate to do so.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health what consideration his Department has given to implementing a standardised framework for funding for community pharmacies.

(AQW 14032/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department continues to engage positively with representatives from Community Pharmacy NI (CPNI) and a draft contractual framework has been agreed between CPNI, my Department and the Health and Social Care Board which will be developed further once we are over the current pandemic.

An important component of this is the commissioning plan for 2020/21 which is currently being implemented and the 2021/22 plan which is being agreed with CPNI.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether any of his Department's publications or advertising campaigns uses images that have been photoshopped to alter the body of the participants.

(AQW 14035/17-22)

Mr Swann: When designing Departmental publications, Departmental officials would use stock images from a variety of sources including official photographs taken or arranged by my Press Office. Press Office do not photo shop or alter images to change body shapes. I am not aware if other external sources alter their images in this manner.

My Department does not directly manage advertising campaigns. The Department's Arms-Length Bodies do procure the services of external advertising companies for campaign advertising. I am not aware of any occasion where such altered images have been used in advertising campaigns.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how many new cases of self-reported breathing or lung problems were caused or exacerbated by work in 2019/20.

(AQW 14047/17-22)

Mr Swann: This information is not available.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of Children in Care or Looked After in (i) 2016/17; (ii) 2017/18; (iii) 2018/19; (iv) 2019/20; and (v) 2020/21.

(AQW 14059/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of children in care in Northern Ireland is published annually in Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland,

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/looked-after-children>.

Information for the year 2020/21 is not available; however my Department is publishing weekly provisional children's social services data during the Covid-19 period which includes the number of children in care,

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-childrens-social-services-data-during-covid-19-0> .

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health to detail his plans for alleviating waiting lists post-pandemic.

(AQW 14075/17-22)

Mr Swann: The pandemic has had an inevitable and serious impact on already unacceptable waiting times. My Department is currently working alongside the HSC to develop a plan to rebuild elective care as quickly as possible as we come out of the latest surge and to develop a longer term approach to tackling our waiting lists on a sustainable basis.

Tackling waiting lists will not be possible without sustained and substantial investment and additional staffing.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of prescriptions issued for anti-depressants in each each month of (i) 2018; (ii) 2019; (iii) 2020; and (iv) 2021 to date.

(AQW 14079/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of prescriptions issued is not known, but the number of antidepressant prescription items dispensed in each month of 2018, 2019 and in January to September 2020 are shown in the table overleaf. Information relating to October to December 2020 will be available from 25 February 2021, following publication of the Official Statistics release "Family Practitioner Services, General Pharmaceutical Statistics to December 2020". Information for January to March 2021 will not be available until June 2021.

Number of antidepressant prescription items dispensed in each month of 2018, 2019 and in January to September 2020

Month	Number of dispensed prescription items for antidepressant medication ^{1,2}		
	2018	2019	20203
Jan	277,171	296,677	302,370
Feb	246,400	259,552	271,447
Mar	272,903	275,800	380,913
Apr	256,491	279,412	342,467
May	275,584	295,724	289,905
Jun	266,818	267,814	295,448
Jul	269,022	292,875	303,627
Aug	281,279	285,544	275,724

Month	Number of dispensed prescription items for antidepressant medication ^{1,2}		
	2018	2019	2020 ³
Sep	256,212	277,622	304,497
Oct	289,170	300,228	-
Nov	277,508	280,397	-
Dec	260,922	289,706	-
Total	3,229,480	3,401,351	2,766,3983

Source: Pharmacy Payment System, Family Practitioner Services, HSC Business Services Organisation.

- 1 All information is for prescriptions prescribed in Primary care and dispensed by a community pharmacist. Data on secondary care prescribing and private prescriptions are not included.
- 2 Anti-depressant items are defined as those categorised under British National Formulary (BNF) chapter 4, section 3.
- 3 Information relating to October to December 2020 will be available from 25 February 2021

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Health how much funding each Health and Social Care Trust allocated to mental health services in the 2019/20 financial year.

(AQW 14080/17-22)

Mr Swann: Expenditure by each Health and Social Care Trust within the Mental Health Programme of Care (PoC) for 2019/20 is set out in the table below:

	2019/20 £m
Belfast Health and Social Care Trust	101
Northern Health and Social Care Trust	69
South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust	46
Southern Health and Social Care Trust	56
Western Health and Social Care Trust	50
Total	322

*Source: Health and Social Care Trusts –Trust Financial Returns (TFRs)

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Health how much COVID-19 funding he has bid for for 2021/22 ahead of the 2021/22 draft budget; and how he plans to allocate the £380 million contained within the draft budget.

(AQW 14101/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department bid for £380 million Covid-19 funding in the 2021/22 budget exercise ahead of the 2021/22 draft budget.

The allocation of £380 million to cover our COVID/Rebuild identified pressures is broken down as follows:

- £25m for Covid-19 vaccine deployment;
- £105m for the ongoing Covid-19 operational response;
- £250m for rebuilding services.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health to detail the status of the investigative review of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority; and when the findings will be published.

(AQW 14177/17-22)

Mr Swann: The final report containing recommendations has been submitted to the Department for consideration. The Department hopes to publish the findings soon along with any further response or actions required.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health for an update on additional funding for the Northlands addiction centre in Derry.

(AQW 14259/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department currently provides grant funding of £126,430 per year to Northlands towards its core administration costs, as part of our Revenue Grant funding scheme. In addition, the Health and Social Care system commissions a number of treatment and support services from Northlands in respect of alcohol and drug use.

Under the heading “Addressing Northern Ireland’s unique circumstances” within “New Decade, New Approach”, the UK Government committed to making funding available for a number of areas, which could include additional funding to support the Derry/Londonderry addiction centre. It is anticipated that the level of funding made available will not be sufficient to cover all the areas set out in New Decade, New Approach. It is my understanding that the specific projects this funding is aimed at supporting are to be determined by a joint board which includes the Secretary of State and the First and deputy First Ministers.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on the bridging legislation that would bring Northern Ireland into line with Great Britain with regard to ensuring the Digital Economy Act applies to health data.

(AQW 14265/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Digital Economy Act, introduced by the UK government in 2017, specifically excludes the administrative sharing or linking of UK health data. I am not aware of any plans to amend this primary legislation.

Department for Infrastructure

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will explore the use of Section 76 (Developer Contributions) in local councils to include elected representatives in the decisions on how these contributions are spent.

(AQW 13216/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): All local councils are free to include elected representatives in these decisions. Development Management Practice Note 21, published by my Department in January 2017, provides guidance on the use of powers under Section 76 of the Planning Act (NI) 2011 relating to planning agreements in order to assist those involved in this aspect of the planning process. It is a matter for the council, as the determining authority for a planning application with an associated planning agreement secured under section 76 powers, to determine how it involves councillors in this process.

Where a financial contribution from a developer has been secured under a section 76 planning agreement, this should be applied for the purposes for which it was secured. It will be a matter for the relevant Council planning authority to monitor the spending of those contributions.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many tonnes of grit was applied in the (i) Northern; (ii) Southern; (iii) Eastern; and (iv) Western Divisions, in (a) 2019/20; and (b) 2020/21.

(AQW 13297/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Details of the tonnage of salt used by Divisions in 2019/20 and to date in 20/21 are set out in the table below:

Division	2019/20	2020/21 to date
Northern	17,690 tonnes	15,570 tonnes
Southern	13,251 tonnes	11,179 tonnes
Eastern	11,004 tonnes	10,880 tonnes
Western	18,596 tonnes	14,717 tonnes
Total	60,541 tonnes	52,346 tonnes

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the scheme to have environmental improvements in alleyways and derelict areas will include those that are currently unadapted.

(AQW 13451/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am very supportive of the efforts of local communities to improve the appearance of alleyways and other similar spaces within their areas, in order to help enhance community pride, reduce antisocial behaviour and generally improve the environment, and to improve health and well-being by helping to promote walking, cycling and other activities.

As the majority of alleyways are not in my Department’s ownership it would make direct intervention by my Department difficult. Instead funding is being offered to Councils under Section 29 of the Local Government Finance Act (NI) 2011 so that Councils can use it either directly themselves, or by providing funding to communities, to benefit all alleyways and similar spaces, irrespective of the ownership of the site or whether the site has been adopted by my Department.

I have invited Councils to scope the opportunities that exist and apply to my Department for funding for proposals. On receipt of proposals from Councils, my Department will assess them to determine their suitability, and they will remain subject to the approval of a business case and Department of Finance consent.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much money has been allocated for structural maintenance in this financial year, compared to each of the last five years.

(AQW 13483/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The table below provides details of my Department's total capital and resource structural road maintenance expenditure for all completed financial years since 2015.

Structural Maintenance	Financial Year £millions				
	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Outturn	54.1	88.3	69.5	108.5	106.3

Outturns will have been determined by budget availability and capacity in a given year.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 12730/17-22, (i) when the feasibility study into providing additional infrastructure on bridges to prevent suicide started; (ii) how long the feasibility study will take; and (iii) whether there has been any recent inspections done by her officials on which bridges would be used to pilot any scheme.

(AQW 13544/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department initiated the feasibility study in mid-December 2020. As part of the feasibility study, officials completed inspections of the Westlink bridges in early January 2021 and further investigations are planned for later this month. It is anticipated that the completed feasibility study will be available for my consideration by May 2021.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she is aware that NI Water have recently written to amateur sports clubs to inform them that the water supply to their premises is now deemed non-domestic use and have subsequently issued water bills going back two years.

(AQW 13578/17-22)

Ms Mallon: It is Land and Property Services, and not NI Water, that is responsible for assigning property classification for rating purposes and therefore non-domestic water charges are applicable for all amateur sports clubs. NI Water, I am advised, has applied retrospective charges to a number of amateur sports clubs in the past 12 months. As per NI Water's Scheme of Charges, in instances where a non-domestic customer has not been charged, a retrospective bill of up to 18 months is applied. Where a non-domestic customer knowingly withholds information from NI Water, a maximum period of six years may apply.

As a public body, NI Water is responsible for ensuring that all non-domestic customers are treated equally and are billed fairly and accurately.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on heavy goods vehicle restrictions for Clady.

(AQW 13611/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Following receipt of objections to original proposals, my officials have amended the proposed draft legislation to seek to minimise the impact of the proposal on local businesses. In order to ensure that due process is followed, officials now need to undertake a fresh short consultation exercise on the amended proposals and this is expected to happen in the coming weeks.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will bid for additional funding to address rural road maintenance.

(AQW 13660/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise that there has been historical under-investment in our road network for a significant number of years and that many rural roads are in need of repairs. I have allocated £10m of my 2020/21 opening Capital budget to specifically remedy defects on rural roads.

My Department bid for additional capital funding for Structural Maintenance during 2020/21 as set out in the table below.

Monitoring Round	Bid Description	Bid £	Allocation Received £
June	Road Maintenance and Street Lighting repairs	11.0	0.0
October	Structural Maintenance	4.5	2.0
	Minor Works	1.0	
	Street Lighting	1.0	

From the partially successful bid of £2.0m received in October monitoring, I allocated £1.1m as a priority to Structural Maintenance with the balance allocated to Street Lighting repairs and Minor Works.

In addition, I internally reallocated Departmental capital funding of £4.5m to Structural Maintenance in January monitoring to utilise remaining available capacity to deliver additional work on the road network over the remainder of the current financial year.

As part of the Budget 2021-22 information gathering exercises, a bid of £120.0m for Capital Structural Maintenance was included. I am committed to setting up a rural roads fund from the available 2021/22 Budget and will continue to use in year monitoring rounds to bid for additional funding, including funding for rural roads, as has been the case in recent years as part of my continued commitment to doing the basics well and achieving regional balance.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of (i) the state of Clondeboye Lake, Bangor; and (ii) any risks arising from this.

(AQW 13668/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The owners and managers of reservoirs have a common law duty to ensure that their reservoir is safe. As previously advised, I cannot comment on individual reservoirs in relation to their condition as 'Guidance within the National Protocol for the Handling, Transmission and Storage of Reservoir Information and Flood Maps (June 2018)' advises against the release into the public domain of detail that may expose potential vulnerabilities in a reservoir.

My officials have responded to consultations for proposed development within the inundation area of this reservoir and have advised the Planning Authority that the Planning Policy requirements, in relation to development in reservoir inundation zones, has not been met.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will provide match funding to allow ESB Energy to replace the public charger network.

(AQW 13680/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Electricity Supply Board (ESB) owns the e-car public charge point network and is responsible for the operation and maintenance of the network. However, the market is also open to other commercial operators. My Department will continue to assist ESB with issues which affect the network, where possible.

The Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV) provides funding to support the early market for ultra-low emission vehicles (ULEVs) in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This includes a £400 million charging infrastructure investment fund (CIIF) to support private sector investment in charging infrastructure by providing greater access to finance on a commercial basis. Funding opportunities for the installation of charge point infrastructure provided by OZEV, where appropriate, can be pursued.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to review gritting criteria to ensure rural schools are accessible.

(AQW 13699/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In accordance with the current Winter Service policy my Department generally salts roads that carry more than 1,500 vehicles per day. The application of the current policy ensures that 28% of the total road network, which carries around 80% of traffic, is salted. Application of this policy costs approximately £7 million per annum but this can be as high as £10 million in more severe winter conditions.

Under this policy small settlements of more than 100 dwellings in rural areas are also connected to the primary gritted network by means of a gritted route. My Department also deploys grit piles and salt bins on unsalted roads as well as undertaking secondary gritting.

The Department has also introduced a priority "secondary" salting to rural schools to ensure they receive a level of special attention throughout the winter period and currently there are 62 rural schools on the list for secondary gritting. The criteria for the provision of grit/salt piles and salt bins has also been amended so that these can now be provided to all affected schools on request.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much each request for ponding would cost to repair in the last twelve months.

(AQW 13744/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not hold information relating to the estimated costs associated with repairs of reported occurrences of water ponding on roads. Expenditure within the Department is recorded on the basis of type of work carried out eg patching, gully cleaning, resurfacing rather than on the basis of the type of defect such as ponding.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many complaints her Department has received regarding political advertising and fly postering in the last twelve months, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 13745/17-22)

Ms Mallon: While my Department's fault reporting and recording system facilitates the recording of complaints about illegal/unlawful advertising and fly-posting, there is no specific category relating to political advertising.

However, I can advise the member that, in the twelve months to the end of January 2021, four complaints were made to my Department about unlawful advertising where the recorded comments specifically mentioned political advertising signage. All four complaints related to the Newry Mourne and Down Council area.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the average response time to planning applications; and (ii) the number of planning applications where there was failure to meet the target response date, broken down by planning statutory consultee, in the last twelve months.

(AQW 13746/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Processing times for planning applications are published quarterly on the DfI website. See links below for the 2019/20 annual statistical bulletin and the latest quarterly provisional statistical bulletin:

<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-planning-statistics-april-2019-march-2020>

<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-planning-statistics-july-september-2020>

Due to the current consultee process (where consultees can be consulted multiple times on one application) and the complexities involved in extracting the data needed from the NI Planning Portal, it is not possible to provide the information in the format requested in part (ii) of the question.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether the 1993 NI Peatlands Policy is still the basis for relevant planning policy today; (ii) whether any of the recommendations of the 2005 Peatland Conservation Policy Steering Group Review of the 1993 policy were implemented, and, if so, which ones; and (iii) what policy advice has been given to local councils to ensure the equitable and environmentally sustainable consideration of planning applications to extract peat on a commercial basis.

(AQW 13748/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Responsibility for the current and future peatlands policy and related advice rests with DAERA. My Department's regional planning policy is set out in the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS), which was published in September 2015, following Executive Committee agreement. The SPPS recognises the importance of habitats, species and features of natural heritage and contains provisions to ensure the management and conservation of biodiversity of sites. With regard to minerals development, including peat extraction from bog lands, the regional planning policy approach is to balance the need for mineral resources against the need to protect and conserve the environment.

DAERA, as statutory consultee for planning purposes, provides advice and guidance to planning authorities in respect of emerging local planning policies. Such policies within LDPs will be tested for their 'soundness' by means of an Independent Examination. DAERA also provides advice with regards to relevant planning applications, including proposals to extract peat on a commercial basis. Any such proposals will be assessed on their merits by the relevant planning authority taking into account the LDP, the SPPS, the views of statutory consultees and all other material planning considerations. In addition, plans and proposals will be required to comply with all relevant environmental legislation.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will ensure that capacity issues regarding waste water treatment works within the South Down area are addressed in order to facilitate new developments and improve environmental protections.

(AQW 13749/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water is proposing significant investment during the PC21 price control period 2021-2027, within the South Down area to address wastewater capacity issues in treatment works, as well as sewer networks. The main proposed PC21 wastewater schemes in the South Down area are:

- Downpatrick wastewater treatment works - £9.6 million
- Annsborough wastewater treatment works - £7.5 million
- Warrenpoint wastewater treatment works (Phase 2) - £6.5 million
- Kilkeel network combined sewer overflow upgrades - £7.2 million
- Drumaness wastewater treatment works - £3.2 million
- Kilkeel wastewater treatment works - £2.9 million
- Newcastle wastewater treatment works - £1.9 million

These proposed schemes, which are subject to the availability of funding from the NI Executive, will help support sustainable development in the constituency and also help to ensure that the works meet the required environmental standards.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Infrastructure what quality checks are carried out on new roads for defects and potholes.

(AQW 13754/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Department has in place a number of processes to seek to ensure that new roads meeting the required quality are provided. These include:

- robust contractual specification for products and workmanship;
- a requirement to submit details of the design and testing of materials to evidence compliance;
- contractual requirements for independent materials testing;
- additional inspection and oversight materials testing by the Department's consultant;
- a contractual process to deal with the reporting and correction of defects; and
- a one-year contractual defects liability period on asphalt surfaces, following completion of the works.

For roads within private developments constructed by developers, quality construction is a pre requisite to adoption by the Department and the following safeguards are in place:

- all design, product specification and workmanship are compliant with the Private Streets Construction Regulations and the Specification for Highway Works;
- the Department has staff in place for the inspection of ongoing Private Streets;
- in compliance with the Private Streets Order, all developers of Private Streets take out either cash or surety bonds with the Department;
- the Department issue bond reductions at various stages of construction (50%, 70% and 90%) and all bond release is dependent on the quality of the works; and
- the Department will only release a developer from their obligations and adopt a development street when it is fully complete and free from defects. The completed works are also subject to a one-year defects liability period.

Following completion of either a new road or Private Streets development and after the liability period expires, the road is inspected and maintained by the Department. Inspections of all roads and subsequent repair of defects are carried out in accordance with current Departmental policy on road maintenance safety standards.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has considered prioritising driving test bookings for students awaiting offers for medical placements or university courses for which a full driving licence is a pre-requisite.

(AQW 13760/17-22)

Ms Mallon: During the initial lockdown period last year, the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) assessed requests from key workers to provide them with priority driving tests appointments, once driving tests resumed. From 1 September 2020, the DVA resumed priority driving tests for key workers, and those who had their driving tests cancelled between the end of March and late June. The DVA continued to accept and assess requests for consideration as a key worker until 5 October 2020 when the application process for key workers closed and the booking system opened to all customers.

The DVA has received a number of requests from key workers requesting that they reinstate a priority service for them to avail of early appointments. The DVA is actively considering the facilitation of priority requests from key workers whose jobs are ancillary to medical, health or social care services and who are required to drive for the purposes of their work. However this approach, if implemented, would be based on engagement with the relevant employers, rather than with the individual learners, to provide the DVA with a list of any relevant staff that fall within this priority group.

Driving tests are scheduled to resume on 8 March, subject to the Executive's review of the Covid restrictions on 18 February, and when they do the booking service will open in three phases. Phases one and two will prioritise groups of customers, for a limited period, whose theory tests will expire by 31 October 2021 and 31 March 2022, respectively. The booking service will then be opened for all other customers in phase 3.

The DVA will contact phase one and phase two customers directly to tell them when they can access the booking system. The DVA will release more slots in May, June and July to provide the capacity needed.

When the DVA is in a position to reopen the booking service for all other customers (phase three), they will issue further communications through nirect and social media channels, and write to all Approved Driving Instructors to confirm this position. The timing of the release of each phase will be kept under review as the Covid situation progresses.

When testing resumes the DVA will continue to offer driving tests on a Saturday and following consultation with key stakeholders will offer driving tests for Heavy Goods Vehicles on Sundays, where it is suitable to do so without compromising the integrity of the test. The DVA will also use overtime to rota off-shift dual role driving examiners to provide additional capacity and to provide cover for scheduled driving tests, where due to a variety of unforeseen reasons such as sick absence or the requirement to self-isolate, driving examiners are unable to attend work.

To help further mitigate the impact on customers due to the recent cessation of practical driving tests as a result of Covid restrictions, I have brought forward further legislation to extend the validity of theory test pass certificates. Theory test pass certificates which have already been extended by eight months and expired from 1 November 2020 onwards, have had their validity period extended by a further four months. In addition, theory test pass certificates which expire between 1 November 2020 and 30 June 2021, and which had not already benefited from an extension, have had their validity period extended by eight months. Customers whose certificates expire between the relevant dates do not need to do anything as their certificates have been automatically extended.

The DVA acknowledges that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity and will continue to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA

has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time.

It is my priority to ensure that our staff and customers remain safe and the DVA will continue to be guided by the latest public health and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will submit a bid for funding from the current underspend to extend the current gritting schedule of our rural roads, with particular attention to the requirement for increased capacity in the Magherafelt area.

(AQW 13761/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In general, my Department salts main through routes carrying more than 1,500 vehicles per day. In exceptional circumstances, roads with difficult topography carrying between 1,000 and 1,500 vehicles per day will also be salted. The application of this policy ensures that 28% of the total road network, which carries around 80% of traffic, is salted at a cost of around £7 million each year.

I fully understand and appreciate the concerns of those who use the more lightly trafficked rural roads and I would like to be able to expand our gritting service to many other routes, including those within the Magherafelt area. However, it is simply not feasible to do so given the severe budget constraints facing my Department and continued reliance on in-year monitoring funds being made available to allow the current service to be met.

It is not practicable to greatly increase the salting schedule mid-season as this would involve the provision of new gritters and facilities for additional salt storage. Any new routes would also require a route optimisation of the existing routes and new routes as well as the time needed to source additional drivers and associated driver training. It should also be noted that the easements identified within my Department in January monitoring sit within capital budgets and as such cannot be reallocated to winter gritting which is funded from the Department's resource budget.

I will continue to make representations to the Executive for increased capital and resource funding for infrastructure given its importance to communities, the economy and environment.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on plans to install a freshwater trunk main to ensure an adequate provision of freshwater in the Skeoge area in Derry.

(AQW 13784/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Bunrana Road/Skeoge water trunk main scheme is a high priority scheme, included in NI Water's PC21 proposals for water projects at a cost of £1.7m, subject to adequate PC21 funding (2021 to 2027).

However, in order to optimise delivery and to minimise cost and traffic disruption, this solution, for the provision of freshwater in the Skeoge area in Derry, is linked to the DfI Roads A2 Bunrana Road Upgrade scheme.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has initiated vesting processes for wastewater treatment pumps at the Skeoge Lands Glengalliagh site and the Link Road Lenamore Road, to ensure these projects are in a state of readiness to be progressed at pace.

(AQW 13785/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has identified high level options for wastewater projects, which are being reviewed and refined. The preferred strategic wastewater servicing solution will determine NI Water's site selection. This key decision requires the completion of essential hydraulic modelling, Design & Build contractor engagement, the undertaking of site investigations and the development of preliminary designs. Once these activities are completed, NI Water will assess the findings and determine the preferred sites for the wastewater pumping stations. It is envisaged that the site selection process should be completed in Spring 2022. Full planning permission is also required for the proposed wastewater infrastructure and it is estimated that that should be completed at the end of 2022.

NI Water does not envisage using vesting procedures to acquire the lands. Instead, the company's usual practice is to acquire land by the mutual agreement of both parties. Once the land is identified, and a design of the site layout is completed to inform the necessary land requirement, an independent land valuation is sought and legal processes are put in place to purchase and transfer ownership of the land to NI Water.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the amount her Department has spent on electric vehicle infrastructure in the past twelve months.

(AQW 13792/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Electric vehicle charge point infrastructure is operated on a commercial basis and funding opportunities for the installation of charge point infrastructure in Great Britain and Northern Ireland are provided by the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV). This includes a £400 million infrastructure investment fund to support private sector investment in charging infrastructure by providing greater access to finance on a commercial basis.

The British Government has just announced that grant funding for the On-street Residential Charge Point Scheme (ORCS) will continue for 2021/22 and £20 million will be available for local authorities to provide charge points for residents without

off-street parking. I would, therefore, encourage local councils, where possible, to access this funding for the installation of charge points on residential streets. My officials have also been engaging with OZEV and with the Energy Saving Trust (EST), who administer the scheme, in particular, with reference to councils in Northern Ireland. The EST has since held a workshop with councils in Northern Ireland about the scheme. My officials will continue to make themselves available to local councils to provide assistance, advice and guidance in respect of electric vehicle (EV) related matters.

My Department has also recently been engaging with ESB on its plans to replace approx. 70 charge points i.e. 35 charge posts to upgrade and improve the reliability of the existing public network. These charge points were installed some time ago and are experiencing faults on a regular basis, many of which are no longer supported by the original manufacturer. ESB can be contacted at ecars@esb.ie or enquiries can be sent directly to ESB, Two Gateway, East Wall Road, Dublin 3, D03 A995.

In addition, I am also making changes to the planning system, through permitted development rights, to make it easier to expand the charging infrastructure for electric vehicles. This will allow expansion work to proceed without the need to apply for planning permission helping to make e-charging more accessible across the North. Where possible, the Department takes every step possible to assist ESB with issues which affect the network.

I have also been able to support the EU INTERREG VA Funded FASTER electric vehicle network project. The project will complement and enhance the existing EV charging infrastructure, which was co-financed by the EU through TEN-T funding. The project is to install a total of 73 EV Rapid charging points across the island of Ireland and the West of Scotland by 31 March 2023.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for a breakdown of all vacant properties and land owned by her Department; (ii) how long each property has been vacant; (iii) how much has been spent on rates in each of the last five years, per property; and (iv) how much has been spent on maintenance in each of the last five years, per property. **(AQW 13826/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: The table below provides the details requested on vacant properties and associated land owned by my Department. The majority of properties and land were acquired (e.g. vested, blight application, favourable opportunity) for use in future road schemes; however, some of these are no longer required for road schemes and are currently in the process of being disposed of including three vacant Roads Service Depots.

The total costs for rates and maintenance in the last five years have been provided for the duration of vacant periods.

Vacant Properties	Vacancy Period	Rates (last 5 years)	Maintenance (last 5 years)	Comments
DVA building sites at: 1 McLean Road, Campsie Industrial Estate, Derry, BT47 3XX 2 10 Coa Road, Enniskillen, BT74 4EG	March 2018 to date	£0	£0	
Properties and associated land at St Lucia site, former military barracks, Omagh	2007 to date	£0	£88,090.82	
Vacant Grade A listed properties at Crumlin Road Gaol site	1996 to date	£0	£80,685.88	
Properties acquired for Roads Schemes				
Pine Cottage, 20 Beechill Road, Belfast	March 2015 to date	£6,937.33	£2,195.51	In process of being let to a charity.
1 Beanstown Road, Lisburn	Records destroyed in line with file disposal procedures.	£3,954.68	£0	Derelict building. Acquired for Lisburn North feeder project
110 Shore Road, Greenisland, Carrickfergus	2008 to date	£6,759.07	£4,916.15	
7 Collon Terrace, Derry	Jan 2013 to date	£0	£1,730.05	
8 Collon Terrace, Derry	Jan 2013 to date	£2,941.92	£0	
45 Bellshill Road, Castledawson	Jan 2017 to date	£3,506.46	£1,055.50	

Vacant Properties	Vacancy Period	Rates (last 5 years)	Maintenance (last 5 years)	Comments
72 Glenhoy Road, Ballygawley	Nov 16 to date	£1,358.08	£0	Due for demolition.
20 Barracric Road, Newry	Dec 20 to date	£0	£0	
15 Gowdystown Road, Banbridge	Nov 20 to date	£0	£0	
Properties no longer required for road schemes, disposal procedures have commenced				
215 Frosses Road, Cloughmills	March 2015 to date	£8,003.59	£0	Currently advertised for sale.
74 Shore Road, Greenisland, Carrickfergus	July 2008 to date	£5,372.62	£4,093.96	Disposal procedures have commenced.
14-16 Parkgate Avenue, Belfast	May 2005 to date	£0	£942.24	Currently advertised for sale.
18 Church Hill, Jonesborough, Newry	Oct 2004 to date	£0	£0	Disposal procedures ongoing.
Vacant Roads Service Depots				
BrookeBorough Depot, Main Street, Brookeborough	July 2013 to date	£4,207.75	£0	Disposal procedures have commenced.
Former Newry Section Office and salt barns, Cecil Street, Newry	Dec 2020 to date	£0	£0	Disposal procedures have commenced.
Corporation Street Depot, Belfast	Sept 2019 to date	£61,129.60	£2,977.76	Acquired for York Street Interchange project

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has received any pre-action protocol letters in anticipation of Judicial Review proceedings in respect of the Chief Planner's Update No. 7.

(AQW 13834/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has not, to date, received any pre-action protocol letters in respect of this matter.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) what bids she made in the January monitoring round; (ii) what funds she surrendered as part of January monitoring; and (iii) for what purpose the surrendered funds were originally earmarked.

(AQW 13847/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

i The following bids and Covid pressures were submitted by my Department as part of the January monitoring round.

	£m
Increased holiday carry forward	2.6
Covid Pressure – Lost income - DVA	10.0
Covid Pressure – Lost income - Parking/enforcement charges	1.9
Covid Pressure – Additional PPE requirement in DVA	0.15
Total	14.65

Subsequent to the January Monitoring round submission, my Department submitted further bids of £50m for Translink reserves and £10m for DVA reserves to assist with maintaining financial sustainability.

ii & iii The following capital reduced requirements were submitted to the Department of Finance, a number of which were ring-fenced and had to be returned:

Ring-fenced capital (must be returned to the Department of Finance)

- £1.5m A5 Scheme
- £1.5m Technical Adjustments (including TENS income, EU Matched funding; and repayment of loans from Trust Ports)

Non Ring-fenced capital

- £1m DVA Hydebank depot
- £0.6m Planning Portal Project.

Non ring-fenced reduced requirements represented 0.27% of DfI's total budget.

Following an assessment of work programmes as part of the January Monitoring exercise, there was no scope to spend the above noted non ring-fenced reduced requirements in year. The capacity of my Department to deliver road schemes is influenced by the capacity within both our internal design teams and contractors over the short period remaining to end March 2021.

My officials will continue to review operations between now and the end of March and alert the Department of Finance to pressures as they are identified or opportunities which arise.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the problem of water overflowing from a manhole at Springwell Grove, Groomsport, will be addressed as it is running onto Groomsport bypass and causing potential road safety issues. **(AQW 13880/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: NI Water has advised me that it is aware of this issue and completed a sewage investigation on 30 December 2020.

The investigation led to a recommendation to replace some of the storm sewer. NI Water's contractors will commence repair work on 15 February 2021 with an expected completion timeframe of 5 to 7 days. In addition a defective Surface Cover was replaced on 07 January 2021.

Once this work has been completed, NI Water will re-visit the site and survey the sewer.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 11992/17-22 (i) to detail the specific options currently being considered; and (ii) whether the construction phase will be reached this year.

(AQW 13886/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As detailed in AQW 11992 /17-22 and AQW 11993 /17-22, I am committed to progressing the Narrow Water Bridge project.

My officials are working to update an economic appraisal of options for development in collaboration with Southern colleagues in the Department for Transport. Current options under consideration include road design, in addition to pedestrian and cycling options, alongside low and high level and opening bridge designs to provide a comprehensive consideration of alternatives.

The Narrow Water Bridge is currently at options analysis stage and therefore it is not currently possible to provide a date when construction will commence.

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether she is aware of flags being erected on street furniture on Cavehill Road, near the junction with Westland Road; (ii) whether she has asked her Department to remove these flags; (iii) whether her Department has reported any of this activity to the police; (iv) whether her Department has organised any multi-agency meetings in a bid to resolve the problem; and (v) whether her Department has tried to ascertain if any paramilitary group is involved.

(AQW 13926/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am acutely aware of the problem of illegal flags on street furniture at Cavehill Road/ Westland Road, Belfast. Illegal flags remain a persistent problem across our society that requires a comprehensive and lasting solution and I am committed to working with Executive colleagues and all stakeholders to deal with this important issue.

Article 87 of the Roads (NI) Order 1993 makes it an offence to attach unauthorised signs or advertisements to structures such as lamp posts. One of my Department's primary considerations is the safety of the public and where unauthorised flags or attachments pose a hazard to road users, my Department will seek to remove that danger. Where there is no such danger, my Department will liaise closely with other key stakeholders and seek to provide a solution.

In this particular case my Department sought advice from the PSNI who advised that it is unlikely broad consent for the removal (voluntary or enforced) of these flags would be obtained. Indeed, the erection of more flags is a likely consequence of such a removal. My officials have recently contacted the PSNI requesting a further reassessment of the situation and a response is currently awaited.

I understand that the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition, which was established as part of the Fresh Start Agreement and tasked with exploring and finding consensus on a range of issues, including the flying of flags, has submitted its report to the First and deputy First Ministers. The Justice Minister, Naomi Long, and I have written to both the First and deputy First Ministers to ask for this report to be shared to enable us to collectively and quickly work towards a sustainable solution to this ongoing problem.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the residents' parking schemes in (a) Belfast; (b) other areas of Northern Ireland; and (ii) what actions are required to make a scheme successful.

(AQW 13935/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The first residents' parking scheme in Rugby Road and College Park Avenue in Belfast came into operation during April 2018. A review of the scheme has been completed and I will be in receipt of the report on this in the coming weeks.

When I have had the opportunity to consider the findings, I intend to make public the lessons learnt from this residents' parking scheme as this will assist in determining the policy for such schemes going forward.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how her Department has improved rail connectivity in the North West.
(AQW 13988/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since coming into office, I have been clear that my priority is addressing regional imbalance, better connecting communities and, importantly, ensuring that we shape our places around our people, for our people and with our people.

I share your desire to improve transport connectivity to the North West, and am committed to improving it for the benefit of our economy and communities across Northern Ireland. My focus for my time in office is to develop our transport infrastructure to improve the lives of the people of Northern Ireland, while mitigating the impacts of climate change through prioritising active and sustainable transport options.

The New Decade, New Approach commitment to undertake a feasibility study into high speed rail did not extend to the North West, and that was simply not acceptable to me or my counterparts in the Irish Government. Working in partnership with Minister Ryan however, I was delighted to announce that the high speed rail feasibility study would be extended to include Derry with the vision of creating a spine of connectivity on our island from Derry to Belfast to Dublin to Limerick to Cork. This should excite us all, not least because it better connects our communities in a more sustainable, cleaner and greener way, but also because it opens up huge potential for our economy.

Early last year, I also publicly stated my commitment to Phase 3 of the Coleraine to Derry line improvements, and allocated funding to take forward a feasibility study into increased frequency of rail services. I have also commissioned a study to look into establishing new halts along the existing line, as well as improved park and ride facilities at Strathfoyle, Eglinton/City of Derry Airport and Ballykelly. In addition it will also examine the feasibility of introducing half hourly services on the Belfast to Derry line.

In December 2020, I was pleased to announce that work was completed on the new £27m Multi Modal Transport Hub in Derry, which received funding from the EU's INTERREG VA Programme. This Hub will provide a step change in public transport services in Derry and the wider North West. In addition, March 2021 will see Translink begin to take delivery of the first of the 21 new rail carriages which will allow us to increase capacity, operating more six carriage trains on busy routes, including the North West, at key times of the day. This will help address the demand for train travel as more people make it their first choice for travel to work, study, shopping, health and leisure activities.

My Department is also currently developing proposals for a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) which will set out the priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks up to 2035. I anticipate publishing a draft document for public consultation later this year.

I believe rail presents a real untapped opportunity for our island, and I would like to re-iterate my commitment to addressing the regional imbalance that has historically impacted the North West. Realising rail potential will of course require the allocation of significantly higher levels of investment than is currently available to me from the NI Executive, but be assured I will continue to make the case for increased investment in infrastructure given the economic, social and environmental benefits it delivers for all our citizens.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an estimated cost of expanding the rail line from Derry to Strabane.
(AQW 13989/17-22)

Ms Mallon: At present there are no estimated costs available for expanding the rail line from Derry to Strabane however I would like to refer you to my detailed answer on my commitment to rail services to the North West in AQW 13988/17-22.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Infrastructure what action she has taken to ensure travel is limited for (i) Rivers Agency; and (ii) DfI Roads staff.
(AQW 14021/17-22)

Ms Mallon: All Department for Infrastructure staff have been advised to work from home where possible during these challenging times. However due to the nature of their work in providing essential public services, some staff – including those from Roads and Rivers – will at times need to be in the workplace or out on site and will therefore be required to travel in order to do so.

Work is ongoing with staff and trade union representatives to ensure that the latest Public Health Agency guidance is communicated to all members of staff and that they are provided with the advice and support they need to keep themselves and others safe, regardless of where they are asked to work.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure when bus and coach operators who have applied for the financial support scheme, and have not yet received payment, can expect to be paid.

(AQW 14023/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Given that the pandemic is continuing to have a very real impact on lives and livelihoods, I understand that private bus and coach operators like many others, are dealing with an extremely difficult situation.

Processing has been completed on 84% of the applications at 9 February 2021. Each application still being processed is being assessed to determine if, and to what level, the evidence supplied to the Department allows payment of financial support under the rules of the scheme. I can assure you that my Department officials are processing applications, under the Bus Operator Financial Assistance Scheme, as quickly as possible, whilst carrying out the necessary checks on each application in order to ensure value for money assurance around the use of public money.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how many storm drains there are in Belfast; and (ii) how often they are (a) inspected; and (b) maintained.

(AQW 14051/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Department is aware of the existence of 22,042 storm drains in the Greater Belfast area which are owned and maintained by a variety of public bodies.

Maintenance of this infrastructure varies depending upon a range of factors including the size and nature of the drain. Designated culverted watercourses are inspected and maintained by the Department, based on a five year prioritised inspection programme, subject to practicalities. The Department's maintenance regime for Category A culvert inlet grilles is generally carried out at weekly intervals and more often, as necessary, during periods of heavy rainfall.

Apart from storm drains within DBFO contracts which cover a number of the Department's main trunk roads and include a ten year inspection cycle, other storm drains for which the Department and its Arm's Length Bodies have maintenance responsibility are inspected when problems are identified and issues are addressed at this time subject to practicalities and the availability of resources.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail her Department's opening resource budget allocation for each financial year since its inception in 2016.

(AQW 14105/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The table below details the Department's opening resource budget, excluding non-cash budgets for depreciation.

	2016-17 £m	2017-18 £m	2018-19 £m	2019-20 £m	2020-21 £m
Dfl Opening Budget	372.8	366.9	370.4	384.6	417.9

Department of Justice

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Justice to detail all funding awarded to the Law Centre NI since January 2020.

(AQW 13633/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): My Department has awarded no grant funding to the Law Centre NI during the period 1 January 2020 to 31 January 2021.

During the same period £23k has been paid in relation to legal aid work.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Justice (i) for a breakdown of all vacant properties and land owned by her Department; (ii) how long each property has been vacant; (iii) how much has been spent on rates in each of the last five years, per property; and (iv) how much has been spent on maintenance in each of the last five years, per property.

(AQW 13721/17-22)

Mrs Long: The information that you have requested is set out in Table 1 overleaf.

DOJ Body		Property Address (indicate land or building)	Date of commencement of vacancy	Cost of rates 2020/21 (to date)	Cost of rates 2019/20	Cost of rates 2018/19	Cost of rates 2017/18	Cost of rates 2016/17
NI Courts & Tribunals Service	Banbridge Courthouse	24 Victoria Street , Banbridge, BT32 3DF	30/09/2016	0	0	0	0	0
NI Courts & Tribunals Service	Bangor Courthouse	6 Quay Street, Bangor, BT20 5EA	31/03/2013	0	0	0	0	0
NI Courts & Tribunals Service	Larne Courthouse	Victoria Road, Larne, BT40 1RN	31/03/2013	£4,235	£3,235	£3,175	£3,108	£3,049
NI Courts & Tribunals Service	Old Town Hall Courthouse	Victoria Street, Belfast, BT1 3GL	31/10/2014	0	0	0	0	0
Core Department	NI War Rooms (Former)	Mount Eden Park BELFAST	21/10/2019	0	0	n/a	n/a	n/a
NI Courts & Tribunals Service	Banbridge Courthouse	24 Victoria Street , Banbridge, BT32 3DF	30/09/2016	£4,035	£3,883	£4,819	£5,320	£3,534
NI Courts & Tribunals Service	Bangor Courthouse	6 Quay Street, Bangor, BT20 5EA	31/03/2013	£1,870	£11,701	£18,013	£4,974	£3,097
NI Courts & Tribunals Service	Larne Courthouse	Victoria Road, Larne, BT40 1RN	31/03/2013	£1,129	£5,904	£6,081	£2,131	£3,439
NI Courts & Tribunals Service	Old Town Hall Courthouse	Victoria Street, Belfast, BT1 3GL	31/10/2014	£4,727	£10,323	£22,990	£11,420	£13,765
Core Department	NI War Rooms (Former)	Mount Eden Park BELFAST	21/10/2019	£1,357	£3,424	n/a	n/a	n/a

Note: Details of Bangor Courthouse have been included although it very recently (9th December 2020) transferred to Bangor Open House Festival under a Community Asset Transfer.

Table 1. Address of vacant properties, date of commencement of vacancy, rates and maintenance costs paid during vacancy extending to five years.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) what happens to a person who is remanded to custody with addictions; (ii) whether or not they are offered medical support to cope with their addictions; and (iii) whether or not they are offered psychological and emotional support.

(AQW 13742/17-22)

Mrs Long: People who come into custody in Northern Ireland often have complex needs. For some this includes addiction to a broad range of addictions from gambling, alcohol and drugs to gaming and shop-lifting.

Healthcare services, including mental health and addiction services are provided to prisoners in Northern Ireland through the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (the Trust).

Addiction Services are in place at each establishment, staffed by the Trust, and supported by Start 360 are commissioned by the Trust to deliver specific aspects of the addictions services.

The diagnosis, assessment and treatment of medical and psychological needs for any individual, including those who are remanded to custody, is the responsibility of the Trust.

The Northern Ireland Prison Service works with a number of organisations to provide additional support to all the people in our care, including those on remand who have addictions. These organisations consist of Gamblers Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous, Relate, Samaritans and others.

I respectfully suggest that the question is redirected to the Department of Health.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime action plan; and when it will be reviewed.

(AQW 13821/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Action Plan to Tackle Paramilitary Activity, Criminality, and Organised Crime is a cross Executive initiative, co-ordinated by a Programme Team within my Department. It was subject to a comprehensive review in June 2020, and the review document is accessible online:

<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/tackling-paramilitary-activity-criminality-and-organised-crime-action-plan>

The Action Plan is currently due to finish its phase one funding period on 31st March 2021. The Executive has agreed with my proposal that the Action Plan be extended for a second phase, in order to build on the work to date and ensure that, collectively, we take a long term, holistic approach to addressing the challenges associated with paramilitarism and organised crime.

This extension is on the basis of match funding from the UK government, and I expect to have confirmation of the financial offer soon. At that stage, it will be the responsibility of the cross-Executive Programme Board to make financial allocations to Departments.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice when a gender-sensitive domestic violence strategy will be developed.

(AQW 13950/17-22)

Mrs Long: While I recognise that domestic abuse affects predominantly women, account needs to be taken of the fact that just under a third of domestic abuse crimes are carried out against men. All victims should be covered by any strategy regardless of gender, gender identity, age or sexual orientation. This is at the core of the seven year cross departmental 'Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy' which was collectively agreed by the Executive. It was also developed in consultation with statutory and voluntary sector partners, representing the interests of all aspects of society.

Domestic Abuse has no boundaries, it affects everyone and it is vital that we ensure inclusivity of all sections of the community in taking work in this area forward. I would have concerns that the adoption of a gender-sensitive domestic violence strategy would send out a message that tackling abuse against men is less important.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice what plans are in place to strengthen funding for vital services supporting victims and survivors of domestic violence.

(AQW 13951/17-22)

Mrs Long: The issue of funding domestic and sexual abuse services is not solely a matter for the Department of Justice, rather this is a cross cutting Executive issue. It is my preference that the Executive agree bids to support the cross cutting work that needs to be taken forward to comprehensively address the issue of domestic abuse. Along with the other sponsoring Ministers of the Executive's Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse strategy, I recently wrote to the Executive with an update on our work in this area. This included a proposal that Executive funding on this issue be considered and distributed more strategically via the Strategic Delivery Board.

Alongside this, a range of domestic and sexual violence and abuse services are funded across a number of government Departments, including my own, with around £7.5m spent during 2019/20.

As part of that my Department took forward, and funded in whole or part, a number of initiatives to tackle domestic abuse. This included the 24hr Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline, behavioural change programmes across Northern Ireland, the introduction of a Domestic Homicide Review service, Independent Sexual Violence Advisors, the See the Signs multi-media awareness raising campaign, a sexual consent media campaign and funding to Policing and Community Safety Partnerships for domestic and sexual abuse initiatives.

Going forward a number of initiatives are to be introduced later this year including a new advocacy support service, in conjunction with PSNI, as well as the introduction of a new domestic abuse offence (which will also have an accompanying multi-media awareness raising campaign).

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of arrests and fines related to COVID-19 regulations since February 2020.

(AQW 14014/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (NI) 2020 are the responsibility of the Department of Health.

Operational policing decisions on enforcing public health restrictions are a matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. The Chief Constable is operationally independent from the Northern Ireland Executive.

As Justice Minister I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the Policing Board.

I can advise however, that the PSNI continues to use the 3Es of engage, explain and encourage to secure public adherence with the regulations as their main approach. Enforcement will always be the last resort however, where it is necessary and proportionate the PSNI will do so in accordance with the Regulations and supporting Guidance.

The PSNI updates its enforcement statistics weekly on its website as www.psni.ppn.police.uk

Any questions regarding the PSNI's approach to enforcing the public health regulations should be directed to the Chief Constable.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of arrests and fines related to the funeral of Bobby Storey. (AQW 14015/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (NI) 2020 are the responsibility of the Department of Health.

Operational policing decisions on enforcing public health restrictions are a matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. The Chief Constable is operationally independent from the Northern Ireland Executive.

As Justice Minister I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the Policing Board.

I understand however, that the PSNI have completed their investigation of the Storey funeral and a file has been submitted to the Public Prosecution Service. It would not, therefore, be appropriate for me to comment further.

More generally however, I can advise that the PSNI continues to use the 3Es of engage, explain and encourage to secure public adherence with the regulations as their main approach. Enforcement will always be the last resort however, where it is necessary and proportionate the PSNI will do so in accordance with the Regulations and supporting Guidance.

The PSNI updates its enforcement statistics weekly on its website as www.psni.ppn.police.uk

Any questions regarding the PSNI's approach to enforcing the public health regulations should be directed to the Chief Constable.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister of Justice whether she intends to submit any bids for funding to support victims of domestic abuse. (AQW 14139/17-22)

Mrs Long: The issue of funding domestic and sexual abuse services is not solely a matter for the Department of Justice, rather this is a cross cutting Executive issue. It is my preference that the Executive agree bids to support the cross cutting work that needs to be taken forward to comprehensively address the issue of domestic abuse. Along with the other sponsoring Ministers of the Executive's Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse strategy, I recently wrote to the Executive with an update on our work in this area. This included a proposal that Executive funding on this issue be considered and distributed more strategically via the Strategic Delivery Board.

Alongside this, a range of domestic and sexual violence and abuse services are funded across a number of government Departments, including my own, with around £7.5m spent during 2019/20.

As part of that my Department took forward, and funded in whole or part, a number of initiatives to tackle domestic abuse. This included the 24hr Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline, behavioural change programmes across Northern Ireland, the introduction of a Domestic Homicide Review service, Independent Sexual Violence Advisors, the See the Signs multi-media awareness raising campaign, a sexual consent media campaign and funding to Policing and Community Safety Partnerships for domestic and sexual abuse initiatives. Any unfunded pressures arising from new work to support victims of domestic abuse will be considered as part of the normal budget process.

Going forward a number of initiatives are intended to be introduced later this year including a new advocacy support service, in conjunction with PSNI, as well as the introduction of a new domestic abuse offence (which will also have an accompanying multi-media public awareness raising campaign).

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 13704/17-22, to detail (i) what discussions she has had with the Minister of Health to increase the enforcement measures in the public health regulations related to COVID-19 to empower the police to take more action in relation to potential breaches; and (ii) what discussions she has had with the Chief Constable about the PSNI's ability to enforce the restrictions related to COVID-19 as currently published. (AQW 14166/17-22)

Mrs Long:

- (i) The Health Protection Regulations are the responsibility of the Department of the Health and adherence to the health protection regulations is a cross-cutting matter for the Executive. Any changes to the existing enforcement measures provided for by those regulations is therefore a matter for the Executive and I would be happy to contribute to any such discussions with the Health and other Ministers at the Executive.

I can confirm however, that I have not had any discussions with the Health Minister specifically in relation to increasing enforcement measures and, since the last changes were made in early January, this is not an issue that has come to the Executive for consideration.

- (ii) Operational policing decisions on enforcing public health restrictions are a matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. The Chief Constable is also operationally independent from the Northern Ireland Executive.

As Justice Minister I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the Policing Board.

I can advise however, that I meet regularly with the Chief Constable to discuss a range of matters and those discussions include matters arising from the enforcement of the COVID-19 restrictions. While I recognise that policing the restrictions is challenging, the Chief Constable has not made any request to me for changes to the current laws.

Any questions regarding the PSNI's approach to enforcing the public health regulations should be directed to the Chief Constable.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Justice whether fines are to be issued for non-essential travel between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, mirroring the fines the Republic of Ireland's Government have issued.

(AQW 14275/17-22)

Mrs Long: There are currently no plans for fines to be issued for non-essential travel between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The Health Protection Regulations are the responsibility of the Department of the Health and any proposed new offence would be a cross-cutting matter for the Executive.

Any changes to the existing enforcement measures provided for by those regulations, including the introduction of any new fines and penalties, is therefore a matter for the Executive and I would be happy to contribute to any such discussions with the Health and other Ministers at the Executive.

Ms Brogan asked the Minister of Justice what work she is undertaking to modernise our approach to Youth Justice.

(AQO 1538/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department, along with our criminal justice partners, has delivered significant change and modernisation in the youth justice system in Northern Ireland in recent years, and continues to do so.

Underpinned by proposals from the Youth Justice Review and cross-Departmental Scoping Study, there are three key strands to this work:

- Early Intervention and Diversion;
- The development of a new Secure Health and Justice Campus; and
- Strengthening legislative provision for children.

The impact of the focus on, and investment in, Early Intervention at a strategic and operational level is evidenced in the huge reduction in the numbers of children entering the justice system. The number of first time entrants has fallen by almost 60% since 2011, and the total number of youth offences dealt with has also fallen year-on-year.

Progress can also be seen in the significant reduction in the number of children held in custody in Northern Ireland. The daily population of Woodlands is often in single figures now, compared to a daily average of 26 only five years ago. This has facilitated the progression of a joint programme to develop a Secure Health and Justice Campus with the Department of Health. The new Campus will ensure the complex needs of the small number of extremely vulnerable children who require secure accommodation are more appropriately met.

In terms of legislative change, I intend to update bail and remand legislation for children through proposals included in the Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, which I am bringing forward this year. The new provisions will seek to strengthen the right to bail for children, and introduce specific conditions which must be met before a child can be remanded into custody, with a view to ensuring that custody is used as a last resort, in line with our international obligations.

The community provision which will be developed as part of the Secure Campus work will be vital in helping to deliver on these proposals. The provision of alternative community accommodation and timely, tailored support will help to both keep children out of secure accommodation – including custody – as well as aiding their reintegration back into the community.

Finally, there are also plans to develop a consolidated Children's Bill for introduction in the next mandate. This will provide a vehicle for any legislative changes required to deliver on the Secure Campus work and will also modernise the youth sentencing framework.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister of Justice whether she intends to abolish the Vagrancy Act 1824 and the Vagrancy (Ireland) Act 1847.

(AQO 1530/17-22)

Mrs Long: Firstly, let me say that no-one should be criminalised for being homeless and I understand the questions that Members may have about the continued relevance of Vagrancy legislation from the nineteenth century.

I am very much aware that begging and rough sleeping are often linked to underlying issues such as homelessness, drug addiction, alcohol addiction, and poor mental health, and involve some of the most vulnerable in our society.

Knowing that there are a number of prosecutions and convictions under vagrancy legislation in Northern Ireland every year, I wrote to the Chief Constable last year about its use in the community.

It is clear from his reply that he too believes that homelessness should not be criminalised. When called out to incidents involving begging or rough sleeping, his officers try to establish any underlying issues and identify whether any statutory or voluntary agencies can help. The legislation is used sparingly and, I am advised, only as a last resort.

To address the underlying problems that lead people into begging and homelessness is complex and requires a whole society approach; as an Executive, our focus should be on addressing the causes and, where possible, eliminating them.

Recognising the cross cutting nature of these issues, I am commissioning a review of the existing vagrancy legislation and its usage. I have asked my officials to report their findings to me in the coming months.

The findings will enable me to decide if repeal of the legislation is needed and the best way forward.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her legislative programme.

(AQO 1531/17-22)

Mrs Long: Upon taking up my position as Minister of Justice in January 2020, I set out ambitious legislative plans for the rest of the mandate, starting with the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill that reached Final Stage in January 2021 and should receive Royal Assent shortly.

I currently have two Bills at different stages in the Assembly. The Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill, which was introduced on 3 November 2020 is now at Committee Stage, and the Protection from Stalking Bill, which was introduced on 18 January 2021 had its Second Stage reading earlier today (8 February) and will now go to Committee Stage.

The fourth Bill in my programme is the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill. Drafting of the Bill is complete and I have sought Executive approval for Introduction to the Assembly later this month.

That just leaves the Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, which will legislate for a number of discrete policy areas that do not come within scope of the other Bills I have just mentioned, as the final Bill in my programme.

Drafting of the Justice Bill is nearing completion and, subject to the completion of pre-Introduction clearances and securing the necessary Executive approvals, I plan to introduce this Bill to the Assembly in April.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her Department's Interface Programme.

(AQO 1532/17-22)

Mrs Long: I am committed to working towards the reduction and removal of interface security structures, wherever they exist, across Northern Ireland.

The Department's Interface Programme is one of the seven headline actions being taken forward as part of the Executive's 'Together: building a united community' (T:buc) Strategy.

Over recent years DoJ-owned interfaces have reduced from 59 to 45 and NIHE-owned interfaces, that also come under the auspices of T:buc, have reduced from 21 to 14.

Interface removal is rarely an event. I often refer to the 4 Rs of re-imagining, re-classification, reduction and removal. Working with local communities to secure maximum consent for any change is a key principle that underpins our work.

Where we have managed to remove security structures, sometimes replacing them with a children's playpark and shared access to services, the benefit to the local community is clear to see.

I trust that we can build on the momentum that now exists to see more of these legacy interface structures reduced or removed in the coming years.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the impact of the Vagrancy Act 1824 on people who are homeless.

(AQO 1533/17-22)

Mrs Long: Firstly, let me say that no-one should be criminalised for being homeless and I understand the questions that Members may have about the continued relevance of Vagrancy legislation from the nineteenth century.

I am very much aware that begging and rough sleeping are often linked to underlying issues such as homelessness, drug addiction, alcohol addiction, and poor mental health, and involve some of the most vulnerable in our society.

Knowing that there are a number of prosecutions and convictions under vagrancy legislation in Northern Ireland every year, I wrote to the Chief Constable last year about its use in the community.

It is clear from his reply that he too believes that homelessness should not be criminalised. When called out to incidents involving begging or rough sleeping, his officers try to establish any underlying issues and identify whether any statutory or voluntary agencies can help. The legislation is used sparingly and, I am advised, only as a last resort.

To address the underlying problems that lead people into begging and homelessness is complex and requires a whole society approach; as an Executive, our focus should be on addressing the causes and, where possible, eliminating them.

Recognising the cross cutting nature of these issues, I am commissioning a review of the existing vagrancy legislation and its usage. I have asked my officials to report their findings to me in the coming months.

The findings will enable me to decide if repeal of the legislation is needed and the best way forward.

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her Department's input into the independent Inter-Departmental Working Group on Mother and Baby Homes, Magdalene Laundries and Historical Clerical Child Abuse.
(AQO 1534/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department was represented on the inter-departmental working group and I welcome the publication of the QUB report, which makes shocking reading in places.

I am committed, along with my Executive colleagues, to ensuring that there is a proper investigation and am fully supportive of the Executive's decision that the victims will play an important part in determining the nature and extent of that investigation.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the Sentencing Review.
(AQO 1535/17-22)

Mrs Long: I have recently agreed a first tranche of recommendations flowing from the Sentencing Review. These include decisions on sentencing for offences causing death by driving which I wish to discuss with the Dolan family, who have maintained a constant interest in the Review, before making any public announcements. I have arranged to meet with the family next week.

Work on completing the remaining recommendations is at an advanced stage.

I anticipate a number of legislative changes flowing from the Review, and will be publishing the way forward shortly.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Justice what plans she has to recommence in-person prison visits when it is safe to do so.
(AQO 1536/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Prison Service was quick to respond to the threat posed by COVID-19 and introduced a range of measures to minimise the risk of transmission of the virus within our prisons. The decisions to suspend in-person visits have been taken with reluctance, out of necessity, and with my support.

It is equally the case that the Prison Service have kept the measures it has in place under regular review, to ensure that they remain consistent and proportionate with the trajectory of the virus and the guidance for the community.

As a result of these ongoing reviews, on two occasions in-person visits have been reintroduced for a period of time, when it was safe to do so and with additional safeguards against infection in place. Most recently in-person visits took place before Christmas, and before it became necessary to suspend them again because of the prevailing risks in the community.

I fully recognise the importance of in-person visits in maintaining family contact and relationships, and to support resettlement back into the community.

The Prison Service already have arrangements in place to restart visits in-person again, as they have done before. The impediment, in common with restrictions everyone currently faces to their daily lives, is the threat the virus continues to present, not the absence of a plan.

Whilst virtual visits cannot replace in-person contact, their introduction has been extremely beneficial and over 29,000 have taken place since April last year.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Justice what steps her Department has taken to assist farmers in protecting their farm businesses and livestock from crime.
(AQO 1537/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department works with partners to make Northern Ireland, including rural communities, safer by reducing opportunities to commit crime. In terms of rural crime, our focus at a strategic level has been developing a collaborative response to address concerns which are specific to rural areas i.e. agricultural crime.

Partners including the Department of Justice; Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI); Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs; the Ulster Farmers' Union; NFU Mutual; Federation of Small Businesses; Young Farmers' Club of Ulster and the Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) meet on a regular basis, via the Rural Crime Partnership, to share information on emerging or re-occurring crimes to constructively develop a co-ordinated response to these issues. A range of actions are undertaken by the Partnership to assist farmers in protecting their farm businesses and livestock from crime. This has included a subsidised support scheme to help farmers fit electronic tracking devices to farm vehicles to deter theft and assist police with recovery should an item be stolen; and promotion of the Farm Watch Scheme, which provides the farming community with practical crime prevention advice and encourages reporting of suspicious activity to the police.

In the absence of events used to engage with the farming community, such as Balmoral, the Partnership has actively promoted key crime prevention messages using a variety of platforms. This has included delivery of social media campaigns to raise awareness of general farm security; vehicle, machinery and livestock theft; and to encourage the reporting of crime or suspicious activity to the PSNI or Crimestoppers. A further social media campaign, led by PSNI, launched today (8 February 2021).

At a local level PCSPs, which are funded by my Department, play a key role in building confidence locally, through engagement and consultation with communities, including rural areas. Specific actions they are taking forward to deter rural crime, some of which are being delivered in the mid Ulster area, include support for trailer and farm machinery marking schemes; fitting of tracker security devices for quad bikes; and promotion of Schemes such as the Farm Watch Scheme, No Cold Calling, Neighbourhood Watch and Text Alert schemes which provide up-to-date information on suspicious behaviours to be aware of.

Such actions have helped to continue the downward trend in recorded rural and agricultural crime.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Justice what action has been taken to implement the recommendations of the Gillen Review Report into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland.
(AQO 1539/17-22)

Mrs Long: There has been substantial progress against the key priority areas set out in The Gillen Implementation Plan, published in July 2020.

Two interim Remote Evidence Centres, one in Craigavon and the other in Belfast, are now ready for use and will commence operations as soon as suitable cases are identified. These facilities will provide victims and witnesses with a less daunting environment from which to give evidence and eliminate any chance of encountering the defendant or their family in court.

From 1 April 2021, adult complainants will have access to fully qualified Sexual Offences Legal Advisors (or SOLAs) via a pilot scheme delivered through Victim Support NI. SOLAs will provide advice in relation to the disclosure of evidence, the use of previous sexual history and will ensure that their clients' interests and wishes are communicated to the Public Prosecution Service.

Work continues in regard to the provision of appropriate training for justice partners; improving Relationship and Sexuality Education for children and young people and enhancing the existing protocol to expedite serious sexual offence cases involving children under 13 years. I also intend to bring forward legislation in this mandate to bring into effect a number of Gillen recommendations.

Department for the Economy

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy what steps were taken to ensure multiple grants, of the same or differing variety, were not awarded to businesses with the same (i) trading name; (ii) registered business address; and (iii) company directors.
(AQW 9597/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): The Member has clarified that this question relates to the £10,000 Small Business Support Grant Scheme, the £25,000 Business Support Grant Scheme for the Retail, Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Sectors and the Micro-Business Hardship Fund. The processes for each of the schemes is set out below:

I. £10,000 Small Business Support Grant Scheme

Land and Property Services put in place database IT coded queries to cross match all applications and check for applications with any of the following;

- the same ratepayer name (this would include trading name);
- the same billing address (this would include a registered business address where it was used as the billing address);
- the same bank account details;

- the same email address; and
- applicants not in receipt of Small Business Rates Relief because of more than 3 properties being recorded as occupied by the same person/business in the rating IT system.

This identified any multiple applications from the same business where separate rate accounts were set up for each property in the name of the business or sole trader.

Applications flagged by these checks had to be individually reviewed by a member of staff before they could be approved. Where necessary, applicants were requested to provide evidence that applications related to separate businesses with confirmation being required from a solicitor or accountant. For limited companies, these checks included confirming what information was held on Companies House for the business.

Every payment file on the £10,000 grant scheme was cross checked against payments on the £25,000 grant scheme to avoid two payments being made to the same business.

There were no routine checks in place to identify applications from businesses with the same company directors. Separate limited companies were each eligible for the grant if they met the other eligibility criteria.

II. £25,000 Business Support Grant Scheme

Applications with the same trading name would have been eligible for the £25k scheme if they were from separately registered companies. The Department only paid one grant per registered company. A company could receive a grant from the £10k Scheme and the £25k scheme if it operated from a different premise.

The Department also had in place cross-checking procedures with the Department of Finance regarding the receipt of grants under the £10k scheme and only paid a balance of £15k where a successful application to the £25k scheme was made, but the company had previously received a £10k grant for the same business.

The Department paid per eligible business. If two eligible businesses operated from the same registered business address and paid separate rates they may have been eligible.

Company Directors were not a consideration in scheme verification as it was the business that was eligible for the scheme, not Company Directors.

The Department had multiple checks in place to ensure the above rules were applied and to prevent duplicate payments. Verification of applications was made on the basis of the information that was available.

III. Micro-Business Hardship Fund

Applications to the Microbusiness Hardship Fund (MBHF) were subjected to a range of checks involving Invest NI, DfE and Land and Property Services. These included checks of trading name, registered address, bank account details, business ratepayer IDs and against companies house data.

These checks were designed to mitigate against the possibility that a business with multiple premises would receive multiple MBHF payments, or against the possibility that a business which had already received a £10k or £25k grant would also receive payment from the Microbusiness Hardship Fund.

Assuming they were separate entities, businesses with the same trading name were not excluded from the scheme.

Checks against companies house information was used to verify / corroborate other information received as part of the application process and not as a definitive test to approve applications – there were a number of reasons for this, including that the majority of applications were not from registered companies.

In terms of company directors, two separate companies with the same company directors would have been eligible for support under the terms of the fund, assuming they met all other eligibility criteria.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister for the Economy when she anticipates the (i) High Street Voucher Scheme; and (ii) Tourism and Hospitality Scheme will be fully operational.
(AQW 11043/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The recent rise in the number of cases of Coronavirus and the restrictions put in place by the Executive means that it would not be appropriate to implement the High Street Stimulus Scheme at present given that much of the retail and hospitality sector will remain closed until at least the 5 March, and the public health messaging continues to be for people to remain at home. However, I remain supportive of the scheme and intend to put forward a bid to the Executive to implement the scheme in spring 2021.

I unveiled details of a new £26.1m support scheme for larger hospitality and tourism businesses that have been impacted by Health Protection Regulations to contain the Covid 19 pandemic on 21st January 2021. The scheme will provide support to large businesses in these sectors which have been significantly impacted by the Health Protection Regulations put in place by the Executive.

The Department will contact eligible businesses and once the form has been completed and returned with the required supporting evidence, it will be assessed and a grant payment will issue in March 2021.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the estimated cost had renewable energy schemes registered for small business rates relief been included in the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme.

(AQW 11067/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: It is estimated that £3.45 million would have been paid out had all premises classed in the Valuation List as 'Electricity Generators (Non Fossil Fuels)' that were in receipt of Small Business Rates Relief when the scheme was open been paid a £10,000 Small Business Support Grant.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the renewable energy schemes registered for small business rates relief which were initially approved, and, ultimately, disapproved, for inclusion in the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme.

(AQW 11068/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Member has clarified that the question refers to the Small Business Support Grant Scheme rather than the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme.

The Department classifies renewable energy schemes as support mechanisms to encourage renewable energy such as the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation. The below information provides details on the number of properties involving renewable energy.

A total of 52 properties classed as 'Wind Turbine' or 'Wind Farm' that are in receipt of Small Business Rates Relief were paid in the initial batch of Small Business Support Grants released on 26 March 2020. These payments have since been identified as ineligible.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy what support or assistance can be given by her Department when business applicants have difficulty and cannot use online applications for their grants.

(AQW 11070/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: All of the Departmental COVID-19 business support grants have been promoted and accessed via the NI Business Info website:

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/campaign/coronavirus-updates-support-your-business>

The website provides very clear instructions and directions on how to apply for each of the grants and other packages of support that have been made available.

In addition, for many of the Department for the Economy (DfE) schemes, there are 'Frequently Asked Questions', pre-eligibility checks, as well as online enquiry forms and a dedicated helpline for prospective applicants.

To date, more than 43,000 applications have been received for the DfE core business schemes, and based on correspondence and enquires received, the Department is not aware of any significant problems or issues being encountered by the applicants who have availed of support and continue to do so.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for the Economy when Self Assessed HMRC tax returns will be accepted as proof of income in applications to COVID-19 Restrictions Business Support Schemes.

(AQW 11136/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Official HMRC correspondence has always been accepted as suitable evidence in support of CRBSS applications, such as submitted tax returns or agreed tax calculations (SA302). The evidence must clearly show the applicant's unique identifiers (name, address, unique tax reference etc) within the documents supplied. This applies equally across all of the emergency COVID support schemes administered by Invest NI.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy why BACS payments for business support grants were dated four or five days prior to the payment being issued.

(AQW 11279/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Member has clarified that the question refers to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme which is operated by Invest NI on behalf of the Department for the Economy.

Invest NI processes payments using the BACS Direct Credit. BACS Direct Credit payments work on a three day cycle, taking three working days to clear. Payments are submitted to BACS on the first day, processed by the banks on the second day, and credited to the recipient account on the third day.

Invest NI will generate a payment advice the day the payment is submitted to BACS with the recipient credited the funds on the third working day. When the payment cycle runs over a weekend or public holiday, as these are not working days, the total time between the issue of the advice and the payment can extend up to five days.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will undertake a review of the COVID-19 support schemes administered by her Department to assess (i) where gaps in support exist; (ii) how to provide support to groups excluded; and (iii) how any potential underspend could be mitigated, before the end of this financial year.

(AQW 12497/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: To date, my Department has provided over £370 million of lifeline support to over 30,000 businesses and is currently delivering millions of pounds to thousands more. These businesses cover all sectors and occupations throughout Northern Ireland.

In addition to the £25k and £10k Business Support Schemes for Large, Small and Micro businesses in 2020, my Department, in response to issues and concerns raised by various stakeholders and representative groups, has launched the following schemes:

- Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme, Part A and B;
- Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme;
- Wet Pubs Business Support Scheme;
- Limited Company Director's Support Scheme;
- Large Tourism and Hospitality Business Support Scheme; and
- Bed and Breakfast, Guest House and Guest Accommodation Scheme.

Given the ongoing restrictions that have been a necessary response to the global pandemic, my officials and our partner organisations will continue to devote all of their time and commitment to the continued implementation of these schemes, and the subsequent delivery of much needed financial support to the respective applicants.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the scheme for company directors following his statement to the Assembly on 23 November 2020 stating that his Department had ringfenced £20 million to support company directors who have been without support up until now.

(AQW 12642/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Limited Company Directors Support Scheme (LCDSS) was agreed by the Executive on 8 January 2021 and opened to applications 6pm Thursday 21 January 2021. The LCDSS will provide financial support to company directors who have personally been adversely impacted by COVID-19. A taxable grant of £3,500 will be paid to the applicant, i.e. the director.

The scheme, including the grant amount, was agreed in the context of the £20 million budget that was pledged by the Executive on the 23 November, and an additional £20 million allocated to the scheme in January 2021.

The scheme is being delivered by Invest NI on behalf of the Department of the Economy and Invest NI are committed to assessing and verifying all applications, and processing payments, to eligible applicants as quickly as possible.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of whether tour operators would be eligible for Part B of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme.

(AQW 12696/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Part B of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) provides support to businesses that supply goods and services to businesses named in the Health Protection Regulations, or are reliant on named businesses being open and fully operational in order to operate, and have been severely impacted as a result.

Businesses that are eligible for the Bus Operator Financial Assistance Scheme are not eligible to apply for Part B of CRBSS. Should a tour operator not be eligible for the Bus Operator Scheme, they may apply to Part B of CRBSS provided the eligibility criteria can be met.

Full details of the scheme, including the full eligibility criteria, are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part-b>.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy, given recent moves by some student accommodation providers to give a payment holiday or discount, to detail the work her Department has undertaken to bring forward a support scheme for students who are in private rental and cannot access their accommodation as they remain at their family home and are being taught remotely.

(AQW 12781/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am acutely aware that students in local higher education institutions have experienced significant disruption since the onset of the pandemic and that this continues to have an impact. In response I have brought forward to a £37.7 million financial support package for students and the higher education sector, which I announced on 4 February 2021. The package includes:

- A one-off discretionary payment of £500 to all students from the UK and EU who are in full time higher education in Northern Ireland, whether that is in a university or further education college setting

- £8.5million to address student financial hardship, digital poverty and to support student unions with mental health provision;
- £4.1million for the provision of a safe working, learning and research environment; and
- £3.1million to compensate universities for lost income arising from rental pauses and releasing students from accommodation contracts.

I have listened to the many concerns raised with me by students, their representative bodies, family members, educators and institutions and will continue to do all I can to help them regain the learning experience they deserve.

However, while my Department is responsible for higher education policy in relation to teaching and research in Northern Ireland, student accommodation, whether it is University halls of residence or private rental housing, is a matter between the individual student and their landlord.

My Department has no remit or legal basis for determining whether students should receive a rental break of their accommodation fees as a result of the disruption caused by the Covid pandemic.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for the Economy what extra financial support is being given to businesses, such as dry cleaners, that have been affected by current restrictions, but do not qualify for current financial support measures as they are deemed essential and their business is dependant on the general public and not on a business being open and fully operational in order for it to operate.

(AQW 13017/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government have introduced a wide range of business support schemes to help ease the extraordinary burden that has been placed on entire communities and our local economy, due to the ongoing global pandemic.

To date, my Department has provided over £370 million of lifeline support to over 30,000 businesses and individuals, and is currently delivering millions of pounds to thousands more, through a number of schemes that have launched since October 2020. Many dry cleaners have been able to apply for support through the range of schemes that have been made available. One of the current support packages is the Covid Restriction Business Support Scheme (CRBSS). Part B of this scheme is open to businesses not named in the Health Regulations, but are either:

- in the direct supply chain of a business named in the regulations and as a result, have been severely impacted; or
- reliant upon a business named in the regulations being open and fully operational and as a result, have been severely impacted.

Whilst the Executive and my own Department continue to receive calls for specific targeted support, it is not possible to design and fund schemes for every sector of business or employment group across our society.

Ultimately however, it will be for the Executive collectively to determine how any new or additional Covid related funding should be allocated.

Finally, I am on record as stating that whilst the 'stay at home message' has been and remains absolutely necessary, it has a damaging impact on our town and city centres and our local high streets. Beyond the forthcoming restriction period, I believe that the best way to support the local economy is to negate the cycle of severe restrictions.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy why AQW 12321/17-22, AQW 12255/17-22, AQW 11976/17-22 and AQW 11755/17-22 have not been answered within the expiry of the timeframe stipulated by Standing Orders; and when they will be answered.

(AQW 13253/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: AQW 12321/17-22; AQW 11976/17-22; and AQW 11755/17-22 have been answered.

AQW 12255/17-22 – was transferred to the Department for Communities on 21.12.2020.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has any plans to introduce further financial support for businesses allowed to open as essential retail and services, but have lost income due to current restrictions related to COVID-19.

(AQW 13409/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Executive and the UK Government have introduced a wide range of business support schemes to help ease the extraordinary burden that has been placed on entire communities and our local economy, due to the ongoing global pandemic.

To date, my Department has provided over £370 million of support to over 30,000 businesses and individuals, and is currently delivering millions of pounds to thousands more through the recent schemes that have been developed and implemented. The combination of these schemes have provided support to all sectors and occupations throughout Northern Ireland.

I am on record as stating that whilst the 'stay at home message' has been absolutely necessary, it has had a damaging impact on our town and city centres and our local high streets. Beyond the current restriction period, I believe that the best way to support these businesses is to negate the cycle of severe restrictions which will inevitably cost jobs and businesses.

With the roll-out of a vaccination programme, there is cause for optimism as we look towards a return to some form of social and economic normality, and government support can then be targeted at helping businesses to be able to operate safely, with as little interruption as possible.

Whilst the Executive and my own Department continue to receive calls for specific targeted support, it is simply not possible to design and fund schemes for every type of business or employment across our society.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the action plan to ensure those homes and businesses not included within Project Stratum have their broadband service improved.

(AQW 13415/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Project Stratum will deliver gigabit-capable broadband infrastructure to more than 76,000 primarily rural premises across Northern Ireland. There are 2,517 premises from the target intervention area currently out of scope.

These premises will not be left behind. Discussions have already been advanced with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and now with Fibrus Networks on board, we are working to identify the viable solutions and costs to bring those premises into this intervention.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will look at options for a rent break, particularly for students who are still paying full rent to their private landlord and who are facing extreme hardship as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 13454/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am acutely aware that students in local higher education institutions have experienced significant disruption since the onset of the pandemic and that this continues to have an impact. In response I have brought forward to a £37.7 million financial support package for students and the higher education sector, which I announced on 4 February 2021. The package includes:

- A one-off discretionary payment of £500 to all students from the UK and EU who are in full time higher education in Northern Ireland, whether that is in a university or further education college setting;
- £8.5million to address student financial hardship, digital poverty and to support student unions with mental health provision;
- £4.1million for the provision of a safe working, learning and research environment; and
- £3.1million to compensate universities for lost income arising from rental pauses and releasing students from accommodation contracts.

I have listened to the many concerns raised with me by students, their representative bodies, family members, educators and institutions and will continue to do all I can to help them regain the learning experience they deserve.

However, while my Department is responsible for higher education policy in relation to teaching and research in Northern Ireland, student accommodation, whether it is University halls of residence or private rental housing, is a matter between the individual student and their landlord.

My Department has no remit or legal basis for determining whether students should receive a rental break of their accommodation fees as a result of the disruption caused by the Covid pandemic.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy to detail her proposals for a Dedicated Skills Fund for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 13463/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Investing in skills must be at the heart of our economic recovery. Good, relevant skills levels do not simply support economic growth, but contribute to people's well-being and ultimately help to create a more equal society, where everyone can reach their potential

The last decade has, however, seen very significant reductions in the funding for the skills development programmes that are now urgently needed to support all sectors, as we seek to move towards economic recovery. The strategic importance of the skills system to achieving our long-term goals of economic growth and improving social equality must, therefore, be met with strategic investment.

This is reflected in the work currently underway to develop a new Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland. Research to support the Skills Strategy consultation document indicated that stakeholders ranked funding as the most important issue for Northern Ireland's skills system. This is backed up by the approach taken in the highest performing economies, which is to increase their investment in skills.

For these reasons, a key proposed commitment in the new Strategy is to create a dedicated, ring fenced fund for skills growth. This approach has already been established in England (National Skills Fund - £2.5bn) and in the Republic of Ireland. This funding must be additional to our existing skills budgets, if we are to make an impact; equally, we should not be considering any reduction in our current levels of investment.

My Department has been developing an initial range of skills proposals to meet the needs of industry, which would sit within a dedicated fund. I should emphasise, however, that this is at a very early stage and these are outline proposals only, which

are still under consideration. A bid for resources to support work under the proposed Skills Fund has been submitted to the Department of Finance under the Comprehensive Spending Review.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what work InvestNI is undertaking to promote Northern Ireland as a place to invest, due to its access to both the UK market and the EU Single Market for goods.

(AQW 13497/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI is closely engaged with my department on detailed work to establish the implications of the Trade & Co-operation Agreement and the NI Protocol. Invest NI is actively pursuing opportunities through a number of channels including media interviews, advertorials and editorial in overseas markets and global awareness campaigns are in development. For example, the Invest NI CEO has already conducted interviews with the BBC World Service and 'Market Watch' by Dow Jones in the US.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for the Economy to detail any additional financial support measures for the travel agent sector.

(AQW 13582/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government have introduced a wide range of business support schemes to help ease the extraordinary burden that has been placed on entire communities and our local economy, due to the ongoing global pandemic.

To date, my Department has provided over £370 million of lifeline support to over 30,000 businesses and individuals, and is currently delivering millions of pounds to thousands more. These businesses cover all sectors and occupations throughout Northern Ireland, including travel agents.

Travel Agencies operating in retail premises have also benefitted from 100% rates holiday for 12 months in 2020/21. Businesses employing staff would also have been eligible for Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, whilst self-employed Travel Agents or Tour Operators would also have been able to claim for lost revenue through the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme.

While the continuing restrictions have been a necessary response to this public health crisis, they have had a devastating impact on many businesses and individuals. I have listened to the concerns of many stakeholders and representative groups and, in response, have announced a number of new support schemes in recent months.

These have included:

- Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme, Part A and B;
- Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme;
- Wet Pubs Business Support Scheme;
- Limited Company Director's Support Scheme;
- Large Tourism and Hospitality Business Support Scheme; and
- Bed and Breakfast, Guest House and Guest Accommodation Scheme.

The Association of Northern Ireland Travel Agents most recently engaged with the Minister of Finance, along with the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Further to this engagement, I await proposals coming to the Executive for approval. I am on record as stating that I would support a targeted financial package for this industry.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 12692/17-22, whether she will publish the business cases associated with investments made under this scheme.

(AQW 13590/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: It would be inappropriate to publish the business cases for investments under the scheme as they are based on commercially sensitive information relating to private parties. The information was supplied on a confidential basis to Invest NI.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy (i) to account for the increase in the Financial Transactions Capital loan write-off estimate, from £9 million in the October monitoring round to £10 million in the January monitoring round, associated with a Sustainable Poultry Litter project; and (ii) whether there is a risk of further credit loss associated with this scheme.

(AQW 13592/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Any potential credit losses are assessed on a regular basis, and it was deemed prudent to increase the Expected Credit Loss (ECL) cover for this project in the January monitoring round. As the scheme is ongoing, these assessments will continue and amendments made if necessary.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the development of a financial package to support travel agents who have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 13607/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government have introduced a wide range of business support schemes to help ease the extraordinary burden that has been placed on entire communities and our local economy, due to the ongoing global pandemic.

To date, my Department has provided over £370 million of lifeline support to over 30,000 businesses and individuals, and is currently delivering millions of pounds to thousands more. These businesses cover all sectors and occupations throughout Northern Ireland, including travel agents.

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- Bed and Breakfast, Guest House and Guest Accommodation Scheme.

The Association of Northern Ireland Travel Agents most recently engaged with the Minister of Finance, along with the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Further to this engagement, I await proposals coming to the Executive for approval. I am on record as stating that I would support a targeted financial package for this industry.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department is developing a financial support package to assist those businesses supplying services and equipment to the aviation sector which has been adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 13608/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: To date, my Department has provided over £370 million of lifeline support to over 30,000 businesses and individuals, and is currently delivering millions of pounds to thousands more. These businesses cover all sectors and occupations throughout Northern Ireland.

The Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) is a support scheme from the Department for the Economy. It is designed to provide support to those businesses directly impacted by the Northern Ireland Health Protection Regulations.

Specifically, CRBSS Part B is open to businesses not named in the Health regulations but either:

- in the direct supply chain of a business named in the regulations and as a result, has been severely impacted; or
- reliant upon a business named in the regulations being open and fully operational and as a result, has been severely impacted.

A grant is available to eligible businesses, subdivided between those paying business rates and those that do not. Grant payments will cover each week that the business is impacted by the Health Protection Regulations.

Further information on CRBSS Part B, including eligibility checks and the application process, are included via the following link:

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part-b>

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for the Economy how the views of students will be considered in relation to alternative awarding arrangements for BTEC and vocational qualifications this year.

(AQW 13615/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Since the outset of the pandemic, my Department has worked collaboratively with key stakeholders to ensure the ongoing effective delivery of vocational education. The Department has established a number of fora for stakeholders, including the Further Education (FE) sector, schools and training organisations, to raise issues and to collaboratively inform the way forward. The views of learners are integral to this process. In addition, CCEA Regulation is working with a wide range of stakeholders as the alternative awarding arrangements are developed for this year.

My officials also regularly meet with the National Union of Students – Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI) to understand and discuss the issues and concerns of learners attending the FE colleges and to take action to address them.

In conjunction with the other national regulators, OFQUAL is currently consulting on the alternative arrangements and all stakeholders, including students, are encouraged to respond to ensure their views are taken into account.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy, in light of the January monitoring round allocations, whether European Social Fund projects will be extended until the end of March 2023.

(AQW 13641/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The successful bid in January Monitoring provides my department with domestic funding for existing ESF projects within the current financial year. This effectively enables my department to defer spending EC funds of c£25.9 million until 2022-23 when EC funding would have otherwise run out. The mechanism for extending ESF activity is currently being explored and I hope to make formal announcements in the coming weeks.

This welcome outcome also provides the Department with additional time to develop appropriate succession Programmes and secure the necessary funding for these valuable interventions.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department sought feedback from businesses who took part in Brexit advice clinics and other preparedness schemes funded by her Department; and to detail the nature of that feedback.

(AQW 13643/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department alongside InvestNI and InterTradeIreland continues to provide a range of schemes to assist businesses to adjust to the post-transition period trading environment. This builds on the extensive business preparedness work undertaken during and prior to last year.

Feedback is continually sought on these schemes to gauge their effectiveness and to tailor and improve what is on offer to respond to emerging issues.

InvestNI has been running EU Exit Advice Clinics and Information Workshops to support businesses since December 2018. Clinics are open to all businesses regardless of size, sector or location and provide the opportunity to ask for company specific advice in a number of EU exit related business areas. Feedback requested from attendees at the clinics held so far has indicated that:

- 94% rated the overall experience of the event as good
- 98% agreed the speakers were appropriate and informative
- 97% agreed that the event was of benefit to me/my company
- 96% agreed the 1-2-1 advice appointment was useful to me/my company
- 97% stated I plan to act on the advice I heard today

My Department has also obtained feedback from InterTradeIreland which illustrates the success of their Brexit Voucher Programme. This provides funding for professional advice to help businesses to identify trade flows and improve supply chain exposure. Feedback requested from recipients has illustrated that, of the businesses which took up the voucher in 2020:

- 95% reported being better equipped to manage the potential impact of EU exit related changes;
- 90% established scenarios for possible financial implications; and
- 77% introduced new skills to their business as a result of the voucher assistance.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy how many businesses (i) applied for; and (ii) successfully received a Brexit voucher from InterTrade Ireland.

(AQW 13644/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As at 2 February, the latest figures for Brexit Voucher applications are as follows.

- i) 3237 businesses applied for Brexit vouchers; and
- ii) 2806 successfully received a Brexit voucher from InterTradeIreland.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy how many businesses have availed of InvestNI's 1-1 advice clinics.

(AQW 13645/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI has been running EU Exit Advice Clinics and Information Workshops to support businesses since December 2018. These moved to online platforms with 1-2-1 Advice Clinics introduced in October 2020. The clinics are open to all businesses regardless of size, sector or location and provide the opportunity to ask for company specific advice in a number of EU exit related business areas. The clinics also include detailed presentations giving key EU Exit advice.

Businesses can book up to 3 x 20 minute sessions at any Advice Clinic. In the period up to 31 January 2021, 9 Advice Clinics were held. 1,046 business representatives attended these events with 678 1-2-1 appointments delivered and 2,502 views of EU Exit presentations and guidance. A further 9 Clinics will be delivered by 31 March 2021. Invest NI has also delivered 13 webinars on EU exit issues. 1,514 business representatives have attended these virtual events.

A communication campaign is currently running to signpost the support available at these Advice Clinics and webinars and to raise awareness across the business community.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what support her Department has given to Northern Ireland's brewing sector as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; and (ii) whether she is considering implementing a Brewers Support Fund, along similar lines to the recently announced scheme in Scotland.

(AQW 13664/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government have introduced a wide range of business support schemes to help ease the extraordinary burden that has been placed on entire communities and our local economy, due to the ongoing global pandemic. These schemes and other financial packages have supported businesses, individual and employers across every sector and industry.

For example, the Scottish Government scheme is similar to the £10k Small Business Support Grant Scheme that my Department implemented in March 2020, and which would have applied to some small brewers in Northern Ireland. More recently this Department launched Part B of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme. This is available to businesses, such as brewers, who are not named in the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, but which supply goods or services to such a business, or is reliant upon such a business being open and fully operational in order to trade. Further details can be found on the NI Business Info website:

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part-b>

To date, my Department has provided over £370 million of lifeline support to over 30,000 businesses and individuals, and is currently delivering millions of pounds to thousands more.

Whilst the Executive and my own Department continue to receive calls for specific targeted support, it is not possible to design and fund schemes for every sector of business or employment group across our society.

Ultimately however, it will be for the Executive collectively to determine how any new or additional Covid related funding should be allocated.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for a breakdown of all vacant properties and land owned by her Department; (ii) how long each property has been vacant; (iii) how much has been spent on rates in each of the last five years, per property; and (iv) how much has been spent on maintenance in each of the last five years, per property.

(AQW 13720/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department does not own any land, and is a tenant in properties owned by the Department of Finance, who manage the NICS estate.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for her assessment of proposals from the UK Government to introduce student loans for higher technical courses provided by further education colleges; (ii) whether she has met with further education colleges to discuss the proposal and the implications for colleges' skills training provision; and (iii) whether the proposals will lead to changes to provision of higher technical skills training in Northern Ireland; and, if so, how.

(AQW 13777/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I note the proposals recently announced by the Department for Education (England) in relation to the Flexible Lifetime Skills Guarantee and flexible Lifelong Loan Entitlement. These initiatives are partly intended to ensure that flexible, technical education routes, primarily at levels 4 and 5, are available to those wishing to avail of them throughout their lives. There are similarities between the thinking behind the proposals and those emerging from the new Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland, a draft of which will soon be published for consultation. In particular, a core objective identified in the new NI Strategy is creating a culture of lifelong learning.

My officials have been engaging with DfE (England) officials to gain an in-depth understanding of the proposals and potential implications for Northern Ireland. It is important to note, however, that the level 4 and 5 landscape is significantly different in Northern Ireland to that in England. Foundation Degrees are the prominent intermediate higher education qualification, followed by Higher National Certificates and Diplomas. These are currently designated for student support.

Notwithstanding the above, I am acutely aware of the local forecast skills under-supply at levels 4 and 5 and the need to ensure there are no barriers to accessing appropriate provision at this level. For this and other reasons, my officials have commenced a 'Review of Level 4 and 5 Provision and HE in FE'. Qualifications and funding arrangements are within scope. The Further Education Colleges have been engaged in the Review since inception as the outcomes could have implications for skills training provision in that sector.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy how many of the 70 new jobs she recently announced by the expansion of Everquote will be located in Derry.

(AQW 13786/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I had the pleasure of having a virtual meeting with the founders of EverQuote Inc. on the 25th January 2021 in advance of announcing the 70 new jobs associated with this new inward investment from the US.

Northern Ireland has long had a reputation for its skilled people and it is this core strength that continues to attract new investors to locate here. Our strong talent offering attracted EverQuote to Northern Ireland, and the adaptability and resilience of our skilled workforce convinced them this was the right location for them.

One of the out workings of the Covid 19 pandemic is that inward investors, in the 'services' sectors in particular, have a fresh perspective on delivery models and the location of their employees. At this time, the company plans to have all employees work remotely which should make it an attractive employment opportunity no matter where you live in Northern Ireland.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether the Companies Directory will be reinstated on the NI Business Info website.

(AQW 13799/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There are currently no plans to reinstate the nibusinessinfo.co.uk Companies Directory. Comparable, and in many cases more detailed, company data is currently available from Companies House via the GOV.UK website. Worldwide company directories can also be accessed through Invest Northern Ireland's Business Information Centre.

These free online services were not available or as fully developed when the nibusinessinfo service first launched. Providing this service now would be a duplication of existing information.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy whether she is aware of the number of students facing suspension from (i) QUB; (ii) Ulster University; and (iii) other Colleges of Further or Higher Education due to COVID-19 breaches; and (iv) whether there is any uniformity of approach adopted by the institutions.

(AQW 13806/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The universities are autonomous institutions, and therefore responsible for their own policies and procedures regarding student discipline. My Department does not therefore hold information regarding the numbers of students at Queen's or Ulster universities who have been suspended due to breaches of the Covid-19 Regulations.

No students at any of the six Further Education (FE) Colleges are facing suspension due to COVID-19 breaches.

Both Queen's University and Ulster University have advised that any of their students who have been issued with a PSNI notice for breach of the Regulations will face an immediate 2-week suspension from the university, and will be instructed to stay at home and self-isolate. They will not have access to any university facilities. If they subsequently receive a further PSNI notice, then they will be immediately expelled.

All six FE Colleges have advised that they have policies and guidance in place for learners in relation to COVID-19, and any breach of these will result in disciplinary action. Furthermore, Belfast Metropolitan College has drawn up a protocol in consultation with Queen's University which triggers the issuing of precautionary notices of isolation to students once the college receives notification from the PSNI that individuals have received a COVID-19 notice.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for the Economy what support will she offer podiatrists in private practice who have been unable to remain open due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 13830/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Podiatrists are considered an essential retail business under The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021, and as such are permitted to remain open during the current period of restrictions.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the Agri-Food Investment Scheme.

(AQW 13852/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Agri Food Investment Scheme (AFIS) was a proposed scheme by Invest NI to allow support to be provided to large agri-food processors. In July 2020 I determined that my department would not proceed with the proposed scheme. I took this decision due to issues in respect of both value for money and affordability.

Minister Poots and I have agreed to do a short review into the needs of the agri-food sector, led by an independent expert, to assess the changing landscape since leaving the European Union and other factors.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has any plans to implement financial support to give agency workers in the private sector the same contractual sick pay as employees working in the same workplace.

(AQW 13866/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Article 5 of the Agency Workers Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 entitles agency workers to the same employment rights as employees. This includes Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) after completion of 12 weeks service.

In 2020, the Minister for the Communities introduced legislation to allow employees to receive SSP on the first day of illness rather than fourth and this will apply to agency workers with the required 12 weeks' service. To qualify for SSP the worker must earn an average of at least £120 per week, have been ill, self-isolating or 'shielding' for at least 4 days in a row (including non-working days).

Contractual sick leave is excluded under Article 6(3) and is a matter for individual employers. I have no current plans to introduce financial support to agency workers in relation to contractual sick pay.

As I have stated previously, any employee who believes they have been unfairly treated should raise a grievance with their employer. In other circumstances related to their treatment or contract of employment, they may be able to complain to an Industrial Tribunal. Anyone who finds themselves in this position may wish to consider contacting the Labour Relations Agency - Workplace Information Service on 03300 555 300 for confidential and impartial information.

In addition, the Law Centre NI provides free, independent, specialist legal advice (subject to capacity) on employment rights. The Law Centre can be contacted on their advice line on 028 9024 4401 or by email: employmentadvice@lawcentreni.org.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy what plans her Department has to put forward a financial package to help students pay for rental accommodation they cannot use due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 13874/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am happy to advise that I recently bid for and secured an additional £37.7m from the Executive to fund a financial support package for higher education. This package includes:

- £22m to fund a one-off discretionary payment of £500 to all students from the UK and EU who are in full-time higher education in Northern Ireland, whether that is in a university or further education college setting;
- £8.5m to address student financial hardship, digital poverty and to support student unions with mental health provision;
- £4.1m for the provision of a safe working, learning and research environment; and
- £3.1m to compensate universities for lost income arising from rental pauses and releasing students from accommodation contracts.

These additional resources will help universities target financial support at those students who are most in need. Any Northern Ireland students experiencing financial hardship should first of all ensure that they have applied online at www.studentfinancenirni.co.uk for all the financial assistance to which they may be entitled. The Department delivers financial support to eligible Northern Ireland students through Student Finance NI, and by the end of November 2020 had provided £84m in maintenance loans and a further £37m in maintenance grants as a contribution towards students' living costs during the academic year, including the cost of accommodation.

Students at Northern Ireland's universities who find themselves in financial hardship may be eligible to receive an award from the Support Funds made available by the Department, and managed by the higher education institutions. Earlier this financial year, I secured £1.4m from the Executive along with a further £1.4m from the Department's own budget for these Support Funds, making a total of £5.6m available to support students facing genuine financial hardship. This is even before I secured the additional hardship funds under the most recent support package.

I have also recently written to Northern Ireland's universities to consider how they might support students by engaging with their private accommodation providers, as well as reviewing their own accommodation policies (where applicable) to ensure they are fair, transparent and have the best interests of students at heart.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy what plans her Department has to help stimulate the housing market once the COVID-19 pandemic is over.

(AQW 13876/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is not within the remit of my Department.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 12932/17-22, whether she can provide a breakdown of the 2517 properties identified, by postcode area.

(AQW 13894/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: A breakdown of the 2,517 currently out of scope premises by postcode area is contained in the attached annex.

Annex

Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq
BT13 3QX	1	BT44 8AR	1	BT75 0RY	1
BT14 8RT	1	BT44 8EZ	1	BT75 0SU	1
BT14 8SG	1	BT44 8HB	1	BT75 0SX	3
BT14 8SH	2	BT44 8HF	2	BT75 0TA	1
BT14 8SJ	2	BT44 8JB	1	BT75 0UA	1
BT14 8SN	1	BT44 8JF	1	BT76 0DP	1
BT14 8SP	2	BT44 8LU	1	BT76 0DW	1
BT16 1TS	1	BT44 8NN	1	BT76 0HG	1
BT16 1TX	1	BT44 8NW	1	BT76 0HJ	1

Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq
BT16 1UA	1	BT44 8RL	1	BT76 0HT	2
BT16 1XE	1	BT44 8RP	1	BT76 0HU	1
BT17 0NG	2	BT44 8SL	2	BT76 0HW	2
BT17 0NN	1	BT44 8ST	2	BT76 0TJ	1
BT17 9JP	1	BT44 8TA	1	BT76 0TU	1
BT18 0HQ	1	BT44 8TE	1	BT76 0TX	1
BT18 0JJ	1	BT44 8TG	1	BT76 0UF	2
BT19 1UB	2	BT44 9DT	1	BT76 0UG	1
BT19 7QQ	2	BT44 9EZ	1	BT76 0UU	4
BT19 7QW	1	BT44 9HW	1	BT76 0UY	1
BT21 0AP	1	BT44 9JD	2	BT76 0UZ	1
BT21 0LP	2	BT44 9JP	2	BT76 0XD	1
BT21 0NA	1	BT44 9NA	1	BT76 0XF	1
BT21 0ND	1	BT44 9NE	1	BT76 0XN	2
BT21 0NH	1	BT44 9NF	1	BT76 0XW	1
BT21 0PJ	1	BT44 9NZ	1	BT77 0BP	1
BT21 0PL	1	BT44 9PR	1	BT77 0BW	1
BT21 0PS	1	BT44 9PS	1	BT77 0BX	1
BT22 1AQ	1	BT44 9QA	1	BT77 0BY	2
BT22 1AR	1	BT44 9QE	1	BT77 0DE	1
BT22 1BX	1	BT44 9RE	1	BT77 0DF	2
BT22 1DF	1	BT44 9RH	1	BT77 0DL	1
BT22 1DP	1	BT44 9RS	1	BT77 0DQ	1
BT22 1DR	1	BT44 9RT	1	BT77 0EB	1
BT22 1EF	1	BT44 9SE	2	BT77 0EL	2
BT22 1GU	1	BT45 5ET	1	BT77 0EN	3
BT22 1HP	2	BT45 5EU	3	BT77 0EP	1
BT22 1JF	1	BT45 5HR	1	BT77 0EQ	1
BT22 1JH	1	BT45 5LU	1	BT77 0ES	3
BT22 1JJ	1	BT45 5LY	1	BT77 0EW	2
BT22 1JQ	1	BT45 5NL	1	BT77 0EX	4
BT22 1NQ	2	BT45 5NP	1	BT77 0HS	1
BT22 1PD	2	BT45 5NR	1	BT78 1PS	1
BT22 1PN	1	BT45 5PB	1	BT78 1QL	1
BT22 1RE	1	BT45 5QG	1	BT78 1RH	1
BT22 1RG	1	BT45 6EW	2	BT78 1SR	1
BT22 1RQ	2	BT45 6HN	2	BT78 1ST	2
BT22 2AA	2	BT45 6HW	1	BT78 1TG	1
BT22 2AB	1	BT45 6JY	1	BT78 1TH	1
BT22 2AL	1	BT45 6LJ	1	BT78 1TJ	1
BT22 2AN	1	BT45 6LS	1	BT78 1UP	1

Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq
BT22 2AS	1	BT45 7BW	2	BT78 1UZ	2
BT22 2DT	1	BT45 7EF	1	BT78 2DN	1
BT22 2DY	1	BT45 7EL	1	BT78 2EY	1
BT22 2EE	1	BT45 7EQ	1	BT78 2HR	1
BT22 2ES	2	BT45 7JJ	1	BT78 2JS	1
BT22 2EU	1	BT45 7JU	2	BT78 2LQ	1
BT22 2EZ	1	BT45 7LD	1	BT78 2LX	1
BT22 2HY	1	BT45 7NA	2	BT78 2PA	1
BT22 2JB	1	BT45 7ND	2	BT78 2QF	2
BT22 2JE	1	BT45 7NS	1	BT78 2QZ	1
BT22 2LG	1	BT45 7RB	1	BT78 3BG	1
BT22 2LR	1	BT45 7SB	1	BT78 3BL	1
BT22 2QY	1	BT45 7SD	1	BT78 3DE	1
BT22 2RG	1	BT45 7SN	1	BT78 3HF	1
BT22 2RS	1	BT45 7TU	1	BT78 3HJ	1
BT23 4TE	2	BT45 7TZ	1	BT78 3HL	1
BT23 4UJ	1	BT45 7UA	1	BT78 3JU	1
BT23 5JX	1	BT45 7UB	1	BT78 3LD	2
BT23 5NE	1	BT45 7UE	1	BT78 3LT	2
BT23 5NF	1	BT45 7XF	1	BT78 3LW	1
BT23 5NW	2	BT45 7YF	1	BT78 3LX	1
BT23 5PP	1	BT45 7YW	1	BT78 3NU	1
BT23 5PQ	1	BT45 8DG	1	BT78 3NZ	2
BT23 5PX	1	BT45 8DL	1	BT78 3PG	1
BT23 5QR	1	BT45 8DQ	1	BT78 3PP	1
BT23 5QY	3	BT45 8DR	1	BT78 3QQ	1
BT23 6AZ	1	BT45 8EY	1	BT78 3RN	1
BT23 6BY	2	BT45 8JL	1	BT78 3RP	2
BT23 6EF	1	BT45 8LW	1	BT78 3SE	1
BT23 6EH	1	BT45 8NB	1	BT78 3SG	1
BT23 6LB	1	BT46 5JP	1	BT78 3TL	3
BT23 6LX	1	BT46 5JW	1	BT78 3UG	1
BT23 6QL	1	BT46 5NH	2	BT78 4AH	1
BT23 6SH	1	BT46 5NJ	1	BT78 4DF	1
BT23 6TU	1	BT46 5NL	1	BT78 4DH	1
BT23 6UE	1	BT46 5NN	1	BT78 4DJ	4
BT23 7QE	1	BT46 5NP	2	BT78 4DR	1
BT23 8RR	1	BT46 5NT	1	BT78 4EA	1
BT23 8RS	1	BT46 5NX	1	BT78 4EF	1
BT23 8SL	1	BT46 5PB	1	BT78 4EH	1
BT24 7BP	1	BT46 5QU	1	BT78 4EL	1

Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq
BT24 7DE	2	BT46 5RN	1	BT78 4EZ	1
BT24 7DF	1	BT46 5SU	1	BT78 4HD	1
BT24 7DY	2	BT46 5UB	1	BT78 4HF	1
BT24 7DZ	1	BT46 5UE	1	BT78 4HH	1
BT24 7EA	1	BT46 5XE	2	BT78 4HX	2
BT24 7JA	1	BT47 2PX	1	BT78 4JJ	2
BT24 7JB	2	BT47 2QD	2	BT78 4LP	1
BT24 7JE	1	BT47 2SP	1	BT78 4LS	1
BT24 7JG	1	BT47 2ST	2	BT78 4NA	1
BT24 7JJ	1	BT47 3AG	1	BT78 4NB	1
BT24 7JN	1	BT47 3BD	1	BT78 4NW	1
BT24 7JW	1	BT47 3BL	1	BT78 4PB	1
BT24 8JD	2	BT47 3EY	2	BT78 4PD	2
BT24 8JN	1	BT47 3HD	1	BT78 4PL	1
BT24 8JU	1	BT47 3HE	2	BT78 4QA	1
BT24 8JX	1	BT47 3HR	1	BT78 4QD	1
BT24 8LD	3	BT47 3LE	1	BT78 4RD	1
BT24 8LX	1	BT47 3LG	2	BT78 4RG	3
BT24 8NA	1	BT47 3LJ	2	BT78 4RN	2
BT24 8ND	1	BT47 3LL	3	BT78 4RR	1
BT24 8PZ	1	BT47 3LN	1	BT78 4SE	1
BT24 8QQ	1	BT47 3LQ	1	BT78 4SS	2
BT24 8QS	1	BT47 3NF	1	BT78 4SZ	2
BT24 8QX	1	BT47 3NG	1	BT78 4TA	3
BT24 8TJ	1	BT47 3QP	1	BT78 4TP	1
BT24 8UA	1	BT47 3QX	1	BT78 4TU	1
BT24 8UB	1	BT47 3RB	4	BT78 4TW	1
BT24 8XX	1	BT47 3RD	1	BT78 4TZ	1
BT24 8XZ	1	BT47 3RE	1	BT78 4UB	1
BT24 8YB	1	BT47 3RW	1	BT78 5BR	1
BT24 8YD	1	BT47 3SU	1	BT78 5BX	2
BT24 8YF	1	BT47 3SX	1	BT78 5BZ	2
BT24 8YQ	1	BT47 3SY	1	BT78 5LF	1
BT25 1DU	1	BT47 3TA	1	BT78 5LL	1
BT25 1ED	1	BT47 3TB	1	BT78 5PH	1
BT25 1JN	1	BT47 3TJ	3	BT78 5PL	1
BT25 1JR	2	BT47 3TP	1	BT78 5QE	1
BT25 1JX	1	BT47 3TQ	1	BT78 5QF	1
BT25 1JZ	1	BT47 3TR	1	BT78 5QQ	1
BT25 1LD	1	BT47 3UG	1	BT78 5QU	1
BT25 1NN	1	BT47 3UH	2	BT78 5RL	2

Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq
BT25 1NP	1	BT47 3UN	1	BT79 0HA	1
BT25 1NZ	1	BT47 4AN	2	BT79 0JU	1
BT25 1QU	1	BT47 4AP	1	BT79 0LR	1
BT25 1RG	1	BT47 4AU	1	BT79 0LU	1
BT25 1ST	2	BT47 4BZ	1	BT79 0LZ	1
BT25 2AA	1	BT47 4DD	1	BT79 0PL	1
BT25 2AW	1	BT47 4DE	1	BT79 0QH	1
BT25 2BU	1	BT47 4DG	1	BT79 0QJ	1
BT25 2DF	1	BT47 4EE	2	BT79 0QU	1
BT25 2EQ	1	BT47 4EF	1	BT79 0SF	1
BT25 2EY	3	BT47 4EG	1	BT79 0SH	2
BT25 2HB	1	BT47 4ER	1	BT79 0SN	2
BT25 2HN	1	BT47 4ES	1	BT79 0TP	1
BT25 2HP	1	BT47 4EW	1	BT79 0TR	1
BT25 2HQ	1	BT47 4EY	1	BT79 0WA	1
BT25 2HR	1	BT47 4HA	2	BT79 0XB	1
BT25 2HS	1	BT47 4HN	1	BT79 0YB	1
BT25 2JN	1	BT47 4JL	2	BT79 0YD	1
BT25 2JS	1	BT47 4JN	1	BT79 7JQ	1
BT25 2JU	2	BT47 4JW	4	BT79 7NH	1
BT25 2LB	1	BT47 4NG	1	BT79 7NX	1
BT25 2LD	1	BT47 4NQ	1	BT79 7PD	1
BT25 2PE	1	BT47 4NS	1	BT79 7QG	1
BT25 2PF	1	BT47 4NU	1	BT79 7QU	1
BT25 2PG	1	BT47 4NY	1	BT79 7RG	1
BT25 2PN	1	BT47 4PY	1	BT79 7RH	1
BT25 2PQ	1	BT47 4QA	1	BT79 7RJ	2
BT26 6EL	1	BT47 4QE	1	BT79 7RQ	1
BT26 6LN	1	BT47 4QJ	3	BT79 7RX	1
BT26 6LY	3	BT47 4QT	5	BT79 7RZ	1
BT26 6NA	1	BT47 4QX	1	BT79 7SD	1
BT26 6NB	2	BT47 4RE	1	BT79 7SE	1
BT26 6NH	1	BT47 4RQ	1	BT79 7SF	1
BT26 6NP	1	BT47 4SD	1	BT79 7SU	2
BT26 6PP	1	BT47 4SG	2	BT79 7SW	2
BT26 6PQ	1	BT47 4SP	1	BT79 7SY	2
BT26 6PR	1	BT47 4TA	1	BT79 7TA	2
BT26 6PU	1	BT47 4TX	2	BT79 7TD	1
BT26 6QP	2	BT47 6FN	1	BT79 7TG	2
BT27 5JJ	1	BT47 6LN	2	BT79 7TW	1
BT27 5JX	1	BT47 6UB	1	BT79 7TY	1

Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq
BT27 5LP	2	BT48 0GZ	1	BT79 7UE	1
BT27 5NG	2	BT48 0JT	1	BT79 7UF	2
BT27 5PP	1	BT48 0JY	2	BT79 8AR	1
BT27 5RJ	1	BT48 9XD	2	BT79 8AS	1
BT27 5SE	1	BT48 9XL	1	BT79 8AW	1
BT27 6XH	1	BT48 9XP	1	BT79 8AX	2
BT28 2EY	1	BT48 9XW	1	BT79 8BG	1
BT28 2LA	2	BT49 0JD	1	BT79 8BJ	1
BT28 2LH	1	BT49 0JQ	1	BT79 8BP	2
BT28 2LW	1	BT49 0LA	2	BT79 8BS	1
BT28 2NE	1	BT49 0LP	3	BT79 8BW	1
BT28 2NN	2	BT49 0LQ	1	BT79 8DR	1
BT28 2NW	2	BT49 0NH	1	BT79 8DW	1
BT28 2PT	1	BT49 0NP	1	BT79 8DX	1
BT28 2QA	1	BT49 0NW	1	BT79 8EL	3
BT28 3SL	1	BT49 0PD	1	BT79 8EQ	2
BT29 4BU	1	BT49 0PF	1	BT79 8HF	1
BT29 4DT	2	BT49 0PZ	1	BT79 8HG	1
BT29 4EF	1	BT49 0QB	2	BT79 8HH	1
BT29 4EG	2	BT49 0QJ	1	BT79 8HQ	1
BT29 4EQ	2	BT49 0QL	1	BT79 8HZ	1
BT29 4ES	2	BT49 0QU	2	BT79 8JD	1
BT29 4JD	1	BT49 0QZ	1	BT79 8JE	1
BT29 4JL	1	BT49 9DX	1	BT79 8JJ	1
BT29 4JQ	1	BT49 9DY	1	BT79 8JX	1
BT29 4NY	3	BT49 9ED	1	BT79 8LL	1
BT29 4QQ	1	BT49 9EF	1	BT79 8LN	3
BT29 4QW	2	BT49 9HA	1	BT79 8LP	2
BT29 4QZ	1	BT49 9JF	1	BT79 8LU	1
BT29 4RE	1	BT49 9JG	1	BT79 8LY	2
BT29 4RJ	1	BT49 9LJ	1	BT79 8LZ	2
BT29 4RN	1	BT49 9LN	1	BT79 8NS	1
BT29 4SW	1	BT49 9LS	1	BT79 8NT	1
BT29 4SZ	1	BT49 9NF	1	BT79 8NU	3
BT29 4TL	1	BT5 7TB	1	BT79 8NW	1
BT29 4TU	1	BT5 7TZ	2	BT79 8NY	2
BT29 4UA	1	BT51 3NN	1	BT79 8PT	1
BT29 4UD	1	BT51 3RY	1	BT79 8PX	1
BT29 4UE	2	BT51 3SB	1	BT79 8PY	2
BT29 4UJ	1	BT51 3SP	1	BT79 8PZ	3
BT29 4YP	1	BT51 4AH	1	BT79 8QA	1

Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq
BT30 6RL	1	BT51 4AR	1	BT79 8QD	1
BT30 7AP	1	BT51 4BJ	2	BT79 8QE	1
BT30 7EH	1	BT51 4DT	2	BT79 9AB	4
BT30 7EJ	1	BT51 4EE	1	BT79 9AE	3
BT30 7HB	1	BT51 4EJ	1	BT79 9BL	2
BT30 7HE	1	BT51 4EU	1	BT79 9BP	1
BT30 7JT	1	BT51 4EY	1	BT79 9BR	1
BT30 7JX	2	BT51 4HS	1	BT79 9BU	5
BT30 7LA	1	BT51 4JA	1	BT79 9BW	1
BT30 7LD	1	BT51 4JH	1	BT79 9DB	1
BT30 7LP	1	BT51 4JL	1	BT79 9ED	2
BT30 7QU	1	BT51 4JN	1	BT79 9EL	1
BT30 7QZ	1	BT51 4LA	1	BT79 9HH	1
BT30 7SN	1	BT51 4LB	3	BT79 9HJ	2
BT30 8AP	1	BT51 4LJ	1	BT79 9HR	1
BT30 8AT	1	BT51 4LR	1	BT79 9HW	1
BT30 8AU	1	BT51 4NS	1	BT79 9HZ	1
BT30 8BA	1	BT51 4NU	1	BT79 9JL	1
BT30 8DH	1	BT51 4PR	1	BT79 9LD	3
BT30 8EQ	1	BT51 4PX	5	BT79 9LT	3
BT30 8HL	1	BT51 4RP	1	BT79 9LX	3
BT30 8HX	1	BT51 4SE	3	BT79 9NW	1
BT30 8JJ	1	BT51 4SF	1	BT79 9PX	1
BT30 8JN	1	BT51 4SQ	1	BT8 8AP	1
BT30 8LG	2	BT51 5BP	1	BT8 8EA	2
BT30 8LT	1	BT51 5BU	1	BT8 8HH	1
BT30 8PD	1	BT51 5BY	1	BT8 8JU	2
BT30 8PJ	1	BT51 5DF	2	BT8 8LU	1
BT30 8PQ	1	BT51 5DJ	1	BT80 0AA	1
BT30 8PX	1	BT51 5DR	3	BT80 0AQ	1
BT30 8PY	1	BT51 5EH	1	BT80 0AS	2
BT30 8QW	1	BT51 5HA	2	BT80 0BT	1
BT30 8RQ	1	BT51 5HB	2	BT80 0DF	1
BT30 8RW	1	BT51 5HD	1	BT80 8RH	1
BT30 8RY	2	BT51 5HQ	1	BT80 8SU	1
BT30 8SJ	1	BT51 5HS	1	BT80 8TA	1
BT30 8SL	1	BT51 5HX	1	BT80 8UR	1
BT30 8SU	1	BT51 5LD	1	BT80 8XB	1
BT30 9AG	1	BT51 5NA	1	BT80 8ZA	2
BT30 9AH	1	BT51 5NE	2	BT80 9AE	1
BT30 9AR	1	BT51 5NU	1	BT80 9BP	1

Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq
BT30 9AT	1	BT51 5PJ	1	BT80 9BT	1
BT30 9ET	1	BT51 5PN	1	BT80 9BW	1
BT30 9JL	1	BT51 5SL	1	BT80 9DZ	1
BT30 9JQ	1	BT51 5TE	1	BT80 9EF	1
BT30 9LJ	1	BT51 5TQ	2	BT80 9HX	1
BT30 9LU	1	BT51 5XR	2	BT80 9NP	1
BT30 9NA	1	BT51 5XX	1	BT80 9NZ	1
BT30 9NH	2	BT51 5YA	2	BT80 9PR	1
BT30 9NP	1	BT51 5YB	1	BT80 9PS	1
BT30 9NW	1	BT51 5YJ	2	BT80 9QJ	1
BT30 9PF	1	BT52 1SE	1	BT80 9RS	1
BT30 9SX	1	BT52 2JD	1	BT80 9TA	3
BT30 9TG	1	BT52 2JT	1	BT80 9TH	1
BT30 9TY	1	BT52 2LZ	1	BT80 9TT	1
BT30 9UF	1	BT52 2NA	1	BT80 9TU	3
BT31 9AR	1	BT52 2PB	2	BT80 9UB	2
BT31 9BA	1	BT52 2PR	1	BT80 9UE	3
BT31 9ER	1	BT53 6NQ	1	BT80 9UR	1
BT31 9JY	1	BT53 6PB	1	BT80 9XL	1
BT31 9LF	1	BT53 6QL	1	BT80 9XW	1
BT31 9LH	1	BT53 7DS	1	BT81 7ET	2
BT31 9LP	1	BT53 7DT	1	BT81 7HA	1
BT31 9QA	1	BT53 7DX	2	BT81 7HB	1
BT31 9QX	2	BT53 7DZ	1	BT81 7HF	1
BT31 9RB	1	BT53 7EA	1	BT81 7HQ	1
BT31 9RT	1	BT53 7EB	1	BT81 7JJ	1
BT31 9SU	1	BT53 7EJ	1	BT81 7JN	1
BT31 9SZ	2	BT53 7EL	1	BT81 7JZ	1
BT31 9TA	1	BT53 7JT	1	BT81 7LB	1
BT31 9TG	1	BT53 7LB	1	BT81 7LH	2
BT31 9TH	1	BT53 7LE	1	BT81 7PA	2
BT31 9TJ	1	BT53 7LG	3	BT81 7PH	1
BT31 9TQ	1	BT53 7LR	1	BT81 7PY	1
BT31 9TY	1	BT53 7NH	1	BT81 7QW	1
BT31 9UA	1	BT53 7NJ	1	BT81 7QY	1
BT31 9UB	2	BT53 7NX	1	BT81 7RE	1
BT32 3PF	2	BT53 8AD	1	BT81 7RN	3
BT32 3PN	1	BT53 8AP	2	BT81 7RT	1
BT32 3PQ	1	BT53 8AT	1	BT81 7RZ	1
BT32 3RL	1	BT53 8DW	1	BT81 7SN	1
BT32 3UL	1	BT53 8EJ	1	BT81 7SP	1

Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq
BT32 4DZ	1	BT53 8JU	1	BT81 7SQ	1
BT32 4HE	1	BT53 8JY	1	BT81 7SW	1
BT32 4HT	1	BT53 8LU	1	BT81 7SY	1
BT32 4HW	1	BT53 8LY	2	BT81 7TH	1
BT32 4LE	1	BT53 8NG	1	BT81 7TQ	1
BT32 4PH	1	BT53 8NN	1	BT81 7TZ	2
BT32 5AB	1	BT53 8NR	1	BT81 7UF	1
BT32 5AE	1	BT53 8PL	1	BT81 7UJ	1
BT32 5AZ	1	BT53 8PX	1	BT81 7UX	2
BT32 5BB	3	BT53 8PZ	1	BT81 7UY	1
BT32 5EQ	1	BT53 8QZ	2	BT81 7XA	1
BT32 5JX	1	BT53 8RL	2	BT81 7YB	5
BT32 5JY	1	BT53 8RY	1	BT81 7YE	1
BT32 5LD	1	BT53 8TN	1	BT81 7YG	3
BT32 5LX	1	BT53 8TU	1	BT81 7YL	1
BT32 5PG	2	BT53 8TW	1	BT81 7YN	1
BT32 5PP	1	BT53 8UJ	1	BT82 0AE	1
BT32 5QF	1	BT54 6HE	2	BT82 0AF	1
BT32 5QY	1	BT54 6HL	1	BT82 0AL	1
BT33 0JZ	1	BT54 6HZ	1	BT82 0BX	1
BT33 0LA	2	BT54 6JJ	1	BT82 0EZ	1
BT33 0NQ	3	BT54 6JN	1	BT82 0HP	1
BT33 0QB	1	BT54 6JQ	1	BT82 0HS	1
BT33 0QD	2	BT54 6LP	2	BT82 0JD	1
BT33 0QF	1	BT54 6LR	1	BT82 0LT	1
BT34 1FJ	1	BT54 6NF	2	BT82 0LY	1
BT34 1RN	1	BT54 6NG	1	BT82 0NH	1
BT34 1RY	3	BT54 6NJ	1	BT82 0PU	1
BT34 1SZ	1	BT54 6NP	1	BT82 0QD	1
BT34 2EP	1	BT54 6NW	1	BT82 0QH	2
BT34 2JE	1	BT54 6QS	1	BT82 0QJ	1
BT34 2LU	1	BT54 6QZ	1	BT82 0QQ	1
BT34 2PS	1	BT54 6RD	1	BT82 0RB	1
BT34 2PT	1	BT54 6RG	2	BT82 0RG	1
BT34 3AW	2	BT54 6RL	1	BT82 0RH	1
BT34 3DD	2	BT54 6RQ	1	BT82 0RJ	2
BT34 3QS	1	BT54 6RT	24	BT82 0SA	1
BT34 3QZ	1	BT54 6SY	1	BT82 0SF	1
BT34 3WL	1	BT56 8NQ	1	BT82 0SL	2
BT34 4JA	1	BT57 8SX	3	BT82 0SN	1
BT34 4LR	1	BT57 8TN	1	BT82 0SS	1

Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq
BT34 4LS	1	BT57 8TP	1	BT82 8FD	1
BT34 4LT	1	BT57 8UD	1	BT82 8LE	1
BT34 4NN	1	BT57 8UE	1	BT82 8LS	2
BT34 4PT	1	BT57 8UH	1	BT82 8NN	1
BT34 4QN	1	BT57 8UP	1	BT82 8NR	1
BT34 4RJ	1	BT57 8UU	2	BT82 8NX	1
BT34 4RP	1	BT57 8UW	1	BT82 8PJ	1
BT34 4RQ	1	BT57 8YB	1	BT82 8PP	1
BT34 4SP	1	BT57 8YF	3	BT82 8PQ	2
BT34 4SR	2	BT57 8YH	1	BT82 8PW	2
BT34 4SU	1	BT6 0NE	1	BT82 8QL	4
BT34 4ZS	1	BT60 1GD	1	BT82 8QR	2
BT34 5FF	1	BT60 1HY	1	BT82 8QW	1
BT34 5HA	1	BT60 1RJ	1	BT82 9LU	1
BT34 5HU	1	BT60 1SB	1	BT82 9LY	1
BT34 5LJ	1	BT60 1SQ	1	BT82 9LZ	1
BT34 5LP	2	BT60 1TR	1	BT82 9NF	1
BT34 5PB	1	BT60 2AH	1	BT82 9NG	1
BT34 5QZ	1	BT60 2BR	1	BT82 9NQ	1
BT34 5RE	1	BT60 2BS	1	BT82 9RE	1
BT34 5TD	1	BT60 2BT	1	BT82 9RQ	1
BT34 5TZ	1	BT60 2DB	1	BT82 9RR	3
BT34 5XJ	1	BT60 2DR	1	BT92 0DP	1
BT34 5XL	1	BT60 2DS	1	BT92 0DQ	1
BT34 5XS	2	BT60 2EQ	2	BT92 0EU	2
BT34 5XU	1	BT60 2FA	1	BT92 0FN	1
BT34 5XX	1	BT60 2FR	1	BT92 0FZ	1
BT34 5YL	1	BT60 2FT	1	BT92 0JR	1
BT34 5YN	1	BT60 2HA	1	BT92 0PB	1
BT35 0AJ	1	BT60 2HE	3	BT92 0PQ	1
BT35 0AL	1	BT60 2HG	1	BT92 0PW	3
BT35 0BT	1	BT60 2JA	1	BT92 1AE	3
BT35 0DQ	1	BT60 2JD	1	BT92 1AF	1
BT35 0EJ	2	BT60 2JP	1	BT92 1AG	1
BT35 0EP	1	BT60 2JU	1	BT92 1AL	1
BT35 0ER	2	BT60 2JY	1	BT92 1BE	2
BT35 0EZ	1	BT60 2LF	1	BT92 1BS	1
BT35 0HD	1	BT60 2LY	1	BT92 1DE	1
BT35 0HH	1	BT60 2NA	1	BT92 1DQ	1
BT35 0HN	1	BT60 2PU	1	BT92 1ER	1
BT35 0JP	1	BT60 2PX	1	BT92 1EW	2

Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq
BT35 0JY	2	BT60 2PY	1	BT92 1EY	2
BT35 0LN	1	BT60 2QB	1	BT92 1EZ	1
BT35 0LS	1	BT60 2QT	1	BT92 1FD	1
BT35 0LU	1	BT60 2RB	1	BT92 1GB	1
BT35 0NB	1	BT60 2SB	1	BT92 2AL	1
BT35 0PH	1	BT60 2TH	1	BT92 2AQ	1
BT35 0PJ	1	BT60 2TQ	1	BT92 2BA	1
BT35 0PQ	1	BT60 2UQ	2	BT92 2BB	1
BT35 0QB	1	BT60 3BR	3	BT92 2BR	1
BT35 0QN	1	BT60 3BS	1	BT92 2FP	1
BT35 0QS	1	BT60 3DJ	1	BT92 3AS	1
BT35 0QU	1	BT60 3DS	2	BT92 3BU	1
BT35 0RB	1	BT60 3DT	1	BT92 4AD	1
BT35 6FL	1	BT60 3DZ	1	BT92 4AP	1
BT35 6FS	1	BT60 3ED	1	BT92 4BD	1
BT35 6LY	1	BT60 3EN	1	BT92 4BQ	1
BT35 6NZ	1	BT60 3HE	1	BT92 4EG	1
BT35 6QY	1	BT60 3HJ	1	BT92 4EH	1
BT35 6RD	1	BT60 3HL	1	BT92 4EJ	2
BT35 6RJ	1	BT60 3HT	2	BT92 4FX	1
BT35 6RL	1	BT60 3HX	1	BT92 4GJ	1
BT35 6TQ	1	BT60 3HY	1	BT92 5AA	2
BT35 7FQ	1	BT60 3HZ	1	BT92 5BJ	1
BT35 7HR	1	BT60 3JA	1	BT92 5BR	1
BT35 7JT	1	BT60 3LF	1	BT92 5FP	1
BT35 7PF	3	BT60 3LG	1	BT92 5GB	1
BT35 7QD	1	BT60 3LQ	1	BT92 6AB	1
BT35 7QP	2	BT60 3LR	1	BT92 6AD	1
BT35 7QT	1	BT60 3NB	1	BT92 6ET	1
BT35 7QU	1	BT60 3NR	1	BT92 6FJ	1
BT35 7QX	3	BT60 3QF	1	BT92 6GX	1
BT35 8HU	1	BT60 3QG	1	BT92 6HY	1
BT35 8JQ	2	BT60 3QJ	2	BT92 6LF	1
BT35 8QN	2	BT60 3QU	1	BT92 6LL	1
BT35 8TB	1	BT60 3QX	1	BT92 6LT	1
BT35 9AH	1	BT60 3RA	1	BT92 6LU	2
BT35 9AQ	1	BT60 3RD	1	BT92 6LW	3
BT35 9AS	2	BT60 3RE	1	BT92 6PR	1
BT35 9DJ	1	BT60 4DU	1	BT92 6PT	1
BT35 9DQ	1	BT60 4EA	1	BT92 7AA	2
BT35 9DX	1	BT60 4JH	1	BT92 7AL	1

Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq
BT35 9EB	1	BT60 4JJ	1	BT92 7BW	1
BT35 9EG	1	BT60 4JN	1	BT92 7DZ	2
BT35 9EL	1	BT60 4JQ	2	BT92 7FR	1
BT35 9EW	1	BT60 4LU	1	BT92 7FU	1
BT35 9HU	1	BT60 4ND	1	BT92 7GL	1
BT35 9JD	2	BT60 4NL	1	BT92 7GW	1
BT35 9LJ	1	BT60 4NS	1	BT92 7GY	1
BT35 9NR	1	BT60 4NZ	1	BT92 7HY	1
BT35 9NS	1	BT60 4PS	1	BT92 7JX	2
BT35 9PE	1	BT60 4PZ	1	BT92 7LE	2
BT35 9RU	1	BT60 4QQ	1	BT92 7LF	1
BT35 9SA	1	BT60 4QZ	7	BT92 7LR	1
BT35 9SX	1	BT60 4RG	1	BT92 8AB	1
BT35 9TA	2	BT60 4SA	3	BT92 8AN	1
BT35 9TP	1	BT60 4SQ	1	BT92 8AR	1
BT35 9TR	1	BT60 4SY	1	BT92 8BH	1
BT35 9TX	1	BT61 8DJ	1	BT92 8BN	1
BT35 9TZ	2	BT61 8DL	1	BT92 8BX	1
BT35 9UF	1	BT61 8EA	1	BT92 8DW	1
BT35 9UT	1	BT61 8EZ	1	BT92 8DZ	1
BT35 9UW	1	BT61 8HR	2	BT92 8EY	1
BT35 9YH	1	BT61 8JD	1	BT92 8FG	1
BT36 4QZ	1	BT61 8LF	1	BT92 8HE	1
BT36 4SY	1	BT61 8LG	1	BT92 8HG	1
BT36 5BN	1	BT61 8LW	1	BT92 8HZ	1
BT36 5BS	1	BT61 8NY	1	BT92 8LD	1
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BT37 0UG	1	BT61 8QA	1	BT92 9AR	1
BT38 7QQ	1	BT61 9NH	1	BT92 9AU	1
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BT38 8QF	1	BT62 1RE	1	BT92 9BJ	1
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BT38 8QQ	1	BT62 1TT	2	BT92 9DL	1
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BT38 9DL	1	BT62 2EF	1	BT92 9FF	1
BT38 9JG	1	BT62 2EZ	1	BT92 9FS	1
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Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq
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BT39 0HS	1	BT63 6AR	1	BT92 9JR	1
BT39 0HY	1	BT63 6EB	1	BT92 9LF	3
BT39 0JF	1	BT63 6EF	2	BT92 9LN	1
BT39 0RF	1	BT63 6EG	1	BT92 9LQ	1
BT39 0RH	1	BT63 6LE	1	BT92 9LR	1
BT39 0SY	2	BT63 6NY	1	BT92 9LY	1
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BT39 0TB	2	BT66 6FD	1	BT92 9NQ	1
BT39 0TD	1	BT66 6PE	1	BT92 9PA	1
BT39 0TE	1	BT66 6PT	1	BT92 9PR	1
BT39 0TG	2	BT66 6QG	1	BT92 9QB	1
BT39 0TP	1	BT66 7AR	1	BT92 9QE	1
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BT39 9ER	1	BT66 7NT	1	BT93 0AH	1
BT39 9JG	1	BT66 7NX	1	BT93 0AS	1
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BT39 9NJ	1	BT66 7SR	1	BT93 0BR	1
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BT39 9SX	1	BT67 0BA	1	BT93 1AA	1
BT39 9TE	1	BT67 0BN	1	BT93 1AE	1
BT39 9TQ	1	BT67 0BU	2	BT93 1AJ	1
BT39 9UD	1	BT67 0DP	2	BT93 1AS	1
BT39 9UL	2	BT67 0ED	1	BT93 1BX	1
BT40 2LH	1	BT67 0EY	2	BT93 1DG	1
BT40 2LJ	1	BT67 0HP	1	BT93 1DH	1
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BT40 2LU	2	BT67 0LT	1	BT93 1DU	1
BT40 2LX	2	BT67 0LZ	1	BT93 1DW	2
BT40 2NE	1	BT67 0PF	2	BT93 1DX	1

Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq
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BT40 3RU	1	BT69 6BY	1	BT93 2BN	2
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BT41 2GY	1	BT69 6HH	1	BT93 2DE	3
BT41 2HG	1	BT69 6HX	1	BT93 2DL	1
BT41 2HS	1	BT69 6HZ	1	BT93 2DU	1
BT41 2HT	1	BT69 6JB	1	BT93 2DZ	1
BT41 2HY	1	BT69 6JF	1	BT93 2EB	1
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BT41 2RW	1	BT70 1RT	1	BT93 4AS	1
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Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq
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BT41 3HZ	1	BT70 2EN	1	BT93 4BZ	1
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Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq
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BT42 3DW	1	BT70 3HU	1	BT93 7ES	1
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Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq
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BT43 6RJ	2	BT71 7ER	1	BT94 2DT	1
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BT43 7HP	2	BT74 4HY	1	BT94 3BF	2
BT43 7HQ	2	BT74 4LG	1	BT94 3BW	1
BT43 7HW	1	BT74 4LR	1	BT94 3BY	1
BT43 7HX	3	BT74 4NQ	1	BT94 3EH	2
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BT44 0BJ	1	BT74 9BA	1	BT94 4GH	1
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BT44 0LJ	2	BT75 0LP	1	BT94 5FP	1
BT44 0NH	1	BT75 0LQ	2	BT94 5FS	1
BT44 0PU	3	BT75 0LR	2	BT94 5GL	1
BT44 0QB	1	BT75 0LS	1	BT94 5GN	1

Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq	Postcode	Freq
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BT44 0QX	1	BT75 0RG	1	BT94 5HP	1
BT44 0SH	1	BT75 0RL	1	BT94 5JW	1
BT44 0ST	1	BT75 0RN	5	BT94 5LF	1
BT44 0TF	1	BT75 0RW	2	BT94 5PT	1

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy for an analysis of associate membership of Horizon Europe compared to that of EU member states.

(AQW 13934/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As a result of the UK's agreement to associate to the Horizon Europe programme, Northern Ireland scientists, researchers and businesses will have access to compete for almost €100 billion of research and innovation programme funding on equivalent terms as organisations from EU member states.

Association will allow UK organisations to act as lead project Coordinators and to take part in evaluations, as well as allowing the UK to attend Programme Committees in order to help influence and shape the direction of travel and allocation of spending for the Horizon Europe programme as it moves forward. UK applicants will have access to all aspects of the programme with the exception of the relatively minor blended finance equity element of the European Innovation Council Accelerator.

I believe that the comprehensive association agreement secured for access to Horizon Europe provides a valuable platform for Northern Ireland's world-class scientists and innovators to build on the region's success in Horizon 2020. Associated status will allow Northern Ireland researchers and innovators to continue to collaborate with the best researchers from Europe and beyond and, in doing so, to accelerate and maximise the global impact of our research in support of a strong and competitive regional economy.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has had any discussions with Student Roost in relation to extending their six week free rent period to students in Belfast.

(AQW 13978/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: While the Department for the Economy provides funding to, and sets the strategic direction for the Higher Education sector in Northern Ireland, student accommodation, whether it is University halls of residence or private rental housing, is a matter between the individual student and their landlord. The Department has no remit in determining whether students should receive a rent rebate or holiday as a result of the disruption caused by the Covid pandemic.

As such, I have not engaged directly with Student Roost. However, I have recently written to Northern Ireland's universities to ask them to consider how they might support students by engaging with their private accommodation providers, as well as reviewing their own accommodation policies (where applicable) to ensure they are fair, transparent and have the best interests of students at heart.

I am also happy to advise you that I have recently bid for and secured an additional £37.7m from the Executive to fund a financial support package for higher education. This package includes:

- £22m to fund a one-off discretionary payment of £500 to all students from the UK and EU who are in full time higher education in Northern Ireland, whether that is in a university or further education college setting;
- £8.5m to address student financial hardship, digital poverty and to support student unions with mental health provision;
- £4.1m for the provision of a safe working, learning and research environment; and
- £3.1m to compensate universities for lost income arising from rental pauses and releasing students from accommodation contracts.

These additional resources will help universities target financial support at those students who are most in need. Students who are in immediate need of financial support should contact their institutions to discuss their options.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy what criteria she has outlined to further education colleges and universities in regards the recent allocation of £10.4 million to the student hardship fund, to ensure the fund is accessible and responsive to students needs in a timescale which ensures the financial pressures students are under are alleviated quickly.

(AQW 13980/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: On 4 February 2021 I announced a £37.7 million financial support package for students and the higher education sector, which includes the £10.4m announced previously.

The package includes:

- A one-off discretionary payment of £500 to all students from the UK and EU who are in full time higher education in Northern Ireland, whether that is in a university or further education college setting;

- £8.5million to address student financial hardship, digital poverty and to support student unions with mental health provision;
- £4.1million for the provision of a safe working, learning and research environment; and
- £3.1million to compensate universities for lost income arising from rental pauses and releasing students from accommodation contracts.

This package is a significant step towards relieving the financial pressures students may be facing. With regard to the student hardship fund, my officials are engaging with the Higher Education Institutions to agree how existing terms and conditions could be flexed in order to ensure that the additional funding I have announced benefits those who need it as soon as possible.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will introduce a new scheme to support self-employed workers who have not qualified for other COVID-19 income support schemes.

(AQW 14031/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government have introduced a wide range of business support schemes to help ease the extraordinary burden that has been placed on entire communities and our local economy, due to the ongoing global pandemic. A number of these schemes and other financial support packages have been specifically designed and targeted at those who fall within the broad 'self-employed' category.

To date, my Department has provided over £370 million of lifeline support to over 30,000 businesses and individuals, and is currently delivering millions of pounds to thousands more.

Whilst the Executive and my own Department continue to receive calls for specific targeted support, it is not possible to design and fund schemes for every sector of business or employment group across our society.

Ultimately however, it will be for the Executive collectively to determine how any new or additional Covid related funding should be allocated.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will provide additional financial support to Northern Ireland universities to allow students to leave university accommodation contracts early without penalty.

(AQW 14053/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am happy to advise that I have recently bid for and secured an additional £37.7million from the Executive to fund a financial support package for higher education. This package includes £3.1million to compensate universities for lost income arising from rental pauses and releasing students from accommodation contracts.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has any proposals to support part-time higher education students facing financial hardship.

(AQW 14069/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department already provides a range of financial support for part-time students. Any Northern Ireland students, including those studying part-time, who are experiencing financial hardship should first of all ensure that they have applied online at www.studentfinancenl.co.uk for all the financial assistance to which they may be entitled. The Department delivers financial support to eligible Northern Ireland students through Student Finance NI, and by the end of November 2020, had provided £84m in maintenance loans and a further £37m in maintenance grants as a contribution towards students' living costs during the academic year, including the cost of accommodation.

Students at Northern Ireland's universities who find themselves in financial hardship may also be eligible to receive an award from the Support Funds made available by the Department, and managed by the higher education institutions.

Earlier this financial year, I secured £1.4m from the Executive along with a further £1.4m from the Department's own budget for these Support Funds, making a total of £5.6m available to support students facing genuine financial hardship.

Moreover, I have recently announced an additional £37.7m from the Executive to fund a financial support package for higher education. This package includes an additional £8.5m to address student financial hardship and, again, these funds are available to part-time students. These additional resources will help universities target financial support at those students, including part-time students, who are most in need.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 19 February 2021

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Carroll asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the criteria for implementing a public inquiry in relation to the Mother and Baby Homes investigation.

(AQW 13585/17-22)

Ms Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The Northern Ireland Executive agreed to establish an independent investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries in Northern Ireland. The independent investigation will be co-designed with victims and survivors of these institutions. The co-design process will be facilitated by a team of experts. Among other things, it is intended to define the criteria or parameters for the independent investigation.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) how much Barnett consequential his Department received as part of the Nature for Climate Fund; and (ii) what actions he is taking to carry forward this scheme in his Department.

(AQW 13899/17-22)

Mr Lyons (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):

- (i) My Department has not received any Barnett consequential as part of the Nature for Climate Fund;
- (ii) I continue to implement the 'Forests for our Future' programme which Minister Poots announced in March of this year which pledges to help tackle climate change by planting 18 million trees over the next 10 years.

I am currently developing a Peatland Strategy for Northern Ireland which will provide a framework for conserving our intact semi-natural peatlands and restoring degraded semi-natural peatlands. I intend to publish the strategy for consultation soon.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what risk assessment was used when making the decision to withdraw his staff from Larne and Belfast ports.

(AQW 14113/17-22)

Mr Lyons: On Monday 1 February, the Department was notified by Mid and East Antrim Council that they were temporarily halting physical inspections in the Larne inspection facility. After discussions with partner organisations and PSNI the Department also decided to temporarily suspend physical checks on Products of Animal Origin (POAO) in Larne and Belfast. This decision was taken as a purely precautionary measure in the interests of staff safety. The possibility of a significant security threat, the lack of knowledge of any formal written threat assessment from the PSNI, and the need to protect staff did not allow enough time for a full risk assessment to be carried out.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what can be done to address the need for a wash certificate in respect of agricultural machinery being brought into Northern Ireland from the rest of the United Kingdom under the Protocol for Ireland/Northern Ireland.

(AQW 14382/17-22)

Mr Lyons: The movement of agricultural machinery into NI from GB, continues to be regulated, regardless of the NI Protocol, under The Diseases of Animals (Importation of Machinery) Order (NI) 1979, which came into effect on 1 September 1979. This Order requires agricultural machinery being moved to NI to be washed and disinfected. Under the Order, the Department may also require these movements to be accompanied by a wash certificate. Historically the Department has exercised the requirement for a wash certificate only at times of high animal disease risk such as Foot and Mouth. These controls remain important to protect the high plant and animal health status and biosecurity of NI.

It is the EU legislative sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) controls, as a result of the the NI Protocol, that now apply further requirements, including the need for a Phytosanitary Certificate (PC) to be issued by a Competent Authority, prior to the movement from GB.

This additional requirement for a PC is disproportionate as it does not reflect the historic low biosecurity risk presented by these movements and creates an unnecessary burden on used agricultural machinery trade.

My Department is continuing to work with Defra officials to mitigate the negative impacts of this additional certification in the short term, and seeking a longer term more workable solution which removes the burdens to NI businesses. To this end, my Department has recently contributed to a letter from the NI Executive to the UK Government pressing it to secure agreement with the EU, on the removal of this additional requirement for a PC, through UK/EU Joint Committee arrangements.

Department of Education

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Education, given the outcomes of the research report commissioned by his Department in 2017 on the post-primary school experiences of 16-21 year old people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender, for an update on his Department's work taking forward the findings of this report and specifically around awareness raising on the dangers to children and young people of conversion therapy.

(AQW 13435/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The "Post-primary school experiences of 16-21 year old people who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Transgender (LGB&T)" was commissioned by the Department in 2015 and published in September 2017. Since the report the following have been carried out/implemented:

- The Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, once commenced, will provide a common definition of bullying; require all schools to centrally record incidents of bullying, their motivation and their outcome; and require each school's Board of Governors to be actively involved in setting its anti-bullying policies, monitoring their implementation and ensuring these are regularly reviewed.

The Department funds and works alongside the Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum (NIABF) to raise awareness of all forms of bullying; promote best-practice in schools; provide effective support to pupils who have been bullied; and to work with pupils who have engaged in bullying to address their behavioural difficulties. In 2018, the NIABF published a Supplement for Effective Responses to Bullying Behaviour on "Supporting Schools when Responding to Bullying Incidents Involving Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Children and Young People."

- In 2019, the Education Authority published, "Guidance for Schools, EOTAS Centres, and Youth Service on supporting Transgender Young People". The non-statutory guidance aims to support schools and other educational settings to develop and sustain effective pastoral care systems which can accommodate and develop the social, emotional, educational, physical and spiritual needs of all pupils within the school ethos.
- Since 2018, the Department has provided the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA) with earmarked funding to develop guidance and resources to support the teaching of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in schools. In June 2019, CCEA launched an online RSE Hub to facilitate easy access to these resources and links to external resources. The RSE Hub includes a section on "LGBTQ+ Matters" and references the 2017 report.
- The 2017 report does not specifically mention conversion therapy.

In "Safeguarding and Child Protection in Schools - A Guide for Schools" the Department stated, "all pupils have the right to learn in a safe and secure environment, to be treated with respect and dignity, and not to be treated any less favourably due to their actual or perceived sexual orientation"

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the level of EU funding his Department will lose access to due to Brexit; and (ii) whether there are any projects that will be discontinued due to the onset of Brexit.

(AQW 13979/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) I do not anticipate a loss of funding for my Department; and
- (ii) I do not anticipate discontinuing any projects.

The only European funding that my Department is currently in receipt of is Peace IV funding. The Peace IV Programme has received extensive support and commitment from all of the partners involved, (i.e. the UK Government, the Government of Ireland and the EU) to ensure that it can be continued until its conclusion in 2023. This commitment has been included within the Withdrawal Agreement between the UK and the EU.

The Peace IV Shared Education Programme is a cross-border initiative financed through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). My Department and the Department of Education (RoI) provide match funding for this programme.

The forthcoming Peace Plus Programme is a single successor programme to Peace IV for the period 2021 to 2027. Commitment to this Programme and its funding is also set out within the Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration. The New Decade, New Approach document also references Peace Plus amongst the Irish Government's commitments.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education what funding streams are available for (i) primary schools; (ii) post-primary schools that have Free School Meals as a criterion.
(AQW 13998/17-22)

Mr Weir: For the purpose of answering this question, Free School Meals is interpreted to mean Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME). In the 2020-21 financial year, the funding streams set out below are those which, have FSME as a criterion.

- Social Deprivation funding, distributed through the Common Funding Formula;
- Extended Schools Programme; and
- Engage Programme

These funding streams are available to both primary and post primary schools.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education how many electronic devices his Department has provided to teachers to enable them to work remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic.
(AQW 14060/17-22)

Mr Weir: In meeting the challenges presented by the pandemic, I have strived to ensure that all staff have sufficient access to the appropriate digital technology. Almost £7 million of funding has been provided to date to support remote learning during the current financial year, representing a significant investment. I have provided additional funding to the Education Authority (EA) to improve the services currently available including upgrades to software, the addition of a number of learning applications and upgrading schools' bandwidth in particularly low bandwidth areas. In addition, in excess of 28,000 new devices will have been made available to pupils.

The C2K system, has supported online access to school services since the beginning of the COVID-19 school closures. Whilst the system was not designed to deliver remote learning, it has adapted well to the shift in the learning environment from school to the home. There are significant elements of the service which can be accessed remotely and the system has provided principals, teachers and pupils with the tools necessary to support teaching and learning remotely.

All users have access to the C2k secure online learning cloud from home. This can be accessed via the MySchool portal, or in some cases directly via service provider portals (Google gsuite / Microsoft Office 365). Teachers have used the services to plan, produce and share digital learning resources with their peers and others, collaborate and have real-time feedback to continue learning from home.

The Education Authority issued some 19,200 teacher laptops in the 2015/2016 academic year to all schools and are currently preparing a business case to refresh all teachers' laptops. It is anticipated this will be with my Department before the end of this financial year and the initial tranche of laptops will become available for distribution in the first half of the 2021/22 financial year.

This will provide new devices for all Primary, Post Primary, Special, EOTAS and Nursery teachers in grant aided schools. Initial forecasts anticipate the number of devices to be procured and issued to teachers will be just over 20,000.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education what avenues can be explored to ensure that convicted terrorists cannot be appointed to the Education Authority in the future.
(AQW 14210/17-22)

Mr Weir: Schedule 1 of the Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 sets out the constitution of the Board of the Education Authority (EA) - a Chairperson and 12 members (representing the interests of various education sectors in NI), appointed by the Department, and eight persons nominated in accordance with the D'Hondt principles ("Political Members"). As such the Chairperson and representative members are appointed to the EA Board by the Department, and the eight Political Members are appointed directly by the nominating officer of the political party.

Most convictions are followed by a rehabilitation period, and after the rehabilitation period has ended, the conviction becomes 'spent'. In line with the Rehabilitation of Offenders (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 (as amended), provided a conviction is 'spent', a criminal record will not necessarily debar an individual from public appointments to the boards of the Department's arm's length bodies.

As this is an issue that may affect public appointments across Departments, I intend to take a paper to Executive colleagues on the matter seeking legislative change.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education why ASD units within a mainstream school settings have not been permitted to operate and stay open, in the same way that special schools have during the COVID-19 restrictions.
(AQW 14256/17-22)

Mr Weir: The operation of special units, including ASD units, attached to mainstream schools will be determined by the school based on the number of children or young people attending for supervised learning and the resources available to the school.

The Education Authority has advised schools (guidance issued on 8 January) that where a number of children from a Learning Support Class are attending school, the school should work to maintain their routine environment.

As I announced in my statement to the Ad-Hoc Committee (6 January), the decision that all pre-school education settings and schools were to open from 8 January to accommodate supervised learning for children of key workers, and vulnerable children and young people, and that Special Schools and EOTAS settings were to open for in-person provision of education, was taken by the Executive informed by judgements based on the scientific and public health advice available.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Education when the vaccination programme for staff in special schools will be rolled out. **(AQW 14298/17-22)**

Mr Weir: Officials are currently in discussions with the Deputy Chief Medical Officer, the Education Authority and Public Health Agency for the roll out of the vaccination for those special school staff supporting clinically extremely vulnerable children with the most complex medical and healthcare needs, in line with the advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI).

It is hoped that vaccinations will commence as soon as possible.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Education, with the number of children back attending schools is on the rise, what action he is taking to ensure the definition of key worker is not being abused. **(AQW 14369/17-22)**

Mr Weir: Current figures which are gathered through the schools survey on a weekly basis indicate that since the beginning of the current lockdown there is no rise in the figures of key worker or vulnerable pupil's attendance, in fact they remained fairly consistent with only a slight fluctuation of between 8% and 8.9% on average per week.

The Continuity Direction which issued on 7 January sets out the requirement for schools to provide remote learning for all pupils, but for schools to remain open for supervised learning for children of key workers and vulnerable children, whilst Special Schools remain open as normal.

Schools however, are best placed to identify vulnerable children and those children whose parents identify as key workers and to take note of attendance of pupils; any issues regarding the validity of a child attending school is dealt with by the school.

Guidance around occupations which should be considered as key workers and the definition of vulnerable children as agreed by the cross- departmental Vulnerable Children and Young Peoples Plan 2020, have issued to all schools.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Education what eligibility requirements there are for members of the Education Authority to be recruited to their posts. **(AQW 14400/17-22)**

Mr Weir: There are 12 members on the Education Authority (EA) Board (Department of Education 'appointed members'), identified by relevant education sectoral organisations (as outlined in Schedule 1, 2(c) of Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2014). There are eight political members on the EA Board by virtue of the Nominating Officer of the relevant political party (as outlined at Article 3 of this Schedule).

The relevant official of the representative organisation (for appointed members) and the Nominating Officer (for political members), are provided with an information booklet including details on the Education Authority, the role profiles for Board members, time commitment, terms of appointment, remuneration and training, as well as information on probity, conflicts of interest, and disqualifications. They also receive specific guidance on equality of opportunity and diversity; geographical representation; and the skills, knowledge and experience required for membership on the EA Board.

In seeking new members to the Board the documentation points to the fact that all EA board Members, regardless of which category of member they represent, should possess the skills, knowledge and experience necessary to perform effectively as a non-executive board member of a public body. In this regard nominees are expected to have experience/ability in any three of the (six) areas listed below (experience can come from their working life or from their personal life including any voluntary or community work):

- (a) Corporate Governance
- (b) Business Sense
- (c) Finance
- (d) Analytical Ability and Decision Making Skills
- (e) Team working and Making an Impact with Others
- (f) Communication and Influencing Skills

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education how the current arrangements regarding schools uniform, in which female students pay a greater amount, fits with his Department's guidance that uniform policy should be fair and reasonable. (AQW 14465/17-22)

Mr Weir: The wearing of a school uniform is not governed by legislation but falls to schools to determine. The day-to-day management of schools, including school uniform policy, is a matter for school Principals, subject to any directions that might be given by the Board of Governors. To assist schools in developing their school uniform policies the Department issued non statutory guidance. The guidance advises that schools should ensure that their school uniform policy is fair and reasonable, in practical and financial terms, and should have regard to their duties under relevant equality and other legislation.

The Department expects Boards of Governors to give a high priority to cost considerations when designing uniforms and the need to keep costs to a minimum so that the school uniform, for all pupils, does not become a barrier for children from low income families attending the school.

The guidance was reissued as a reminder to schools in 2018 and is available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/circular-201104-guidance-schools-school-uniform-policy-revised-5-june-2018>.

The Department of Education is committed to providing school uniform grants to low income families to assist with the cost of purchasing a school uniform for their child. The scheme is administered by the EA and information on how to apply is available at <https://www.eani.org.uk/financial-help/free-school-meals-uniform-grants/apply-for-free-school-meals-uniform-grants>.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Education whether this year's A level results will be released at the regular time in August rather than later that month, to ensure pupils can avail of their university offer. (AQW 14506/17-22)

Mr Weir: Final dates have not yet been agreed for the issue of examination results in 2021. Discussions are ongoing with other jurisdictions.

It will be important that results are issued to students in Northern Ireland on the same dates as candidates in other jurisdictions that share the GCSE and A level brand, especially in relation to A level results that are needed for university admissions. Centres and students will be notified once final dates have been agreed.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education where the Category B students who live outside the catchment area will be educated following the proposed merger of three maintained secondary schools in the Downpatrick area. (AQW 14556/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have not yet received any recommendations on these proposals or formed an opinion on them, nor will I be able to until after the conclusion of the statutory objection period. I do, however, act as decision taker on the proposals and I am, therefore, unable to comment on the detail or merits of them at this point of time.

Once the objection period has concluded on 29 March 2021, my officials will collate all responses received by the Department, along with all other pertinent information and provide me with a submission to assist me in taking a decision that is in the best interests of all learners.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether he will consider promoting a more economical and environmentally friendly approach to the way his Department works by introducing a paperless method of issuing teachers' salary and pension dockets. (AQW 14569/17-22)

Mr Weir: In relation to teachers' salary notifications, I can confirm that a new teachers' payroll IT system, which is currently scheduled for live implementation in early 2022, will provide all payslips to teachers in electronic format only.

As part of the new Teachers' Pension system, an online portal for NI Teachers Pension Scheme members will be introduced later in 2021. From then, pensioner members will no longer receive a paper payslip each month but will be able to view and print their payslips and P60s via the portal.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education when an area plan for Ards and North Down will be published. (AQW 14575/17-22)

Mr Weir: "Providing Pathways", the first Strategic Area Plan 2017-2020 was published by the Education Authority (EA) in April 2017 and is supported by an Annual Action Plan containing identified work streams and planning priorities to be progressed.

It is a matter for the EA working with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) supported by sectoral support body representatives to plan provision and bring forward proposals, including area solutions, to meet the education demands and needs of children and young people.

Department of Finance

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance when he intends to commence recruitment for the Fiscal Council.
(AQW 13776/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Preparations for establishing the Fiscal Council are at an advanced stage and I expect to make an announcement shortly.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the roll-out of next census.
(AQW 13960/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The legislation for the 2021 Census (Order and Regulations) was approved by the Assembly last July and the Census will take place in the North and in England and Wales on 21 March 2021. In undertaking the Census officials will adhere to all current public health requirements and the decision to proceed has been taken following advice from the Chief Medical Officer.

The 2021 Census will be a digital-first census with the public being encouraged through a range of communications to fill out their census form online. However paper forms will be available for those that require them.

A pre-delivery postcard announcing the census will be delivered to every household by the postal service during the week 22nd–26th February. Census advertising will also commence at this time.

Invitations to take part containing details of how to complete the census online or on paper will be delivered by the postal service to all households during the week of 1st -5th March. Following Census Day reminder letters will also be sent to any households that have not yet completed their statutory return.

As the Census collects key data to inform the allocation of public money, field follow-up of non-responding addresses is also planned for after Census Day. A final decision on the timing and nature of this element will be informed by advice from the Chief Medical Officer. It should be noted that Census field staff will never cross the threshold of a property.

As a first step, field staff will only be directed to check addresses where records show a statutory return has not been submitted. Field staff will then identify if that property exists and is occupiable. Only following that will field staff call at the household and in doing so will not cross the threshold. Field staff will remain socially distanced from householders and use the personal protective equipment provided (including where necessary face coverings).

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Finance whether district councils will receive additional funding given the estimated £300 million of unspent funds in his Department.
(AQW 13987/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I would be content to consider any further proposals for funding from departments. I have asked my Executive colleagues to consider how the available funding can be used by their departments to provide support to those impacted by Covid-19, particularly for those who have been unable to access existing support.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance how many rates relief holidays for estate agents since March 2020 have been deemed to have been made in error by Land and Property Services.
(AQW 14044/17-22)

Mr Murphy: On review Land & Property Services (LPS) has identified 5 offices of commercial estate agents which have been awarded a 12 month rates holiday in error since March 2020.

LPS is in the process of removing 8 months' rates relief from each of the rate accounts; as they remain eligible for a 4 month rates holiday.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance to detail any representations he has made to the (i) UK Government; and (ii) Irish Government, in relation to tax relief for crossborder workers.
(AQW 14058/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My officials raised the issue of tax relief for cross border workers (also referred to as Trans-Border Workers Relief) with their counterparts in both the Irish and British Governments when I met with representatives of the Cross Border Workers Coalition (CBWC) in September last year.

This is primarily a matter for the Irish Government, who my officials pressed for greater clarity on how more flexibility could be shown to workers, particularly during these difficult times. Following that engagement, the Irish Revenue updated its published COVID-19 information and advice regarding the relief which now confirms that in terms of the Trans-Border Workers Relief: "If employees are required to work from home in the State due to COVID-19, such days spent working at home in the State will not preclude an individual from being entitled to claim this relief, provided all other conditions of the relief are met. This concessionary measure will continue to apply for the tax year 2021 where an employee is required to work from home in the State due to COVID-19, and provided all other conditions of the relief are met."

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Finance to detail the number of applications that have received a grant under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme that have since been deemed to be ineligible; and the total value of any such grants paid out. (AQW 14082/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Land & Property Services is not yet in a position to provide this information for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme as investigations are not yet complete.

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister of Finance how many alcohol-related deaths occurred in North Belfast in 2019. (AQW 14184/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) collates data on registrations of death.

The deaths information that NISRA produces is based on death registration data as captured by General Register Office. The methodology for selecting alcohol related deaths was revised in 2017, following a consultation (<https://consultations.ons.gov.uk/health-and-life-events/alcohol-mortality-definition-review/>) led by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to develop a UK-wide definition of alcohol-related deaths.

The new definition includes conditions known to be exclusively caused by alcohol (that is, wholly attributable causes) and excludes conditions where only a proportion of the deaths are caused by alcohol (that is, partially attributable causes).

Assembly area has been used to identify North Belfast. The number of alcohol specific deaths attributed to North Belfast in 2019 was 28.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance when census forms will start going out to the public. (AQW 14542/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The census takes place on 21 March 2021.

Invitation letters/forms which contain details of how to complete the census online or on paper will be delivered by the postal service to all households during the week of 1st -5th March.

Department of Health

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what plans are in place to vaccinate people who are homeless. (AQW 12577/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): The challenges around vaccination of the homeless will require a delivery program to be developed which meets the needs of this particular section of the population.

The particular challenges around the administration of two timed doses will require careful planning to ensure the homeless receive the full protection of the vaccines available to the rest of the population. Officials are currently considering these issues in detail.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health when childcare workers will receive both COVID-19 vaccine doses. (AQW 12590/17-22)

Mr Swann: Vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which advises the 4 UK Health Ministers.

Other than health and social care workers identified at priority group 2, JCVI has not recommended prioritisation linked to occupation. Therefore, childcare workers will be vaccinated in line with the general population group they belong to. The rate limiting factor for deployment of the vaccine is the availability of vaccines. The purpose of this approach is to save as many lives as possible with the available vaccine.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health to detail his plans for administering the COVID-19 programme in the community including in pharmacies, dental practices and other professions already trained due to the nature of their work. (AQW 12606/17-22)

Mr Swann: The model for vaccine deployment has been designed to be pragmatic, agile and flexible, and has involved collaborative working across the Health and Social Care system in conjunction with our wider stakeholders and partners.

Teams of vaccinators have been trained from a range of professional backgrounds including Pharmacists, Nurses, Dentists and Allied Health Professionals in addition to extant HSC staff and primary care staff.

The vaccination programme involves a mixture of delivery models and these will include: mobile teams for care home residents and staff as well as support for district nursing for house bound patients; Enhanced Trust Occupational Health staff teams for the mass vaccination of staff; and a GP based programme which will see GPs operating in cluster formation vaccination sites with additional support.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Health how the free condoms scheme works, including distribution and costs.

(AQW 12636/17-22)

Mr Swann: The PHA funds a pilot C-Card scheme in line with NICE Guidance. The A C-Card Scheme is a confidential sexual health service for young people (the target group are 16-25 year olds). The service provides free condoms, information, support and advice in safely managing their sexual health, at convenient times and in a variety of locations. It offers supported access to condoms, with the young person carrying a card with a Client ID Number, which allows the service provider to monitor the access whilst maintaining user confidentiality. It is more than just a condom distribution scheme.

At the onset of C-Card pilot PHA allocated funding of £3,739 for start-up costs to cover OCN level 2 training (funding required for accreditation of participants), hire of a central venue and catering for the regional training and the purchase of varieties of condoms for each of the areas and condom demonstrators. The C-Card was designed by PHA and 9,000 printed. The SHSCT allocated an additional budget of £2,500 which was all spent on purchasing condoms and lube for the service

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health for an update on a programme by which district nurses would be able to supply vaccines for COVID-19 to those who are housebound and to those who are in the clinically extremely vulnerable group.

(AQW 12658/17-22)

Mr Swann: Plans have been implemented for District Nurses to call with housebound patients, with the support of Trust mobile units and GPs. By week commencing 1st February 1,478 housebound patients had been vaccinated.

Clinically extremely vulnerable patients continue to be vaccinated by GPs and HSC Trusts.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Health to detail the efficacy after receiving the first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine.

(AQW 12663/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine is a highly effective vaccine and from clinical trial data is anticipated to have a sizeable effect on preventing severe disease and hospitalisation.

JCVI has now recommended that as many people on the JCVI priority list as possible should be offered a first vaccine dose as the initial priority.

The four UK Chief Medical Officers agree with JCVI that prioritising the first doses of vaccine for as many people as possible will deliver the greatest benefit overall in the shortest possible time, will have the greatest impact on reducing mortality and hospitalisations thus protecting the Health and Social Care system, and is the right thing to do for public health.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Health to detail the uptake of the COVID-19 vaccines amongst both Health and Social Care Trust staff and agency staff in the care home sector.

(AQW 12671/17-22)

Mr Swann: By 9th February 2021 13,517 care home staff have received their first dose of vaccine and 10,974 have received both doses.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Health whether he will instruct the Northern Ireland vaccine phase 1 roll-out to include frontline education staff, including teachers and classroom assistants.

(AQW 12672/17-22)

Mr Swann: Vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which advises the 4 UK Health Ministers.

Other than health and social care workers identified at priority group 2, JCVI has not recommended prioritisation linked to occupation. Therefore, childcare workers will be vaccinated in line with the general population group they belong to. The rate limiting factor for deployment of the vaccine is the availability of vaccines. The purpose of this approach is to maximise effective use of the available vaccine against severe infection.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Health what he is doing to ensure those in long term hospital stays who are high risk get their vaccine in line with the roll-out timetable.

(AQW 13079/17-22)

Mr Swann: Trusts have started the vaccination of hospital inpatients with the help of hospital pharmacies. Trusts have received a quantity of the AstraZeneca vaccine to enable them to vaccinate all long term patients aged 65 years and over.

This is crucial but complex and labour-intensive work, taking into consideration the clinical needs of each individual patient.

The vaccination programme will take time to ensure it is implemented safely and all plans are subject to the availability of vaccine supplies from manufacturers

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health to detail the timeline for delivery of the COVID-19 vaccination programme via community pharmacies.

(AQW 13125/17-22)

Mr Swann: The COVID-19 vaccination programme will be scaled up significantly and rapidly over the coming weeks as more vaccines become available. Community pharmacy has an important part to play in the vaccination rollout, as set out in the Department's COVID-19 Vaccination Programme Phased Plan published on 12 January 2021.

The Department is currently working with the Health and Social Care Board and Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland to put plans in place for community pharmacies to play a full and active part in the programme, as soon as vaccine supplies permit.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Health what discussions he has had with the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation for the prioritisation of teachers before schools are due to return for face to face teaching.

(AQW 13242/17-22)

Mr Swann: Vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which advises the 4 UK Health Ministers.

Other than care home workers at priority group 1 and health and social care workers identified at priority group 2, JCVI has not recommended prioritisation linked to occupation. Therefore, teachers will be vaccinated in line with the general population group they belong to. The rate limiting factor for deployment of the vaccine is the availability of vaccines.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health to detail any plans he has to vaccinate staff in childcare settings.

(AQW 13395/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Vaccination Programme in Northern Ireland is guided by JCVI recommendations. Beyond care home workers and Health and Social Care Workers included at Priority Groups 1 and 2, JCVI have not recommended vaccination based on occupation. As such, staff in child care settings will be vaccinated in accordance with the relevant cohort of the population they belong to.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health when all childcare providers will be contacted to arrange vaccination of staff, after letters were sent inviting some providers to make appointments during the week commencing 18 January 2021.

(AQW 13422/17-22)

Mr Swann: Throughout January 2021 Trusts and GPs have been working to vaccinate Priority Groups 1- 2, which included health and social care workers at Group 2.

Beyond those groups, JCVI has not recommended occupational prioritisation to date. Therefore, anyone not within Group 2 will be offered a vaccination when their relevant age cohort falls to be vaccinated.

In line with JCVI recommendations, deployment of the vaccine will move through priority groups 1-9 to complete Phase 1. At that stage JCVI may give consideration to prioritisation by occupation.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health (i) what counselling and emotional support services his Department is funding in North Belfast; (ii) where these services are located; and (iii) whether they provide support to children and young people.

(AQW 13545/17-22)

Mr Swann:

(i) The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust currently fund the following organisations to provide counselling in North Belfast:

- Bridge of Hope
- Cancer Lifeline
- Lighthouse
- New Life
- Wave
- Counselling all Nations
- Lenadoon
- East Belfast Community Counselling

(ii) These services are located at:

- Bridge of Hope – Alliance Avenue, McSweeney Centre
- Cancer Lifeline – Alliance Avenue
- Lighthouse – Duncairn Gardens
- New Life – Ardoyne
- Wave – Chichester Park South, Grove Well-being Centre

- Counselling all Nations - Grove Well-being Centre
 - Lenadoon – Crumlin Road
 - East Belfast Community Counselling – Spectrum Centre
- (iii) Counselling in the Belfast Trust is delivered by the community and voluntary sector. The Trust funds the organisations in (ii) but this is based on organisation and not age range.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health what steps he has taken to increase the number of intensive care unit beds since 2019.

(AQW 13549/17-22)

Mr Swann: Plans were put in place to increase ICU capacity in incremental stages during the first wave, using the Belfast City Hospital Tower (BCHT) as the regional ICU Nightingale facility. ICU bed usage reached its peak for the first wave on 10 April, with 96 beds occupied in total, including 58 COVID-19 patients. BCHT has since maintained additional ICU capability for future phases.

The Critical Care Network for Northern Ireland (CCaNNI) developed a critical care surge plan, which has been kept under review and was updated in advance of this third surge. The latest plan provides the ability to flex critical care capacity to an absolute maximum of 177 ICU beds across the region. The plan requires Trusts to work collectively to ensure that critical care capacity is maximised, while making the most of available staffing resources. Within this overarching plan, decisions will be taken on the need to transfer patients to the Belfast City Hospital Nightingale facility.

A new Command and Control Hub has also been established for the third wave to operationally manage critical care on a regional basis. CCaNNI continues to play a central role in advising this Hub on the implementation of the critical care surge plan and will continue to report daily to the Department.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health to detail the position under the EU Protocol in respect of the importation and approval of medicines from 31 December 2021.

(AQW 13838/17-22)

Mr Swann: Following the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol on 1st January 2021 Northern Ireland remains aligned with the EU acquis for medicines, whereas Great Britain does not. Medicines for Great Britain and Northern Ireland are now regulated under different regimes but overseen by the Medicines and Healthcare Product Regulatory Agency (MHRA), the UK's medicine and medical product regulator.

The UK Government and the EU Commission have agreed a 12 month period to allow industry time to prepare for the regulatory and supply chain changes that will be required to comply with the NI Protocol by 1st January 2022.

Following the recent temporary triggering of Article 16 of the Northern Ireland Protocol the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster wrote to the European Commissioner Vice President Sefcovic on 2nd February. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster outlined proposals for which agreement with the European Union was urgently requested. It was specifically proposed that the arrangements on medicines agreed on 5th November 2020 should be extended for a further 12 months at least until 1st January 2023. A long-term approach was also sought to ensure no barriers of any kind to the movement of medicines into Northern Ireland.

I trust you will find this response helpful.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health (i) what bids he made in the January monitoring round; (ii) what funds he surrendered as part of January monitoring; and (iii) for what purpose the surrendered funds were originally earmarked.

(AQW 13846/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department received an opening Resource budget allocation of £6,158.4 million, excluding the Executive's response to Covid-19 and an opening Capital budget allocation of £295m.

In addition, my Department received Resource funding of £388 million in June Monitoring, and £540 million in October monitoring and Capital funding of £38.7 million in June monitoring, £1.6 million in the September Covid exercise and £32.4 million in October monitoring.

As a result of this additional funding, my Department did not submit any resource or capital bids in the January Monitoring round.

My Department surrendered

- £90 million of COVID Resource funding relating to forecast reductions in untaken annual leave and PPE requirements. Some £70m of this £90m surrender was highlighted before Christmas as being available to help facilitate the provision of relief packages to those struggling as a result of the necessary additional restrictions. However, following a change to the budgeting treatment that enables additional expenditure to be charged to this year over and above what is recorded in the accounts, the Executive have allocated a further £175 million funding towards Covid PPE requirements.
- £23million of non-ring-fenced Resource funding, as a result of the need to downturn activity across Trusts to allow focus on immediate COVID pressures.

- £0.7million of ring-fenced funding after fully funding the Agenda for Change pay awards,
- £0.274million of ring-fenced funding relating to INTERREG and Brightstart
- £0.655 million Immigration Health Surcharge funding which was surrendered at the request of the Home Office
- £5million of ring-fenced Resource Depreciation and Impairment funding
- £25.027million of Capital funding relating to HSC ICT programme, NIAS Fleet and Estate, NIFRS Learning and Development Centre (phase 2) and funding for projects from the Small Business Research Initiative. Following the outcome of January monitoring the Finance Minister invited Executive Colleagues to consider ways of utilising the unallocated funds held by DoF. The Executive have allocated an additional £17.9 million of capital funding for the Belfast City Hospital site, NIAS fleet, medical equipment and for the procurement of licences for Digital health technologies.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Health for an update on the uptake of the flu vaccine.
(AQW 13878/17-22)

Mr Swann: As at 31/12/20, uptake for the following eligible cohorts was as follows:

- 65 and over: 77.3%.
- Under 65 at risk: 61.2%
- Year 8 in secondary school: 66.7%
- Primary school children: 72.5%
- 2-4 year olds: 54.2%
- Frontline health care workers: 52.2%
- Frontline social care workers: 40.8%

In all of the eligible cohorts, there has been increased uptake of the vaccine this season compared to 2019.

An extension to the eligible cohorts to individuals who will be aged 50-64 by 31 March 2021 was announced in January. These individuals can receive their vaccine from their GP or from participating community pharmacies.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health how many patients receive NDT on a Health Service prescription, broken down by Health Trust; and why this drug is not more widely available.

(AQW 13922/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are less than five patients currently receiving Natural Desiccated Thyroid (NDT) on a Health Service Prescription via hospital pharmacies across all HSC Trusts in Northern Ireland. A further breakdown is not available in order to protect the personal information of individuals.

The table below details the number of patients who have been identified as having been prescribed NDT tablets on a "named patient" basis in primary care across Northern Ireland. These were for prescriptions dispensed by a community pharmacist and are broken down by Local Commissioning Group area.

Local Commissioning Group	Number of Patients
Belfast	10
Northern	*
South Eastern	7
Southern	5
Western	*
NI Total	27

* Information suppressed to protect personal information of individuals (cell count less than 5)

NDT products are not licensed for use in the UK and their use is not recommended by national and international clinical guidelines (including those produced by the Royal College of Physicians, British Thyroid Association and European Thyroid Association). NICE guidelines published on 20 November 2019 also recommends against the use of NDTs in the treatment of hypothyroidism

(<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng145>).

Licensed medicines have been assessed for efficacy, safety, and quality to ensure they have been manufactured to appropriate quality standards and to ensure that when placed on the market they are accompanied by appropriate product information and labelling. All prescribers considering prescribing NDT products, or any unlicensed medicine, must be satisfied that an alternative, licensed medicine would not meet the patient's needs and should be prepared to take full responsibility for prescribing the medicine and for overseeing the patient's care, including monitoring and follow-up.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health (i) to detail any part of his estate that is surplus to requirements; (ii) where the surplus is located; and (iii) whether his Department is engaged with the Community Assets Transfer process.
(AQW 13931/17-22)

Mr Swann: The requested information is detailed in the table below:

Owner	Property	Engagement with CAT process?
Department of Health	Land at Whiteabbey inc. Hillcroft building, Newtownabbey	Yes
	Market Street Day Centre (part only), Downpatrick	Yes
	Land at Cairnshill, Belfast	Yes
BHSCT	Wellington Park, Belfast	Yes
NHSCT	Audley Terrace, Ballymena	Yes
NHSCT	Norfolk Court, Rathenraw, Antrim	Yes
SEHSCT	Dunmurry Clinic, Belfast	Yes

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what are the plans for the abandoned military hospital on the Musgrave Park Hospital site.

(AQW 13958/17-22)

Mr Swann: Building work is under way to refurbish part of the Duke of Connaught military hospital to support the delivery of day case fracture surgery in line with the blueprint document, 'Rebuilding, Transition and Transformation of Elective Orthopaedic Care delivered by Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland', that I announced in July 2020.

This building work is expected to complete in early Summer 2021.

The Trust phlebotomy service is also located within this building, and the Belfast HSC Trust is considering the potential for further services to use the residual vacant space, subject to funding.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Active Travel Centre at the North-West Transport Hub.
(AQW 10567/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I am very keen to increase the proportion of everyday journeys made by walking, cycling and public transport right across the North.

Enhanced passenger facilities opened in November last year with the completion of the main station work along with a new 100 space Park & Ride facility. This work marks a further step in development of this integrated active travel hub that will help to inspire smarter, greener and healthier travel choices. The provision and operation of an Active and Sustainable Travel Centre (ASTC) is another important part of the Hub project. The ASTC has the potential to become an exemplar of best practice; providing a focal point for the encouragement and promotion of sustainable travel, and the destination to advise, inform and support users and out-of-state visitors in making local, suburban and regional journeys.

My Department submitted an application for funding of the Active and Sustainable Travel Centre (ASTC) from the INTERREG VA Programme to the Special European Union Programmes (SEUPB). SEUPB has advised this request for funding is still under consideration.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) to detail any in-year bids made to the Department of Finance during (a) 2019/20; and (b) 2020/2021; and (ii) whether they were successful or not.
(AQW 13896/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The tables below show bids made and allocations received at each monitoring round for 2020-21 and 2019-20.

	June Monitoring		October Monitoring		January Monitoring	
	Bids £m	Allocations £m	Bids £m	Allocations £m	Bids £m	Allocations £m
2020-21						
<i>Resource</i>						
Covid	185.4	68.8	82.4	82.4	45.6	45.6
Non-Covid	16.3	0	5.9	0	63.9	63.9

2020-21	June Monitoring		October Monitoring		January Monitoring	
	Bids £m	Allocations £m	Bids £m	Allocations £m	Bids £m	Allocations £m
<i>Capital</i>						
Covid	0	0	29.8	29.8	0	0
Non-Covid	1.0	1.0	9.1	3.6	0	0

2019-20	June Monitoring		October Monitoring		January Monitoring	
	Bids £m	Allocations £m	Bids £m	Allocations £m	Bids £m	Allocations £m
<i>Resource</i>						
Non-Covid	3.0	4.6	33.9	8.7	28.5	4.0
<i>Capital</i>						
Non-Covid	0	7.1	57.3	46.1	14.5	3.9

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider increasing her Department's contribution of 50 per cent funding for greenway schemes to alleviate some of the burden on local councils.

(AQW 13964/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In my answer to AQW 12123/17-22, I indicated that I am willing to make a substantial contribution to the capital costs of greenways but would also encourage Councils to seek support from other sources, in respect of the wider benefits that greenways can bring for communities.

I understand the pressures that Councils are facing in these unprecedented times and, accordingly, I have made some additional funding available for the greenway projects that were included in my announcement in September 2020. I remain willing to work with Councils and to consider with them, how best to take forward this important work.

Equally important, in taking forward the greenways agenda, is for Councils to work with communities, landowners and other stakeholders in developing agreed proposals that can be developed into greenway schemes that are ready to be built.

Any decision regarding potential funding in the future will depend on budget allocations to the Department in 2021/22 and beyond. Final budgets for next year have not yet been agreed.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of the publication of Cycling in Northern Ireland 2019/20, for her assessment of whether a sample size of 2,962 individuals, from an initial target of 9,000 households, is statistically sufficient to base departmental decisions on.

(AQW 14046/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Cycling in Northern Ireland 2019/20 report is based on responses to the Northern Ireland Stastical Research Agency's Continuous Household Survey and the results presented are considered statistically representative of the population.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the progress of the adoption of (i) Breesy View, Belleek; and (ii) White Island Court, Belleek.

(AQW 14062/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) I am advised that the Breesy View residential development in Belleek is now fully occupied and that the developer is currently working on completion of minor defects to achieve NI Water final certification. When this has been achieved, the developer intends to lay the final surfacing on the footways and roads and this would enable the Department to issue a Preliminary Certificate. If no further defects arise, the development could therefore be adopted one year after the issue of the Preliminary Certificate. My officials will continue to liaise with the developer with the aim of achieving final adoption as soon as practicable.
- (ii) The White Island Court residential development in Belleek is partially complete and I understand it was acquired by a new developer in 2015. My officials have tried to impress upon the new developer the need to complete the roads and sewerage infrastructure to an adoptable standard. However, in the absence of a willingness on the part of the developer to do so, my officials recently initiated enforcement action to have the necessary work completed. It is anticipated work will commence in Spring of this year to bring the entire development up to an adoptable standard.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure under what consent regime her Department undertook the diversion of the watercourse required due to the construction of the new park and ride facility at Drumahoe, Derry, approved under LA11/2018/0013/F.

(AQW 14100/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The diversion of the watercourse was consented through the A6 Derry to Dungiven Dualling Scheme Environmental Statement and the formal decision to proceed with the scheme which was published in December 2011, in accordance with article 67A(1), (3) and (8) of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the new taxi driver grant scheme.

(AQW 14116/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The second Taxi Driver Financial Assistance Scheme which launched on Friday 12th February 2021 is open to all self-employed taxi drivers in the north who meet the eligibility criteria, including those drivers who did not apply for the first scheme in November 2020 or whose applications were unsuccessful.

The second scheme runs for a 12 month period from 22nd March 2020 until 21st March 2021. The scheme is open to applicants who had either continuous taxi insurance throughout the entire 12 month period, or partial insurance during this time. This will provide support to a wider range of applicants, including some who were not eligible for the first scheme (which covered the period 22nd March 2020 to 30th September 2020).

The second scheme is based on the same evidence (in terms of overheads) as the first scheme, and the principle that costs still have to have been incurred by the driver, so continuing to ensure VFM. Payments from the second scheme will therefore be made on a pro rata basis to reflect the individual circumstances of, and actual costs incurred by, the wider pool of eligible drivers. The scheme is addition to the financial support available to self employed taxi drivers through the Self Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS).

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans her Department has to provide financial support for driving instructors who were unable to work for a 14 week period, from March 2020, when the first lockdown commenced.

(AQW 14121/17-22)

Ms Mallon: While my Department is responsible for regulating the Approved Driver Instructor (ADI) industry, through the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA), it does not employ ADIs in the capacity of delivering driving instruction.

At the end of March 2020, my officials in the DVA notified all ADIs and Approved Motorcycle Instructors (AMIs) of the suspension of all testing services to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Since then, the DVA has regularly engaged with the industry, signposting them to a range of advice and guidance from the Public Health Agency (PHA) and the Department for the Economy for workers, small businesses and the self-employed for financial support that they may be able to avail of.

During the initial lockdown, many ADIs and AMIs were able to avail of the financial support available at that time. Packages included the Self Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS), the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, the Covid small business grant, hardship funds and government loan schemes. During the recent restrictions, further packages of financial support have been introduced by the Department for Economy and Department of Finance and many more ADIs have been able to avail of this support.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister for Infrastructure what financial assistance has been given to ports by the Executive to help support the flow of goods post-Brexit.

(AQW 14140/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department launched the NI Ports Infrastructure Grant Scheme in September 2019 aimed at supporting commercial sea ports in their preparations for EU Exit. In total, £2.5m of grant funding was awarded in March 2020 to three NI Ports; Warrenpoint Harbour, Foyle Port and Belfast Harbour.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) Translink's reserves at the start of the pandemic as at 11 March 2020; and (ii) Translink's reserves following the allocation of £15 million on 2 February 2021.[R]

(AQW 14201/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) Translink's cash reserves at the end of the 2019-20 financial year which coincided with the start of the pandemic were approximately £24m.
- (ii) As you have correctly stated, the Executive has allocated an additional £15m to Translink to support its financial viability in recognition of the losses it has sustained over recent years. This funding is in addition to an extra £35m allocated to Translink for the same reason. This support, totalling £50m, will be paid to by Department to Translink before the end of March 2021.

In this regard, it is estimated that Translink's reserves will be in the region of £70m at the end of the financial year. This funding will help to protect our public transport network and assist in preserving Translink's financial health in the short term as our public transport network will continue to deal with the impact of COVID-19 into the next financial year.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the rationale for not bidding for COVID-19 resource funding to enable active travel initiatives such as (i) bike repair vouchers; and (ii) the one path scheme in 2020/21.

(AQW 14202/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In terms of a bike voucher scheme, I am not persuaded that the untargeted scheme operated in England would be the most effective use of funding. However, the development of a more targeted scheme would take significant time and it would not have been possible to develop and deliver a scheme within the available timeframe for spend by 31st March 2021.

The One Path Initiative revolves around face to face contact with users of the path and the organisation of stakeholder events and activities. It would not have been possible to arrange these during the current lockdown.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much funding her Department has contributed to the FASTER programme for charge points.

(AQW 14214/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am pleased to be able to inform you that my Department will be contributing €513,945 (£455,371) of Match Funding towards the FASTER project.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the mapping of historical, cultural and relevant community features along the route of the Comber Greenway will be completed.

(AQW 14278/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As explained in my answer to AQW 12736/17-22, my officials are working on a pilot scheme for signage on the Comber Greenway which will identify key destinations along a one and a half mile section of the greenway between Kings Road and East Link Road. I plan to implement this pilot this year which will help inform any further development. Until this pilot is completed and evaluated it is not possible to say when signage along the entire route will be completed.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure when AQW 10567/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 14290/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I refer the Member to AQW 10567/17-22 which is now answered.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for her assessment on whether the extreme weather event of the 22 August 2017, that caused serious flooding in the North West, was attributable to climate change; and (ii) to detail the current position on her Department's proposed flood alleviation schemes for (a) Eglinton village; and (b) Drumahoe, Derry.

(AQW 14370/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Extreme rainfall events have increased in recent decades and this is consistent with what would be expected as a result of the influence of climate change. Whilst it is not possible to attribute the extreme weather of 22 August 2017 entirely to climate change, this was a very significant rainfall event.

My Department completed feasibility studies which were formally approved in May 2020 for flood alleviation works in Eglinton and Drumahoe. The design work for both schemes has now commenced, and will include allowances for climate change in line with Departmental Guidance. It is currently anticipated that the design stage is likely to take 18 months to complete. Throughout the design process the economic viability of these schemes will continue to be reviewed in line with Departmental guidance and best practice. Following completion of the design, and subject to their continued economic viability and availability of funding, both schemes will then progress via separate procurement exercises to appoint contractors for the works.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) to detail (a) the number of; and (b) the proportion of vehicles, which are due for MOT but an application for a test is not being made, in each of the last six months; and (ii) how this compares in each of the previous twelve months.

(AQW 14397/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency's booking system does not hold information on vehicles that have not made an application for a test. It is, therefore, not possible for them to monitor and collate information about vehicles that may have an historical record against their current licensing status and match these to the recent transaction history that takes account of Temporary Exemption Certificates issued in the last 12 months.

The number of vehicle tests conducted is a National Statistic and as such is released in accordance with the UK Official Statistics Code of Practice. The 'DfI Driver, Vehicle, Operator and Enforcement National Statistics' report is published on a quarterly basis with the latest edition covering the period from 1 July to 30 Sept 2020. Vehicle test statistics are presented in quarterly or monthly schedules, dependent on the volumes in question. The next release of these figures is scheduled for 23 February 2021.

Given recent public interest in these statistics, the Department is now publishing provisional testing statistics on a monthly reporting cycle, which are available on the Department's website. The latest monthly report for January 2021 was published on 12 February.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure what consideration is being given to extending the expiry date of the Strangford Ferry SmartCard, or refunding customers for journeys not taken, as a consequence of COVID-19 restrictions. (AQW 14403/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Strangford Ferry Service has continued to operate throughout the pandemic, however, I do acknowledge that many people have been avoiding non-essential travel during the lockdown periods so I have decided to extend by 1 year, the expiry date for all unused journeys. This will also apply to all Smartcards that have expired since the first Covid-19 lockdown period. The normal rules will continue to apply for refunding unused journeys.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will review the option that allows people to book their MOT tests in test centres in a constituency other than their own during lockdown. (AQW 14405/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Under the current Covid-19 Regulations, MOT testing is deemed an essential service and therefore travelling for the purpose of preparing or presenting a vehicle for MOT is permitted.

There are no restrictions limiting customer choice when booking an MOT test. Customers can choose whatever test centre is most convenient for them and the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) has no plans to change this. For the most part, customers choose to take their vehicle to their closest test centre although some, for a variety of reasons, choose an alternative centre to ensure their vehicle is tested and can be legally kept on the road.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the rationale for restricting the second taxi driver support scheme to a two week window for applications; and (ii) whether applications received and rejected during the open period will be communicated to claimants in such time that they may reapply or amend applications. (AQW 14545/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Using the evidence gathered from the first scheme, I believe that two weeks strikes the right balance between giving drivers time to complete the short application process and at the same time ensuring that the large volume of applications are processed at pace to enable payments to be made as quickly as possible to successful applicants once the scheme closes.

No applications will be rejected during the two week open period. If an applicant realises they have made an error after submitting their online application form, they can contact the Department on 02890 540605 (between 9:00 and 17:00 Monday to Friday) or via email at TDFAS21@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk to advise of the error that was made, including their application reference number for the affected form – staff will then ask the applicant to provide the correct/amended information via email in order to process the application. In cases where eligibility is less clear, and it is necessary to carry out further verification checks, applicants will be contacted directly for more information by a member of the team.

All applications will be assessed before any payments are made and not before the closing date of 26 February.

Further information about the scheme is available in the Taxi Drivers Financial Assistance Scheme 2021 Guidance (<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/taxi-drivers-financial-assistance-scheme-guidance>)

Department for the Economy

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy how many businesses in the North Down constituency are ineligible for the Covid Restrictions Business Support Schemes, even though their business was forced to close as a result of the current COVID-19 regulations.

(AQW 11372/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): The specific requested information is not readily available. However, information in relation to the number of businesses, by parliamentary constituency and district council area, which have applied to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS), received payment or have been rejected can be accessed online via the following webpages:

Part A: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-businesssupport-scheme-part>

Part B: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-businesssupport-scheme-part-b>

The intention of the NI Executive was to design the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) and the COVID Restrictions Business Support Schemes (CRBSS) to be as flexible and as broad as possible in order to protect all businesses required to close or cease trading, or that operate within the supply chain of businesses required to close, as a result of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations. It was, therefore, hoped that, by design, ineligible businesses would not exist or be extremely limited in number. However, as CRBSS does contain exclusions, such as businesses that are eligible for LRSS, it is possible that a business was required to close under the Regulations but was rejected under the CRBSS.

My officials have been open to taking on board feedback from stakeholders and applicants to address any identified potential issues. My officials are also corresponding directly with applicants to individually assess each application and the evidence

provided, to ensure that each has the best opportunity of success. Applicants are also offered the opportunity to appeal any rejection decision, with each appeal assessed openly in line with a published appeals process.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has any plans to reclassify those who are self-employed, but are effectively employed workers.

(AQW 12128/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I have no imminent plans regarding employment status legislation but I am aware it is a complex area which interacts closely with tax law. It determines the rights that an individual gets, and the taxes that they and the business they work for must pay. I understand that the current framework can sometimes fail to provide the clarity and certainty that individuals and businesses need. While employment law is devolved to Northern Ireland, taxation is a reserved matter. Any future plans for change to the employment status framework would, therefore, need to take appropriate account of the United Kingdom tax system.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy to provide a timeframe for introducing a COVID-19 financial support scheme for bed and breakfasts that were previously unable to avail of business support grants.

(AQW 12204/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: A Bed and Breakfast, Guest House and Guest Accommodation Scheme opened on Thursday 28th January 2021. Details about the Scheme can be found here: <https://covid19.tourismni.com/accommodationsupport/>

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy what financial support is available to sports clubs that also operate hospitality, including bars, which have been forced to close by the current COVID-19 regulations.

(AQW 12411/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department for Communities, which is responsible for the administration and promotion of sport, has run two support schemes for sports clubs: the Sports Hardship Fund for and the Sports Sustainability Fund. Both are now closed for applications.

In response to the restrictions in place, my Department has introduced the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS).

Part A of the scheme is for businesses that are required to close/cease trading under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 but are not eligible for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

Part B is for businesses which supply goods or services to a business named in the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020. The business must be a supplier of goods or services, to a business named in the Health Protection Regulations either directly or via an intermediary supplier or subcontractor; or the business is dependent on a business named in the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 being open and fully operational in order for it to operate.

Each application is assessed on a case by case basis. I would therefore ask businesses to review the full eligibility criteria and to make use of the online eligibility checker available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part>. I would encourage all businesses to make applications should the eligibility checker advise eligibility.

A licensed bar or restaurant that operates independently of a sports club, but from within the grounds of a club, may be entitled to support via the Wet Pubs Business Support Scheme (WPBSS). In order to qualify for the WPBSS, a business must be in receipt of the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS). The Department has contacted all eligible businesses in order to complete the application process. Details of the scheme are available at Coronavirus: Wet Pubs Business Support Scheme (nibusinessinfo.co.uk).

Full details of the support available to businesses are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/campaign/coronavirus-updates-support-your-business>

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy (i) how many applications her Department has received for the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme; and (ii) how many payments have been made.

(AQW 12468/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As of 10 February 2021 there have been 2,733 applications submitted to the Newly Self Employed Support Scheme and a total of 830 payments have been made to applicants, totalling over £2.9m. Invest NI continue to gather the necessary evidence to enable verification of the remaining applications and make payment to eligible applicants as quickly as possible.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for the Economy for a breakdown of how many successful applications have been made to Part A of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme, broken down by council area.

(AQW 12537/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Information in relation to the number of businesses that have applied to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme and received payment can be accessed online via the following webpages:

Part A: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part>

Part B: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part-b>

The information details the number of applications to date based by status (draft/submitted/processed/rejected/paid) and provides a breakdown about the operation of the scheme by District Council area and Parliamentary Constituency. The data is updated on a weekly basis.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) what COVID-19 financial support schemes for businesses such as event catering companies, florists, wedding bands and bridal outfitters are in place; and (ii) what additional support will be made available to those who have not been eligible for current or previous COVID-19 support schemes.

(AQW 13089/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) Businesses which are required to close or cease trading at their premises due to the Health Protection Regulations may apply for support through the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

Businesses which are required to close or cease trading due to the Health Protection Regulations but are not eligible for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme may apply to Part A of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme.

Part B of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme is for businesses which supply goods or services to a business named in the Health Protection Regulations. The business must be a supplier of goods or services, to a business named in the Health Protection Regulations either directly or via an intermediary supplier or subcontractor; or the business is dependent on a business named in the Regulations being open and fully operational in order for it to operate. Businesses such as event catering companies, florists, wedding bands and bridal outfitters can apply to the scheme provided the full eligibility criteria are met. Full details of the scheme, including eligibility criteria are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part-b>.

These schemes supplement the support available from the UK Government such as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme which have both been extended to April 2021.

- (ii) I have recently introduced schemes to provide support to the newly self-employed and limited company directors, many of whom have been unable to access support to date.

Support schemes have also been launched to assist large businesses within the tourism and hospitality sectors, wet pubs and tourist accommodation providers.

In total, these additional scheme will provide over £90 million of support to those who have been ineligible for previous support or required additional support. In considering further interventions, including any new funding or packages of financial support, it will be for the Executive collectively to determine how this will be allocated to best support economic recovery.

Details of all schemes can be found on the NI Business Info website available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/campaign/coronavirus-updates-support-your-business>.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for the Economy what consideration he has given to develop a scheme to provide financial support to the owners of dog boarding kennels who have been impacted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 13514/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Executive and the UK Government have introduced a wide range of business support schemes to help ease the extraordinary burden that has been placed on entire communities and our local economy, due to the ongoing global pandemic.

To date, my Department has provided over £350 million of support to over 30,000 businesses and individuals, and is currently delivering millions of pounds to thousands more through a number of schemes that have been developed and implemented in recent months. The combination of these schemes have provided support to all sectors and occupations throughout Northern Ireland. I am on record as stating that whilst the 'stay at home message' has been absolutely necessary, it has had a damaging impact on many of our business sectors. The travel industry has been hit particularly hard, and as a consequence many other businesses have been impacted, including dog kennel owners and other similar family pet facilities.

With the roll-out of a vaccination programme, there is cause for optimism as we look towards a return to some form of social and economic normality, and government support can then be targeted at helping businesses to be able to operate safely, with as little interruption as possible.

Whilst the Executive and my own Department continue to receive calls for specific targeted support, it is simply not possible to design and fund schemes for every type of business or employment across our society.

Ultimately however, it will be for the Executive collectively to determine how any new or additional Covid related funding should be allocated.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she is considering a lifetime skills guarantee, similar to that announced in England.

(AQW 13695/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am aware of the announcement made by the Prime Minister to establish a 'Lifetime Skills Guarantee' in England. This provides those without a Level 3 qualification with the opportunity to secure the skills they need, no matter where they are in their career. This commitment has been matched with an investment of £2.5 Billion by the Chancellor, however we must await the outcome of the Budget process in Northern Ireland before committing to any new skills initiatives.

My Department has been following the plans in England closely as we develop our new Skills Strategy. Indeed, many of the interventions planned to deliver the skills guarantee in England are already in place or being developed here.

My Department has been designing an initial range of skills proposals, which are currently under consideration, however these cannot be advanced without a significant increase in funding for skills. I have submitted a bid for £50m as part of the current Budget process.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the loss of EU funding to the Social Enterprise Agencies in the Upper Bann constituency; and what measures her Department is putting in place to assist them.

(AQW 13992/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The current ESF Programme is providing £7.5m to one social enterprise based in Upper Bann. This is due to complete in March 2022. A number of other social enterprises from other areas do however provide support to participants in Upper Bann. These can be viewed at ESF 2014-2020 Projects Awarded Call 2

We are currently in the processes of developing future skills policy that will include those types of interventions historically funded under the ESF Programme.

Replacement funding has been promised by the UK Government under the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF). Fiscal policy and future funding fall within the remit of the Finance Minister. However, in light of uncertainty around the UKSPF, my Department has secured additional domestic funding that will enable us to extend support for ESF activity until March 2023. My officials are currently working through legal and regulatory issues and I would hope to be able to make more formal announcements in the coming months.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy to provide a risk assessment regarding delays in filling departmental vacancies; and whether this will delay the delivery of departmental strategies.

(AQW 14011/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department's staffing position has been challenging for some time and officials have been monitoring the situation closely. A specific risk around staffing capacity and capability was added to the department's corporate risk register in September 2020 with an extreme risk rating, which demonstrates the critical significance the department places on dealing with the matter.

A high vacancy rate has been a key contributor to this risk. In November 2020 the Department had 331 vacancies in total. That number has now reduced to 271 at the end of January 2021. While that is a significant improvement following a number of recruitments, it is still a vacancy rate of 23% and presents considerable challenges.

It is difficult to quantify the impact our vacancy rate has had on the delivery of departmental strategies. Several areas of work have faced delays during the course of the last year but for a variety of reasons, not least the need to prioritise urgent and new Covid response work. Covid has simply forced the Department to reset its priorities and some work areas have been deliberately paused as a result. My officials will continue to monitor all formally paused work closely.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether language schools are eligible to claim under Part B of the Coronavirus Business Restrictions Support Scheme given that travel is curtailed; and (ii) whether they fall within the scheme's definition of a supply chain.

(AQW 14030/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Part B of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme is for businesses which supply goods or services to a business named in the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020. The business must be a supplier of goods or services, to a business named in the Health Protection Regulations either directly or via an intermediary supplier or subcontractor; or the business is dependent on a business named in the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 being open and fully operational in order for it to operate.

Due to the varying nature of businesses, each application is assessed on a case by case basis. I would therefore ask businesses to review the full eligibility criteria and to make use of the online eligibility checker available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-supportscheme-part-b>. I would encourage all businesses to make applications should the eligibility checker advise eligibility.

I would also encourage businesses to examine other assistance through the wider support measures provided by the NI Executive. Information on other support measures available to support businesses, employers and the selfemployed during this health and economic crisis can be found at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/business-support/coronavirus>.

The website information is updated, as required, to include advice for individuals and businesses as well as those employees who may be furloughed under the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS). It includes information on help available through other UK-wide schemes as well as specific Northern Ireland support measures.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for the Economy what progress has been made on acquiring financial support for Northern Ireland students studying in universities in Great Britain.

(AQW 14123/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Northern Ireland students elsewhere in the UK are not without support. The other jurisdictions have all announced significant increases to their student support packages. An additional £50m to support students in England was recently announced which is in addition to £20m announced in December. Students in Scotland who are experiencing hardship as a result of coronavirus will be supported by £20m of Government funding. A further £10m has also been allocated to universities and colleges in Scotland for income lost in providing rent rebates. In January, the Welsh Government announced a £40m package of support for students facing financial hardship.

I would encourage any Northern Ireland student studying outside of Northern Ireland to contact their university, should they be in financial hardship, and to avail of the support which is in place there.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy how much it costs per litre to transport Liquid Petroleum Gas in a lorry across the Irish Sea.

(AQW 14218/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department understands that liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) is not brought into Northern Ireland by road tanker using commercial ferries, but is instead imported using dedicated ships, with the product then stored in terminals before being delivered by road to consumers. The LPG market in Northern Ireland is not regulated, and the Department does not have access to information on the cost of transporting LPG.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether students will be eligible for the £500 Covid Disruption Payment if (i) they are currently on a leave of absence; and (ii) they were on a leave of absence during semester one.

(AQW 14303/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Covid Disruption Payment is for full-time UK and EU students at Northern Ireland publicly funded Higher Education Institutions and full-time Higher Education students at the Further Education Colleges, in recognition of the disruption suffered by students to their studies due to the impact of Covid-19.

If the students are enrolled on a full-time basis, they will be eligible for the Covid Disruption Payment. It is important to note, however, the funding agreed is for Northern Ireland institutions to support their students. Payments will issue directly from the institutions, not from the Department. It will be a matter for the Higher Education Institutions to decide whether a student meets the eligibility criteria.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department will offer alternative support for students within alternative providers in higher education.

(AQW 14458/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Covid Disruption Payment is for full-time UK and EU students at Northern Ireland publicly funded Higher Education Institutions and full-time Higher Education students at the Further Education Colleges, in recognition of the disruption suffered by students to their studies due to the impact of Covid-19.

It is important to note, however, the funding agreed is for publically funded Northern Ireland institutions to support their students. Payments will issue directly from the institutions, not from the Department. It should also be noted the only feasible way in which a payment scheme of this size can be implemented is to work through the students' institutions; that is, either their university or further education college.

An 'alternative provider' is any provider of higher education courses which is not in direct receipt of recurrent grant funding from the Department for the Economy, or from equivalent funding bodies in other UK jurisdictions. The bible colleges do not receive recurrent grant funding from the Department and are therefore considered 'alternative providers'.

As the Covid Disruption Payment is for Northern Ireland publicly funded Higher Education Institutions, alternative providers such as the bible colleges, which are not in receipt of grant funding from the Department, are not eligible. The Department simply does not have the legal vires to make payments to such institutions.

However, the Department delivers financial support to eligible Northern Ireland students, including those studying designated courses at alternative providers, through Student Finance NI. By the end of November 2020, my Department had provided £84m in maintenance loans and a further £37m in maintenance grants as a contribution towards students' living costs during the academic year.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy how the decision was taken to classify bible colleges as alternative providers, therefore excluding these students from the £500 Covid Disruption Payment.

(AQW 14459/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Covid Disruption Payment is for full-time UK and EU students at Northern Ireland publicly funded Higher Education Institutions and full-time Higher Education students at the Further Education Colleges, in recognition of the disruption suffered by students to their studies due to the impact of Covid-19.

It is important to note, however, the funding agreed is for publically funded Northern Ireland institutions to support their students. Payments will issue directly from the institutions, not from the Department. It should also be noted the only feasible way in which a payment scheme of this size can be implemented is to work through the students' institutions; that is, either their university or further education college.

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 26 February 2021

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) how much the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition has cost to date; and (ii) for a breakdown of payments to each member.
(AQW 1976/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The total cost of the work of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition to date is £809,019.88.

£380,245.85 was paid to members of the Commission for remuneration, travel and subsistence. A breakdown of payments to each member is detailed in the table below:

Commissioner	2016/17 (£)	2017/18 (£)	2018/19 (£)	2019/20 (£)	2020/21 (£)	Totals
Mr Neville Armstrong (Joint Chair)	£13,943.75	£22,334.62	£7,466.32	£1,046.85	£1,012.50	£45,804.04
Dr Dominic Bryan (Joint Chair)	£9,038.20	£19,441.65	£7,425.50	£881.25	£3637.50	£40,424.10
Mr Doug Beattie MC MLA*	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Mr Ian Crozier	£1,950.00	£6,993.75	£6,506.50	£187.50	£562.50	£16,200.25
Mr Richard Good	£5,207.90	£15,717.60	£6,066.45	£418.05	£458.10	£27,868.10
Mr Tom Hartley	£4,687.50	£14,139.65	£6,131.25	£393.75	£656.75	£26,008.90
Prof. Thomas Hennessey	£5,607.59	£22,828.05	£7,994.52	£750.80	£1524.35	£38,705.31
Dr David Hume MBE	£4,818.90	£11,298.00	£2,653.65	£472.05	£551.10	£19,793.70
Mr Donncha MacNiallais	£3,025.40	£9,468.75	£5,911.55	£299.85	£717.75	£19,423.30
Mr Nelson McCausland	£0.00	£12,152.70	£264.60	£5,494.05	£562.50	£18,473.85
Mr Ian McCrea	£3,431.93	£11,431.63	£5,141.25	£566.25	£375.00	£20,946.06
Dr Katy Radford MBE	£5,619.70	£10,831.35	£3,187.50	£431.25	£2437.50	£22,507.30
Mr David Robinson	£7,317.35	£19,311.15	£7,164.15	£723.45	£2,063.55	£36,579.65
Mr Mukesh Sharma MBE DL	£5,604.84	£15,056.40	£7,662.75	£300.00	£1143.75	£29,767.74
Mr Carl Whyte**	£2,480.45	£8,531.85	£3,562.50	£0.00	£0.00	£14,574.80
Mr Stephen Barr***	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£3,168.75	£3,168.75
Annual Totals	£72,733.51	£199,537.15	£77,138.49	£11,965.10	£18,871.60	£380,245.85

* not eligible to claim remuneration as an MLA since the Commission commenced its work.

** not eligible to claim remuneration since being elected to Belfast City Council in May 2019.

*** Mr Stephen Barr replaced Mr Doug Beattie MC MLA in April 2020.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what issues are delaying the Troubles-related incident Victims Payment Scheme.
(AQW 4276/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We remain entirely committed to delivering the scheme and acknowledge that the scheme needs to be funded to operate properly. Considerable progress has already been made in areas such as developing the IT system, appointing Board members, and sourcing staff and accommodation

The Executive committed substantial funding this year to establish the administrative arrangements for the Scheme and the draft Budget for 2021/22 also provides for administrative costs. In particular, this will allow victims' organisations to recruit additional staff to support applicants to the Scheme.

The important issue of funding pressure on the Block Grant remains to be resolved. TEO Ministers, Finance Minister and Justice Minister are engaged in correspondence with the Secretary of State in relation to funding and will be meeting with him to address this matter urgently.

It remains our view that the Scheme should be funded by the Westminster Government as an addition to the Block Grant. We will continue to make this case directly. Such discussions will not prevent TEO in the meantime from making the necessary requests for funding from the Department of Finance as it falls due.

Mr O'Toole asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why they have not yet responded to my letter regarding Brexit transition, dated 12 April.

(AQW 4433/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We responded to this correspondence on 9 June 2020. A further copy will be emailed to the Member.

Mr Beattie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) how many Executive meetings there has been since the reformation of the Executive; and (ii) how many meetings has each Minister attended in person.

(AQW 5121/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: From 11 January 2020 to 26 November 2020, there have been 69 meetings of the Executive Committee.

All Ministers attended 60 meetings of the Executive.

These Ministers were not present at the following meetings:

20 January	Minister of Justice
10 February	Minister for the Economy
17 February	Minister of Finance
10 March	Minister for the Economy Minister of Justice Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
24 April	Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
4 June	Minister for Communities
8 June	Minister for Communities
11 June	Minister for Communities
3 September	Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

For information, Deirdre Hargey MLA resigned as Minister for Communities on 14 June 2020, and was replaced by Carál Ní Chuilín MLA.

Mr T Buchanan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) was there any requirement for the deputy First Minister to notify the Executive Office of her intention to attend the funeral of Bobby Storey during the current COVID-19 restrictions; and (ii) if so, was the appropriate notice given.

(AQW 5370/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: No: Ms O'Neill attended the funeral in her capacity as Vice-President of Sinn Féin. Giving appropriate notice was therefore not applicable.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail how much has been spent on the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition in the last five years, broken down by year.

(AQW 5462/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The costs for the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition to date are:

- June 2016 – March 2017: £182,480.65
- April 2017 – March 2018: £423,688.59
- April 2018 – March 2019: £156,976.57
- April 2019 – March 2020: £24,402.12
- April 2020 – February 2021: £21,471.95

Mr O'Toole asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the Executive Committee (Functions) Bill, to clarify whether the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland will continue to be treated as a fundamental cross-cutting issue; and to confirm whether any decisions around the protocol, or its implementation, will be considered by the full Executive and not taken unilaterally by any individual Minister.

(AQW 5997/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive is committed to dealing with Brexit in a collective way. The Protocol has cross-cutting ramifications and interdependencies, and the Executive is focused on dealing with these issues collectively. An Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters, chaired by us and consisting of Ministers from the departments most impacted by Brexit (DAERA, DoF, DfE, DfI, DoJ and DoH), was therefore established to provide a forum for collective discussion and agreement on the various issues associated with EU Exit including the Protocol. We consider that the provisions of the Executive Committee (Functions) Act 2020 in relation to cross-cutting matters have not affected the range and significance of the issues which Ministers continue to bring to it for decision in accordance with their obligations.

Mr Chambers asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether any protocols are in place to give prior notice to Members of an official visit by either the First Minister or deputy First Minister to their constituency.

(AQW 6292/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Current guidance for Ministers on the exercise of their official responsibilities states that Ministers who intend to make an official visit within Northern Ireland must inform the MLAs for the relevant area. While it is recognised that there will be occasions when visits are organised or the details confirmed, at short notice, Ministers are expected to give as much notice as possible.

Miss Woods asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when AQW 5916/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 6426/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: AQW 5916/17-22 was answered on 2 October 2020.

Mr Muir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 6133/17-22, when they intend to table a Transfer of Functions Order to the Executive for approval to transfer responsibility for the statutory functions under the Reservoirs Act (NI) 2015 from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to the Department for Infrastructure.

(AQW 6891/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Transfer of responsibility from DAERA to the Department for Infrastructure for the functions exercisable under the Reservoirs (NI) Act 2015 is one of package of transfers of functions for which we intend to seek Executive agreement in the near future.

Miss Woods asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 1613/17-22, whether she will bring forward an Age, Goods and Facilities and Services Bill in the current mandate.

(AQW 6977/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Consideration of extending age discrimination legislation to the provision of goods, facilities and services was commenced under the previous Executive. A decision was not made in respect of the scope of that legislation prior to the end of the last Assembly. The issue requires further work to inform the potential scope of any legislation.

Appendix 1 to the "New Decade, New Approach" document supports the possible outline of a Programme for Government including the bringing forward of an Age, Goods and Facilities and Services Bill. This will be subject to the Executive agreeing a final Programme for Government.

Mr Chambers asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, following the Executive Departments (Northern Ireland) Bill, and the loss of functions previously within their responsibility, for their assessment of the ongoing necessity for two junior Ministers.

(AQW 7088/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Junior Ministers are appointed to assist us in the exercise of our functions in relation to the Executive Office. It is our assessment that there not only continues to be a need for such assistance but also that this has become even more essential in helping us to address more recent developments and challenges, including those presented by Covid-19 and EU Exit.

Mr Dickson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the number of Written Questions submitted to their Department; and (ii) the number still awaiting answer, since January 2020.

(AQW 8070/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Between 11 January 2020 and 4 February 2021 The Executive Office received 575 Written Assembly Questions. Of these 31 were: transferred to another department for answer (24), or withdrawn

by the Member (7). 233 are currently awaiting answer. A number of these (7 questions) are subject to ongoing consideration as to their eligibility for response by TEO, or by other departments.

Mrs D Kelly asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the timeframe for the completion of the review of the Commission of Victims and Survivors; and (ii) whether the terms of reference of the review will be published.

(AQW 13419/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We have asked for a review of the Commission for Victims and Survivors to be undertaken and are currently considering the Terms of Reference for this. Once the Terms of Reference are agreed we anticipate the review will be completed within 6 months.

The review will consider areas such as how the Commission's services should be delivered in the future and what structure is best suited to delivering responsive, focused, efficient and quality services. The Terms of Reference will be published when agreed.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether (i) the Executive Office must authorise all meetings of the North/South institutions and the agendas for such meetings; and (ii) the institutions are continuing to operate as normal.

(AQW 14182/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires us, acting jointly, to give the Executive and the Assembly, as far in advance of each NSMC meeting as is reasonably practicable, information relating to the meeting including the date, the agenda, and the names of the Ministers who are to attend the meeting.

At a Plenary meeting on 18 December the NSMC agreed a schedule of sectoral meetings for February to June 2021. The Joint Secretariat is in the process of arranging these meetings.

Mr Carroll asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given their commitment to a racial equality strategy, to detail their assessment of Gregory Campbell's recent comments in relation to Black Lives Matter.

(AQW 14230/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: No such assessment has been made.

Achieving racial equality remains a key priority for us. Our minority ethnic community are extremely valued and important members of our society. We remain committed to full implementation of the Racial Equality Strategy to provide them with the best possible opportunity to participate fully in society as equals.

As the Strategy states, we are under no illusion about the size of the challenge involved in tackling racial inequalities. Political leadership is critical but the action needed to stamp out racism is not just for Government - it is for everyone in our society.

We therefore continue to encourage everyone in society to play their part in helping us make this a place where people can live, learn, socialise and work together regardless of race or ethnicity.

Ms McLaughlin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 8869/17-22, whether the acquisition of the Meenan Square site will be completed before the end of this financial year; and for an estimated date for the demolition of the existing property and site clearance.

(AQW 14376/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The business case for this major mixed-use regeneration project in Meenan Square aims to develop the site as a shared space for fostering positive community identities; building good relations; and harnessing wider economic and social benefits, thus reclaiming and repurposing a dilapidated site which has for too long been a catalyst for anti-social behaviour.

The business case is at an advanced stage and is being prioritised within The Executive Office with a view to submission to the Department of Finance in the coming weeks.

Work is also ongoing to secure purchase of the site, subject to business case approval, before the end of this financial year if possible. A pre-condition to the purchase of the site is that the current owner ensures all buildings are demolished and the site cleared.

Mr McGuigan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the recruitment process for the new Head of the Civil Service will commence.

(AQO 1519/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We have reviewed the Head of the Civil Service role and engaged with officials on the recruitment and selection process.

This process will be in accordance with relevant NICS policies and the requirements of the Civil Service Commissioners.

It is expected to launch in March to enable an appointment to be made by summer to align with the interim arrangements in place for the Head of the Civil Service role.

Mr Butler asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the support their Department is providing to groups that benefitted from the European Social Fund.

(AQO 1344/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive Office's Urban Villages Initiative supports collaborative approaches with a number of European Social Fund (ESF) projects in 2020/21 in Urban Village areas spanning Belfast and Derry~Londonderry.

These include a partnership with Belfast City Council on three employability projects: Belfast Works, Path 2 Employment and JobWorks+. Delivery partners for these projects include Ashton Community Trust; East Belfast Mission; GEMS NI; Job Assist Centre; West Belfast, Job Assist Greater Shankill; Workforce Training Services and Springboard Opportunities. TEO's funding allocation is £75,518.

Urban Villages is also supporting the Building Your Future project led by Poleglass Community Association in the Colin area with an allocation of £26,720 and £25,000 in to the Skills North West project led by Triax in Derry~Londonderry. Women's Tec in the North Belfast Urban Village area is not currently funded under ESF but was previously, and the organisation is delivering an Urban Villages community-led project with support of £22,063.

TEO is also providing support totalling £39,826 to Ashton Community Trust, Bryson Charitable Trust and Roe Valley Residents Association under the 2020/21 TBUC Camps Programme and a further £3,871 is being provided to Ashton Community Trust through the Planned Interventions Programme.

Central Good Relations funding is also being provided to projects through: Barnardo's, £21,135; Springboard Ltd, £87,814, and Training for Women Network Ltd, £43,910. In addition, funding of £2,940 has been provided to Limavady Community Development Initiative through the Department's District Council Good Relations Programme.

Mr Dunne asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what intervention and support can be given to the aerospace sector which has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQO 1094/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: COVID-19 has presented extraordinary challenges to aviation and aerospace, and the industry, internationally, is facing a crisis.

Notwithstanding the caution with which aerospace businesses have approached the first six months of the pandemic, there are signs that some are now looking towards fresh opportunities, whether through diversification into new products or market segments, and geographies not previously explored.

The Invest NI Aerospace team are already engaged with companies and negotiating to secure new investments that can support the repositioning of those businesses, with reduced reliance on traditional aerospace.

They are also continuing to promote programmes such as FlyZero and collaborative engagement to secure Aerospace Technology Institute funding going forward, and that work will be intensified as businesses begin to see beyond COVID-19.

We were very pleased recently that workers at Shorts were given a level of certainty and optimism following the recent sale of Shorts Brothers to Spirit Aerosystems. We welcome that development and look forward to seeing Shorts go from strength to strength.

We wrote recently to the President and Chief Executive Officer of Spirit AeroSystems, Tom Gentile, welcoming the news of its acquisition of Short Brothers, highlighting the long-standing strategic relationship that exists between the company and local Government and looking forward to a continuation of the partnership as Shorts integrates with Spirit.

The acquisition by Spirit is clear recognition of the high regard in which the Shorts workforce is held and we wish the company every success for the future.

Mr Dunne asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on securing funding for the Troubles-related incident Victims Payments Scheme.

(AQO 1517/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The proposed allocation of funding in the draft Budget would provide £6.7 million for administrative costs of the Victims' Payments Scheme for permanent disablement. This demonstrates the Executive's commitment to delivering the Scheme. Part of this funding will enable the victims' and survivors' sector to recruit additional staff to support applicants.

It remains our view that the Scheme should be funded by the Westminster Government as an addition to the Block Grant. We will continue to make this case directly. Such discussions will not prevent TEO in the meantime from making the necessary requests for funding from DoF as it falls due.

Ms Flynn asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether immediate emotional and psychological support will be provided to meet the needs of survivors of Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries.

(AQO 1522/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Work on Mother and Baby Homes is led by the Department of Health, however TEO is jointly responsible for sponsorship of the Inter-Departmental Working Group (IDWG) and leads on the other element of the IDWG work in relation to historical clerical child abuse.

Ministers are committed to the provision of appropriate support for survivors from Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries.

As part of the wider announcement on the publication of the research report on 26 January, attention was drawn to the sources of support and help survivors can access, in their locality.

It is recognised that individuals may require additional support as they engage in the co-design process and this will be provided. WAVE has also provided input to Reference Group meetings to date.

Once established, the co-design group will be asked to consider what further or more bespoke support services may be needed for victims and survivors. Survivors have emphasised the importance of ensuring that bespoke specialist support is available and their views will be central to the design of those services.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what assessment his Department has made of how wildlife crime, including illegal trapping and capture, has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 11741/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): My officials are members of The Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime in Northern Ireland (PAW NI); a multi-agency body comprising non- government and statutory organisations which includes representatives of those involved in wildlife law enforcement. My officials liaise regularly with the other member groups, particularly the PSNI.

As the main enforcement body in Northern Ireland, the PSNI investigate reports of wildlife crime such as the illegal trapping and capture of protected species. The PSNI are currently unable to provide any statistics on wildlife crime for 2020.

Other members of PAW (NI) have not reported an increase in wildlife crime since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 5437/17-22, for an update on whether legislation on a Deposit Return Scheme and an Extended Producer Responsibility Scheme will be introduced to help increase the rate of plastic recycling.

(AQW 11744/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department has been working alongside GB colleagues to develop proposals for a Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) for drinks containers and an Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) Scheme for packaging materials with a view to public consultation in 2021. Legislation will be worked up following the outcome of that consultation. The intention is for both schemes to include plastic packaging materials.

Alongside making it easier to recycle difficult to recycle packaging materials and tackling litter, the aim of both DRS and EPR is to increase our current recycling of packaging in general, and core materials (paper, glass, aluminium, steel, wood and plastic) in particular.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how much carbon is estimated to be held in (i) raised; and (ii) blanket bogs in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 11788/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department does not hold this information at present.

Peatlands, such as raised and blanket bogs, are among the most carbon-rich ecosystems on the planet and as such will play a key role in mitigating climate change. Healthy peatlands in good condition not only store carbon but can actively sequester atmospheric carbon in perpetuity, as well as support biodiversity and reduce flood risk.

Peatland covers a significant part of Northern Ireland, most notably peatland with semi-natural vegetation which covers approximately 12% of the land area. Most peatland here has been modified by man and is considered degraded and in poor condition, emitting significant amounts of stored carbon. These habitats are also highly sensitive to air and water pollution which can damage or kill the peat-forming species and interfere with the peat's carbon storage capacity.

Reflecting their current condition and role as a carbon source, emissions from peatlands will soon be included in the national greenhouse gas emissions inventory. Indeed, the recently published Sixth Carbon Budget report recognises the need for peatlands to be restored widely and managed sustainably, as part of a suite of nature-based solutions to climate change.

Further information on UK peatland GHG emissions is provided in the following Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH) report on the Peatlands emissions inventory:

Implementation of an Emissions Inventory for UK Peatlands (defra.gov.uk)

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the risk of bog slippage in upland areas in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 11930/17-22)

Mr Poots: As I indicated in Minister Poots reply to question AQW 11931/17-22, the issue of peat stability is primarily a geotechnical issue. The Geological Survey for Northern Ireland provides expert comment to my Department on this issue.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs why municipal waste is exported to outside of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 12174/17-22)

Mr Poots: International waste shipment and the export of waste is a reserved matter for Defra and the UK Government. However like other commodities, waste may be traded as a commercial good both domestically and internationally. In regulating this trade there is UK legislation in place to prohibit the export of most waste for disposal, unless it is going for specialist treatment. Given this, municipal waste being exported from Northern Ireland is most likely being sent for recycling or recovery.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what licencing and inspection regulations exist for keeping poultry in urban and suburban environments.

(AQW 12283/17-22)

Mr Poots: All keepers of birds, except those who keep caged birds as pets indoors, are required to register their birds with the Department under the Avian Influenza (Preventive Measures) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007. This applies to bird keepers in any location in Northern Ireland (NI).

All keepers of poultry must also provide for their welfare under the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. This Act obliges all keepers to take all reasonable steps to ensure that the 'five needs' detailed within the legislation are met. These include:

- a suitable environment
- a suitable diet
- the opportunity to exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- being housed with, or apart from, other animals
- being protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

The Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 provides powers of inspection and enforcement in cases of failure to comply with the welfare provisions contained in the relevant legislation.

General guidance on keeping poultry can be viewed on the NIDirect website (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/keeping-chickens>), including an overview of the legal provisions, and links to welfare responsibilities, recommendations on floor area, exercise space, and other advice on how livestock including poultry can legally be kept on the property.

Following the recent confirmation of Avian Influenza in NI, there is an obligation for all bird keepers in NI to adhere to biosecurity measures applicable within the Avian Influenza Protection Zone (AIPZ) introduced on the 1 December. A further housing measure was also introduced as part of the AIPZ from 23 December. This requires all bird keepers to house their birds or keep them otherwise separate from wild birds until further notice.

Following the confirmation of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza at a holding in Clough, County Antrim on 6 January 2021, further restrictions have now been imposed. A Protection Zone (PZ) of 3k and a Surveillance Zone (SZ) of 10k have been initiated around the premises. All bird keepers within these zones are subject to the restrictions (including any in urban or suburban areas). Full details can be found on the DAERA website (<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/avian-influenza-ai#toc-0>).

The Avian Influenza legislation also provides powers for the clinical inspection of all registered flocks by Department veterinarians within these zones, or in any case of suspect disease, irrespective of location.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what bids has he made to the Department of Finance for the available COVID-19 funds for the agricultural sector, including the wool industry.

(AQW 13196/17-22)

Mr Poots: DAERA sought and was allocated a total of £41.7m Resource DEL by the Executive as set out in the table below.

	Executive Allocations £'m
Market Interventions in the Agri-Food Sector	25.0
Waste Programme	15.2
Support for Fisheries Sector	1.5

	Executive Allocations £'m
	41.7

Further to my response to AQW 4072/17-22 I have not submitted any additional bids to the Department of Finance for the agricultural sector for 2020-21.

I have critically reviewed and examined a wide range of potential opportunities for further spend in this financial year and can confirm that given we are now in February, it would not be possible to spend additional funding before the end of this financial year.

I will obviously keep this position under review.

In the event that specific evidence of need for further support in this financial year is identified, my Department will liaise as appropriate with the Department of Finance to secure additional resources if required.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what plans he has to introduce the mandatory and free microchipping of kittens.

(AQW 13353/17-22)

Mr Poots: I currently have no plans to introduce a requirement to microchip kittens within Northern Ireland.

I am aware that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has consulted on a proposal to make the microchipping of kittens in England compulsory. I will keep the position on this matter under review.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what impact assessment was conducted in respect of the restrictions on participants from Northern Ireland with regard to cage bird shows in Great Britain.

(AQW 13532/17-22)

Mr Poots: Due to the short time period with which DAERA had to prepare for EU regulations which now newly apply to animal movements from Great Britain (GB) to Northern Ireland (NI), as a direct result of the Northern Ireland Protocol, no impact assessment was completed prior to the ending of the transition period.

I am however acutely aware of the difficulties with the conditions contained in the Export Health Certificates (EHCs) which are now required for live animal and bird movements from GB to NI, particularly the entirely un-necessary residency conditions for NI exhibitors, which were not required prior to the ending of the transition period.

Minister Poots previously wrote to the European Commission highlighting the unjustified requirements associated with these and other EHCs and requesting that consideration be given to mitigations for these rules where possible. My officials will continue to raise with the Commission, on a regular basis, the ongoing concerns with the additional requirements in an effort to seek flexibilities or derogations.

Be assured that I too will continue to urgently discuss these concerns with Ministerial colleagues across the UK, including their escalation via the Joint Committee process, to determine how the impact of these new unnecessary impediments to the movement of caged birds within the UK can be reduced, if not removed altogether.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the future viability of Northern Ireland exhibitors participating in cage bird shows in Great Britain.

(AQW 13533/17-22)

Mr Poots: No assessment has currently been completed on the future viability of Northern Ireland exhibitors participating in cage bird shows in Great Britain.

However, I am very aware that while exhibitors can still travel to cage bird shows in Great Britain (GB) with no change, there have been significant changes to the requirements these birds must meet on their return to Northern Ireland (NI).

These changes are as a result of the regulations for entry into NI from GB which are laid down in EU legislation, and which have now become applicable for all GB to NI bird movements following the end of the transition period, as a result of the Withdrawal Agreement and the Northern Ireland Protocol.

I am acutely aware of the difficulties with the conditions in the 'Export Health Certificates (EHCs)' which are required for these birds to now move from GB to NI, and the existence of entirely un-necessary residency conditions for NI exhibitors which were not required prior to the ending of the transition period.

Minister Poots previously wrote to the European Commission highlighting the unjustified requirements associated with EHCs and requesting that consideration be given to mitigations for these rules where possible, this would include via the Joint Committee process. My officials will continue to raise with the Commission, on a regular basis, the ongoing concerns with the additional requirements in an effort to seek flexibilities or derogations.

Be assured that I too will continue to urgently discuss these concerns with Ministerial colleagues across the UK to determine how the impact of these new unnecessary impediments to the movement of caged birds within the UK can be reduced, if not removed altogether.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) whether he has made a decision to withdraw from operation of the North/South institutions; and (ii) if so, what departmental areas are affected by his withdrawal from the operation of the North/South institutions.

(AQW 14273/17-22)

Mr Lyons: I will act at all times to deliver the best possible outcomes for the people of Northern Ireland, our Agri-Food sector and indeed for the wider economy. I do so in accordance with my Ministerial responsibilities including the Ministerial code.

In interactions with our Government I have emphasised the need for action to be taken given the negative impacts of the protocol. There is also the very clear need to send a message to the Government of the Irish Republic that North/South relationships are impacted by the implementation of a protocol which that Government endorsed and championed, a protocol which does damage to the agreements that they purport to uphold, not to mention the significant damage that it does to our citizens, consumers, businesses and communities in Northern Ireland.

For all the reasons outlined I cannot and will not continue to act as though relationships have not been impacted as a result of the actions taken by Republic of Ireland's Government. Going forward I will consider each matter on its merits. I will not take any actions which would negatively impact on Northern Ireland. Therefore given the impact on the protocol, I cannot proceed on the basis of business as usual in respect of North/South relations.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 13119/17-22, to detail the amount of funding that will be available to all local councils.

(AQW 14340/17-22)

Mr Lyons: As part of DAERA's 2021-22 Draft Budget I have allocated £3.0m Capital to support activity under the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) Programme which includes the Forest Park Enhancement and Community Trail Development Scheme. A specific allocation has not been made for Councils. DAERA will consider the budget in the context of Expressions of Interest received from Councils by the 5 March 2021 deadline and anticipated Executive approval of DAERA's 2021-22 Final Budget, which is due by the end of March 2021.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 13119/17-22, whether this capital funding will also be available for local council-owned or rented facilities.

(AQW 14341/17-22)

Mr Lyons: The opportunity to receive funding support through the Forest Park Enhancement and Community Trail Development Scheme will be available to Council's for recreational infrastructure development projects for which the Council has obtained landowner permission and can include council-owned or rented facilities.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what can be done to address the regulations for exhibitors participating in cage bird shows in the rest of the United Kingdom caused by the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.

(AQW 14383/17-22)

Mr Lyons: Caged Birds can continue to move from Northern Ireland (NI) to Great Britain (GB) as per existing arrangements. I am, however, fully aware that there are significant changes to the requirements which must be met for cage and aviary birds moving from GB to NI or returning to NI from GB following the end of the transition period.

The new requirements are set out in European Commission Decision 2007/25/EC which details the veterinary certification requirements for the introduction of live pet birds accompanying their owners into the European Union from Third Countries (which is how the EU now considers Great Britain), and provides the template for the Export Health Certificates (EHC) that must accompany cage and aviary birds such as budgerigars and finches during such movements.

I am acutely aware of the difficulties with EHC's and the existence of entirely un-necessary residency conditions for Northern Ireland exhibitors

Minister Poots previously wrote to the Commission highlighting the unjustified requirements associated with existing EHCs and requesting that consideration be given to mitigations for these rules were possible. My officials will continue to raise on a regular basis the concerns with the additional requirements in an effort to seek flexibilities or derogations.

Be assured that I too will continue to urgently discuss these concerns with Ministerial colleagues across the UK to determine how the impact of these new unnecessary impediments to the movement of caged birds within the UK can be reduced, if not removed altogether.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, within the context of an all-island approach to animal disease, specifically bovine tuberculosis, how many farmers manage one holding in both north and south jurisdictions for the intention of the Basic Payment Scheme.

(AQW 14413/17-22)

Mr Lyons: My Department does not hold information on holdings Northern Ireland farmers may have in the Republic of Ireland.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) the expected timeframe for the implementation of the 25 recommendations made by the Rural Needs Working Group; and (ii) any planned initiatives that may directly affect people living in rural areas of East Londonderry.

(AQW 14476/17-22)

Mr Lyons: My Department has already implemented a number of the recommendations made by the Working Group established to Review the Implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016. Progress on implementation is set out in Annex A. My Department is working to implement the remaining recommendations over the coming months although it recognises that Covid-19 restrictions may have an impact on delivering some of the recommendations.

In relation to those recommendations made by the Rural Needs Working Group which are applicable to other public authorities, the Department has written to each public authority requesting that it implements the recommendations.

In relation to initiatives in rural areas of East Londonderry, DAERA's ongoing Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) Programme supports a range of initiatives which benefit all rural communities across Northern Ireland.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on his Department's efforts to remove the necessity of an EU pet passport for domestic pet travel between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

(AQW 14488/17-22)

Mr Lyons: The EU Pet Travel Regulation (Regulation (EU) 576/2013) continues to apply in Northern Ireland (NI) following the end of the transition phase and as a result, there are now additional requirements for pet travel from Great Britain (GB) to NI.

I am acutely aware of the impact of what I consider to be completely unnecessary measures, on those travelling within the United Kingdom (UK), including the additional costs, and I am particularly concerned at the impact these will have on those travelling with assistance pets. I also recognise the significant implications on other sectors for example for those that travel to attend shows and exhibitions, on hobby breeders and the potential impact on tourism for those wishing to holiday in NI or return to NI from GB accompanied by their pets.

After engaging with my officials to find potential flexibilities, and considering pet owners have not had time to familiarise themselves with the new rules, my predecessor Minister Edwin Poots confirmed that DAERA would delay the introduction of any routine checks on pet travel from GB to NI until 1st July 2021.

In the interim, I will continue discussions to urgently seek derogations from the unnecessary requirements. Minister Poots also wrote to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, George Eustice MP, and to the European Commission, highlighting these issues, and particularly the entirely unjustified requirements for rabies vaccination and tapeworm treatment given that both the UK and the Republic of Ireland (RoI) are considered free from both diseases.

Furthermore, he requested that urgent consideration be given to the introduction of a 'Common Travel Area' for pets travelling between GB, NI and RoI and a joint GB/NI/RoI Working Group has been established to consider where flexibilities can be achieved. A Terms of Reference for this group has now been agreed and two meetings convened on 3 and 12 February 2021 to discuss the technical detail of the pet travel regulations.

This matter has also now been escalated by the UK Government to the European Commission seeking urgent resolution to the matters. The Commission has responded and discussions are ongoing which I hope will find pragmatic solutions to what I consider to be these unnecessary additional requirements.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what plans his Department has to strengthen legislation on invasive species such as Japanese Knotweed.

(AQW 14604/17-22)

Mr Lyons: The Wildlife (NI) Order 1985 contains powers for controlling the introduction of invasive non-native species (INNS) in the wider environment. Under Article 15 of the Wildlife Order, it is an offence to 'plant or otherwise cause to grow in the wild' Japanese knotweed or any other invasive plant listed in Part II of Schedule 9 of this legislation. Whilst the current legislative position does not require landowners to eradicate Japanese knotweed, they must ensure it is not allowed to escape from their premises.

I currently have no plans to review legislation related to INNS, including Japanese knotweed.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how much his Department has paid in consultancy fees since the beginning of the current Assembly mandate.

(AQW 14633/17-22)

Mr Lyons: The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has paid a total of £16k since the beginning of the current Assembly mandate. This is broken down in the table below.

Period	£'000
10 January 2020 – 31 March 2020	6
1 April 2020 – 15 February 2021	10

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) the process for bringing dogs from Britain to Northern Ireland; (ii) the quarantine period required; and (iii) the costs involved.

(AQW 14658/17-22)

Mr Lyons:

- (i) The EU Pet Travel Regulation (Regulation (EU) 576/2013) details the documentary, health and compliance check requirements for the travel of pet dogs (including assistance dogs), cats and ferrets between or into European Union Member States which are needed to avoid the quarantining of animals. The Regulation continues to apply in Northern Ireland (NI) following the end of the transition phase and as a result, there are now additional requirements for pet travel from Great Britain (GB) to NI, including obtaining a rabies vaccination, tapeworm treatment and an Animal Health Certificate (AHC) or valid EU Pet Passport from a veterinary practice.

However, after engaging with my officials to find potential flexibilities, and considering pet owners have not had time to familiarise themselves with the new rules, my predecessor Minister Edwin Poots confirmed that DAERA will delay the introduction of any checks on pet travel from GB to NI until 1 July 2021. As a result, there will be no routine checks until then.

- (ii) There is no quarantine requirement for pets travelling from GB to NI, when travel is compliant with the above requirements. However from 1 July 2021, pets that do not comply with the requirements of the EU Pet Travel Regulation (EU) 576/2013 will be subject to appropriate action as set out in Article 35. These actions include returning the pet animal to its country of dispatch or isolating the pet animal under official control for the time necessary for it to comply with the necessary conditions. The owner will be responsible for any costs incurred.
- (iii) The cost of consultation, advice, vaccinations and issuing documentation is set by each individual veterinary practice, but the Department understands that these may range approximately from £60 for a passport in NI; or £100 for an AHC in GB and £80 for vaccinations and treatments.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he plans to extend the Ornamental Horticulture Industry (Coronavirus, Financial Assistance) Scheme.

(AQW 14673/17-22)

Mr Lyons: In June 2020, Minister Poots announced a £1.6m support scheme for growers in the ornamental horticulture sector who were adversely impacted by the closure of garden centres and other markets for bedding, cut flowers and other plants due to lockdown measures in spring 2020. The scheme opened on 15 October and closed on the 15 November 2020, attracted 10 applications, 2 of which subsequently withdrew their claims.

I am aware of the concerns that nursery businesses and garden centres are having at this time regarding the current lockdown, and in particular the impact it is having on cash flow, and I plan to meet with representatives of the horticulture industry in early March to hear about this first hand.

I have written recently to the Health Minister, Robin Swann MLA, to encourage him to permit 'click and collect' services for garden centres. This would help to stimulate seasonal purchases of plants and avoid introducing a financial support scheme similar to last year.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether further work is planned to enhance the quality of water in the (i) Connswater; (ii) Knock; and (iii) Loop rivers.

(AQW 14705/17-22)

Mr Lyons: The water quality pressures in the Connswater, Knock and Loop rivers are typical of many urban waterways, primarily related to discharges from domestic properties, industry and waste water infrastructure. In recent years there has been a relatively low level of pollution from industrial sources in all three catchments however, DAERA staff continue to advise industry on pollution prevention steps as and when required.

The "Living with Water" Programme lead by the Department of Infrastructure (DFI) aims to improve water quality in the Greater Belfast area through effective wastewater management. Specific measures for the Connswater catchment outlined in a recent consultation document include the replacement of the Sydenham Waste Water Pumping Station, sewerage network improvements and the provision of additional network capacity.

In addition my Department is also working on a wide ranging programme of measures to improve water quality in waterbodies throughout Northern Ireland and these will be contained in the draft River Basin Management Plan due to be published at the end of March 2021.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what efforts her Department will make to assist Lough Neagh eel fishermen whose trade with Great Britain has been prohibited by the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland and to seek re-admission to this vital market.

(AQW 14792/17-22)

Mr Lyons: The European Union's policy of not allowing the trade of eels out of or into the EU market and the Northern Ireland Protocol has impacted on the Northern Ireland eel trade.

Minister Poots raised the issue at an Inter-Ministerial Group for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs meeting on 25 January 2021. I continue to engage with the Department for Food and Rural Affairs to seek ways to minimise the impact of the Protocol regarding the loss of trade in adult eels from Northern Ireland to Great Britain and in juvenile eels from Great Britain to Northern Ireland for restocking.

My Department continues to review ways of supporting the fishing industry in Northern Ireland during these difficult times.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) whether he is aware of animals being kept in isolation at Northern Ireland ports awaiting checks; and (ii) whether he can provide an indication on how long these animals are held.

(AQW 14812/17-22)

Mr Lyons: My officials have confirmed that no live animals have been detained in the ports beyond the time required to carry out the requisite checks – one hour at most.

Live animal inspection is prioritised in the ports as animal welfare has always been a priority for my Department. Vets are present at all times to ensure that animal welfare is not compromised.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on his Department's intentions to review the Habitat and Species Action Plans, published in 2000 and 2008.

(AQW 14813/17-22)

Mr Lyons: Individual Habitat and Species Action Plans were produced following the initial publication of the Northern Ireland Priority Habitats and Species Lists by the then Environment and Heritage Service. Current work is focussed on revising the priority lists and subsequently the necessary conservation actions, with a view to updating the action plans over time.

Specific action continues to be developed for habitats on designated sites, farmed priority habitats and species such as red squirrel, curlew, and other farmland wading birds.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment on the merits of introducing the use of DNA testing of dog foul to assist dog fouling detections and associated penalties.

(AQW 14814/17-22)

Mr Lyons: While the technology to DNA test dog foul is available, it is not something I currently plan to introduce in Northern Ireland for a number of reasons. Firstly such an approach would require the introduction of new legislation to compel dog owners to submit swabs of their dogs' DNA – this in itself raises a number of issues and similar powers of compulsion have not been introduced in respect of microchip implants for dogs – which would arguably have a stronger case for such legislation. In the case of a voluntary scheme, the uptake is likely to be relatively high among responsible dog owners (who already diligently pick up after their dogs), but low amongst less responsible dog owners who are likely to be accountable for the majority of dog foul in our streets.

Alongside a very broad range of other environmental matters, the issue of dog fouling will be considered in DAERA's forthcoming draft Environment Strategy for Northern Ireland. The Strategy will consider options for tackling this scourge in the future and include the outcome of the current review of Fixed Penalty Notices for litter and dog fouling offences, and I would encourage everyone to respond to the Environment Strategy public consultation when it is published later this year.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps his Department is taking to restore marine ecosystems.

(AQW 14906/17-22)

Mr Lyons: My Department is committed to protecting and improving the status of ecosystems in the Northern Ireland marine environment, and in collaboration with the other UK administrations, is preparing an updated programme of measures that will set out the actions needed to achieve Good Environmental Status. This will be subject to public consultation later in 2021.

The marine protected area network plays an important role in protecting and restoring marine ecosystems, and my Department's current focus is on establishing effective management across the network. A public consultation on fisheries management measures for marine protected areas will close on 31 March 2021. It proposes measures that are considered

necessary to protect and restore marine ecosystems that could be damaged by fishing activities. The consultation can be viewed at: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-development-fisheries-management-measures-marine-protected-areas-mpas-and-establishment>

My Department has provided grant funding to Ulster Wildlife for a project to assess the feasibility of blue carbon habitat restoration in Northern Ireland. This project will inform the development of future restoration projects. My Department is working with potential delivery partners to develop proposals to restore blue carbon habitats and other marine ecosystems. In addition to restoring degraded habitats, these proposals will include activities for protected species, improving water quality and reducing marine litter.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail his Department's plans to allocate funding for the restoration of habitats and ecosystems of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 14907/17-22)

Mr Lyons: My Department is developing a range of funding programmes and initiatives to support the restoration of habitats and ecosystems in NI. These are listed below:

- 1 The Environment Fund and its Challenge Funds. A Green Recovery Challenge Fund is under development for 2021/22.
- 2 The development of a Resilient Peatland Programme.
- 3 The development of future Agri-Environment schemes.
- 4 The implementation of the "Forests for our Future" programme.
- 5 Development of budgetary proposals to support the protection and restoration of marine and coastal ecosystems.

Most of these initiatives and programmes will require multi-year investment and the level of delivery will be dependent upon the level of budget secured by the Department.

The Department have also been engaged with the development of the new EU Peace Plus Programme 2021-27.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what discussions his Department has had with the UK Government to progress the establishment of a sanitary and phytosanitary or a veterinary agreement with the EU.

(AQW 14908/17-22)

Mr Lyons: Under the terms of the EU Withdrawal Agreement, the Northern Ireland Protocol and domestic legislation, Northern Ireland must continue to align with EU sanitary and phyto-sanitary (SPS) rules. I am opposed to the detrimental impact of these additional rules on the intra-UK movement of animals, goods and products from Great Britain (GB) to Northern Ireland (NI). I feel that these checks are unnecessary and my predecessor, Minister Poots, has already written to Defra Secretary of State, George Eustice MP, and the European Commission, to highlight the difficulties caused by these new requirements.

The responsibility for considering any potential future alignment on SPS rules between the UK and the EU, including the negotiation of a veterinary agreement, rests with the UK Government.

Discussions between the UK Government and the European Commission, which I hope will find pragmatic solutions and lead to the resolution of the current difficulties, are ongoing.

In parallel, I will continue to engage with my Ministerial colleagues across the UK and my officials will also continue to engage with their GB counterparts to consider all available flexibilities and mitigations that could help to minimise the immediate impact on trade. However the long term solution must be removing the protocol.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what his Department is doing to protect Blackies Wood, Bangor, from the impact of the new housing development.

(AQW 14916/17-22)

Mr Lyons: Thank you providing clarification of the location of Blackie's Wood. Ards and North Down Borough Council has consulted the Natural Environment Division of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency about three planning applications in the vicinity of the area.

Planning Application Reference	Date of last consultation
LA06/2016/0596/F	2017
LA06/2019/0100/F	2019
LA06/2019/0476/F	2019

Officials have assessed these planning applications in line with planning policy and have recommended conditions and provided informatives, to mitigate or compensate where appropriate, to ensure that significant natural heritage concerns are addressed.

However it is up to the Local Planning Authority (Ards and North Down Borough Council) to make a determination on whether or not to grant approval for these proposals (taking into account all material considerations including our advice) and to decide what conditions and informatives should be applied should approval be granted.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Sustainability Agricultural Land Management Strategy.
(AQW 14960/17-22)

Mr Lyons: My Department set out an 'Approach to Implementation' of the Expert Working Group (EWG) Sustainable Agri Land Management Strategy (SALMS) recommendations, containing proposed actions designed to improve farm profitability and environmental performance. Implementation of the recommendations is overseen by a DAERA SALMS Steering Group of senior officials. My officials liaise regularly with the EWG for advice on the implementation actions and send the EWG biannual SALMS progress reports.

Good progress has been made on implementation of the SALMS recommendations. Various actions have been ongoing since 2017. These include:

- on-going integration of key aspects of sustainable agriculture within CAFRE's Knowledge Advisory Service;
- a suite of on-going AFBI led scientific research projects to fill evidence gaps;
- pilot implementation of soil testing across 49,711ha of land;
- pilot projects of topographic scanning using LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging using fixed wing aircraft) across specific water catchments to identify nutrient run-off risks;
- investigation of appropriate Decision Support Tools;
- installation of high frequency water monitoring equipment by AFBI; and
- support under the Farm Business Improvement Scheme - Capital (FBIS-C) and Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) to encourage uptake of specific equipment and measures.

The SALMS recommendation for integration of sustainable agriculture with CAFRE's Knowledge Advisory Service (KAS) is on target with good progress made on establishment of 20 environmental Business Development Groups (BDGs) involving approximately 415 farm businesses. Sustainability has been incorporated into all BDGs as a key theme.

The SALMS recommendation for a soil sampling and analysis programme for farmers, was successfully piloted between 2017-2019. The Pilots were conducted in 3 water catchments (Upper Bann, Colebrooke and Strule) and in one open element that was available province wide.

Collectively, the Pilots constituted a publicly funded (£2.261m) intervention where 1,613 farmers' with fields spanning over 49,711 ha had soil samples collected and analysed on a 'free to farmer' basis.

An evaluation of the Pilot Schemes has been carried out. The results from the piloting approach, are helping to inform future direction and policy development in relation to soil health and future farm support measures. Development of a business case for a Soil Nutrient Health Scheme is ongoing, with planning underway for the launch of the Scheme (subject to business case approval) at a later date.

The Farm Business Improvement Scheme Capital (FBIS-C) has provided almost £14.5m of grant aid in total to over 3,000 farm businesses over the first two tranches of Tier 1, which has helped support the purchase of a large range of more efficient, precision and emissions reducing technologies. Letters of Offer have begun to issue for the third tranche of Tier 1 FBIS Capital, which has a funding allocation of £15million, following the very positive response in applications received, particularly for Low Emissions Slurry Spreading Equipment.

Support offered under the Environmental Farming Scheme is also making good progress. Some 5,000 farmers are participating in the EFS after four tranches. Two further tranches are planned, subject to the necessary approvals.

My officials will continue to implement and test the recommendations within the SALMS, which have the potential to make substantial improvements to soil health and the sustainability of land management.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the exact responsibilities statutory bodies have to remove graffiti on their property.
(AQW 14976/17-22)

Mr Lyons: There are powers available to district councils to tackle graffiti which the formal guidance stipulates they should use in the first instance so that they can claim the costs of removal from the perpetrators and pursue offenders. The pertinent legislation relating to graffiti is Article 18 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (NI) Order 1985 (the 1985 Order). This legislation was transferred from the former Department of the Environment to the Department for Communities under the Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (NI) 2016.

The Clean Neighbourhoods & Environment Act (NI) 2011 enables district councils to serve a 'defacement removal notice' (DRN) on the owners, occupiers, operators of 'relevant surfaces', statutory undertakers and educational institutions whose property is defaced with graffiti. However, DRNs are not intended to be used to deal with new cases of graffiti, rather to enable district councils to clear surfaces defaced by graffiti over time.

There is no duty on statutory bodies to remove graffiti unless issued with a removal notice under the 1985 Order or a DRN.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department has made an assessment of the potential merits of introducing a blue carbon strategy for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 14985/17-22)

Mr Lyons: The importance of blue carbon habitats and their role in climate change adaption and mitigation is now widely recognised. My Department has been working with other administrations through a sub group of the British-Irish Council to share knowledge and experience on blue carbon topics.

To obtain a better understanding of the Northern Ireland context, my Department has invested in a feasibility study to identify potential areas for blue carbon habitat restoration. This project will inform the development of strategies relating to blue carbon habitats and associated restoration projects.

My officials are currently developing blue carbon targets and objectives for the draft Environment Strategy, and these will also be relevant to the updated Biodiversity Strategy. Consideration has not yet been given as to whether there is a need for a standalone blue carbon strategy.

Department for Communities

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities how much has been spent in each of the last three years to enable the Housing Executive to replace oil burners with gas burners; and for her assessment of the value for money in replacing one form of fossil fuel with another.

(AQW 14028/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): The table below sets out the cost of annual oil to gas conversions since 2017/18 to the present.

The Housing Executive has advised the following;

- The electronic database does not retain details of a previous heating installation once it is replaced. Therefore it is not possible to extract the heating conversion data from it.

For this reason, the annual number of oil to gas conversions is a robust estimate based on annual reductions in the number of properties with oil heating, discounted for sales and demolitions.

- The annual unit costs are averages derived from the contract costs and history of uplifts.

Year	Oil to Gas conversions	Unit Cost	Total Cost
2017-18	843	£4,379	£3,691,497
2018-19	1,038	£3,569	£3,704,622
2019-20	1,280	£3,569	£4,568,320
2020-21	533	£3,720	£1,982,760
Total	3,694		£13,947,199

The Housing Executive's current Heating Policy is that for any heating replacement or upgrading schemes, gas heating will be installed where gas is available. They acknowledge that this is changing from one form of fossil fuel to another, but believe that for now this is the correct approach to take, as switching from a standard oil boiler to a condensing gas system in typical Housing Executive homes has considerable benefits in improving energy efficiency, reducing carbon emissions and addressing fuel poverty.

The Energy Saving Trust has indicated that replacing an old G-rated oil boiler with some heating controls with an A-rated gas boiler with a full set of heating controls could save around £280 in tenants' annual heating bills and 3,000kg of carbon dioxide emissions a year per house.

The Housing Executive recognises the need for low-carbon heating solutions in the short term and net-zero options in the longer term. In the interim it continues to explore the potential benefits of such solutions through a series of pilot projects, and as part of the new Energy Efficiency Strategy for its stock they will be reviewing the Heating Policy in light of the Department for Economy's emerging Energy Strategy.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Communities what social housing developments for people aged 55 and older are planned for the Larne area.

(AQW 14130/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I can advise that there are 14 new social housing units for older people (Category 1 / Over 55s) currently programmed to start in the Larne area. These are included in the 16-unit Connswater Homes proposal at 84 Curran Road, which is due to start on-site in 2021/22.

It is also anticipated that the put-back on the site of the former Tower Block 'Gardenmore House', Riverdale, Larne, will provide new social housing for active older people (Category 1 / Over 55s).

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Communities what plans there are to rebuild social homes on the publicly-owned property related to the Riverdale, Larne.

(AQW 14132/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Gardenmore House, Riverdale was demolished in 2011. The timing of the redevelopment of this site is linked to the demolition of the last remaining tower block, Latharna House.

Latharna House is programmed for clearance by October 2021 with demolition scheduled for August 2022. The cleared site at Gardenmore is intended to be developed for Category 1 / Over 55s, which will help to accommodate any long-term residents displaced as a result of the demolition of Latharna House.

In January 2021, the Housing Executive sent a nomination letter to Radius Housing regarding the delivery of new social housing at this location. The housing association is due to respond to this by the end of February 2021. If accepted, Radius will progress the development of a new social housing scheme of an estimated 15-25 units, with a view to securing a start on-site in the 2021/22 year, subject to Planning Approval timeframes.

Following the proposed redevelopment of the Gardenmore site, housing need will be reviewed and the site of Shane House considered for further provision if required.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Communities whether she will consider legislation, similar to that in Scotland, permitting students to end their tenancies in purpose-built student accommodation after giving 28 days' notice, due to COVID-19.

(AQW 14135/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Any tenant in the Private Rented Sector with a tenancy of less than five years here can to end their tenancies after giving 28 days' notice.

I would however note that the obligation to fulfil a contract between individuals is legally binding and it is outside the powers of my Department to change this.

Any students who may be experiencing financial hardship, should contact their Higher Education Institution to determine if they are eligible to receive support.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Appeals Service backlog; and whether there will be any financial support for those who are waiting on an appeal decision due to the delays.

(AQW 14235/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department continues to list the benefit appeals for hearing despite the challenges faced as a result of the pandemic. In order to maximise listing capacity The Appeals Service (TAS) has introduced additional options for case listing. Appellants can now choose to have their appeal listed on the papers, by telephone, video link or face to face. Paper hearings and remote hearings are listed consistently in response to demand.

A number of venues have been identified and adapted to ensure they are COVID secure for all parties to attend a physical hearing while work is continuing to find additional venues to list benefit appeal hearings.

Hearings in these venues commenced in December 2020 and January 2021 but in response to the new restrictions announced, the President of the Appeals Service has postponed face to face hearing until the end of February 2021 when it will be reviewed in light of the advice available.

Customers receiving a Welfare Supplementary Payment who have an ongoing appeal following reassessment from DLA are not affected by the delay in appeal hearings as the Welfare Supplementary Payment regulations stipulate that this must remain in payment until the decision of the appeal tribunal is received by the Department.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of historical assets in private hands, that the Historic Environment section has not been able to take action to protect due to lack of funding for legal challenges from 2016 to date.

(AQW 14236/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am not aware of any occasions on which Historic Environment Division has been prevented from taking action regarding historic assets in private hands, due to lack of funding for legal challenges during that time period.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the proposal for a new sail training vessel to facilitate youth development, mentoring, and training, as proposed in Section E, 3.4 of the Fresh Start Agreement.

(AQW 14243/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Following an approach from AYT in 2016, officials from my Department, working in partnership with the Irish Government's Department for Defence (DoD), assisted the Trust to develop proposals for the construction of a custom built 50 metre tall ship at an estimated cost of €15.5m. The aim of the project was to contribute to the personal development of young people across Ireland through participation in cultural integration and youth development programmes.

AYT developed a Strategic Outline Case for the project which was reviewed by my Department's economists who identified a number of key issues with the proposal, including the future cost of running the ship, which was likely to result in an annual average shortfall estimated at €620k; assumptions over usage figures; long-term demand/sustainability of the project; costs per participant; and value for money.

My officials last met with AYT in April 2018 when these issues were discussed and the Trust agreed to review their proposal and bring forward additional information to address the Department's concerns. Following this meeting no further correspondence was received from the Trust.

My officials continue to liaise with DoD who have advised that in a meeting in December 2019, AYT brought forward a new proposal to lease and operate an existing tall ship rather than construct a new one. This was to be funded exclusively by the Irish Government. DoD gave no commitment to provide funding to AYT and I understand they have had no further contact with the Trust since that meeting.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she has considered fast tracking any outstanding Personal Independence Payment appeals to award people benefits to which they are entitled.

(AQW 14392/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Listing cases is the administrative function of The Appeals Service (TAS). It is the function of the tribunal panel, who are independent, to come to a decision on an appeal.

Before listing an appeal for hearing TAS consider a number of factors including receipt of submissions from all parties to the proceedings, the availability of participants and preferred method of hearing i.e. face to face, video, telephone or paper.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities how Executive advice to work from home fits with plans to bring staff working in benefits back into the workplace from next week.

(AQW 14396/17-22)

Ms Hargey: In line with Executive guidance all staff within my Department that can work from home, are doing so. There are no plans to bring back benefits staff to office based working where they have the IT capability and are successfully delivering services remotely.

While significant additional IT and telephony has been provided to maximise remote working as far as possible, the administration of benefits is also often dependent on staff attending the office as some clerical based roles particularly cannot be delivered remotely. There remains therefore a requirement for some staff to continue attending offices to deliver essential services.

In addition, where staff are new or inexperienced they may require additional support in an office environment including where staff are undergoing training and consolidation which cannot be delivered remotely. A number of new positions are due to be filled with newly recruited staff from next week, who will be attending the office for training purposes. The overall numbers attending will however continue to be well within assessed safe limits for the building.

The health and safety of staff in my Department is paramount, therefore, COVID-19 risk assessments have been completed in all offices. Hygiene and social distancing measures are in place to ensure that staff who need to work in the office can do so safely and in compliance with all relevant Public Health Agency and Health & Safety Executive guidance.

My Department continues to deliver essential services protecting the most vulnerable in our society and staff have demonstrated tremendous resilience throughout this pandemic in their continued commitment to provide this necessary support to the people who need it.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities for an update on a new community centre for Victoria Bridge.

(AQW 14415/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am not aware of any plans to build a new community centre for Victoria Bridge.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) each bid made by her Department for in-year monitoring monies during 2019/20 and 2020/21; (ii) additional allocations to her Department in each monitoring round during 2019/20 and 2020/21; and (iii) any unsuccessful bids made by her Department rejected by the Minister of Finance in each monitoring round during 2019/20 and 2020/21.

(AQW 14473/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department submitted bids of £26.7m in 2019/20 monitoring rounds which were met in full. The total allocations received was £32.5m as detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: 2019-20 Non Covid Bids & Allocations

Monitoring Round	Description	Bids Submitted £000	Allocations £000	Category
June	Co-ownership Housing allocation	20,000	20,000	Capital
September	Debt Advice	1,330	1,330	Resource
	Additional pension		5,168	Resource
	Housing Executive Disabled Adaptions	4,229	4,229	Capital
	Tampon Tax Funding		561	Resource
	Brexit - Housing Executive stockpile supplies	540	540	Resource
	Brexit - Local Gov. Civil Contingencies	500	500	Resource
January	Tampon Tax Funding		15	Resource
		26,717	32,461	

In 2020/21 the Department submitted Non-Covid bids of £228.8m and received Non-Covid allocations of £62.675m as detailed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: 2020-21 Non Covid Bids & Allocations

Monitoring Round	Description	Bids Submitted £000	Allocations £000	Category
June	Local Gov. Boundary Commissioner	550	550	Resource
	Debt Advice		2,797	Resource
October	Co-ownership scheme	39,250	39,250	FT Capital
January	Tampon Tax Funding		78	Resource
	for the Landlord Housing Grant	189,000	20,000	Resource
		228,800	62,675	

Bids were submitted by the Department during the year in separate Covid Exercises with allocations being received at each Monitoring round. All bids that were required and submitted were successful. Details of these and the associated allocations per Monitoring Round are included in Table 3 below.

Table 3: 2020-21 Covid Allocations Received

Scheme No.	COVID-19 Scheme Resource	June MR £000	Oct MR £000	Jan MR £000	Total £000
1	Discretionary Support Scheme	5,000			5,000
2	Supporting People Scheme	10,000		1,200	11,200
3	Homelessness Scheme	7,329			7,329
4	Grants to Local Councils	20,300	55,000	10,000	85,300
5	Access to Food Packages	10,000	3,500		13,500
6	Community Support Fund	6,500	3,000		9,500
7	Charitable Grants	15,500		5,000	20,500
8	Benefit Delivery Response	5,000			5,000
9	Culture Resilience Fund	4,000			4,000
10	Sport Hardship Fund	2,000	15,000	10,000	27,000
11	Housing Executive Supporting People PPE	3,500			3,500

Scheme No.	COVID-19 Scheme Resource	June MR £000	Oct MR £000	Jan MR £000	Total £000
12	Community, Voluntary and Social Enterprise Sector PPE		2,500		2,500
13	Social Enterprise Support		7,000	2,250	9,250
14	Culture Resilience Scheme (Culture Recovery)		29,000		29,000
15	Heating Payment			44,256	44,256
16	Housing Executive Supplier Payments Relief			1,632	1,632
17	Loss of Rental Income (Housing Executive Landlord)			4,500	4,500
		89,129	115,000	78,838	282,967

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities, in relation to the anticipated JobStart scheme, (i) whether she has (a) consulted business and young people to find out what works and what they want from the scheme; (b) outlined the benefits to employers; (c) ensured young people get paid at least minimum wage; and (d) clarified who pays the young people; and (ii) whether funding to the employer covers the salary.

(AQW 14478/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My officials have engaged with the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Princes Trust, Include Youth and representatives from Youth Forum to explain how it is envisaged the JobStart scheme will operate, relay the benefits for young people of taking part and to gather feedback.

They have also engaged widely with employers and employer representative bodies including the Federation of Small Businesses, Construction Industry Training Board, Chamber of Commerce and Business in the Community. Webinar based engagement has also been made with approximately 170 employers. Officials have also engaged with Councils, Sector Skills Councils and Health and Social Care Trusts.

Through all of this engagement officials have explained how the Scheme has been designed, the benefits for employers and young people of getting involved and have also taken on board suggestions for improvements and made some changes to the scheme following these discussions

The JobStart scheme will provide funding to employers which covers:

- 100% of the National Minimum Wage for 25 hours per week for a total of 6 months (or 9 months for a young person who meets additional criteria)
- associated employer National Insurance contributions
- employer minimum automatic enrolment contributions (pension)

This funding is paid monthly in arrears by my Department to the employer. The payments will commence when my Department has evidence that the young person is enrolled on the employer's payroll and is being paid through Pay As You Earn (PAYE). Young people are employees of the company while on the Scheme and will be entitled to the same terms and conditions as every other employee during their period of employment. It is the sole responsibility of the employer to pay the employee during their time on the Scheme.

Employers can consider employing the young person for more than 25 hours per week or at a higher salary but the funding will only cover the first 25 hours at National Minimum Wage level.

The JobStart scheme is and will continue to be an agile Scheme and the Department is committed to continuously improving it by listening to

feedback from both employers and young people as the Scheme progresses.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the provision of new social housing in Strabane town.
(AQW 14480/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Whilst there have been no social housing units completed to-date in 2020/21 in Strabane Town, there are currently 12 social housing units under construction by Ark Housing Association on Main Street.

As part of the Social Housing Development Programme, the Housing Executive is working closely with housing associations to bring forward two significant new social housing schemes in Strabane:

Habinteg Housing Association is seeking to secure a start on-site before the end of March 2021 for a 150-unit new build development on the site of the former Adria Factory. This site is in Habinteg's ownership and planning approval has been secured. Habinteg is currently working to conclude the tender process for the construction works. This development will

provide 112 general needs homes, 27 homes for active older people, 2 large homes for families with complex needs, and 9 wheelchair accessible homes.

Clanmil Housing is seeking to deliver up to 78 new homes at Evisk Road/Mount Carmel Heights. This scheme proposal is currently programmed for delivery in 2022/23, but may be brought forward to the 2021/22 programme year, subject to progress.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities whether the underspend by councils on the Affordable Warmth Scheme in 2020/21 can be carried over to 2021/22.

(AQW 14485/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Affordable Warmth Scheme had an allocated budget of £12m for the financial year 2020/2021. Due the restrictions of Covid-19 in relation to home visiting the Housing Executive, who administer the Scheme along with local Councils on behalf of the Department, are predicting a year-end spend of £6.5m.

Under current budgeting rules the Department does not have year-end flexibility and any funding not used before the end of March will be lost to the Department. The Department will however aim to minimise any reduced requirements and seek to use these elsewhere within the Department, when budget rules permit.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities whether she will consider enabling GPs and social workers to refer patients and clients to the Affordable Warmth Scheme.

(AQW 14486/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Affordable Warmth Scheme is administered on behalf of the Department by the Housing Executive in partnership with local Councils. The scheme is available to home owner occupiers and those who privately rent their home. It is targeted at those areas where levels of fuel poverty are highest and is primarily aimed at low income households who experience the effects of fuel poverty and energy inefficiency.

While primarily a targeted Scheme there is currently scope for local Councils to also make other referrals. These can be from GPs and social workers.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 13725/17-22 and AQW 2439/17-22, why individual residents no longer appear to be considered stakeholders in the implementation of legislation around Houses in Multiple Occupation.

(AQW 14492/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The purpose of the Houses in Multiple Occupation review was to look at the impact of the regulatory scheme on councils in terms of resources, guidance and legislation with a view to identifying any changes necessary to ensure the legislation achieves its policy intent. In conducting this review we have directly contacted councils, The Landlords Association and tenants advocacy groups through Housing Rights. Anyone with an interest in the regulation of Houses in Multiple Occupation can engage in the process and make their views known to the Department by responding on <https://consultations.nidirect.gov.uk/>

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 13725/17-22, whether the implementation of legislation on Houses in Multiple Occupation can be balanced if residents in relevant localities do not have their views sought directly.

(AQW 14493/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The purpose of the Houses in Multiple Occupation review was to look at the impact of the regulatory scheme on councils in terms of resources, guidance and legislation with a view to identifying any changes necessary to ensure the legislation achieves its policy intent. In conducting this review we have directly contacted councils, The Landlords Association and tenants advocacy groups through Housing Rights. Anyone with an interest in the regulation of Houses in Multiple Occupation can engage in the process and make their views known to the Department by responding on <https://consultations.nidirect.gov.uk/>

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister for Communities whether consideration has been given to improve the current Personal Independence Payment telephone assessments, which are being undertaken during the pandemic as an alternative to face-to-face meetings.

(AQW 14498/17-22)

Ms Hargey: A number of improvements have been implemented to PIP telephone assessments. These include: a Video Relay Service to assist customers with hearing or speech impairments; and 3-way calling to enable a customer's companion to support them during the assessment. Audio recording of telephone assessments is planned from Spring 2021 and a proof of concept to test video assessments has commenced. Also, a customer survey of the telephone assessments service has been commissioned to inform any necessary further enhancements. Robust quality assurance processes have been put in place, including audit and observing telephone assessments to ensure quality.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities for a list of the new developments that have been built by social housing providers in the last five years.

(AQW 14512/17-22)

Ms Hargey: AQW 14512/17-22-INFORMATION TO BE PLACED IN ASSEMBLY LIBRARY

Due to the volume of information required to answer AQW 14512/17-22, the information attached at Annex A has been placed in the Assembly library.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the success her Department is having in reducing the backlog in Personal Independence Payment appeals.

(AQW 14541/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As a result of the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, no appeals were listed for hearings between 18 March 2020 and 6 July 2020. In response to the tightening of restrictions the President of the Appeals Tribunal took the decision to suspend all face to face oral hearings from 26 December 2020 until the end of February 2021, but this is subject to review. This decision was taken to protect the health and safety of appellants, many of whom already suffer from compromised health and who may feel compelled to attend the physical hearing they opted for.

My Department is responsible for listing appeals before an independent tribunal panel. However, it is a judicial function to hear and determine the outcome of an appeal. Every effort is being made to increase listing capacity including securing additional venues for physical hearings that meet the risk assessment requirements for public and staff safety, which is of course paramount at this time.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 13110-17/22, to detail each payment made to the (i) Ulster Branch of Ireland Rugby Football Union; and (ii) Irish Football Association, in relation to their redevelopment of Kingspan and Windsor Park; and the dates on which each payment was made.

(AQW 14553/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The tables below show the payments released to Ulster Branch of Ireland Rugby Football Union; and (ii) Irish Football Association in relation to the redevelopment of Kingspan and Windsor Park:

Irish Rugby Football Association

Payment Date	Amount (£)
22-Aug-12	252,496
13-Sep-12	10,740
19-Dec-12	38,629
06-Feb-13	549,211
20-Feb-13	442,587
20-Feb-13	34,113
19-Mar-13	835,894
19-Mar-13	49,509
17-Apr-13	985,281
26-Apr-13	1,077,936
26-Apr-13	13,979
22-May-13	234,490
07-Jun-13	520,979
07-Jun-13	6,844
02-Jul-13	648,148
04-Jul-13	9,792
08-Aug-13	1,109,001
08-Aug-13	4,843
04-Sep-13	1,521,482
04-Sep-13	13,173
10-Oct-13	614,296

Payment Date	Amount (£)
23-Oct-13	5,637
19-Nov-13	886,992
19-Nov-13	9,872
13-Dec-13	479,393
13-Dec-13	32,024
23-Jan-14	262,847
29-Jan-14	5,461
19-Feb-14	687,706
19-Feb-14	12,852
20-Mar-14	5,357
24-Mar-14	1,086,781
17-Apr-14	21,462
29-Apr-14	317,184
12-May-14	724,066
11-Jun-14	105,604
11-Jun-14	10,714
08-Aug-14	5,357
19-Aug-14	56,705
04-Sep-14	38,384
12-Sep-14	594,099
21-Oct-14	167,613
07-Nov-14	5,357
02-Dec-14	13,821
19-Dec-14	104,208
20-Feb-15	161,149
30-Mar-15	229,908
15-Apr-15	1,221
17-Apr-15	171,978
21-Mar-16	244,961
21-Mar-16	145,951
21-Mar-16	62,437
14-Feb-20	74,248.62
Total Grant released by Department *	15,704,772

Irish Football Association

Payment Date	Amount (£)
19-Sep-12	138,346
05-Mar-13	653,774
28-Mar-13	177,017
02-Jul-13	125,474
04-Sep-13	49,901

Payment Date	Amount (£)
05-Nov-13	57,517
16-Jan-14	11,160
19-Feb-14	64,623
09-Apr-14	209,071
19-Jun-14	208,343
08-Jul-14	544,853
25-Jul-14	773,000
01-Aug-14	124,645
19-Aug-14	438,000
12-Sep-14	734,379
24-Sep-14	51,760
21-Oct-14	1,181,480
04-Nov-14	35,042
28-Nov-14	1,598,616
19-Dec-14	1,704,699
12-Jan-15	1,720,925
27-Feb-15	961,870
27-Feb-15	46,902
26-Mar-15	1,413,400
31-Mar-15	22,500
29-Apr-15	1,195,680
14-May-15	4,466,002
29-May-15	48,448
29-Jun-15	1,311,777
29-Jun-15	475,000
20-Jul-15	1,893,383
25-Aug-15	1,313,378
26-Aug-15	53,629
28-Sep-15	1,842,770
02-Dec-15	36,109
02-Dec-15	17,110
18-Nov-16	1,541,085
09-Feb-17	615,431
14-Aug-19	48,546
24-Jul-20	10,950
30-Sep-20	120,987
Total Grant released by Department *	28,037,578

* Prior to the Programme Delivery responsibility moving to the Department in 2012, Sport NI released some initial grant payments:

- Irish Rugby Football Association (Ulster Branch): £218,169
- Irish Football Association: £93,628

Consistent with standard practice for large grant funded construction projects, a small percentage of capital funding is retained for a period into the operational phase, to ensure each project is satisfactorily completed. The respective amounts for the two Stadia are as follows:

- Irish Rugby Football Association (Ulster Branch): £9,013
- Irish Football Association: £118,794

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Communities whether consideration is being made to facilitate provision for the resumption of outdoor youth sport.

(AQW 14559/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Covid-19 position continues to evolve at pace and due to the gravity of the situation the Executive extended the current public health restrictions, which came into effect on 26 December, until 5 March 2021. Further details can be found at the link below:

Coronavirus (COVID-19) regulations guidance: what the restrictions mean for you | nidirect (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you#toc-13>)

As you are aware under the current Health Regulations no outdoor sport is permitted, except at elite level. The Regulations do however permit individuals to undertake outdoor exercise in recognition of the importance of health and physical wellbeing at this time.

The Department continues to engage with officials from other Departments to inform the development of proposals for a safe return to sport, including youth sport. Any review of the current Regulations and restrictions will be in accordance with the medical and scientific advice.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the renovation of the Housing Executive Kings Road flats in East Belfast.

(AQW 14577/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The tender for the planned works to Kings Road Flats, Tullycarnet closed on Wednesday 17th February.

The Housing Executive envisages that, subject to an acceptable tender return, this project will be awarded at the end of April 2021 with a contract start date of late May 2021.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Communities for an update on Housing Executive new build development in East Belfast.

(AQW 14578/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Within East Belfast Parliamentary Constituency, there have been 58 social housing units completed to date in 2020/21. I have included details of these units at Table 1 below.

There are currently 136 social housing units under construction, details of which I have included in Table 2 below.

There are a further 203 social housing units programmed to start through the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) 2020/21 – 2022/23. Again I have provided details of these units which is included in Table 3 below.

Please note, programmed schemes can be lost or slip to future programme years for a variety of reasons e.g. relating to delays in acquiring sites and/or failure to secure Planning Approval.

Table 1: East Belfast social housing units completed in 2020/21 (58 Units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Strategic Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completed Year
Ark	5 Hornby Crescent	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	Urban	1	2019/20	2020/21
Choice	179, 181, 187, 197, 199-203 Beersbridge Road	Belfast	Competitive Design & Build	General Needs	Urban	18	2018/19	2020/21
Choice	55 Belle Bashford Court	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	Urban	1	2019/20	2020/21
Choice	71 Inverary Avenue	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	Urban	1	2019/20	2020/21

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Strategic Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completed Year
Choice	4A Galway Mews	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	Urban	1	2020/21	2020/21
Clanmil	5-7 Connsbrook Avenue	Belfast	Competitive Design & Build	General Needs	Urban	21	2017/18	2020/21
Connswater	15 Connswater Grove	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	Urban	1	2019/20	2020/21
St Matthews	22 Beechfield Street	Belfast	Rehabilitation	General Needs	Urban	1	2019/20	2020/21
St Matthews	71 Beechfield Street	Belfast	Rehabilitation	General Needs	Urban	1	2019/20	2020/21
South Ulster	Redcar Street	Belfast	Competitive Design & Build	General Needs	Urban	12	2018/19	2020/21

Table 2: East Belfast social housing units under construction (136 Units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Strategic Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Alpha	123 Barnetts Road	Belfast	Competitive Design & Build	CAT1 Elderly	Urban	14	2019/20	2020/21
Ark	Ravensdale Street	Belfast	Competitive Design & Build	General Needs	Urban	6	2020/21	2021/22
Choice	Ballybeen Square, Phase 2 (T)	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	Urban	26	2018/19	2020/21
Choice	Ballybeen Square, Phase 2 (T)	Belfast	New Build	Wheelchair	Urban	2	2018/19	2020/21
Choice	50 Reaville Park	Dundonald	Rehabilitation	General Needs	Urban	1	2020/21	2020/21
Choice	Lewis Square	Belfast	Competitive Design & Build	General Needs	Urban	27	2020/21	2022/23
Choice	Lewis Square	Belfast	Competitive Design & Build	Wheelchair	Urban	2	2020/21	2022/23
Choice	8 Whincroft Road	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	Urban	1	2020/21	2020/21
Connswater	Lands adjacent to 91 Gilnahirk Road	Belfast	Competitive Design & Build	CAT1 Elderly	Urban	6	2019/20	2021/22
Connswater	15 Ballygowan Road	Belfast	Rehabilitation	General Needs	Urban	1	2020/21	2020/21
Radius	288 Beersbridge Road	Belfast	New Build	Wheelchair	Urban	2	2018/19	2021/22

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Strategic Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Radius	288 Beersbridge Road	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	Urban	20	2018/19	2021/22
St Matthews	50 Harper Street	Belfast	Rehabilitation	General Needs	Urban	1	2018/19	2020/21
Triangle	98 Hollywood Road (formerly East Belfast Competitive Design & Build)	Belfast	Competitive Design & Build	CAT1 Elderly	Urban	25	2018/19	2020/21
Triangle	98 Hollywood Road (formerly East Belfast Competitive Design & Build)	Belfast	Competitive Design & Build	Wheelchair	Urban	2	2018/19	2020/21

Table 3: East Belfast social housing units programmed to start 2020/21 - 2022/23 (203 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Strategic Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Ark	1-3 Evelyn Avenue	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	Urban	6	2020/21	2021/22
Ark	Church Road	Dundonald	Off The Shelf	General Needs	Urban	7	2020/21	2020/21
Choice	Park Avenue	Belfast	Competitive Design & Build	General Needs	Urban	21	2020/21	2021/22
Connswater	2 Knocknagoney Avenue	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	Urban	1	2020/21	2021/22
Connswater	2A Knocknagoney Avenue	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	Urban	1	2020/21	2021/22
St Matthews	85 Madrid Street	Belfast	Rehabilitation	General Needs	Urban	1	2020/21	2021/22
Apex Housing	Bryson Street, Phase 2	Belfast	New Build	CAT1 Elderly	Urban	8	2021/22	2022/23
Apex Housing	10-12a & 14-16 Parkgate Avenue	Belfast	New Build	CAT1 Elderly	Urban	14	2021/22	2022/23
Choice	Morven Park (T)	Dundonald	New Build	General Needs	Urban	20	2021/22	2023/24
Choice	Lands to the rear of 85 Channing Street	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	Urban	20	2021/22	2023/24
Choice	Sirocco Works Site (Waterside)	Belfast	Competitive Design & Build	General Needs	Urban	69	2021/22	2023/24

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Strategic Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Choice	Sirocco Works Site (Waterside)	Belfast	Competitive Design & Build	Wheelchair	Urban	7	2021/22	2023/24
South Ulster	Stormont Inn	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	Urban	28	2021/22	2023/24

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Strabane Public Realm Scheme.
(AQW 14615/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Strabane Town Centre Public Realm scheme obtained planning approval on 28 April 2020. The Integrated Consultant Team are currently progressing technical design development and my officials are working closely with the project promoters, Derry City and Strabane District Council, to finalise the business case for the project. Once finalised, and subject to business case approval, Council's funding request will then be considered.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities whether all Housing Executive properties in the programme that is replacing oil burners with gas boilers, with the objective of reducing carbon emissions, are also receiving upgraded home insulation; and to detail the rationale for this decision.
(AQW 14628/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has confirmed that as part of its specification on all new full heating or boiler replacements, they install high energy efficient boilers with the aim of helping to reduce carbon emissions. As part of this process, contractors will inspect the loft space of the property to establish the depth of existing insulation, and if below the minimum requirements of 270mm, the Housing Executive will upgrade. This improves thermal comfort within the dwellings and helps to combat fuel poverty by reducing heat loss and reducing tenants heating costs.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities why a village realm scheme has not been introduced for Millisle.
(AQW 14637/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department has no current plans for a public realm scheme in the village of Millisle. As a rural settlement it sits outside the Department's urban regeneration remit.

I have, however, written to my Executive colleagues, DAERA Minister Gordon Lyons MLA and DFI Minister Nichola Mallon MLA, with regard to how our Departments can work collaboratively to support schemes in smaller settlements.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities for an update of the Sub-Regional Stadia programme, to include (i) the reasons for the delay in its implementation; (ii) the amount of money so far given out by the programme; (iii) the anticipated timeline for the programme; and (iv) the breakdown of funding already agreed.
(AQW 14666/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is one of the commitments in the "New Decade, New Approach" agreement and as such my Department has been working to update the evidence base for the programme given the passage of time since the original consultation.

A range of primary and secondary research tools have been adopted to inform the updated evidence base. This work is nearing completion and has utilised a club survey along with discussions with key stakeholders including governing bodies of football, Sport NI, councils and Disability Sport NI. The analysis stage has begun and will inform the shape and scope of the programme going forward including the timeline for delivery.

The budget for the programme remains at £36.2m subject to affordability. No capital expenditure has been incurred and no allocations have been agreed.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Housing Executive External Wall Insulation programme at Wandsworth, East Belfast.
(AQW 14678/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has advised that the Wandsworth Insulation Scheme is currently being processed through their internal approval procedures and, following market engagement, will commence on site in September 2021.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of public confidence in the review being conducted in the Charity Commission (CCNI) by independent counsel if its outcome will only be available to the Department on request, but otherwise remain within the control of the Board of CCNI.
(AQW 14689/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The review that has been commissioned by the Chief Commissioner will provide some of the assurances that my department has sought in relation to the actions of the Commission at the time of the relevant statutory inquiries, the lessons learned and how these have informed current processes. I look forward to seeing the recommendations for further changes, where these are required.

It is important to me that there is public confidence in the regulatory framework for charities here and I have commissioned my own review of the legal and regulatory framework, with a focus on the performance of the current regulator within it. It will be conducted by an independent panel and report in the summer.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities how the review into the Charity Commission can command public confidence if independent counsel will not be expected to comment on the issues raised.

(AQW 14690/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I welcome the review commissioned by the Chief Commissioner which will provide some of the assurances sought by my department in relation to the actions of the Commission at the time of the relevant statutory inquiries and what lessons have been learned.

Those directly affected will have an opportunity to meet with independent counsel in order to outline their concerns, and that, having heard those concerns Senior Counsel will report, making recommendations as to how the Commission's processes can be further improved.

It is important to me that there is public confidence in the regulatory framework for charities here and I have commissioned my own review of the legal and regulatory framework, with a focus on the performance of the current regulator within it. The review will be carried out by an independent panel and will report in the summer.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities what steps her Department has taken to secure funding for the independent advice sector.

(AQW 14691/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department provides significant annual funding in the region of £6.4million for the provision of independent community based advice services, including appeals and help with problem debt.

It is clear that the draft budget presents very significant challenges for the Executive and across departments with a constrained Spending Review outcome. However, one area that I see as being of vital importance is the provision of advice support services that are crucial to helping those people most impacted. I will ensure these critical services continue next year as an essential element of the Departments budget.

The Draft 2021-2022 Executive Budget is currently out for consultation and all responses will be taken into account in finalising the Budget. No decisions on the final outcome have been made yet. Now is the chance for people to have their say on how the Draft Executive Budget will impact them, which will help shape the final outcome.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities whether legislation to extend and strengthen welfare reform mitigations will be introduced before 31 March 2021; and, in the absence of legislation before the financial year-end, to detail the mechanism to continue making mitigation payments.

(AQW 14694/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I can confirm that draft legislation to provide for the extension of the existing welfare mitigation schemes has been prepared and will be introduced to the Assembly at the earliest opportunity.

my Department continues to make payments to all eligible people under contingency arrangements agreed with the Department of Finance. This means that mitigation payments are made under the sole authority of the relevant Budget Act. These arrangements are currently in place until 31 March 2021 and an extension beyond this date will be discussed with the Department of Finance if necessary.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Living Over the Shops Scheme.

(AQW 14702/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I refer the Member to my response to AQW 12785 /17-22 which was raised by Mr Jonathan Buckley MLA and answered on 1st February 2021.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities what measures she is taking to amend the discretionary support isolation grant criteria to ensure more people isolating can get access to the £500 payment.

(AQW 14758/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Since the introduction of self-isolation grants on 25 March 2020, my Department has processed 21,309 applications, with over 78% of cases resulting in awards totalling £2.3m.

My Department continues to assess the effectiveness of all emergency Covid support measures.

The management information included in this response while accurate at the time it is provided may change when subjected to final reconciliation/verification checks prior to publication as applicable.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities how many individuals availed of the discretionary support isolation grant more than once.

(AQW 14762/17-22)

Ms Hargey: An analysis of self-isolation grants paid during the period 1 July 2020 - 31 January 2021 shows that 12% or 460 payments related to a second or more award to the applicant. In terms of expenditure, payments to those receiving a second or more award represented 33% of the overall self – isolation grant expenditure for that period.

The management information included in this response while accurate at the time it is provided may change when subjected to final reconciliation/verification checks prior to publication as applicable.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities whether she has any plans to increase the income threshold for applicants seeking assistance from the Affordable Warmth Scheme.

(AQW 14768/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I recently approved some changes to the eligibility criteria for the Affordable Warmth Scheme in relation to increasing the income threshold from £20,000 to £23,000 per household and also removing disability benefits from the calculation of income for the Scheme. Work is ongoing to amend the relevant Scheme regulations and these changes to scheme eligibility will then be implemented.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities how many households are affected by the bedroom tax and do not qualify for mitigation payments.

(AQW 14790/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I would refer to the response to question AQW 11061/17-22 on this issue as this remains the most up-to-date information currently available to my Department.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 14165/17-22, to detail the scientific rationale and evidence that has informed the decision to ban outdoor sports where social distancing can be maintained.

(AQW 14863/17-22)

Ms Hargey: AQW 14165/17-22 referred to the Department of Health website which details all the Covid-19 related scientific evidence which is provided to the Executive to inform the decisions it takes around the Public Health Restrictions. i.e. <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/covid-19-scientific-evidence>

Outdoor sports is one element of an overall approach to reduce community transmission in order to protect the health service. By way of example, the summary paper provided by the Department of Health to the Executive in November 2021, set out the impact of community transmission on the 'R' rate which would ultimately impact on the healthcare system.

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/doh-summary-paper-ni-executive>.

For now the Executive has decided that to continue to suppress the virus it is important that people stay at home, exercise locally and only undertake essential travel.

The return of sport including outdoor sport will be considered as one of the critical steps in the safe return of sport when the medical and scientific advice indicates that the circumstances are right. That will be a decision which will be taken by the Executive.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Communities what provision she is making to support people who have had to take time off work due to long Covid, particularly if they did so during their probationary period and are thus unable to access full sick pay.

(AQW 14876/17-22)

Ms Hargey: People impacted by long COVID and unable to work due to illness, can claim Employment and Support Allowance or Universal Credit in the normal way. Help is also available for those in financial crisis through my Department's Discretionary Support scheme

My Department's Make the Call service provides advice to people to help identify all the money, support and services they are entitled to and can be contacted through the Freephone service on 0800 232 1271.

In addition, anyone in need of additional support, including those who have been identified as clinically extremely vulnerable, can contact the COVID-19 Community Helpline (Freephone 0808 802 0020, Email: covid19@adviceni.net. Text: ACTION to 81025) which will provide personalised advice and referral to appropriate support depending on an individual's circumstances.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister for Communities what discussions she has had with the Executive on a roadmap for a return to outdoor sport for children.

(AQW 14890/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Executive has had to make difficult decision to protect life, ensure that the health service is not overwhelmed and stop the spread of the virus.

My officials continue to engage with officials from other Departments to inform the development of proposals for a safe return to sport, including youth sport.

Any review of the current Regulations and restrictions will be in accordance with the medical and scientific advice.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities, given the lack of confirmation of future funding for the Fresh Start Women Involved in Community Transformation programme, and acknowledging that the current delivery body contract ends on 31 March 2021, what consideration has been given to (i) extending the current contract; or (ii) allocating funding via grant funding mechanisms as an interim measure to ensure there is no gap in the provision of this programme for communities.

(AQW 14894/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I refer you to previous AQWs 13331/17-22, AQW 13332/17-22 and AQW 13456/17-22.

As I previously explained, funding for the 'Women Involved in Community Transformation' Programme is provided to my Department through the cross-Executive Tackling Paramilitarism and Organised Crime Programme.

Funding for Phase One of the programme is due to finish on 31 March 2021 and whilst the Executive has agreed to a three year period for Phase Two, this is dependent on match funding from the British Government. At this stage, the British Government has not committed to providing funds for the Programme.

My officials continue to liaise with Department of Justice colleagues on the budget position as this will determine what is deliverable.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 9391/17-22, (i) whether the scope of the review is limited to two specific charities; (ii) to detail the rationale for this decision; and (iii) why the review does not cover the effectiveness of the regulator.

(AQW 14967/17-22)

Ms Hargey: AQW 9391/17-22 referred to the independent review of charity regulation and the performance of the regulator commissioned by Minister Ní Chuilín, for which an independent panel has been appointed.

Separately, the Chief Commissioner has appointed independent Counsel to enable her to provide some of the assurances that my department has sought in relation to the actions of the Commission at the time of the statutory inquiries into Lough Neagh Rescue and the Disabled Police Officers charities.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Communities to detail the cuts to the Independent Advice Sector proposed by the 2021/22 budget.

(AQW 15050/17-22)

Ms Hargey: It is clear that the draft budget presents very significant challenges for the Executive and across departments with a constrained Spending Review outcome. However, one area that I see as being of vital importance is the provision of advice support services that are crucial to helping those people most impacted by poverty. I will ensure these critical services continue next year as an essential element of the Department's budget.

The Draft 2021-2022 Executive Budget is currently out for consultation and all responses will be taken into account in finalising the Budget. No decisions on the final outcome have been made yet. Now is the chance for people to have their say on how the Draft Executive Budget will impact them, which will help shape the final outcome.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities when her Department's Anti-Poverty Strategy Expert Advisory Panel will present its recommendations.

(AQO 1558/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Anti-Poverty Strategy Expert Advisory Panel has presented its report on recommendations for an Anti-Poverty Strategy to the Department and my officials are currently considering its content.

The development of the Anti-Poverty Strategy will be taken forward using a co-design approach, with involvement from stakeholders at all stages of the process.

The Panel's recommendations will set the direction for this work and they will be considered by the strategy development groups in the context of affordability, deliverability and available evidence before a draft of the Strategy is presented to the Executive for agreement prior to public consultation.

Department of Education

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the schools which have raised issues with their (a) fire alarm system; (b) emergency lighting; (ii) which schools had these issues addressed; and (iii) the average time and the longest time taken to address an issue following it being raised by the school, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 14005/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Statutory building compliance with the relevant regulations within the Education Authority is the responsibility of the EA Maintenance Service, who in conjunction with their Term Service Contractors, deliver an annual programme of compliance works across the entire Schools Estate, with the exception of Voluntary Grammar and Grant Maintained Integrated schools who are funded to undertake these works themselves.

(i)(a) In the last three years there has been a total number of 3104 task orders raised in relation to fire alarm systems. The breakdown into individual years / schools is as follows:

	Number of Schools	Number of Task Orders
2018	522	919
2019	636	1141
2020	549	960
2021	70	84

(i)(b) In the last three years there has been a total number of 1219 task orders raised in relation to emergency lighting systems. The breakdown into individual years / schools is as follows:

	Number of Schools	Number of Task Orders
2018	523	611
2019	306	351
2020	229	254
2021	3	3

(ii) In the last three years all task orders raised have been addressed for issues relating to fire alarm and emergency lighting systems.

In accordance with the terms and conditions of the Term Service Contracts all task orders raised for fire alarm and emergency lighting issues have been responded to within the contract Key Performance Indicators ranging from 1 Hour, 2 Hours, 1 Day, 2 Days, 5 Days and 7 Days. The response time against each individual task order is established by the relevant authorising officer with respect to the scope and urgency of the remedial works required

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education (i) whether he has made a decision to withdraw from operation of the North/South institutions; and (ii) if so, what departmental areas are affected by his withdrawal from the operation of the North/South institutions.

(AQW 14180/17-22)

Mr Weir: I would like to reiterate and make clear I will act at all times to deliver the best possible outcomes for the people of Northern Ireland, our schools and indeed our wider society. I will do so in accordance with my Ministerial responsibilities including the Ministerial Code.

My Party has clearly indicated to Her Majesty's Government that they must take clear action on the Northern Ireland Protocol and I believe that the Government of the Republic of Ireland also needs to be made aware that North/South relations have been damaged by the current implementation of this Protocol. This is notwithstanding the significant negative impact that it is having on our citizens, consumers and communities.

For all the reasons outlined I cannot and will not continue to act as though relationships have not been impacted as a result of the actions taken by the Republic of Ireland's Government. Going forward I will consider each matter, as it presents to me, on its merits ensuring not to take any actions which would negatively impact on Northern Ireland, however I cannot proceed on the basis of business as usual in respect to North/South relations.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education what information has been provided to Boards of Governors regarding the conditions of agreed Development Plans.

(AQW 14239/17-22)

Mr Weir: Initial contact with a school following my decision on a Development Proposal is simply to advise what the decision is and that it, and the recommendations presented to me, will be published to the Department's website. At that stage no discussion of wider Departmental policies or practices that may impact on implementation is undertaken.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education what steps have been taken to improve autism spectrum disorder provision at (i) St Brigid's Primary School, Derry; and (ii) St Brigid's College, Derry, given the year-on-year increase in demand for places. (AQW 14255/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) has advised that work is ongoing between its 'Special Schools and Specialist Provisions Area Planning Team' and its Statutory Operations Team to look at pressures across the region, including Derry City and Strabane District Council area, in relation to placing children in specialist provision and reviewing provision that already exists. If pressures are identified within a particular area, the EA will contact schools with a view to establishing or expanding provision from September 2021.

The EA also launched a consultation in October 2020 on their 'Framework Papers for Special Schools and Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools'. The consultation is due to end April 2021, the outcome of which will determine how provision is established in the future.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education how many classroom assistants are employed to facilitate the complex needs of children in primary and post-primary mainstream schools. (AQW 14388/17-22)

Mr Weir: The number of classrooms assistants currently employed by the Education Authority within the mainstream primary section is 5709, and in post primary is 2625 (giving a total of 8334). Each Classroom Assistant will have a specific number of contracted hours based on the assessed need of the individual child.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for an update on all planned capital projects for the West Tyrone constituency. (AQW 14417/17-22)

Mr Weir: There are currently 141 planned capital projects at schools in the West Tyrone Constituency. This includes, five Major Capital projects, two School Enhancement projects and 134 Minor Capital Works projects, with overall costs in the region of £54m. Whilst there are currently no planned Voluntary Youth Capital Schemes within the West Tyrone area, the Education Authority (EA) is continuing to progress a Controlled Youth Scheme for future youth service provision within the Strabane area. It is anticipated that work will commence on the capital project towards the end of 2021/22.

The table below provides details of capital projects that have been progressed during 2020/21 or that are planned for progression in 2021/22.

Table 1: Planned Capital Works For The West Tyrone Constituency

Schools in West Tyrone		Capital Works delivered or planned FY 20/21	Current Status (RIBA Stage)	Capital Works Planned for FY21/22	Current Status (RIBA Stage)
Major Capital Projects					
2046677	Gaelscoil na gCrann	announced to proceed to design 2014 for a 7 class primary school and single nursery unit.	Completed July 2020		
2410311	Strabane Academy	announced to proceed to design 2013 for a 700 pupil post primary school.	Completed December 2020		
2046638	Gaelscoil Úi Dhochartaigh			announced to advance in design in 2013 for a 7 class primary school and single nursery unit	Estimated to commence construction on site late 2021
2036703	St Catherine's Primary School			announced to advance in design in 2020 for a 14 class primary school and double nursery unit. The procurement of an Integrated Consultant Team is underway	anticipated appointment of Integrated Consultant Team in June 2021

Schools in West Tyrone		Capital Works delivered or planned FY 20/21	Current Status (RIBA Stage)	Capital Works Planned for FY21/22	Current Status (RIBA Stage)
2260283	Drumragh Integrated College	announced in 2018 under Fresh Start agreement. An Integrated Consultant team has been appointed and is progressing Stage 0/1 Feasibility Stage	Stage 0/1 due for completion in March 2021. Est on site by Summer 2023		
School Enhancement Projects					
2036095	St Mary's Primary School, Cloughcor	announced to advance in design under the second call to the School Enhancement Programme (SEP2)			
2012708	Strabane Primary School	announced to advance in design under the second call to the School Enhancement Programme (SEP2)			
Minor Works					
Preschool					
2BB0385	Denamona Pre-School			School Meals accommodation extension and refurbishment	0
2116265	Omagh North Nursery School	Fire risk works	6		
Primary Schools					
2012344	Mcclintock Primary School	Fire risk works / Security fencing	5		
		Upgrade Boiler house Pumps	5		
2012660	Denamona Primary School			Extension & Refurbishment	0
2012691	Omagh County Primary School	Traffic Management	7		
		Upgrade Kitchen Canopy	6		
		Fire Risk Works	6		
		SMA Extension & Refurbishment	7		
2012707	Dromore Primary School			Replacement External Storage	0

Schools in West Tyrone		Capital Works delivered or planned FY 20/21	Current Status (RIBA Stage)	Capital Works Planned for FY21/22	Current Status (RIBA Stage)
2012708	Strabane Controlled Primary School	H&S - Fencing Upgrade	5	Traffic Management/car parking	0
		SEN Accommodation Works – Nursery accommodation	5	School meals accommodation Extension & Refurbishment	0
		Upgrade Fencing	5	H&S - Condition Survey Works to Playgroup Mobile	0
		Stat Rem 20 - Em Lighting Upgrade	5		
		Oil Tank Removal	5		
2012711	Donemana Primary School	SMA Extension & Refurbishment	5	Traffic Management/car parking	0
		Fire safety works	6	Safeguarding & Security Works	0
2016068	Artigarvan Primary School	DDA Security fencing	7	Traffic Management/car parking	0
		Upgrade Emergency Lighting	5		
2016089	Gibson Primary School	Fencing	6		
2016442	Sion Mills Primary School	Upgrade Boiler	5		
2016663	Cooley Primary School	Upgrade Security Measures	5		
2032573	St Brigid's Primary School	Pitch drainage and resurfacing	5		
2032607	St Mary's Primary School, Killyclogher	Upgrade Boiler Controls	5		
2032676	St Patrick's Primary School, Gortin	Upgrade Insulation To Roof	5	School Meals Accommodation	0
		Upgrade Flooring	5		
2032677	Drumlish Primary School	Provision of SEN accommodation & Replace external door.	7		
		Dishwasher installation	5		
2032682	St Eugene's Primary School	Boiler Upgrade	5		
2032684	St Lawrence's Primary School	Replace Mobile (following roof collapse)	4		
2032694	St Caireall's Primary School	Upgrade of heating system and boiler	7	School meals Extension & Refurbishment	0

Schools in West Tyrone		Capital Works delivered or planned FY 20/21	Current Status (RIBA Stage)	Capital Works Planned for FY21/22	Current Status (RIBA Stage)
2032700	St Joseph's Primary School	REPLACEMENT PREFABRICATED CLASSROOM ACCOMMODATION	6	H&S - Bin Compound and Storage	0
		Upgrade Cavity Wall Insulation	5	Replacement fencing/gates & car park resurfacing	0
		Upgrade Floor In Classroom	5		
		Fire Alarm Upgrade	5		
2032704	Recarson Primary School			School meals accommodation Extension & Refurbishment	0
				DDA - Pupil Specific	0
				Pupil Specific - Hygiene Room	0
				Re-wiring in main school	0
2032705	St Patrick's Primary School, Eskra	Window Upgrade	4		
		Upgrade Chimney	5		
		Upgrade fencing to secure site	5		
2032721	Sacred Heart Primary School	Special Needs Provision (not pupil specific)	6		
		Boiler Upgrade	5		
2032723	Roscavey Primary School	DDA works	4		
		Toileting/changing facility for SEN (Pupil Specific)	7		
		SMA Extension & Refurbishment	6		
		Upgrades For Dda	1-4		
2032730	St Columba's Primary School			Safeguarding - Secure Gate & Fencing	0
		Dda Upgrade -Fencing	5		
2032731	St Teresa's Primary School	DDA works to play area on site	4	Replacement Mobile Classroom Single	0
		DDA Prefabricated Accommodation - DDA child specific	6		
		DDA works to play area	5		

Schools in West Tyrone		Capital Works delivered or planned FY 20/21	Current Status (RIBA Stage)	Capital Works Planned for FY21/22	Current Status (RIBA Stage)
2032737	St Colmcille's Primary School	Gas Infrastructure	5	Traffic management	0
				Additional modular accommodation	1
2036008	St Patrick's Primary School, Newtownstewart	Fire Risk Works	7	DDA Pupil Specific DDA (provide of hygiene room)	0
		DDA shower Provision	5	resurfacing	0
2036095	St Mary's Primary School, Cloughcor	Refurb- sewerage sys/ septic tank	6	Traffic Management/car parking	0
		St Mary's PS (Cloughcor) Fire Safety Works - bin compound/doors	6		
		Roof Structure	7		
		Upgrade Access Control	5		
2036097	St Peter's Primary School	DDA works for two pupils	7	Traffic Management/car parking	0
		FRA works	5		
2036116	St Conor's Primary School	fencing access control	5		
2036153	St Scire's Primary School			School Meals accommodation Extension & Refurbishment	0
				traffic management/car parking	0
2036449	Christ the King Primary School	Dda – Upgrade Toilets	5	FRA Works	7
		Upgrade Roof	5		
		Upgrade of play surface	5		
2036459	St Theresa's Primary School	Gas Infrastructure	5		
2036557	All Saints Primary School			SMA Extension & Refurbishment	0
				Classroom - Primary	0
				Traffic Management/Car Parking	0

Schools in West Tyrone		Capital Works delivered or planned FY 20/21	Current Status (RIBA Stage)	Capital Works Planned for FY21/22	Current Status (RIBA Stage)
2036674	Holy Family Primary School	FRA Works	7	School meals accommodation Extension & Refurbishment	0
		Upgrade Rm For Agp Provision	5	drainage/retaining wall	0
		Upgrade Fan	1-4		
2036703	St Catherine's Primary School	FRA Assessment Works	5		
		Lighting Upgrade	5		
		Upgrade Oil Tank			
		Upgrade Gas Supply To Mobile	5		
2036712	St Michael's Primary School, Dunamanagh	DP 4 Primary Schools to amalgamate	5		
		2 classroom extension and upgrade to heating system and fire safety	5		
2046638	Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh			Demolition	0
Post Primary Schools					
2210065	Castledearg High School	Pitch upgrade works	6		
		Upgrade DhW Cylinder	5		
2210125	Omagh High School	Fencing	6	H&S - Accommodation upgrade/ refurbishment	0
2230138	Dean Maguirc College	Refurb Changing Rooms/ Boys Toilets & Refit Cubicles	6	Mobile replacements	4
				Electrical rewire	0
				Other Roof repairs to Assembly/Sports Hall	0
				Pitch Refurbishment	0
				School Meals accommodation	0
2230148	St John's Business and Enterprise College	Upgrade Control Panel And Rewire (SMK)	5		
		Install High-level Fan Heaters	5		
2230298	Sacred Heart College	Traffic Management	6		
		Other Site Secure Boundary Fencing	5		
		Dad Upgrade Disabled Toilet	5		
		Gas Infrastructure	5		

Schools in West Tyrone		Capital Works delivered or planned FY 20/21	Current Status (RIBA Stage)	Capital Works Planned for FY21/22	Current Status (RIBA Stage)
2230301	Holy Cross College				
2260283	Drumragh Integrated College	Additional accommodation	7		
		Additional accommodation - double modular	6		
2410066	Omagh Academy	Pitch upgrade works	6		
2410311	Strabane Academy			Demolition works	1
2420064	Christian Brothers' Grammar School	Roofing Upgrade	5		
		Legionella	5		
Special Schools					
2316528	Knockavoe School & Resource Centre	Upgrade Room For Agp Provision	1-4	Design works required for classroom ext & drainage to school meals kitchen	1
				Community Building	3
				Traffic Management/Car parking	0
				More AGP rooms required	1
2316661	Arvalee School and Resource Centre	Reconfiguration of existing spaces to provide two teaching classrooms	6	Additional accommodation	0
				Community Building	3
		Upgrade Door Access	5	Traffic Management/car parking	0
	RIBA Stage				
	6 - Handover and Close				
	5 - Construction				
	1-4 - Prep, Brief and design stages				

I remain fully committed to delivering the Strule Shared Education Campus Programme and my officials and I are working diligently to progress to the next stage in the procurement process. Provisional opening of the Campus remains planned for September 2025.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education what bids did made for the surplus COVID-19 money, given the ongoing needs in respect of wellbeing, lack of devices and catch-up requirements.
(AQW 14419/17-22)

Mr Weir: For the purpose of answering this question surplus COVID-19 money is interpreted to be those surplus funds held by the Executive after the outcome of the initial January Monitoring exercise. On this basis, my Department only bid for and received £35.4m for a potential teachers' pay settlement.

My Department has already secured £12m of COVID-19 funding for learning support programmes and summer activities in schools, and a further £5m for wellbeing which issued out to educational settings.

Given the current restrictions, the ability of schools to incur expenditure has been considerably curtailed. As a result, the Department has sufficient budget cover to fund any further in-year wellbeing needs and catch-up requirements that may arise.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Department has invested significantly in the provision of laptops and other IT equipment, having initially procured and loaned almost 11,700 devices to vulnerable learners up to the end of November 2020. A further 17,700 additional devices have been procured, and the EA is in the process of allocating these to schools.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education how many schools are currently waiting on emergency repair work to commence. (AQW 14462/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has advised me that there are currently 28 schools waiting on emergency repair work to commence.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) any significant outcomes that have resulted from the 2016 Paramilitary Action Plan; and (ii) how much of the £25 million budget allocated for the action plan has been spent since 2017. (AQW 14567/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has contributed significantly to outcomes derived from the NI Executive's Tackling Paramilitarism Action Plan in a variety of ways including innovative youth work interventions through the Education Authority's Youth Service which is helping to change the lives of the most vulnerable and hard to reach children and young people. Over 3,000 children and young people have participated in Phase One interventions and over 700 professionals, including youth workers, teachers and police and community workers have engaged in capacity building activities.

In addition, my Department has received funding for Curriculum materials and support for teachers (led by Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment) and a pilot "Wrap-around" educational support programme in four areas which links to my Department's work to reduce educational underachievement linked to socio-economic disadvantage.

The budget for Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme is managed by the Tackling Paramilitarism Team within the Department of Justice. My Department's budget for 2020/21 is approximately £1.7m and full spend is expected this financial year.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, given that mainstream schools are largely operating remotely, to detail (i) how successful his Department has been at revising home to school transport for special school children to reduce mixing of schools and bubbles; and (ii) how his Department will maintain this going forward when mainstream children are being reintegrated into their schools. (AQW 14572/17-22)

Mr Weir: The majority of the Education Authority (EA) routes to special schools have successfully been adjusted on a temporary basis to reduce vehicle occupancy or to reduce mixing of schools within the vehicle. There are a small number of EA bus routes where pupils attending more than one special school continue to travel together as it was not deemed logistically possible to split the run due to the geographical spread of the pupils or where pupils' needs were best met by their usual driver and escort team. In these cases the occupancy levels are significantly reduced which has allowed for pupils attending different schools to be zoned within the vehicle.

These adjustments for special schools were introduced by the EA as temporary measures because of the additional vehicle and staffing resources that were available during the period of mainstream schools being attended only by vulnerable children and those of key workers. It is not anticipated that the EA will be able to continue to deliver these temporary measures after the reopening of mainstream schools and will continue to engage with special school principals on this issue.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, following his statement that his Department will assess the impact of the pandemic on children, young people and workforce, and that this will inform his attempt to access funding to support the need identified, (i) whether he has plans to achieve; (ii) whether the plans will involve consulting all stakeholders, including our children; (iii) whether the plans will include the nursery sector; and (iv) when he will be publishing the plans. (AQW 14573/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Joint Health & Education Oversight Group was established in April 2020 to ensure that measures, including bespoke arrangements, were put in place to support vulnerable children and families on a risk assessed basis and in accordance with the relevant Covid-19 guidelines. The group comprises senior Health & Education officials and continues to meet on a weekly basis to monitor activity, discuss and resolve issues and develop plans.

As part of the ongoing work between health and education, the Joint Health/Education Oversight Group is currently considering the terms of reference for the recruitment of a post leading on partnership and engagement with VCYP and their families, to learn from experiences during COVID 19, and to seek to embed their voices within the Education/ Health interface.

A children and young persons' group has also been established, through the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYSP) that will provide regular input into the Joint Health and Education Oversight Group meetings. The group is comprised children and young people attending special schools from across NI.

The Department has collaborated in a Department of Health (DoH) led cross departmental response to vulnerable children during the pandemic, including the development of the Vulnerable Children and Young People Plan. DoH are currently considering the feedback to the consultation.

The draft plan can be found at;

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/health/Cross-Departmental-Actions-for-Vulnerable-Children-and-September-2020.pdf>

In planning for school return in January, the Department issued a 'Contingency Framework for Vulnerable Children and Young People' to all schools, to be used when schools/education settings are directly impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. The Framework guides how vulnerable children are identified, and supported, in partnership with parents and carers and children, both in school or at home depending on the level of restriction on school provision

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/vulnerable-children-and-young-people-contingency-planning-framework>. The framework, which runs alongside the other public health measures agreed by the Executive, has been designed to support collaborative working across the education and Health and Social Care sectors in line with the Children's Services Co-operation Act NI (2015).

I recently approved a similar model to the Engage Programme which has been developed by officials in conjunction with the Education Authority and representatives of the Special Schools Strategic Leadership Group. An allocation of £279k has been secured for the remainder of this financial year, subject to business case approval, to help address the impact of school closures, in terms of lost learning, on children and young people with complex needs attending Special Schools. A bid has been made for a further £650K to continue the programme until July 2021 and it would be the Department's intention that, subject to business case and funding approval, a further bid would be made to enable the programme to continue for Academic Year 2021/2022.

The longer-term impact of the current unprecedented disruption on children and young people's learning is difficult to estimate. Clearly, pupils may have gaps in their knowledge and skills, or may not have acquired some of the knowledge or skills they would have in normal circumstances. As always, schools will recognize the need to identify and support those pupils who are most likely to experience difficulties in engaging with learning. However, to support schools, the Department fully recognises the need to plan for and fund ongoing evidence based interventions to support schools to identify and limit the long-term impact of the current disruption. As a system, we also need to consider how we take stock to ascertain the extent to which Covid-19 disruption has affected learning. Officials are considering options and I will bring forward further proposals, including any plans for consultation and engagement in due course.

As part of the on-going work within my Department to consider and address the issues brought about by Covid-19, policies such as Restart, supporting children's learning through the Engage Programme, the Emotional Health and Well-Being Framework, flexibility of school starting age, the establishment of an Expert Panel on educational underachievement and the fundamental review of education are all either in progress or will be starting shortly. Each of these interventions will be monitored and reported upon separately and my officials recognise the importance of involving children and young people in the design and outworkings of such policies.

In respect of the Expert Panel in educational underachievement, its Action Plan is to be with me by 31 May 2021.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to unfold, DE Finance will continue to work in conjunction with DoF to ensure that educational funding requirements arising from COVID-19 are fully addressed.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 13705/17-22, (i) whether the needs of pupils in special schools differ greatly from those of pupils in special units attached to mainstream schools; (ii) for his assessment of the differing provision of education being provided to pupils in these two different settings; and (iii) for his assessment of whether this could have an impact on their development.

(AQW 14668/17-22)

Mr Weir: In the majority, the needs of pupils in special schools differ from those of pupils in specialist classes attached to mainstream schools.

Children and young people attending a special school, in the most part, present with very significant intellectual or cognitive impairments and will additionally have other complexities of need which may include medical or behavioural barriers. These children and young people require extremely high pupil to staff ratios and are likely to need a high degree of support from medical teams and/or allied health professionals.

Those children and young people who are enrolled in specialist classes attached to mainstream schools have been assessed as needing a small group setting with fewer pupils and a higher level of adult support, and which also allows for opportunities for individualised teaching. Such settings allow a child or young person to participate within the wider school community, where they are able to do so, and subsequently, where appropriate, gradually reintegrate into a mainstream setting as barriers to learning are addressed.

There exists a continuum of provision to meet a continuum of need. Children are placed in the most appropriate setting to meet their assessed needs with the consent of those who have parental responsibility.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the legal issues delaying the disposal of (a) Causeway School in Bushmills; and (b) Portrush YC and adjacent Out Centre; and (ii) the expected time period these will take to resolve.

(AQW 14669/17-22)

Mr Weir: Causeway School in Bushmills

This property is held under the terms of a Lease dated 1st August 1928, the contractual term of this lease runs for a term of 99 years and is due to expire on 1st April 2026. The identity of the Landlord changed with the Landlord's interest being taken over by the National Trust. The National Trust has submitted a significant dilapidations claim, which is currently under consideration by the EA Solicitors and EA Officers. A Quantity Surveyor has been assigned to assess this and discussions are ongoing with the National Trust in the hope that agreement can be reached between EA and the National Trust as to the terms under which the National Trust will accept an early surrender of the lease. It is hoped that agreement will be reached in the incoming financial year.

Portrush YC and adjacent Out Centre

The site was used as a Youth Centre and Technical College. There are title difficulties involved with the disposal of the property. The site is held under two separate plots, one by way of conveyance and the other by way of lease. The EA is preparing a Business Case for buying out of the restrictive covenants under the terms of the lease. Once completed it is anticipated that a joint disposal in conjunction with NRC will complete in 2022.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) evaluation of the success of the Engage Programme, (i) whether the ETI will be asked to comment on whether the level of resourcing is adequate to the task; (ii) whether the ETI will be asked to evaluate the effectiveness of remote learning at nursery, primary, post-primary and special school levels; and (iii) whether his Department will commission research into the effectiveness of models of remote learning from other jurisdictions, as national and international perspectives would be useful.

(AQW 14674/17-22)

Mr Weir: The remit of the ETI's evaluation of the Engage programme includes evaluating its delivery against the programme aim and objectives, and its impact on the children and young people in primary and post-primary schools. It will therefore seek to identify the extent to which approaches adopted by schools are securing those aims and objectives. While not specifically tasked to comment on the level of resourcing, there is scope for such findings to be reported if appropriate.

During the current lockdown, inspections across all education and training phases continue to be paused. However, District Inspectors continue to work closely with schools as they review the effectiveness of and plan improvements to their remote learning provision. At a system level, the ETI is currently developing thematic reports, containing analysis of the qualitative findings from their recent survey on remote learning, in-depth case studies and summarising pre-schools', schools' and EOTAS centres' experiences of monitoring and evaluating the delivery and quality of remote learning.

Both the Department and its professional advisors in ETI regularly review both local and international research on remote learning from other jurisdictions. There are no plans to commission specific research on models in other jurisdictions at this time.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Education whether any post-primary school in receipt of public funds can design their own admissions criteria that is in breach of their Section 75 duties.

(AQW 14696/17-22)

Mr Weir: Schools are not regarded as designated Public Authorities for the purposes of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and are therefore not subject to the statutory equality duties set out in Section 75 (1) and (2) of the Act.

Within a school, the role of the Board of Governors is to promote equality, good relations and diversity as well as to comply with education, human rights and anti-discrimination legislation that relate to the operation of the school.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Education what steps his Department will take when a school designs their own admissions criteria that excludes children who live 500 yards away from the school.

(AQW 14697/17-22)

Mr Weir: Under Article 16 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 the statutory responsibility for setting admissions criteria rests with the Boards of Governors of individual schools and not my Department.

My Department has the statutory authority to provide guidance to Boards of Governors on the post-primary admissions process and, in doing so, provides advice on the admissions criteria it is recommended that schools use and that schools do not use. My Department does recommend the use of geographic criteria, however recommends that each is used alongside the school being the 'nearest suitable school' to the child's home. Boards of Governors must, by law, have regard to this advice when drafting admissions criteria.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Education, in setting its admission criteria, whether a post-primary school can include that only children from an affluent background can apply for a place at the school.

(AQW 14698/17-22)

Mr Weir: Under Article 16 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 the statutory responsibility for setting admissions criteria rests with the Boards of Governors of individual schools and not my Department.

My Department has the statutory authority to provide guidance to Boards of Governors on the post-primary admissions process and, in doing so, provides advice on the admissions criteria it is recommended that schools use and that schools do not use. My Department recommends that schools prioritise children eligible for free school meals (FSME) so that the proportion of such children admitted is not less than the proportion of first preference FSME applications received within the total number of first preference applications received. Boards of Governors must, by law, have regard to this advice when drafting admissions criteria.

Within a school, the role of the Board of Governors is to promote equality, good relations and diversity as well as to comply with education, human rights and anti-discrimination legislation that relate to the operation of the school.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Education what steps his Department will take when a grammar school excludes children from applying to the school by making their own school admissions criteria.

(AQW 14700/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is a legal requirement for schools to have admissions criteria that allow them to prioritise children for admission and Article 16 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 provides this power to Boards of Governors of individual schools. These admissions criteria must be capable of rank ordering children for admission down to the last available place.

There is no capacity for any school to exclude a child from applying for admission to that school.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education, following on from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People's Review of Special Educational Needs Provision, entitled *Too Little, Too Late*, (i) for an update on actions being taken by his Department and the Education Authority to address the commissioner's findings; (ii) for an update on the current waiting time for a statement of educational need to be carried out; (iii) how many children are currently waiting beyond the 26 week statutory target; and (iv) to detail what further actions he intends to take to address this issue.

(AQW 14770/17-22)

Mr Weir: Both the Department and Education Authority (EA) are working collaboratively to improve processes and procedures to achieve better outcomes for children with SEN. To ensure effective oversight of this work, I have agreed to the establishment of a Special Educational Needs (SEN) Governance Group to provide strategic oversight and co-ordination of the overall programme of improvements within the EA and DE.

The main purpose of the SEN Governance Group is to maintain oversight of the work being implemented in response to the recommendations from NICCY's 'Too Little, Too Late' review; the EA's Audit of Practice; the Department's SEN Transformation project; and the NIAO's 2017 Value for Money Report and 2020 follow-up Impact Report. The Group also oversees implementation of the new SEN Framework and is provided with updates in relation to the new area planning frameworks for special schools and specialist provision in mainstream.

In terms of the waiting time for a statement of educational need, out of the total 1,030 open cases at the end of January 2021, 80 children had been waiting more than 26 weeks for their statutory assessment process to be completed (including cases where exceptional circumstances have arisen). Work continues to further reduce this figure, however this represents significant progress in easing the backlog of cases waiting on a statement and on completion within the statutory 26 week timeframe since the baseline was established in November 2019. At that time a total of 1,070 cases were open longer than the statutory timeframe of 26 weeks, and there has been a 93% reduction in this figure over the ensuing 14 months.

This has been achieved through a targeted improvement project which has included process re-design, staff development and support, rigorous case by case management and improved data analysis.

This project forms part of a wider cross-sectoral SEND Strategic Development Programme which will prioritise and address the range of recommendations laid out in both the NICCY report, and others. This will incorporate all the changes required within the EA under a single programme and will apply the same rigorous focus on improving outcomes for children and families right across the NI SEND system.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the lack of teachers within the Irish medium sector (IME) with a specialized subject, what steps his Department intends to take to increase the number of teacher training positions for the IME sector.

(AQW 14772/17-22)

Mr Weir: As both questions relate to numbers of Irish-medium teachers I shall answer them together. I am aware of the concerns of the Irish-medium sector about the availability of suitably qualified teachers. This is something I have communicated with Minister Dodds in the Department for the Economy about, as Initial Teacher Education (ITE) cuts across both our areas of responsibility. My officials will be engaging in work to consider the current provision, particularly for post-primary, with the ITE providers and sectoral representatives. This work will scope what longer term ITE provision is needed

to ensure beginning teachers receive the best training to support them in delivering immersion education in the Irish-medium sector.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the publication of the interim report on the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages on 5 January 2021 by British Government officials, and the subsequent recommendation to provide a sufficient number of Irish medium teachers, what steps his Department intends to take to meet this recommendation.

(AQW 14773/17-22)

Mr Weir: As both questions relate to numbers of Irish-medium teachers I shall answer them together. I am aware of the concerns of the Irish-medium sector about the availability of suitably qualified teachers. This is something I have communicated with Minister Dodds in the Department for the Economy about, as Initial Teacher Education (ITE) cuts across both our areas of responsibility. My officials will be engaging in work to consider the current provision, particularly for post-primary, with the ITE providers and sectoral representatives. This work will scope what longer term ITE provision is needed to ensure beginning teachers receive the best training to support them in delivering immersion education in the Irish-medium sector.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether there have been expressions of interest in the old Strabane Academy site on the Liskey Road.

(AQW 14869/17-22)

Mr Weir: The following organisations and local representatives have expressed an interest in the future development of the site.

- Derry and Strabane District Council
- Daniel McCrossan MLA
- Milltown Heritage Group
- Maoliosa McHugh MLA on behalf of the Woodland Trust and a local community group (No name provided in correspondence)

The Education Authority is in the process of carrying out a review to consider alternative educational use at the former Liskey Road school site.

Only after this exercise has been concluded will any remaining lands no longer required by the EA be declared surplus to requirements and progressed for disposal in line with LPS guidance.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education why, when wiring deficiencies at Fleming Fulton Special School were notified to the Education Authority on 18 January 2019, has a repair order not been raised.

(AQW 14886/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) has advised me that a site inspection of Fleming Fulton Special School was undertaken by the Contractor on 29 October 2018 and this report was issued to the EA on 18 January 2019.

Unfortunately, due to an administrative error in the EA related to the harmonising of internal processes and procedures to a single EA compliance reporting regime, the remedial works were not actioned. An Emergency Work Form has now been approved for these wiring remedial works to be undertaken in the 2020/21 financial year.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Education to detail the schools that have been (i) refurbished; and (ii) built in the past 10 years.

(AQW 14897/17-22)

Mr Weir: The following schools have been built or refurbished within the past 10 years;

(i) Refurbished

School Name	Approved Cost	Description	Date Completed
St Gerard's Resource Centre, Belfast	£4.3m	Refurbish 12 Class Special School	March 2014
Colaiste Feirste, Belfast	£18.3m	Extend & Refurbish 600 pupil Post Primary IM School	April 2018
Gaelscoil Neachtain, Londonderry	£1.1m	Refurbishment of existing accommodation	May 2014

(ii) Built

School Name	Approved Cost	Description of Works	Date Completed
Victoria PS, Belfast	£4.71m	14 Class PS	May 2015
Eglington PS, Londonderry	£2.6m	8 Class PS	August 2015
St Teresa's PS, Lurgan	£3.9m	7 Class PS	October 2015
St Joseph's Convent PS, Newry	£8m	14 Class PS Double Nursery Unit 2 MLD Units	December 2015
Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagain, Belfast	£3.7m	5 Class PS	December 2015
St Clare's Abbey PS, Newry	£6.3m	15 Class PS 1 Nursery Unit 1 MLD Unit	March 2016
Dromore Central PS	£10.8m	25 Class PS 2 SEN rooms	June 201
Arvalee School, Omagh	£10.4m	110 Pupils	September 2016
Tannaghmore PS, Lurgan	£7.34m	22 Class PS	September 2016
Castle Tower School, Ballymena	£21m	285 Pupils	September 2017
Edenderry Nursery School	£1.3m	52 pupils	November 2016
St Mary's PS, Banbridge	£6.8m	14 Class PS 1 Nursery Unit 2 MLD Units	September 2017
St Bronagh's PS, Rostrevor	£4.9m	7 Class PS	September 2017
Drumlins Integrated PS, Ballynahinch	£3.8m	7 Class PS	September 2017
Foyle College/Ebrington PS, Londonderry	£31.45m	850 Pupil VGS 14 Class PS 2 MLD Units 2 Nursery Units	December 2017
Parkhall Integrated PS, Antrim	£20.7m	735 Pupil Controlled Post-Primary School	June 2018
Omagh Integrated PS	£7.6m	14 Class PS 1 Nursery Unit	June 2018
St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon	£29.13m	1320 Pupil VGS	March 2019
Corran Integrated PS, Larne	£4.8m	7 Class PS 1 Nursery Unit	June 2019
Woodburn PS, Carrickfergus	£3.72m	7 Class PS	July 2020
Gaelscoil na gCrann, Omagh	£3.37m	7 Class Irish-Medium PS 1 Nursery Unit	July 2020
Braidside Integrated PS, Ballymena	£7.3m	14 Class PS 1 Nursery Unit	July 2020
Strabane Academy	£23.25m	700 Pupil Controlled Post-primary School	October 2020

The School Enhancement Programme (SEP) makes funding of between £500,000 and £4 million available for projects aimed at refurbishing or extending the existing school provision. The projects completed under the first SEP call are

detailed below, most of the projects involved a new build extension as well as some refurbishment of the existing buildings.

School Name	Approved Cost	Description of works	Date Complete
Acorn Integrated Primary School	£1.3M	Three-classroom extension has replaced the temporary accommodation.	May 2016
Anahorish Primary School	£1.5M	New permanent build extension to replace mobiles and provide new Multi-Purpose Hall.	September 2017
Ballyclare Secondary School	£3M	New extension to include accommodation for general classrooms, administration facilities and home economics, careers, drama, staffroom and toilet facilities. Some refurbishment of existing school.	October 2016
Ballymoney High School	£3M	New two-storey extension to provide additional classrooms for ICT, Maths Home Economics and general administration. A stand-alone music suite. Refurbishment of existing classrooms and removal of mobile classrooms.	September 2016
Belfast High School	£4M	New sports facility including a synthetic turf playing area /hockey pitch	June 2016
Belfast Royal Academy	£4M	New sports hall. New block for music. New dining area, toilets and refurbished IT classrooms, home economics and learning support.	June 2016
Broadbridge Primary School	£3.2M	New 10 classroom extension to provide permanent accommodation.	October 2020
Ceara School	£1.7M	Single storey extension to provide five new classrooms with ancillary spaces, minor remodelling/ refurbishment of the existing school building, and relocation of existing temporary classrooms to release space for external play areas.	July 2018
Coleraine Academical Institution (now Coleraine Grammar School)	£2.7M	Refurbishment of the existing school building including: rewiring, refurbishment of heating system, replacement of double glazing, upgrade of mechanical plant room and toilet refurbishment to allow amalgamation.	November 2015
Dalriada School	£2.2M	New sports hall with dedicated gymnasium and full fitness suite.	December 2016
De La Salle College	£1.7M	New pitch and pavilion	Substantially complete
Donard School	£1M	Extension to replace temporary accommodation.	February 2017
Erne Integrated College	£4M	New Sports Hall, general refurbishments	August 2018
Friends School	£3.3M	Extension for Maths History and Music.	September 2016
Integrated College, Dungannon	£3.5M	New Sports Hall, pitch and floodlighting. New build for changing rooms also includes space for learning support & sixth form. Refurbishment of existing accommodation.	June 2017
John Paul II Primary School	£1.5M	New four-classroom extension and alteration to existing school building	June 2017
Killeen Primary School	£1.5M	Extension and refurbishment and new Multi-Purpose Hall.	September 2017
Knockevin School	£2M	New permanent build infants' centre.	January 2016

School Name	Approved Cost	Description of works	Date Complete
Loreto Grammar School, Omagh	£2.9M	Replacement of mobile accommodation with new modular general classrooms, science and music accommodation in addition to other refurbishment work.	March 2016
Maine Integrated Primary School	£1M	Replacement of number of mobiles with new modular buildings.	June 2015
Malone Integrated College	£3.3M	New build Sports Hall and Gymnasium.	September 2020
Methodist College	£4M	Refurbishment of McArthur Hall.	January 2018
Millennium Integrated Primary School	£0.9M	Extension and remodelling works to provide ancillary space and administrative accommodation.	September 2015
Millington Primary School	£3M	Extension and Refurbishment	
Mount Lourdes Grammar School	£1.1M	Extension to dining room, site works and provision of a covered walkway	March 2018
New Buildings Primary School	£1.5M	Refurbishment and roof repairs.	September 2016
New-Bridge Integrated College	£4M	Replacement of eight temporary classrooms with new modular accommodation.	January 2018
Our Lady's Grammar School, Newry	£3.3M	New technology block and new block for IT and sixth form.	Due to complete March 2021
Rainey Endowed School	£4M	Provision of new modular buildings to replace mobiles. Phase 2 involved the provision of new sports hall and some mechanical and electrical works.	April 2017
Rathore School	£1.1M	New extension and refurbishment works to provide five new classrooms, Post 16 suite, parent meeting room and increased ancillary facilities. Removal of temporary accommodation.	June 2016
Sacred Heart Grammar School, Newry	£1.8M	New extension and refurbishment for science rooms.	November 2016
Saintfield High School	£1.2M	New sports hall and changing facilities.	February 2015
St Bernard's Primary School, Glengormley	£1.2M	New annexe to provide five additional classrooms	February 2017
St Columb's College	£2.7M	New sports hall and associated support and ancillary accommodation and the conversion of existing changing accommodation to a Drama suite.	September 2017
St Joseph's Grammar School, Donaghmore	£4M	New Sports Hall and extension.	September 2016
St Joseph's Primary School, Carnacaville	£2.1M	Refurbishment of internal areas and an extension to include three new classrooms, resource areas, multi-purpose rooms and a multi-purpose hall.	February 2016
St Louis Grammar School, Ballymena	£4M	Extension and Refurbishment of Convent Building to provide accommodation for music, drama and creative arts.	November 2019

School Name	Approved Cost	Description of works	Date Complete
St Malachy's College, Belfast	£4M	Refurbishment and Health & Safety works - new windows, upgrade heating system, refurbish Drama and Science, refurbish staff and pupil toilets and changing rooms upgrade electrical systems.	August 2019
St Mark's High School, Warrenpoint	£3.6M	New build extension to include a sixth form study along with Science, ICT and General classrooms. General refurbishment, including works to address disability access.	December 2016
St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt	£4M	Demolition of 11 existing mobile classrooms and the permanent construction of a new block to provide accommodation for the Music Department, a Sixth Form Common Room, Drama suite and General Classrooms	May 2017
St Michael's College, Enniskillen	£1.4M	New pitch and pavilion.	May 2019
St Patrick's Academy, Lisburn	£3.7M	New-build sports hall and standalone extension to address, music, art and home economics deficiency	August 2018
St Patrick's Grammar School, Armagh	£4M	Extension and refurbishment	May 2017
Strandtown Primary School	£4M	Construction of 12 new classrooms to address existing under-provision of facilities	August 2019
Sullivan Upper School	£2.9M	A new stand-alone two-storey sports pavilion, 3G pitch and associated accommodation, gymnasium and ancillary accommodation.	July 2017
The Armstrong Primary School	£3.9M	Extension and Refurbishment	January 2017
Victoria College	£3.9M	New build Sports Hall. Refurbish old accommodation to provide Arts and Science rooms.	August 2017
Wallace High School	£3.2M	New extension and Refurbishment to include works to Technology – Systems Room, Art rooms, PE and Home Economics.	September 2018
Willowbridge School	£3.9M	New build extension to the Lendrum Campus to include multi-purpose rooms, Home Economic, Art and Design and General Classrooms.	May 2017

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Education what provision is being made for the vaccination of workers transporting children to and from special needs schools on school transport.

(AQW 14933/17-22)

Mr Weir: As you can appreciate the prioritisation of the rollout of the vaccine is carried out at a UK level by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). Northern Ireland, along with the other Devolved Administrations, will adhere to the JCVI advice on prioritisation of the vaccine.

JCVI have advised that “the first priorities for any COVID-19 vaccination programme should be the prevention of COVID-19 mortality and the protection of health and social care staff and systems. Secondary priorities could include vaccination of those at increased risk of hospitalisation and at increased risk of exposure, and to maintain resilience in essential public services.”

Phase 1 of the programme will therefore offer vaccination to care home residents and staff, frontline health and social care workers, and those 80 years of age and over.

JCVI indicated on 6 January that they are considering under the next priority phase of vaccinations, those at increased risk of exposure to SARS-CoV-2 due to their occupation.

I am keen for the Executive to prioritise vaccinations for all education staff who are in face to face engagement with children and young people and would hope that first priority is given to staff within Special Schools who carry out close personal care and that these discussions are ongoing and guidance will be updated once a decision has been made.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new build programme at Bangor Central Integrated Primary School.

(AQW 14936/17-22)

Mr Weir: Bangor Central Integrated Primary School has been selected for a major capital investment project to improve or replace its existing accommodation. The project will cater for the school's current approved enrolment of 618 pupils.

The business case was approved by my Department in July 2020 and identified the preferred option of a new-build school on a new site on the Balloo Road in Bangor. In July 2020 the Education Authority appointed an Integrated Consultant Team and the early stages of design are now progressing well with good engagement between all stakeholders.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education why, when wiring deficiencies at Blythefield Primary School were notified to the Education Authority on 16 January 2019, has a repair order not been raised.

(AQW 14965/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) has advised me that a site inspection was undertaken by the Contractor on 1 November 2018 at Blythefield Primary School and this report was issued to the EA on 16 January 2019.

Unfortunately, due to an administrative error in the Education Authority (EA) related to harmonising internal processes and procedures to a single EA compliance reporting regime, the remedial works were not actioned. An Emergency Work Form has now been approved for these remedial works to be undertaken in the 2020/21 financial year.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Education (i) what flexibility will be in place for children who are, or have close family members that are, clinically extremely vulnerable in any return to school advice; and (ii) what supporting measures will be put in place for them to continue learning remotely.

(AQW 14980/17-22)

Mr Weir: The policy on shielding is available in the NI Direct website here: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-and-vulnerable-people>

Pupils previously shielding or with a family member who was previously shielding due to being identified as 'clinically extremely vulnerable' (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-definitions-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-and-vulnerable#toc-0>) can continue to attend school.

This is also the case for those who are 'vulnerable' (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-definitions-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-and-vulnerable#toc-1>) to COVID-19. If you have concerns about this, you may wish to speak with your GP or hospital consultant. Their advice can be shared with the school if you wish. The school can then determine if it needs to take any additional actions to reduce the risk further.

A small number of children will be advised by their clinical team not to attend an educational setting. The vast majority of these children would routinely be advised not to attend school even outside pandemic period due to the risk of infections other than COVID-19.

Further guidance is available in the Department of Education's guidance for education settings (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-school-and-educational-settings-northern-ireland>) Sections 6 and 7 of the guidance includes information on supporting clinically extremely vulnerable staff and children in the school setting.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education (i) how the proposed phased return to school of pupils will impact those teachers on the Substitute Teachers' Support Scheme; and (ii) when he expects the scheme to run to.

(AQW 15030/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have agreed to a phased reopening of schools in March. As well as teaching each of the returning year groups, schools will be providing a mixture of face-to-face teaching, remote learning and supervised learning for vulnerable and key workers' children and it is likely that demand for substitute teachers will increase.

The Substitute Teachers' Income Support Scheme 2021 was initially announced to cover the period to 12 February, and was extended to 7 March 2021. I have also approved a further extension of the scheme to 31 March 2021.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister of Education to detail the rationale for not including Year 6 and Year 11 pupils in the first cohort of year groups earmarked to return to classroom teaching on 8 March 2021.

(AQW 15037/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Executive's decision has always been guided by the prevailing public health advice and scientific evidence, while recognising the priority the Executive has placed on education and all the benefits that brings, not just in the short term but also for longer term societal and economic benefits.

It is my preference to have all pupils in school as soon as practicably possible but this has to be balanced against the public health position, and the advice that the Executive has received from the medical and scientific experts is that this should be done cautiously and slowly.

The specific advice received from the Department of Health indicated that any return prior to Easter should be restricted to two-three year groups maximum at any one time, and so to expand beyond this would have been directly to contravene health advice, therefore the most the Executive were willing to support prior to Easter was a return of a maximum of three year groups at any one time.

The Department engages with a practitioners' group made up of school principals from across the educational sector, and this practical advice, alongside the medical and scientific evidence, helps to inform the Minister's and Executive decisions.

It has been agreed that the phased return will focus, in the first instance, on the early years in pre-school and primary school which are crucial for children's development. The following phase will focus on students in years 12-14 who are engaged in learning for key qualifications that are vital if they are to have every opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills required for progression to the next stage of education, employment or training.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education how many school days, out of the total number of school days available this academic year and the previous academic year, will have been remote learning- based by the end of Easter 2021.

(AQW 15051/17-22)

Mr Weir: Each school has responsibility for their own calendar each year which includes holidays, made up of 9 optional closure days (an additional 4 days were provided in 2020/21 due to COVID-19), 5 School Development Days and 5 Professional Development Days. As a result, it is not possible to provide a definitive number of days that remote learning has been utilised as each school may be different.

The tables below set out the number of remote learning days covering the two periods of lockdown factoring in generic holiday periods and demonstrate two scenarios with varying dates for returning to school.

Dates - until 5 March with pupils to return on 8 March 2021	Total number of days when learners have been learning at home / taught remotely.
23/03/20 - 30/6/20	60
04/01/21– 05/3/21	40
Total	100

Dates - up to 9 April	Total number of days when learners have been learning at home / taught remotely.
23/03/20 - 30/6/20	60
04/01/21 – 09/4/21	54
Total	114

These tables discount two weeks at Easter 2020, two May Day holidays 2020, one week at half term February 2021, one day for St Patricks Day and two weeks at Easter 2021.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister of Education to outline the guidance to schools in relation to the delivery of online learning.

(AQW 15067/17-22)

Mr Weir: Since March 2020, the Department's Continuity of Learning project has developed and implemented a range of resources, training and guidance to support schools, pupils and parents.

In January 2021, the Department of Education issued an Educational Continuity Direction, which makes it a legal requirement for all pre-school settings and schools to provide remote learning at the current time.

Alongside the Direction, the Department published further detailed guidance for schools on supporting remote learning and online learning (Updated Circular - Further guidance for schools on supporting remote learning). This sets out clear expectations, and provides additional advice and guidance to schools as they consider how to tailor and adapt delivery of the curriculum, which may include online learning. Schools are required to have regard to this guidance. The Department has also simplified its remote learning guidance into a one-page, quick glance document for schools entitled Effective Practice in Remote Learning (Effective practice in remote learning | Department of Education (education-ni.gov.uk) .

My Department has also provided guidance for schools on both Remote Learning and Curriculum Planning and Blended Learning for 2020/21. Further resources, guidance materials and case studies have also been produced by my Department's Continuity of Learning Project.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the status of the rightsizing of Bunscoil Cholmille, Derry

(AQW 15076/17-22)

Mr Weir: Bunscoil Cholmcille has asked to reduce its approved admissions and enrolment numbers under the voluntary downsizing element of the Department's Resetting for Area Planning process. It is anticipated that Officials will write to confirm the outcome by the end of March 2021.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education, further to his announcement on the phased return of pupils to schools, to outline why remote learning would resume for pre-school/nursery children and pupils in P1 to P3 for the week beginning 22 March 2021, until the start of the Easter holidays, in order to enable the return of years 12 to 14.

(AQW 15083/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Executive's decision has always been guided by the prevailing public health advice and scientific evidence, while recognising the priority the Executive has placed on education and all the benefits that brings, not just in the short term but also for longer term societal and economic benefits.

It is my preference to have all pupils in school as soon as practicably possible but this has to be balanced against the public health position, and the advice that the Executive has received from the medical and scientific experts is that this should be done cautiously and slowly.

The specific advice received from the Department of Health indicated that any return prior to Easter should be restricted to two-three year groups maximum at any one time, and so to expand beyond this would have been to directly contravene health advice, therefore the most the Executive was willing to support prior to Easter was a return of a maximum of three year groups at any one time.

The Department engages with a practitioners' group made up of school principals from across the education sector, and this practical advice, alongside the medical and scientific evidence, helps to inform mine and the Executive's decisions.

It has been agreed that the phased return will focus, in the first instance, on the early years in pre-school and primary school which are crucial for children's development. The following phase will focus on students in years 12-14 who are engaged in learning for key qualifications that are vital if they are to have every opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills required for progression to the next stage of education, employment or training. Prior to Easter, these phases will not overlap, hence the return to remote learning for the pre-school and primary group from 22 March.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Education what action he intends to take against schools who use criteria defined by his Department as not recommended when determining post-primary admissions.

(AQW 15088/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is the sole responsibility of the Board of Governors (BoG) of a school to define the criteria it will use to select children for admission if the school is over-subscribed with applications. This requirement is set out in legislation at Article 16 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. Article 16B of the Order allows my Department to publish guidance on the admissions process and requires BoGs to 'have regard to' the guidance; however, my Department plays no part in the setting of criteria and has no approval role.

Last October, my Department provided schools with guidance on the post-primary admissions process, including on use of recommended and not recommended criteria. However, while my Department can recommend which criteria a school may use, it has no power to intervene and change the content of a school's admissions criteria.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education to detail the rationale behind selecting P1 to P3 pupils as the primary school cohort to return to in-person teaching from 8 March 2021 rather than P6 and P7 pupils.

(AQW 15090/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Executive's decision has always been guided by the prevailing public health advice and scientific evidence, while recognising the priority the Executive has placed on education and all the benefits that brings, not just in the short term but also for longer term societal and economic benefits.

It is my preference to have all pupils in school as soon as practicably possible but this has to be balanced against the public health position, and the advice that the Executive has received from the medical and scientific experts is that this should be done cautiously and slowly.

The specific advice received from the Department of Health indicated that any return prior to Easter should be restricted to two-three year groups maximum at any one time, and so to expand beyond this would have been to directly contravene health advice, therefore the most the Executive was willing to support prior to Easter was a return of a maximum of three year groups at any one time.

The Department engages with a practitioners' group made up of school principals from across the education sector, and this practical advice, alongside the medical and scientific evidence, helps to inform mine and the Executive's decisions.

It has been agreed that the phased return will focus, in the first instance, on the early years in pre-school and primary school which are crucial for children's development. The following phase will focus on students in years 12-14 who are engaged in learning for key qualifications that are vital if they are to have every opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills required for progression to the next stage of education, employment or training.

Ms Brogan asked the Minister of Education to outline any relaxation to the role of the Education and Training Inspectorate when school inspections are due to recommence in the next academic year.

(AQW 15094/17-22)

Mr Weir: The ETI has a statutory duty to monitor, inspect and report on the standards of education and professional practice among teachers under Article 102 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.

During the current lockdown, inspections across all education and training phases continue to be paused. A wide range of ETI district inspector activity continues across all phases of education and training, including identifying effective practice to promote improvement in the interest of all learners.

ETI remains committed to engage with reference groups, including policy makers, leaders, teachers' unions and professional associations to discuss when inspection will resume, associated approaches to inspection, and areas of focus.

Ms Brogan asked the Minister of Education whether he has given consideration to prioritising the vaccination of school staff involved with the education and care of pupils with special educational needs, or a statement, who attend mainstream primary and post-primary schools.

(AQW 15095/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Health is currently leading and coordinating the roll out of the Covid-19 vaccination programme here, in line with the priority groups identified by the Joint Council on Vaccinations and Immunisations (JCVI). The policy agreed at this time is focussed on special schools and in particular the staff who support clinically extremely vulnerable children.

Paediatricians have identified those children and young people who are clinically extremely vulnerable. This list has been shared with the Education Authority who are working with schools to identify those staff who work with the children identified, for prioritisation for vaccination in this phase of the vaccination programme.

It is hoped that vaccinations will commence as soon as possible.

Ms Brogan asked the Minister of Education what plans he has put in place to ensure children using school buses as a means of transport can remain in their school bubbles when more pupils return to face-to face learning.

(AQW 15096/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department's current guidance has been drafted following consultation with the Chief Medical Officer, the Chief Scientific Advisor and the Public Health Agency to ensure it aligns with the relevant medical and scientific advice.

This guidance recognises that children should, as far as possible be grouped together by year group or school, both in school and on school transport, however it is acknowledged that there will be limits to the extent to which grouping can be arranged and so there may be mixing of wider groups on school transport. The current guidance explains that the use of consistent groups or bubbles is not an "all-or-nothing" approach and will bring public health benefits even if logistics mean that this measure can only be implemented partially and it references home to school transport as a potential example of this.

The EA will continue to deliver home to school transport in line with all relevant guidance.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education to detail the rationale for excluding primary six from the initial cohort of pupils to return to schools, given they will undertake AQE's Common Entrance Assessment or the Post-Primary Transfer Consortium's Entrance Assessment in or around November 2021.

(AQW 15111/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Executive's decision has always been guided by the prevailing public health advice and scientific evidence, while recognising the priority the Executive has placed on education and all the benefits that brings, not just in the short term but also for longer term societal and economic benefits.

It is my preference to have all pupils in school as soon as practicably possible but this has to be balanced against the public health position, and the advice that the Executive has received from the medical and scientific experts is that this should be done cautiously and slowly.

The specific advice received from the Department of Health indicated that any return prior to Easter should be restricted to two-three year groups maximum at any one time, and so to expand beyond this would have been to directly contravene health advice, therefore the most the Executive was willing to support prior to Easter was a return of a maximum of three year groups at any one time.

The Department engages with a practitioners' group made up of school principals from across the education sector, and this practical advice, alongside the medical and scientific evidence, helps to inform mine and the Executive's decisions.

It has been agreed that the phased return will focus, in the first instance, on the early years in pre-school and primary school which are crucial for children's development. The following phase will focus on students in years 12-14 who are engaged in learning for key qualifications that are vital if they are to have every opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills required for progression to the next stage of education, employment or training. Prior to Easter, these phases will not overlap, hence the return to remote learning for the pre-school and primary group from 22 March.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to detail the rationale behind asking primary school children who have returned to face-to-face learning to then revert back to remote learning to allow post-primary school year groups to return to face-to-face learning before Easter.

(AQW 15125/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Executive's decision has always been guided by the prevailing public health advice and scientific evidence, while recognising the priority the Executive has placed on education and all the benefits that brings, not just in the short term but also for longer term societal and economic benefits.

It is my preference to have all pupils in school as soon as practicably possible but this has to be balanced against the public health position, and the advice that the Executive has received from the medical and scientific experts is that this should be done cautiously and slowly.

The specific advice received from the Department of Health indicated that any return prior to Easter should be restricted to two-three year groups maximum at any one time, and so to expand beyond this would have been to directly contravene health advice, therefore the most the Executive was willing to support prior to Easter was a return of a maximum of three year groups at any one time.

The Department engages with a practitioners' group made up of school principals from across the education sector, and this practical advice, alongside the medical and scientific evidence, helps to inform mine and the Executive's decisions.

It has been agreed that the phased return will focus, in the first instance, on the early years in pre-school and primary school which are crucial for children's development. The following phase will focus on students in years 12-14 who are engaged in learning for key qualifications that are vital if they are to have every opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills required for progression to the next stage of education, employment or training. Prior to Easter, these phases will not overlap, hence the return to remote learning for the pre-school and primary group from 22 March.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Education why primary six pupils were not included in the cohort returning to school on 8 March 2021, given that these children need time to prepare for the transfer test taking place later in the year.

(AQW 15163/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Executive's decision has always been guided by the prevailing public health advice and scientific evidence, while recognising the priority the Executive has placed on education and all the benefits that brings, not just in the short term but also for longer term societal and economic benefits.

It is my preference to have all pupils in school as soon as practicably possible but this has to be balanced against the public health position, and the advice that the Executive has received from the medical and scientific experts is that this should be done cautiously and slowly.

The specific advice received from the Department of Health indicated that any return prior to Easter should be restricted to two-three year groups maximum at any one time, and so to expand beyond this would have been to directly contravene health advice, therefore the most the Executive was willing to support prior to Easter was a return of a maximum of three year groups at any one time.

The Department engages with a practitioners' group made up of school principals from across the education sector, and this practical advice, alongside the medical and scientific evidence, helps to inform mine and the Executive's decisions.

It has been agreed that the phased return will focus, in the first instance, on the early years in pre-school and primary school which are crucial for children's development. The following phase will focus on students in years 12-14 who are engaged in learning for key qualifications that are vital if they are to have every opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills required for progression to the next stage of education, employment or training. Prior to Easter, these phases will not overlap, hence the return to remote learning for the pre-school and primary group from 22 March.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education whether his Department intends to install improved ventilation in schools, including the use of hepa filters.

(AQW 15169/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department's current Education Restart Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings in Northern Ireland was issued in December 2020. This includes advice to schools on how to maximise ventilation with fresh air in order to minimise the risk of transmission of the Covid-19 virus.

Installing additional ventilation in schools, including HEPA filters, would be an extensive task given the number of schools within the estate. It would take a considerable time to install these facilities in every school.

While I have not ruled out the provision of enhanced ventilation facilities, there are no plans for this to be implemented at this time. However, the levels of transmission within schools will be kept under review, along with the guidance on ventilating classrooms.

Ms Brogan asked the Minister of Education whether he will allow any level of discretion to the school starting age for children due to begin primary one in September 2021, given his intention to bring forward legislation on the issue.

(AQW 15174/17-22)

Mr Weir: Compulsory school age is set out in Article 46 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 and provides for compulsory school age to be determined by reference to the date a child reaches the age of four. The current legislation does not provide discretion and if I was to provide this now I would be acting outside the scope of the legislation.

I appreciate there will be individual circumstances where it is appropriate for children to delay starting school when they are due to which is why I announced my decision to develop policy proposals to address the issue of flexibility in school starting age for individual pupils. This is a key legislative priority for me but the process of policy development and public consultation will take time to ensure we have a sound policy and evidence basis on which to move forward,

In the absence of a legal means by which they can defer school starting age, a limited number of parents each year make their own arrangements to educate their child outside the formal school system once they reach compulsory school age. In these circumstances, parents are required to ensure their child receives an education suitable to their age and ability. In such cases where a parent has educated their child of compulsory school age outside a school setting then subsequently decides that the child should attend school, the parents should contact the Principal of the school they would like their child to attend. The child would then normally be admitted to his or her chronological age group, provided that the school has capacity within its overall enrolment.

My advice to parents is that if they have concerns about their son or daughter starting primary school they should speak to the Principal of the school to which they have applied to discuss the school's arrangements for the transition and induction of children into Year 1.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Education whether he will provide the opportunity for children to repeat pre-school this coming year, to accommodate those who missed out due to COVID-19.
(AQW 15217/17-22)

Mr Weir: The opportunity for children to repeat a year is already in place and there is a process available for any parent who wishes to take that option, and schools are best placed to advise them if the option is the right thing to do for some individual children

There is no concrete evidence base that would suggest it would be in the best educational interests of all children to repeat the educational year in a wholesale type approach. It should be noted that some evidence would suggest that repeating the school year could have a negative effect for pupils.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Education to detail the timeline for the plan to return all school children to the classroom.
(AQW 15268/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is my preference to have all pupils in school as soon as practicably possible but this has to be balanced against the public health position, and the advice that the Executive has received from the medical and scientific experts is that this should be done cautiously and slowly.

Any decision by the Executive on the timing for a full return to face to face teaching for all pupils will be guided by the prevailing public health advice and scientific evidence, while recognising the priority the Executive has placed on education and all the benefits that brings, not just in the short term but also for longer term societal and economic benefits.

Taking account of this the Executive agreed that the phased return will initially focus, on the early years in pre-school and primary school which are crucial for children's development. The following phase will focus on students in years 12-14 who are engaged in learning for key qualifications that are vital if they are to have every opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills required for progression to the next stage of education, employment or training.

Both sets of pupils will return to full time face to face teaching following the planned Easter holidays, and considerations around other year groups will take place given the medical /scientific advice at the time.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education, further to his announcement on the phased return of pupils to schools, why primary six pupils were not amongst the year groups to return to face to face teaching from 8 March 2021.
(AQW 15272/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Executive's decision has always been guided by the prevailing public health advice and scientific evidence, while recognising the priority the Executive has placed on education and all the benefits that brings, not just in the short term but also for longer term societal and economic benefits.

It is my preference to have all pupils in school as soon as practicably possible but this has to be balanced against the public health position, and the advice that the Executive has received from the medical and scientific experts is that this should be done cautiously and slowly.

The specific advice received from the Department of Health indicated that any return prior to Easter should be restricted to two-three year groups maximum at any one time, and so to expand beyond this would have been to directly contravene health advice, therefore the most the Executive was willing to support prior to Easter was a return of a maximum of three year groups at any one time.

The Department engages with a practitioners' group made up of school principals from across the education sector, and with a group of representatives from trade union organisations. This practical advice, alongside the medical and scientific evidence, helps to inform mine and the Executive's decisions.

It has been agreed that the phased return will focus, in the first instance, on the early years in pre-school and primary school which are crucial for children's development. The following phase will focus on students in years 12-14 who are engaged in learning for key qualifications that are vital if they are to have every opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills required for progression to the next stage of education, employment or training. Prior to Easter, these phases will not overlap, hence the return to remote learning for the pre-school and primary group from 22 March.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education what engagement he has had with school leaders and trade union representatives about providing catch-up programmes over the summer months.
(AQW 15309/17-22)

Mr Weir: My officials are currently exploring the possibility of a Summer Scheme in July / August 2021. A survey was issued to primary schools, post-primary schools and EOTAS settings on Monday 22 February 2021 seeking expressions of interest. Teaching unions and practitioners will be consulted on the detail of the scheme in due course.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the major capital build for Saint Catherine's Primary School, Strabane; and an estimated timeframe for completion.
(AQW 15323/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department has engaged the Education Authority to procure an Integrated Consultant Team (ICT), who will take the major capital project for Saint Catherine's Primary School through the initial development and design phases to completion of the project.

Having completed the pre-qualification stage for the procurement it is anticipated that appointment of the ICT will take place in early June 2021.

It is not possible to provide an accurate timeframe for completion of this major capital project at this early stage.

Department of Finance

Dr Aiken asked the Minister of Finance, following the Transport Secretary's announcement on the 23 January of £764 million investment of restoring railways in England, whether he will earmark the Barnett consequential for the same purpose in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 14141/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Barnett Consequential are unhypothecated meaning they do not have to be used for the purpose which gave rise to the consequential and are allocated in line with local needs and priorities.

The Executive will consider any request for funding from the relevant Minister in light of competing priorities and overall level of funding available at that time.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Finance whether provision will be made for additional financial resources to councils to enable them to minimise any rates rise or to ensure no rates rise is required.
(AQW 14185/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I recognise the challenges that Councils have faced and am committed to working closely with the Councils to help ensure that there is continued delivery of essential local services. The Executive has provided £100m in support to Councils this financial year. I have already committed to providing £150m of rates support to businesses in 2021/22, which will help protect council rate income. The Executive has chosen to freeze the regional rate for 2021/22 and I would encourage Councils to use the new rate setting powers that I have recently announced, including giving them more time to strike their district rate, to set rates which support households and businesses recover in the months ahead.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 13045/17-22, whether his Department has any contracts with China; and, given the international concerns expressed regarding the treatment of China's Uighur people, what action will be taken before the placing of any future orders.
(AQW 14192/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department does not have any contracts with China.

All contracts awarded by my Department, including those awarded to Chinese suppliers, require compliance with all applicable anti-slavery and human trafficking laws and are awarded in compliance with Procurement Guidance Note (PGN) PGN 03/18 - Human Rights in Public Procurement which requires that Departments take a risk based approach when assessing the potential for human rights violations. Where the risk is high this could include site inspection and regular audits of sites throughout the supply chain.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Finance how many schemes his Department has brought forward to assist businesses since the beginning of the pandemic.

(AQW 14223/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In May 2020 my Department introduced time-limited support measures for the aviation sector which provided up to £5.7 million to Belfast City Airport, City of Derry Airport and those airlines operating essential flights. Further support has recently been developed for this sector which continues to be severely impacted by the pandemic. This package is for up to £10 million for Belfast City and Belfast International Airports which will help to protect jobs and connectivity.

Over £290 million has been allocated to additional Covid specific additional business rate reliefs this year. This includes a four month business rates holiday which was implemented for all businesses by 31 July. A targeted 12 months rates holiday was also implemented for 25,000 businesses in the economic sectors most severely impacted by the pandemic. Rates relief for 12 months was subsequently extended to manufacturing and newspaper businesses.

By 31 July, over £244 million in £10,000 Small Business Grants had been paid by my Department on behalf of the Department for the Economy.

Further business supports have been developed and administered in the second half of the year. The Department put in place the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme to provide financial support to businesses required to close by the Health Protection Regulations. By 15 February, some £168 million had been paid to businesses through this scheme to over 13,000 businesses.

You may also be aware that I announced my intention to put in place a substantial package of business rates relief in the 2021/22 financial year and I am holding £150 million to provide that relief.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance whether he is allocating any of the unspent £320 million to the redevelopment of Casement Park project.

(AQW 14231/17-22)

Mr Murphy: While the required funding for Casement has been met in full both this financial year and next financial year, all proposed allocations to Departments as set out in the draft Budget are currently subject to consultation, which ends on 25 February. Departments will have an opportunity to refine their pressures, taking into account responses to the consultation, before the Budget is agreed by the Executive and the Assembly. It will be for the Executive to decide how any unspent funding that is being carried forward into the next financial year is to be used in tackling the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Finance when she will bring forward secondary legislation to enact the Legal Services Oversight Commissioners powers of intervention.

(AQW 14242/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I plan on bringing forward the necessary legislation later this year.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance what provisions are in place to ensure that public sector procurement contracts are awarded based on value rather than price.

(AQW 14293/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Public Procurement Policy requires that contracts are awarded on the basis of best value for money which is defined as the most advantageous combination of cost, quality and sustainability to meet customer requirements.

In this context:

- cost means consideration of the whole life cost;
- quality means meeting a specification which is fit for purpose and sufficient to meet the customer's requirements; and
- sustainability means economic, social and environmental benefits, considered in the business case, in support of the Programme for Government.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance (i) whether garages and workshops are eligible for the COVID-19 rates relief scheme; (ii) whether such businesses are considered retail; and (iii) to detail the rationale for these decisions.

(AQW 14332/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As part of the response to COVID 19, the Executive introduced an 18% reduction in the Regional Rate for all non-domestic premises, and also a range of support measures that included the 4 month rates holiday for all businesses and small business support grants. Many garages and workshops were eligible for this support.

My Department also implemented a targeted rate relief scheme following research carried out by University of Ulster Economic Policy Centre. Retail, hospitality, leisure, tourism, airports and childcare were identified in the UUEPC research as the business uses in the greatest need of support. This was the rationale for the Executive's decision to put in place The Rates (Coronavirus) (Emergency Relief) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, as amended, which provides the detail of what uses may receive the additional 8-month targeted relief. The criteria adopted is similar to rate support schemes elsewhere.

Garage and workshop premises would be eligible for the additional relief if they are occupied by businesses that use such premises for purposes as set out in the Regulations. A garage or workshop is seldom used as a retail hereditament as defined in the Regulations. Car showrooms are identified as qualifying for the additional relief.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Finance to detail his legislative programme for the remainder of this Assembly Mandate. (AQW 14399/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Please see table at Annex A for details of the legislation my department plans to advance in the current mandate.

ANNEX A

Primary Legislation

Title	Purpose	Status
Budget Bill 2021	Budget	Written evidence to the Finance Committee on 17 th February followed by oral evidence on 24 th February. The intention is to take the Budget Bill through using accelerated passage. The Budget Bill is planned to be taken through the Assembly on the following dates: 1 st March - Supply Resolution and Budget Bill Stage 1 2 nd March – Budget Bill Stage 2 Consideration 8 th March – Consideration Stage 9 th March – Further Consideration Stage & Final Stage Royal Assent is required by 24 th March.
Budget (No. 2) Bill 2021	Budget	Anticipated May/June 2021
Financial Reporting (Departments and Public Bodies)	Necessary to implement the Review of Financial Process.	Working with the Office for Legislative Counsel (OLC) the draft bill is complete and a draft Explanatory and Financial Memorandum is with OLC for review. The Bill is now named the Financial Reporting (Departments and Public Bodies) Bill (Northern Ireland). Whilst the precise timing will depend on the conclusion of the discussions currently ongoing with HMT, and planned engagement with OLC and DSO, it is anticipated that the Bill will be introduced after Easter recess.

In addition, work is being taken forward on social value in procurement, a fiscal council, and public bodies' reform. Legislation on these issues will follow once the policies are in place.

Westminster Bills requiring LCMs

Title	Purpose	Status
Public Service Pensions Bill	To remove unlawful age discrimination identified in NI public service pension schemes as a consequence of the 'McCloud ruling'	Subject to Executive agreement

Statutory Rules (subject to Affirmative / Draft Affirmative)

Title	Purpose	Status
The Energy Performance of Buildings (Certificates and Inspections) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (DoF)	To reduce the statutory fees that are charged when data is entered onto the domestic and non-domestic register for Energy Performance Certificates, Display Energy Certificate and Air Conditioning Inspection Reports	Draft documents - SR, SL1, Explanatory Note and Motion for Debate have been prepared for the DoF Minister's consideration.
The Official Statistics (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021	The Statutory Rule will amend the Official Statistics Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 by naming additional bodies as producers of official statistics.	Draft being prepared
The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (DOF)	To set the regional rate for the upcoming rating year	SL1 and draft being prepared

Title	Purpose	Status
The Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (DOF)	To extend rate relief to ATMs in rural areas	SL1 approved by Committee
The Land Registry (Fees) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (DOF)	To update the fees to enable Land Registry to generate income sufficient to meet its operating expenses under Land Registration Act (Northern Ireland) 1970.	SL1 and draft SR being prepared.

Statutory Rules (subject to Negative Resolution)

Title	Purpose	Status
The Pensions Increase (Review) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021	Routine uprating wef 12 April 2021 of pensions in payment (and deferred pensions) for public service pensioners with reference to the annual change in CPI (0.5%)	Draft being prepared
The Public Service Pensions Revaluation Order (Northern Ireland) 2021	Routine revaluation of in – year pension accruals by active members of CARE (Career average) public service pension schemes for the scheme year ending 31 March 2021, with reference to annual change in CPI (0.5%) or average weekly earnings (2.4%)	Draft being prepared
The Whole of Government Accounts (Designation of Bodies) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021	To designate bodies in Northern Ireland to provide information for Whole of Government Accounts (WGA).	Draft being prepared
The Building (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021	Amendment of Building Regulations in relation to Fire Safety and Radon Issues. Amendment of Building Regulations in relation to transposition of Energy Performance of Buildings (EPBD 3) requirements.	Public Consultation on Fire Safety and Radon issues finished in October 2020. The Department's Building Standards Branch (BSB) has completed an analysis of the consultation responses and given evidence to the Finance Committee. Final proposals are to be considered by the local Building Regulations Advisory Committee (NIBRAC) and the Department hopes to bring forward a Building Regulations amendment (Statutory Rule) and changes to supporting guidance in the relevant Technical Booklets in the near future. It is anticipated that this amendment will not be drafted until the next Assembly mandate.
The Rates (Small Business Hereditament Relief) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021	To extend the small business relief scheme which provides support to local small businesses	SL1 and draft SR being prepared.

Title	Purpose	Status
The Rates (Coronavirus) (Emergency Relief) (No. 3) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021	To extend rate relief support to those sectors most affected by the pandemic	Not yet drafted.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance to detail the costs to run Ministerial cars for the 2019/20 financial year, broken down by Department.

(AQW 14448/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department of Finance does not hold the detail of costs to run other Departments' Ministerial cars. The cost to the Department of Finance to run the Ministerial car for the 2019/20 financial year was £7,970.92.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance to detail the number of suicides in each month of 2020; and how this compares with figures in the previous two years.

(AQW 14449/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) collates data on death registrations.

There are some situations where the registration of the death can be delayed, specifically where the death has been accidental, unexpected or suspicious, and must be referred to the Coroner, only to be registered after completion of the investigation. Such deaths may not appear in published statistics until at least six months after the death occurred. Suicides registered during a particular time will therefore not be reflective of suicides that actually occurred in that period.

At present, NISRA recommends that users of suicide statistics refer to the subset of 'self-inflicted injury' as the most accurate count in relation to trends. This is due to an ongoing review of the coverage of the sub-category 'undetermined intent'. Further information on the review is available in the guidance note provided at <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/suicide-statistics>.

The table provides the number of deaths as a result of self-inflicted injury (ICD code X60-X84 & Y87.0) in each of the years 2018 to 2020 broken down by month. Data for the years 2018 and 2019 are final, whereas 2020 data are still provisional. Data for October to December 2020 are currently not available but are due to be published on 24th March 2021.

Month	Number of Death Registrations due to self-inflicted injury ⁽¹⁾		
	2018	2019	2020*
January	16	24	9
February	8	18	15
March	17	24	10
April	11	15	11
May	12	21	17
June	16	12	16
July	16	7	17
August	16	15	12
September	9	17	20
October	28	18	N/A
November	22	12	N/A
December	13	9	N/A

(1) Deaths by self-inflicted injury are a sub-set of suicide deaths; deaths of undetermined intent are excluded.

* provisional

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance how many Civil Service staff vacancies exist within each Department; and what measures are being taken to fill those vacancies.

(AQW 14487/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Details of the total vacancies in each department is not held centrally. Individual departments advise DoF NICSHR of vacancies that they wish to proceed to fill.

For General Service grades, supply is available at AO, SO and DP grades from recent volume external competitions, with allocations of successful candidates into vacant posts underway. It should be noted that due to the current pandemic

situation, some departments have asked for start dates to be delayed. A number of individual competitions are also underway to fill General Service posts requiring specific skills and experience, particularly relating to priority posts at the senior grades. Consideration is currently being given to generating supply at the EO1 and EO2 grades.

For non-General Service grades, the range and complexity of roles within the NICS means that these vacancies fall across over 60 occupational groups (such as civil engineers, medical officers, accountants, etc) and require individual competitions.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Finance to detail the procurement process that was used to acquire personal protective equipment for all Departments.

(AQW 14507/17-22)

Mr Murphy: From the 23 March 2020 until the end of June 2020, a number of Covid related PPE products were purchased using the extreme urgency provisions of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 (as amended) without competition in accordance with guidance published by the European Commission. This was in response to global market constraints and difficulty in securing access to particular PPE products required to support our frontline workers.

On the 25 June, the HSC Business Support Organisation established a Dynamic Purchasing System for the procurement of both disposable and re-useable Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and other associated products. Competitions for Covid related PPE products have been processed via this system on behalf of Departments. This system allows new suppliers and products to be added to the list at regular intervals.

For general (non-Covid related) PPE items, where the estimated contract value is above £30,000, open competitions advertised via eTenderNI are used.

Departments will manage their own procurement competitions for PPE requirements valued below £30,000.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance (i) for his assessment of the UK Housing Secretary announcement on 10 February 2021 concerning access to the grants and loans in Northern Ireland; (ii) to detail any Barnett consequential arising; and (iii) to detail the applicability of new taxes cited to Northern Ireland.

(AQW 14529/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have not been provided with the detail of the measures announced by the Housing Secretary on 10 February.

Officials are working to determine the precise impacts for the Executive including the Barnett implications and tax applicability, however Treasury has indicated that whilst the tax will apply here and in Britain, it will be for the Devolved Administrations to consider the need for a levy similar to the one announced for England.

Devolved Administrations will receive Barnett consequentials on the increased spend that arises from the tax, as per the usual arrangements.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance to detail the journeys he made by Ministerial car in the 2019/20 financial year.

(AQW 14540/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I made the following journeys by Ministerial car in the 2019/20 financial year:

- 20 return journeys from home to Clare House, Belfast
- 15 return journeys and 2 single journeys from home to Stormont Estate, Belfast
- 15 single journeys between Clare House and Stormont Estate, Belfast
- 5 single journeys from Clare House or Stormont Estate to Belfast City Centre and Greater Belfast
- 1 return journey from home to Newry then Dublin Airport
- 1 return journey from home to Derry City
- 1 journey from home to Greenmount College, Antrim then Stormont Estate, Belfast
- 1 return journey from home to Belfast City Airport

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Finance what steps he has taken to ensure that healthcare workers who receive £500 and healthcare students who receive £2000 recognition payments will not have to pay tax or National Insurance contributions on these payments.

(AQW 14543/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The payment of tax and National Insurance contributions is subject to rules set by the Treasury and HMRC. I have recently written to the Treasury on the issue of special recognition payments and requested that these payments are exempted from tax and social security calculations. Unfortunately the Financial Secretary to the Treasury has stated that the British Government does not believe there is a case for granting an exemption in relation to the special recognition payment.

He has also advised that if the intention is for workers to benefit by at least £500 through bonus schemes, the Executive – like the other devolved administrations – has the option to gross up the payment to take into account the tax liabilities.

I have written to the Health Minister suggesting that he may wish to consider the cost and other implications of this approach to the special recognition payments.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Finance what bids he received in the January monitoring round from the Department for Infrastructure for the further development of the Department's greenways infrastructure strategy.

(AQW 14599/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I can confirm that the Department for Infrastructure did not submit any bids in the January Monitoring round for the further development of the Department's greenways infrastructure strategy.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Finance what discussions he has had with the Minister of Health concerning the potential for bids to support independent podiatrists through the pandemic using money to be spent during this financial year.

(AQW 14684/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have asked all Executive colleagues to consider the potential for bids to support the sectors within their areas of policy responsibility.

I have had no specific discussions however, with the Minister of Health regarding the potential for bids to support independent podiatrists. As independent podiatrists are privately run businesses, policy responsibility in this area rests with the Minister for the Economy.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Finance why communication difficulties will not be listed as a long-term condition in the forthcoming census, given that almost 30,000 people in Northern Ireland indicated that communication difficulty was their primary long-term condition in the 2011 NI Census.

(AQW 14829/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The development of the content of the 2021 Census questionnaire started in 2015 with a consultation on the questions to be included. At that stage there was a clear need for the continuation of a health condition question. This question, first asked in the 2011 Census, examines the nature of any long-term health conditions.

Subsequent to the consultation, a range of topic-expert groups considered each question. The health condition question was considered by a health topic-expert group with representatives from the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency, the Department for Communities and Queens University Belfast.

This work along with the consultation revealed significant user need for information on health conditions such as 'Autism and Asperger syndrome' and a strategic need to align census outputs with international definitions to promote standardisation.

This, combined with the limited space available to hold the question, resulted in the refined list of health conditions listed below:

- Deafness or partial hearing loss,
- Blindness or partial sight loss,
- A mobility or dexterity difficulty that requires the use of a wheelchair,
- A mobility or dexterity difficulty that limits basic physical activities (for example walking or dressing),
- An intellectual or learning disability (for example Down syndrome),
- A learning difficulty (for example dyslexia),
- Autism or Asperger syndrome,
- An emotional, psychological or mental health condition (for example depression or schizophrenia),
- Frequent periods of confusion or memory loss (for example dementia),
- Long-term pain or discomfort,
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing (for example asthma), and
- Other condition (for example cancer, diabetes or heart disease).

This was indicated in the "2021 Census Northern Ireland Proposals Document" published in April 2019 and presented at a number of public road shows at venues across the North. In the Autumn of 2019, the questionnaire was fully tested in the 2019 Census Rehearsal.

There was no negative feedback related to the health conditions categories received on the 2021 proposals document, at any of the road shows, nor from the participants in the 2019 rehearsal. This position was finalised and brought to the Assembly for final approval in legislation passed last year.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance (i) whether he considered Armagh city as a location for one of the Connect 2 Regional Hubs; (ii) what discussions he has had with local Government in relation to the provision of a Connect 2 Regional Hub in Armagh city; (iii) why Armagh city was not chosen as a location for a Connect 2 Regional Hub; and (iv) where in Newry city he proposes for a Connect 2 Hub.

(AQW 14858/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My department is committed to establishing regional hubs where staff can work near to where they live, in line with their departmental requirements.

The initial locations of the Connect2 regional hubs are based on NICS staff commuter data analysis provided by Ordnance Survey NI, geographical location, and central government's existing office portfolio. My Department will continue to review the data to ensure that the hubs maximise their impact and best meet departmental requirements.

My officials would be pleased to meet and work with the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Council's Chief Executive to discuss existing and potential future plans.

Discussions are being held with Newry, Mourne and Down District Council about potential space within Newry city centre.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Finance how many people in care homes in the North Belfast constituency have died with COVID-19.

(AQW 14880/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) collates data on death registrations.

Data on deaths in care homes at this geographical level are not currently available. Data cleansing work on lower level geographies is still ongoing. Our current, most robust geography for 2020 deaths in care homes is Local Government District (LGD) level, which is available via the weekly Deaths Bulletin at the link below.

<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/death-statistics/weekly-death-registrations-northern-ireland>

Looking specifically at place of death for Belfast LGD, 155 care home residents have died with COVID-19.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Finance how many people with (i) learning disabilities; and (ii) dementia have died with COVID-19.

(AQW 14882/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) publishes official statistics on deaths by cause of death. The most recent release of the Registrar General Quarterly Report includes deaths registered in the 3rd quarter of 2020 (July to September): <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/registar-general-quarterly-tables-2020>

In the period March to September 2020, there were 902 deaths registered where Covid19 was mentioned anywhere on the death certificate. Of these 902 Covid19 related deaths, 345 deaths (38.2%) also had dementia (ICD10 codes F01, F03) or Alzheimer disease (G30) listed on the death certificate.

Learning disability (including Down's Syndrome) (ICD10 codes F81.9 and Q90.9) was reported on 5 death certificates, equivalent to 0.6% of the 902 Covid19 related deaths during this period. Note that death certificates include only diseases/ conditions that were causal or contributory to death; having a learning disability may not have been recorded on the death certificate for this reason.

Please note that these data are provisional and subject to change.

The fourth Registrar General quarterly report of 2020 (October to December) is due to be published on 24th March 2021.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance whether his programme for regional hubs will be open for Northern Ireland Civil Service employees who are resident in the Republic of Ireland; and what are the personal tax implications.

(AQW 14918/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Connect2 regional hubs will be open and accessible for all Northern Ireland Civil Service employees regardless of where they reside. There are no additional personal tax implications to staff using Connect2 Hubs.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether there will be an increase in the number of agency workers hired as part of the NICS contract awarded to Premiere People on 25 January 2021.

(AQW 14939/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Like many organisations, the NICS uses agency workers to carry out work which for various reasons cannot be completed by substantive NICS staff. This includes covering periods of staff absence or to support time-limited projects or contractual work or, where necessary, to cover permanent vacancies, pending substantive appointments. There is no commitment as to the volume, or value of services required under the Contract awarded to Premiere People on 25 January 2021.

However, the NICS intends to reduce its reliance on agency workers. Recruitment is ongoing to fill permanent vacant posts. The majority of agency workers are at Administrative Officer (AO) level and as 15 February 2021 there were 1749 agency workers at this grade in the NICS. A recent AO external competition, that allowed current agency workers within the NICS to apply, has resulted in over 560 letters of offer being issued to date.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance to detail plans for the number of new agency workers being hired under the NICS contract awarded to Premiere People on 25 January 2021.

(AQW 14940/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There is no commitment as to the volume, or value of services required under the Contract awarded to Premiere People on 25 January 2021.

The estimated value of the contracts awarded to Premiere People is £394m over 5 years, with the breakdown noted below:

Lot	Lot Title	Estimated Value
1	Administrative DfC	£300,000,000.00
2	Administrative excluding DfC	£58,500,000.00
4	Environmental/Scientific/Medical	£16,000,000.00
5	Agricultural	£11,000,000.00
6	Ancillary and Industrial	£1,000,000.00
8	Youth and Social Care	£7,500,000.00

The use of the contract is demand driven and the figures provided are estimates rather than a guaranteed level of business. Therefore, the number of new agency workers being hired under the NICS contract cannot be confirmed.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Finance whether he will he consider extending the same flexibility in COVID funding carry over that is available to Departments to arm's-length bodies and the organisations that they fund.

(AQW 15091/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Departments have been given limited flexibility to transfer funding between COVID-19 schemes in recognition of the demand led nature and uncertainty around implementation and uptake of schemes. Departments have the discretion to utilise that flexibility as they deem appropriate.

There is no carryforward of unspent funding into 2021-22 available to departments.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Finance whether he will provide clear guidance to Land and Property Services to resolve issues being faced by retail showrooms and other businesses which have closed following Executive guidance and legislation, but have been deemed ineligible for assistance by Land and Property Services.

(AQW 15215/17-22)

Mr Murphy: LPS must administer the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme in accordance with The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 and The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020. To act outside the Regulations would mean that LPS officials were acting unlawfully, although LPS officials have sought to interpret regulations as flexibly as possible to allow businesses to avail of support. That being said, LPS cannot take into account the fact that a business may have closed when they were not required to do so under the Health Protection Regulations. Where there is a question as to eligibility in respect of the requirement of a business to close, LPS liaises on the matter with the Department of Health to ensure their interpretation of the regulations is correct.

In addition to the requirement for a business to close under the Health Protection Regulations, there are additional eligibility criteria under the Financial Assistance Regulations that must be met to be eligible for assistance under LRSS. Therefore it is not as straightforward as a business being required to close under the Health Protection Regulations.

LPS is mindful of the fact that mistakes can be made in both the submission and administration of applications. Every applicant has the right to request that the decision to reject their application is reconsidered so additional evidence can be supplied and the decision reviewed.

If there are particular retail showrooms businesses which have had their applications for LRSS rejected, and you believe they are eligible, please let me have the details and I will ask LPS to investigate.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Finance whether social value will be one of the criteria of the policy approach of the new Procurement Board.

(AQO 1617/17-22)

Mr Murphy: One of my key priorities for the Procurement Board is to develop an enhanced policy on the inclusion of social value in all government contracts. For the first time, social value policy will be co-designed by representatives from the private and public sectors and will include themes and outcomes in line with the Executive's needs.

Once agreed I will bring this new policy to Executive colleagues for approval.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Finance how he intends to improve communication with those who have applied for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

(AQO 1620/17-22)

Mr Murphy: LPS has received just over 22,800 applications for the LRSS. Such a large volume of applications has inevitably generated a huge volume of correspondence from applicants and their representatives.

The priority from the outset has been to process these applications and advise applicants of the outcome and to make payments as quickly as possible.

However, as Members will know the restrictions have been amended and extended on a number of occasions and the administration of the scheme has been more complex than any of us could have envisaged, with 27 different payments now in operation. The number of amendments and restrictions has also meant significant reconsideration of applications to review them against amended criteria.

LPS has directed all its available resources to the administration of this scheme and I am grateful to all the staff for the way they have responded in dealing with this unprecedented situation. I don't believe it was possible to do this anymore effectively with the resources available at the time and the constraints in place. 96% of the applications received have now been dealt with resulting in over £169 million of financial support paid out to over 13,000 businesses. LPS will take the lessons learned from administering this scheme into any future work of a similar nature.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Finance what assessment has been made of the financial impact arising from the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill proposed by the Minister of Justice.
(AQO 1623/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As the department bringing the legislation it would be for DoJ to lead on any analysis needed to understand the financial impact of any changes in this area.

However, in this instance, DoJ has advised that their aim in setting policy is to follow the legal principle of 100% compensation.

DoJ has further advised that it is not possible to quantify the costs of a new discount rate, as it is not known what the discount rate will be until a review has been conducted under the new framework.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister of Finance what discussions he has had with the Minister for Communities in relation to sporting clubs that have been turned down for Localised Restrictions Support Scheme funding and do not meet the criteria for the Sports Sustainability Fund.
(AQO 1625/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I met the Minister for Communities on 16 February to discuss how the Sports Sustainability Fund and the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme can be best aligned. My officials are also in regular contact with their counterparts in the Department for Communities on this issue and are sharing information to ensure that organisations are directed to the correct scheme.

My Department has a reconsideration process for all applicants where an application to the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme has been turned down. This is applicable for all applicants, including those who do not meet the criteria for the Sports Sustainability Fund.

Department of Health

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to detail the timescale for red flag referrals for cancer returning to pre-pandemic levels.
(AQW 9946/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): The pandemic has had a devastating impact on a wide range of health and social care services. Unfortunately, the scale of the pressures we have faced has even impacted on red flag/urgent cancer treatments and surgery. These postponements are under continuous review to ensure that any delay in providing patients with the care they need is minimised.

I have established a new regional approach to prioritisation of surgery to ensure that any available theatre capacity across Northern Ireland is allocated to those patients most in need, both during the surge in COVID-19 admissions and in the future. All Trusts are maintaining urgent bookable theatre lists for emergency surgery and, where capacity allows, are utilising capacity within those lists for cancer surgery. This includes fully maximising all available in-house Health and Social Care (HSC) and Independent Sector capacity.

Trusts are keeping the position under daily review and are reinstating red flag surgery and reschedule patients as quickly as possible. The new regional process highlighted above will ensure that patients are seen according to clinical priority and not on the basis of their Trust of residence.

The HSC will continue to explore all opportunities to maximise and expand available capacity, but it remains impossible to predict when red flag referrals for cancer will return to pre-pandemic levels.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether he will request military personnel for duties to assist in relieving ongoing winter pressures on frontline Health Service staff.
(AQW 12159/17-22)

Mr Swann:

110 Combat Medical Technicians (CMTs) were deployed from RAF, Navy and Army to assist nursing staff in some of our hospitals which have been most under pressure.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Health to detail the current waiting time for a first time cancer patient to see a consultant.

(AQW 12417/17-22)

Mr Swann: Table 1 below provides the average waiting time for a first time cancer patient to be seen by a consultant. South Eastern Trust provided this information by tumour site and this is shown in Table 2. This information is based on patients who were triaged as suspect cancer and does not necessarily mean that the patient is a confirmed cancer patient. It includes those with a GP red flag referral or a consultant upgrade to red flag.

Table 1

HSC Trust	Average waiting time (days)
Belfast	16
Northern	47
South Eastern	*
Southern	61
Western	14

*Data shown in Table 2 by tumour site

Table 2

South Eastern Trust	
Tumour Site	Average Waiting time (days)
Breast	2
Brain and CNS	3
Dental	16
Gynae	34
Haematology	3
Head & Neck	50
Lung	47
Lower GI	26
Other	13
Sarcoma	29
Skin	25
Testicular	15
Upper GI	37
Urology	28

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health (i) what logistical or other support has been sought and obtained from the Army in the fight against COVID-19; (ii) whether a request for such support needs Executive approval; and (iii) whether Executive approval has been sought.

(AQW 12529/17-22)

Mr Swann: Officials in the Department have been engaged with armed forces representatives throughout the pandemic and on a range of issues. Armed forces colleagues have provided specialist advice and assistance in relation to testing, vaccination and surge planning, amongst other areas. In the initial surge period, military assistance was required to transfer patients requiring Extra Corporeal Membrane Oxygenation (ECMO) to specialist hospitals in England.

110 Combat Medical Technicians (CMTs) were deployed from RAF, Navy and Army to assist nursing staff in some of our hospitals which have been most under pressure.

There is an agreed process for requesting Military Assistance for Civilian Authorities. Under this process, the Minister can request military support from the Ministry of Defence through a request made to the Northern Ireland Office. Executive Ministers must notify the Executive of any such requests for assistance.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health in which category of the COVID-19 vaccination programme are (i) unpaid carers; (ii) direct payment healthcare workers; (iii) District nurses; (iv) Community Pharmacy staff; and (v) Agency health and social care staff; and who is responsible for contacting these groups to inform them of their vaccination details.

(AQW 12550/17-22)

Mr Swann: The categories of the Covid-19 and who is responsible for contacting them to inform them of their vaccination details are as follows:-

(i)	Unpaid carers	Priority Group 6	Their GP Practice will make contact
(ii)	Direct payment healthcare workers	Priority Group 2	Trust will have already made contact with their staff
(iii)	District nurses	Priority Group 2	Trust will have already made contact with their staff
(iv)	Community Pharmacy staff	Priority Group 2	Trust will have already made contact with their staff
(v)	Agency health and social care staff	Priority Group 2	Trust will have already made contact with their staff

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health whether shielding health workers can be treated as exceptional cases to receive both the initial and booster COVID-19 vaccinations to enable them to return to work as quickly and safely as possible.

(AQW 12570/17-22)

Mr Swann: At this stage anyone who is CEV should continue to follow the latest CMO advice of 26 December regardless of their vaccination status. The advice was as follows:

“From 26 December, CEV people who are working and are unable to do so from home are advised not to attend the workplace.

This is advice only. People are free to make their own judgements about whether or not they should attend work, depending on the COVID-security of their working environment. However, the general restrictions which apply to everyone must be followed.”

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) has recommended that as many people on the JCVI priority list as possible should be offered a first vaccine dose as the initial priority.

The four UK Chief Medical Officers agree with JCVI that prioritising the first doses of vaccine for as many people as possible will deliver the greatest benefit overall in the shortest possible time, will have the greatest impact on reducing mortality and hospitalisations thus protecting the Health and Social Care system, and is the right thing to do for public health.

Operationally this will mean that second doses of both vaccines will be deprioritised until a wider range of the priority groups have received a first dose of vaccine.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health to detail his plans to administer the COVID-19 vaccination programme for those who are unable to leave their homes due to mobility or other medical reasons.

(AQW 12605/17-22)

Mr Swann: Plans have been implemented for District Nurses to call with housebound patients, with the support of Trust mobile units and GPs. Up to and including 21st February 4,486 housebound patients had been vaccinated.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Health what consideration has been given, and what progress has been made, to date on the issue of COVID-19 vaccinations to the terminally ill.

(AQW 12641/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am mindful of the particularly difficult position those who have a terminal diagnosis and their families.

Depending on the stage the illness has progressed to, an individual with a terminal diagnosis may be offered vaccination in circumstances similar to those equally ill but without a terminal illness. In addition, for those whose illness has progressed to an advanced or late stage, their clinician will discuss with them whether vaccination is appropriate to their particular circumstances.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health when parents of children who are clinically extremely vulnerable will be offered COVID-19 vaccinations.

(AQW 12707/17-22)

Mr Swann: The main carer for a child who is clinically extremely vulnerable will be vaccinated as part of priority group 6. Priority Group 5 is currently being vaccinated.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health how many vaccines have not been administered due to patients missing their appointment; and how this will impact the vaccine roll-out programme.

(AQW 12717/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is no data available on the numbers of appointments missed due to non attendance. Booking an appointment and then not attending inevitably denies an opportunity to be vaccinated to another person.

The level of vaccines that have not been administered, known as wastage, is being closely monitored and has been extremely low in comparison to other mass vaccination programmes.

All vaccinators across the Vaccination Programme are working extremely hard to keep this figure at the current level.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health what consideration has been given to providing the COVID-19 vaccine to carers who are directly employed by patients under the self-employed scheme.

(AQW 12719/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Northern Ireland vaccination programme began on 8 December 2020 and focused on care home residents and staff. In addition health and social care staff in direct contact with vulnerable patients were also offered vaccination. Within a number of weeks, the programme was extended to the wider health and social care community sector, regardless of the employment status.

Personal Assistants (PAs) or Self Directed Support Carers will have had access to the vaccination clinics and were advised by their local Trust as to when they could book a vaccination slot at one of the 7 vaccination clinics across NI.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether his Department is reviewing pay or additional remuneration for final year nursing students on placements.

(AQW 13031/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is beyond dispute that the current pandemic presents unique and unprecedented challenges for these students as they undertake their clinical placements, which are an essential element of their pre-registration training. I have accordingly decided that a special recognition payment of £2,000 should be made to all students on the nursing and midwifery pre-registration programmes over the period 1 October 2020 to 31 March 2021 commissioned by my Department from Queen's University Belfast and the Ulster University.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Health for a breakdown of the £90 million provided for the COVID-19 response which has now been surrendered.

(AQW 13337/17-22)

Mr Swann: The £90 million related to a reduction in the forecast requirement for the cost of untaken annual leave of £65 million and a £25 million reduction in forecast PPE requirements as the budgeting rules had prevented it from being spent on PPE at that time.

Due to a change in the budgeting treatment by HM Treasury for our PPE stock it has now been made possible for me to utilise an additional £175 million of the unallocated funding held centrally by DoF for PPE, which effectively includes the £90m previously surrendered.

My Department is continuing to monitor the financial position in relation to Covid-19 costs and requirements are kept under constant review.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 12716/17-22, why independent childcare providers have not been offered the COVID-19 vaccination at the same time as their colleagues in the voluntary and community sector.

(AQW 13421/17-22)

Mr Swann: JCVI has advised that the first priorities for the COVID-19 vaccination programme should be the prevention of mortality and the maintenance of the health and social care systems. As the risk of mortality from COVID-19 increases with age, prioritisation is primarily based on age. JCVI did not recommend the prioritisation of any other professions apart from care home workers and Health and Social Care workers.

The implementation of the vaccination programme has followed and will continue to closely follow the prioritisation list as recommended by JCVI.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health when teachers and school staff working with children with special education needs will be vaccinated.

(AQW 13452/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member will be aware that the programme will be rolled out in line with JCVI recommendations on priority groups. A number of occupational groups have requested early access to the vaccine and while I remain sympathetic it is essential that we concentrate on those at greatest risk from the effects of COVID-19.

JCVI has not recommended prioritisation by occupation. However plans are being finalised to vaccinate a limited number of staff in special schools.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether medical students will be able to avail of the recognition payment.

(AQW 13693/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have repeatedly emphasised my appreciation of the contribution made by all employees and students across Health and Social Care during the unprecedented challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am also aware that many medical students have directly contributed to addressing the challenges presented by COVID-19 by taking up paid medical student technician and other healthcare assistant roles created by the HSC Trusts during this emergency. Individuals employed in these roles for a minimum of one month during the period 27 March 2020 to 31 January 2021 will be entitled to access the HSC £500 Staff Bonus Scheme on a proportionate basis.

Medical Education leadership across the entire NHS has been united that the priority for medical students during the most recent phases of the COVID-19 pandemic should be to support them to progress with their learning. My Department is making significant investment to ensure that this happens despite the constraints resulting from COVID-19 protocols. We have augmented our annual expenditure of £27.2m on facilitating clinical placements for medical students. An additional £4.0m is being spent over the 2020/21 academic year to ensure that the necessary significant additional supervision can be provided when medical students are in clinical environments.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health (i) to detail which health and social care staff will receive the £500 recognition payment; (ii) whether agency workers will receive the payment; (iii) whether community pharmacy staff will receive the payment; and (iv) whether registered carers working in the community will receive the payment.

(AQW 13703/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) An FAQ on the special recognition payment, which includes eligibility criteria, has been published on the Department's website and is available at the following link; <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/hsc-staff-recognition-payment-faqs>
- (ii) Agency workers on longer term placements will be eligible.
- (iii) Officials in My Department are also developing mechanisms to provide this payment to wider healthcare settings, such as community pharmacy staff.
- (iv) Officials in My Department are also looking at ways to provide this payment to those working in Independent social care settings, including those working in care homes, homecare staff, palliative care/hospice staff

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether some medical students are eligible for the £2,000 special recognition payment.

(AQW 13715/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have repeatedly emphasised my appreciation of the contribution made by all employees and students across Health and Social Care during the unprecedented challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am also aware that many medical students have directly contributed to addressing the challenges presented by COVID-19 by taking up paid medical student technician and other healthcare assistant roles created by the HSC Trusts during this emergency. Individuals employed in these roles for a minimum of one month during the period 27 March 2020 to 31 January 2021 will be entitled to access the HSC £500 Staff Bonus Scheme on a proportionate basis.

Medical Education leadership across the entire NHS has been united that the priority for medical students during the most recent phases of the COVID-19 pandemic should be to support them to progress with their learning. My Department is making significant investment to ensure that this happens despite the constraints resulting from COVID-19 protocols. We have augmented our annual expenditure of £27.2m on facilitating clinical placements for medical students. An additional £4.0m is being spent over the 2020/21 academic year to ensure that the necessary significant additional supervision can be provided when medical students are in clinical environments.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health (i) for a breakdown of all vacant properties and land owned by his Department; (ii) how long each property has been vacant; (iii) how much has been spent on rates in each of the last five years, per property; and (iv) how much has been spent on maintenance in each of the last five years, per property.

(AQW 13719/17-22)

Mr Swann: The requested information is provided in the table below.

Property	Date vacant	Date declared surplus by ALB	Spend on rates in each of last 5 years (or since vacant if vacancy occurred within the last 5 years)	Spend on maintenance in each of last 5 years (or since vacant if vacancy occurred within the last 5 years)
Land at Whiteabbey inc. Hillcroft building	July 2018	September 2018 – in disposal process	20/21: £8,389 19/20: £8,045 18/19: £15,859	20/21: £206 19/20: £9892 18/19: £1822
Iona House, Strabane	October 2011	Not surplus	20/21: £5,650 19/20: £5,650 18/19: £5,650 17/18: £5,650 16/17: £5,650	£0
Market Street, Downpatrick	April 2019	August 2020 – in disposal process	20/21: £26,790 19/20: £24,955	20/21: £11,664 19/20: £11,664
Building on Derg Valley site	September 2012	Site not surplus	20/21: £3,846 19/20: £3,644 18/19: £3,476 17/18: £3,310 16/17: £3,150	20/21: £530 19/20: £1,530 18/19: £1,530 17/18: £2,030 16/17: £530
Land at Drumcoo	N/A	Not surplus	£0	£0
Land at Cairnshill Knockbracken	N/A	June 2019 - in disposal process	£0	£0
2 Listed churches, Knockbracken	N/A	Not surplus	£0	£0
Glen Villa, Knockbracken	October 2015	Not surplus	£0	£0
Land and buildings at Gransha	Land N/A Buildings 2005	Not surplus	20/21: £766 19/20: £753 18/19: £723 17/18: £696 16/17: £669	20/21: £171,533 19/20: £10,615 18/19: £8,130 17/18: £11,050 16/17: £12,875

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health what plans are being put in place to ensure that the health care needs of trans people are prioritised and the current situation of delay is alleviated.

(AQW 13764/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Gender Identity Pathway Review Group currently is taking forward work to identify a new sustainable service model which will address waiting times, offer timely care and support people who are referred for assessment and treatment.

Anyone in need of support should in the first instance speak to their GP. In addition, there are a number of voluntary and community organisations who have been a significant source of support for many individuals transitioning (and their families) and for those waiting to access services.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health what financial support is being offered to medical students on full time placement in hospitals.

(AQW 13780/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have repeatedly emphasised my appreciation of the contribution made by all employees and students across Health and Social Care during the unprecedented challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Medical Education leadership across the entire NHS has been united that the priority for medical students during the most recent phases of the COVID-19 pandemic should be to support them to progress with their learning. My Department is making significant investment to ensure that this happens despite the constraints resulting from COVID-19 protocols. We have augmented our annual expenditure of £27.2m on facilitating clinical placements for medical students. An additional £4.0m is being spent over the 2020/21 academic year to ensure that the necessary significant additional supervision can be provided when medical students are receiving teaching when on placement in clinical environments.

Additional practical support has been provided to students in order to help offset the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the following steps:

- students were allocated the Trust of their choice for placement where possible, with the potential to reduce unnecessary travel and rent costs;
- students are offered free accommodation while on placement with provision being extended as required;
- during GP placements, students have been permitted to remain in B&B accommodation at weekends to reduce travel; and
- my Department provided funding for multiple sets of “scrubs” for medical students

I am also aware that many medical students have directly contributed to addressing the challenges presented by COVID-19 by taking up paid medical student technician and other healthcare assistant roles created by the HSC Trusts during this emergency. Individuals employed in these roles for a minimum of one month during the period 27 March 2020 to 31 January 2021 will be entitled to access the HSC Staff Bonus Scheme on a proportionate basis.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health why the £2,000 payment being given to students on non-salaried clinical placements across all year groups excludes medical students in training to be doctors; and whether a full impact assessment of this exclusion has been completed.

(AQW 13833/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have repeatedly emphasised my appreciation of the contribution made by all employees and students across Health and Social Care during the unprecedented challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Clinical placements for medical students, which do not commence largely until Year 3 of their undergraduate programme, are qualitatively different from other healthcare professions. My priority has been to support these students to progress on their undergraduate programme despite the limitations of COVID-19 protocols and over 2020/21 my Department will be investing over £31m to ensure that they can continue to undertake their learning on placement under clinical supervision.

I am also aware that many medical students have directly contributed to addressing the challenges presented by COVID-19 by taking up paid medical student technician and other healthcare assistant roles created by the HSC Trusts during this emergency. Individuals employed in these roles for a minimum of one month during the period 27 March 2020 to 31 January 2021 will be entitled to access the HSC £500 Staff Bonus Scheme on a proportionate basis.

The flat rate, one-off, special recognition payment I recently announced applies to specific pre-registration programmes where clinical placements are qualitatively different from those of medicine students.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Health to detail the vaccination plan and timeframe for children with very complex needs and who are medically vulnerable, and their families, in the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 13859/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member will be aware that the Northern Ireland model for vaccine deployment does not include routine vaccination for children under 16 years. However, in certain circumstances a child’s clinician may conclude it is the particular child’s best interests to receive the vaccine.

The main carers for children who are vulnerable will be vaccinated as part of priority group 6.

Mr O’Toole asked the Minister of Health whether he will extend the student recognition payment to include students who contributed in the first wave of the pandemic from March 2020, including medical students who were on placement.

(AQW 13872/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have no plans to change the qualifying period for the payment of a flat rate, one-off special recognition of £2,000 to qualifying students on certain pre-registration healthcare programmes I announced on 25 January 2021. This remains the period 1 October 2020 to 31 March 2021.

Any student during the first wave of the pandemic, including our medical students, who has worked in the HSC for a minimum of one month during the period 17 March 2020 to 31 January 2021, will also be entitled to access the HSC Staff Bonus Scheme on a proportionate basis.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health whether the special recognition payment for health workers will be extended to student doctors who worked in NHS facilities during this pandemic.

(AQW 13918/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have assumed that this question relates to medical students rather than doctors in Training.

I have repeatedly emphasised my appreciation of the contribution made by all employees and students across Health and Social Care during the unprecedented challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am also aware that many medical students have directly contributed to addressing the challenges presented by COVID-19 by taking up paid medical student technician and other healthcare assistant roles created by the HSC Trusts during this

emergency. Individuals employed in these roles for a minimum of one month during the period 27 March 2020 to 31 January 2021 will be entitled to access the HSC £500 Staff Bonus Scheme on a proportionate basis.

Medical Education leadership across the entire NHS has been united that the priority for medical students during the most recent phases of the COVID-19 pandemic should be to support them to progress with their learning. My Department is making significant investment to ensure that this happens despite the constraints resulting from COVID-19 protocols. We have augmented our annual expenditure of £27.2m on facilitating clinical placements for medical students. An additional £4.0m is being spent over the 2020/21 academic year to ensure that the necessary significant additional supervision can be provided when medical students are in clinical environments.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the impact of Article 16 of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland on COVID-19 vaccine supply to Northern Ireland.

(AQW 13938/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member will be aware that Northern Ireland receives its share of vaccines from Public Health England and not directly from outside the UK.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Health whether his Department will extend the £2,000 payment for student nurses and allied health placement students to include medical students who are on clinical placement and working on the frontline in our hospitals during the pandemic.

(AQW 13945/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have repeatedly emphasised my appreciation of the contribution made by all employees and students across Health and Social Care during the unprecedented challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am also aware that many medical students have directly contributed to addressing the challenges presented by COVID-19 by taking up paid medical student technician and other healthcare assistant roles created by the HSC Trusts during this emergency. Individuals employed in these roles for a minimum of one month during the period 27 March 2020 to 31 January 2021 will be entitled to access the HSC £500 Staff Bonus Scheme on a proportionate basis.

Medical Education leadership across the entire NHS has been united that the priority for medical students during the most recent phases of the COVID-19 pandemic should be to support them to progress with their learning. My Department is making significant investment to ensure that this happens despite the constraints resulting from COVID-19 protocols. We have augmented our annual expenditure of £27.2m on facilitating clinical placements for medical students. An additional £4.0m is being spent over the 2020/21 academic year to ensure that the necessary significant additional supervision can be provided when medical students are in clinical environments.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Health when COVID-19 testing staff in mobile testing units will be vaccinated.

(AQW 14018/17-22)

Mr Swann: Mobile testing staff will be vaccinated in line with the priority given to the cohort of the population they belong to by JCVI and reflected in the Covid 19 Vaccination Phased Plan.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health to detail the qualifying courses of students on unpaid clinical placement, assisting during the COVID-19 pandemic between 1 October 2020 and 31 March 2021, who are proposed to receive a one-off recognition payment of £2,000; and why all medical students on clinical placement during the same period are not receiving the payment.

(AQW 14063/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have repeatedly emphasised my appreciation of the contribution made by all employees and students across Health and Social Care during the unprecedented challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

On 25 January, I announced the payment of a flat rate, one-off special recognition of £2,000 to qualifying students on certain pre-registration healthcare programmes over the period 1 October 2020 to 31 March 2021.

The qualifying courses are the Nursing and Midwifery, Allied Health Profession, Social Work and Physician Associate pre-registration programmes commissioned by my Department from Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University.

I am aware that many medical students have directly contributed to addressing the challenges presented by COVID-19 by taking up paid medical student technician and other healthcare assistant roles created by the HSC Trusts during this emergency. Individuals employed in these roles for a minimum of one month during the period 17 March 2020 to 31 January 2021 will be entitled to access the HSC £500 Staff Bonus Scheme on a proportionate basis.

Medical Education leadership across the entire NHS has been united that the priority for medical students during the most recent phases of the COVID-19 pandemic should be to support them to progress with their learning. My Department is making significant investment to ensure that this happens despite the constraints resulting from COVID-19 protocols. We have augmented our annual expenditure of £27.2m on facilitating clinical placements for medical students. An additional £4.0m is being spent over the 2020/21 academic year to ensure that the necessary significant additional supervision can be provided when medical students are in clinical environments.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health whether Down syndrome is included on the clinically extremely vulnerable list for priority vaccinations in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 14067/17-22)

Mr Swann: Adults with Down's syndrome are included in the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable group.

Persons who are clinically extremely vulnerable are included in priority group 4 which is the cohort of the population currently being vaccinated.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of people on a waiting list for surgery as of (i) 1 January 2019; (ii) 1 January 2020; and (iii) 1 January 2021.

(AQW 14076/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of patients waiting for surgery¹ on 31st January² 2019, 2020 and 2021 is detailed in the table below.

Month Ending	Number of Patients Waiting ³
Jan-19	68,752
Jan-20	72,329
Jan-21	82,006

Source: DoH Inpatient Waiting Times Dataset

- 1 Please note: these data reflect the number of patients waiting for inpatient or day case treatment, the majority of which will be for surgical procedures. However there may be a small number of other non-surgical and diagnostic procedures included within these data; the majority of diagnostic endoscopic procedures have been excluded.
- 2 Waiting Time figures are not held for 1st January of each year.
- 3 All data are provisional and subject to change.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Health whether agency workers within the Health and Social Care sector should be receiving the Coronavirus vaccination at the same time as their colleagues who are permanently employed; and who is responsible for ensuring that they can access the vaccine.

(AQW 14084/17-22)

Mr Swann: Trust directors have indicated all agency staff working regular patterns were offered vaccination by the various Trusts at the same time as their directly employed colleagues.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health whether social care workers will receive a £500 special recognition payment.

(AQW 14169/17-22)

Mr Swann: The qualifying criteria for the special recognition payment will be extended to social care workers. A Frequently Asked Questions section has now been published on my Department's website at:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/hsc-staff-recognition-payment-faqs>

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health why, when a patient receives their first COVID-19 vaccination, the appointment date for the second dose is not then agreed.

(AQW 14190/17-22)

Mr Swann: Those who have booked in for their first dose online will automatically receive a date for the second dose. Persons will be called forward when the second dose date falls due by the Trust or GP Practice where they received their first vaccination.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health under what conditions clinically extremely vulnerable people can travel to vaccination centres to receive their vaccination.

(AQW 14228/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member will be aware that clinically extremely vulnerable people who have not been offered vaccination by their GP can book a vaccination slot at a vaccination centre.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health whether medical students on clinical placement will receive the £2000 special recognition payment announced on 27 January 2021.

(AQW 14297/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have repeatedly emphasised my appreciation of the contribution made by all employees and students across Health and Social Care during the unprecedented challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am also aware that many medical students have directly contributed to addressing the challenges presented by COVID-19 by taking up paid medical student technician and other healthcare assistant roles created by the HSC Trusts during this emergency. Individuals employed in these roles for a minimum of one month during the period 17 March 2020 to 31 January 2021 will be entitled to access the HSC Staff Bonus Scheme on a proportionate basis.

Medical Education leadership across the entire NHS has been united that the priority for medical students during the most recent phases of the COVID-19 pandemic should be to support them to progress with their learning. My Department is making significant investment to ensure that this happens despite the constraints resulting from COVID-19 protocols. We have augmented our annual expenditure of £27.2m on facilitating clinical placements for medical students. An additional £4.0m is being spent over the 2020/21 academic year to ensure that the necessary significant additional supervision can be provided when medical students are in clinical environments.

The flat rate, one-off, special recognition payment I recently announced applies to specific pre-registration programmes where clinical placements are qualitatively different from those of medicine students. I do not have any plans to expand the qualifying courses for this payment to include medical students.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he will commit to taking measures to ensure that former senior Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) staff cannot play a prominent role in the private care home sector for a time after their RQIA role finishes, so as to avoid any conflict of interest.

(AQW 14313/17-22)

Mr Swann: All HSC senior executives are issued with contracts of employment in the form set down by the Department of Health in Circular HSS(SM) 3/2008. These contracts do not contain any express post-termination restrictions, although they do include provisions relating to confidential information.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health whether agency staff working for the Health Service will receive a £500 recognition payment.

(AQW 14320/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have directed that Agency workers on longer term placements, covering vacant posts, be eligible for the HSC Recognition payment. My Officials are finalising the details of the mechanisms for payment.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health whether the special recognition payment for health care staff will be paid during this financial year.

(AQW 14323/17-22)

Mr Swann: An FAQ on the special recognition payment, which includes eligibility criteria, has been published on the Department's website and is available at the following link;

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/hsc-staff-recognition-payment-faqs>

The issue of payment to Health and Social Care staff is complex and will require considerable administration. Payment is therefore unlikely to be in this financial year, however, every effort will be made to make payment as early as possible.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Health whether the Southern Health and Social Care Trust will discontinue its routine practice of not making determinations of Continuing Health Care eligibility in cases where the individual concerned had been placed in a residential care or nursing home.

(AQW 14328/17-22)

Mr Swann: As you will be aware, the Department published the Analysis of Responses Report entitled 'Continuing Healthcare in Northern Ireland: Introducing a Transparent and Fair System' on 11 February 2021. The report can be accessed from:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/consultations/continuing-healthcare-northern-ireland-introducing-transparent-and-fair-system>

My Department will now commence a process along with key stakeholders across the HSC to implement the preferred option and develop associated guidance.

In regards to the Southern Health and Social Care Trust specifically, the Trust is reflecting on recent correspondence received from NIPSO in respect of Continuing Healthcare, as well as on communication received from the Department of Health (dated 11 February 2021) in respect of the above mentioned consultation exercise on Continuing Healthcare, the purpose of which was to provide clarity and revision to the continuing healthcare policy in Northern Ireland.

After a period of consideration, the Trust will be taking action to address any ongoing concerns which individuals have in respect of requests for CHC determinations.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 12604/17-22, whether he has any plans to submit a business case to prioritise key workers (i) in essential retail; (ii) living in rural areas; (iii) in private residential and care homes; and (iv) with underlying medical conditions, within the COVID-19 vaccination programme.

(AQW 14333/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) Key workers in essential retail & (ii) Key workers living in rural areas;

Vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which advises the 4 UK Health Ministers. JCVI have not recommended occupational prioritisation other than Health & Social Care Workers at Priority Group 2.

- (ii) Key workers in private residential and care homes

All key workers in private and residential care homes should have had the opportunity to receive their vaccination as vaccines were offered to all those within this sector under at priority group 1.

- (iii) Key workers with underlying medical conditions, within the COVID-19 vaccination programme.

The vaccination programme in Northern Ireland is running steadily and we have made exceptional progress through groups 1-4. Those people with underlying medical conditions which render them clinically extremely vulnerable are being vaccinated as part of priority group 4 and those clinically vulnerable will be vaccinated as part of priority group 6.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on reform of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority to ensure full independence and highest standards in corporate governance.

(AQW 14345/17-22)

Mr Swann: In October 2020, I appointed six interim Non Executive members to the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) Board.

The RQIA Board is operating its committees including its Audit and Risk Assurance Committee with proper arrangements for risk management and financial management in place.

RQIA is functioning as a properly constituted arms length body of the Department of Health, with appropriate accountability arrangements in place, including mechanisms for internal and external audit.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on work carried out so far in 2021 on the implementation of the recommendations of the Inquiry into Hyponatraemia-related Deaths.

(AQW 14347/17-22)

Mr Swann: In 2021 work has continued on the Statutory Duty of Candour, the Independent Medical Examiner, Being Open Guidance, the HSC Board Member Handbook and the SAI Statement of Rights.

My officials continue to move forward work on the recommendations in tandem with dealing with the pressure on the system as a result of the pandemic.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health to detail the Dual Diagnosis services in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 14358/17-22)

Mr Swann: Patients with a dual diagnosis of mental health and addiction have access to the same mental health and addictions services as those with a single diagnosis. In both mental health and addiction services the level and kind of care and treatment are professional decisions based on the clinical needs of the patient. It is therefore not possible to detail specific dual diagnosis services, as these are provided in line with all mental health and addiction services.

Both mental health and addictions services are available in all Health and Social Care Trusts across Northern Ireland. The services are usually accessed through a referral from a GP and out of hours services are available if deemed clinically necessary.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health in which priority group of the vaccination programme are family members of those living with blood cancers.

(AQW 14371/17-22)

Mr Swann: As per the JCVI recommendations, carers who care for those who are clinically vulnerable are included as part of priority group 6.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of intensive care unit nursing vacancies that are currently vacant at the Ulster Hospital; and how long the posts have been vacant.

(AQW 14426/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are currently 13 vacant intensive care unit (ICU) nursing posts at the Ulster Hospital, the only ICU site in the South Eastern Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust. It is hoped this progress will be made in the coming weeks with a view to filling these vacancies in the following month, subject to completion of satisfactory pre-employment checks.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the bereavement services currently commissioned (i) regionally; and (ii) within each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 14432/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department for Health does not commission bereavement services regionally or within Health and Social Care Trusts.

The Public Health Agency provides funding for various bereavement services, projects and groups across Northern Ireland.

Bereavement services within each HSC Trusts have traditionally been provided by 3rd sector community, voluntary and charitable organisations who through contracts deliver bereavement care and support to the bereaved.

Specialist services are also available to deliver mental health or psychological therapies when bereavement has become more complicated by trauma or circumstances of death. Each HSC Trust also has a dedicated Bereavement Co-Ordinator.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Health to detail his funding allocation of £175 million for personal protective equipment (PPE), including what is to be ordered and for how long a period the PPE is expected to cover his Department.

(AQW 14440/17-22)

Mr Swann: Orthopaedic Operations

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health (i) what the current waiting time is for an Orthopaedic operation; and (ii) how many have taken place in each of the last three years, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 14484/17-22)

Mr Swann: Data on the current waiting times and number of Orthopaedic specific operations is not available. However, data is available on the number of people currently waiting, the number of weeks waiting, the average waiting time and the number of operations carried out within the Trauma and Orthopaedic (T&O) speciality.

There were 19,371 patients waiting for a T&O appointment at 31st January 2021. This is broken down by the number of weeks patients were waiting to date as at 31st January 2021 in Table 1, and does not therefore reflect how long patients will wait. These data exclude most patients waiting on diagnostic endoscopies but may include some patients waiting on other diagnostic procedures.

Table 1: Number of Patients waiting for T&O appointments by weeks waiting, 31st January 2021

Weeks Waiting	Number of Patients Waiting	
0-6	554	(2.9%)
>6-13	1,223	(6.3%)
>13-21	1,176	(6.1%)
>21-26	449	(2.3%)
>26-52	2,601	(13.4%)
>52	13,368	(69.0%)
Total		19,371

Source: DoH Inpatient Waiting Times Dataset

1 Data are provisional and subject to change

The average completed waiting time for patients undergoing T&O surgery is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Average waiting times (weeks) for T&O Surgery, 2017/18-2019/20

HSC Trust	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Belfast	31.3	35.9	14.1
Northern	24.5	29.3	29.0
South Eastern	16.7	19.1	18.4
Southern	25.3	31.0	24.2
Western	52.1	56.8	58.9
Northern Ireland	30.4	34.9	28.5

Source: Hospital Inpatient System

The number of T&O operations that have taken place in each of the last three years is presented in Table 3, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.

Table 3: Operations carried out under T&O specialty, 2017/18-2019/20

HSC Trust	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Belfast	11,368	11,436	10,228
Northern	<5	0	0
South Eastern	1,555	1,487	1,373
Southern	3,075	3,422	3,028
Western	2,776	2,798	2,678
Total	18,774	19,143	17,307

Source: KH08 returns

Note: Totals may be revised by <5 to avoid unnecessary disclosure.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health to detail the the financial support available to foster families.
(AQW 14502/17-22)

Mr Swann: A fostering allowance is paid to carers according to the age and any special needs of the child. The weekly basic allowance ranges from £131.97 - £194.42 and it comprises several components including food (40%), household costs (25%), clothing and footwear (18%), pocket money (10%) and travel costs (7%).

Additional allowances for special occasions such as birthdays or Christmas, school trips/activities, spectacles, travel expenses or if the child has any other special requirements in accordance with the child's care plan may also be paid.

I recently approved additional funding of £754,800 for foster carers bringing the total additional support provided to £1.39million since the start of pandemic.

This provided for two periods of 20% uplift in the food and household elements of the fostering allowance per child for a period of 12 weeks. The first uplift was paid during the school closures in the first wave and the second in January to March 2021.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health whether he will ensure that a full equality impact assessment is conducted on his draft Budget.
(AQW 14503/17-22)

Mr Swann: The size of my Departments budget and the extremely constrained timescale for consultation has meant my Department has been unable to complete a full EQIA on the Draft budget. As an alternative a high level equality impact assessment has been produced based on the proposed funding allocation and its likely impact on the S75 groups. This has been published on our website and can be viewed by the following link.

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/consultations/draft-budget-outcome-consultation>

Once a final budget is confirmed and I have made decisions on how the additional funding will be allocated, it will then be the responsibility of my Department's policy officials and ALBs to consider the equality/human rights/rural needs implications of the funding provided and take forward screening, EQIAs and related consultation as required.

Ms Brogan asked the Minister of Health to detail the discrepancies between different Health and Social Care Trusts in relation to the policy of offering vaccinations to those providing care to very young children and babies in nurseries and crèches.
(AQW 14538/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Northern Ireland vaccination programme has been rolled out in line with JCVI guidance on priority groupings. Trusts and GPs are working very hard to roll out an unprecedented vaccination programme at pace. Trusts/GPs have used their clinical judgement on occasions or in order to avoid a dose being wasted offered the vaccine to someone which may not have been strictly in accordance with the priority vaccination order as recommended by JCVI. This is entirely sensible and appropriate. It is likely there may be some missteps along the way but this should not detract from the work and commitment of those delivering the programme.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how much was paid to the (i) Ulster Independent Clinic; (ii) Kingsbridge; and (iii) North West Independent Hospital in the three month period of 2020 when its beds were acquired for the Health Service.
(AQW 14548/17-22)

Mr Swann: Due to complexities of validating provider claims for expenditure which are based on a full cost recovery process and not a price per procedure / session -as is the normal contracting process - the overall account payments to the three Independent Sector Providers are still being finalized.

The overall cost is expected to be in the region of £10m across the three provider organisations and the totality of payments will be finalised within the financial year. Once this work is completed, the final value of payments made to each provider organisation will be known in detail.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the impact lockdowns have had on the physical and mental wellbeing of children.

(AQW 14558/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is a growing body of evidence on the challenges that lockdown and public health restrictions present to children, particularly in relation to their physical and mental wellbeing. This is attributable to factors including increased stressors on families, reduced contact with education and other support, social isolation, and more time spent online. It is one of the reasons why an early decision was made to develop a COVID-19 Vulnerable Children and Young People's Plan.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of dental practices that provide NHS care in South Belfast, in each year since 2015.

(AQW 14605/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of General Dental practices in the South Belfast Assembly Area, between 2015 and 2020, is detailed in the table below.

Year*	Number of Dental Surgeries in South Belfast Assembly Area
2015	32
2016	33
2017	34
2018	34
2019	33
2020	33
31st December 2020	33

Source: Family Practitioner Services, Business Services Organisation

*Number of active dental surgeries at the 31st March each year. The number of active surgeries at the 31st March 2021 is not available until the annual release of the FPS General Dental Statistic 2020/21 publication on 22nd June 2021; as such, the latest figures at 31st December 2020 have been given.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health (i) how eligibility was determined for the £500 special recognition payment for frontline workers; (ii) whether the special recognition payment will count as income; (iii) whether he has received confirmation from the Minister for Communities and the Minister of Finance that anyone receiving the payment who are also in receipt of social security payments will not be adversely affected.

(AQW 14620/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) An FAQ on the special recognition payment has been published on the Department's website and is available at the following link; <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/hsc-staff-recognition-payment-faqs>
The scheme I have asked officials to implement reflects that as was introduced in Scotland. The eligibility criteria has been established to recognise the contribution of employed workers, with a proportionate payment of up to £500 based on verified hours worked.
- (ii) The payment is non-consolidated - it is not pensionable and does not create a new baseline for future pay calculations. However, tax and national insurance are payable on the sum. Further work is being undertaken by my officials to explore and potential means of reducing the tax implications to each individual.
- (iii) My Department is currently clarifying with the Department for Communities if this payment can be excluded from income assessed for benefits.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health whether he will include voluntary sector workers who are NISCC registered in the £500 special recognition payment, given their work helping the most marginalised and vulnerable during the pandemic.

(AQW 14630/17-22)

Mr Swann: An FAQ on the special recognition payment has been published on the Department's website and is available at the following link;

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/hsc-staff-recognition-payment-faqs>

The scheme I have asked officials to implement reflects that as was introduced in Scotland. While I in no way diminish the great contribution of volunteers, this scheme is for the recognition of employed workers, with a proportionate payment of up to £500 based on verified hours worked. Those in the voluntary sectors are therefore not included.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to increase the number of people offered vitamin D in the fight against COVID-19.

(AQW 14707/17-22)

Mr Swann: On 17 December 2020 NICE published COVID-19 rapid guideline NG187, available at <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/NG187>, following a review of the current available evidence. This review concluded that there was insufficient evidence of benefit to support the use of vitamin D to prevent or treat COVID-19, outside a clinical trial setting.

In light of this, I can advise that the Department does not intend to promote or make vitamin D available for the treatment or prevention of COVID-19 at this time, however this position will be reviewed in future should further evidence become available that would support its use for this reason. It remains the case that Vitamin D products continue to be prescribed to vulnerable patients in Northern Ireland in circumstances where it is deemed clinically appropriate to do so.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health how much his Department has paid in consultancy fees since the beginning of the current Assembly mandate.

(AQW 14740/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Health has paid the following amounts in consultancy fees since the beginning of the Assembly mandate.

				(£'000)
2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21 (to end of Quarter 2)	
22	206	475	215	
Total				918

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether his Department accepts all the recommendations from the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority's 2015 Review of Eating Disorder Services.

(AQW 14746/17-22)

Mr Swann: The 2015 RQIA Review of Eating Disorder Services made 26 recommendations all of which have been addressed by the relevant Health and Social Care organisations.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health to detail the average number of patients in intensive care units in each hospital for each week of January and the first two weeks of February, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 14797/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of patients in intensive care units in each hospital for each day in January and February 2021 is published on the Department's COVID-19 dashboard and is available in excel format at the link below.

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/covid-19-daily-dashboard-updates>

The Department began to collect this information in March 2020 in response to the pandemic. Data for previous years is not held centrally.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health what immediate interventions his Department plans to take to provide patients of Bannview GP practice in Portadown with GP cover in light of reports that the practice has closed.

(AQW 14859/17-22)

Mr Swann: Bannview GP Practice in Portadown Health Centre remains open and patients should continue to contact the Practice as normal. Patients with urgent care needs will continue to be assessed through the normal telephone triage process which, for a few days, is being provided by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust's Phone First service. Arrangements have also been put in place for patients with particular medical conditions.

The Trust is continuing to work closely with the Health and Social Care Board and the Department to address the current situation and put longer term arrangements in place to maintain the provision of GP led services in the Practice.

In the meantime GP support to the Practice is currently being provided by other local GP practices and the GP Federation Crisis Response Team.

Patients should still attend their scheduled appointment to receive their Covid vaccination.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health whether carers who are agency workers and who work for companies that have a contract with a Health and Social Care Trust will qualify for the £500 special recognition payment.
(AQW 15001/17-22)

Mr Swann: An FAQ on the special recognition payment has been published on the Department's website and is available at the following link; <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/hsc-staff-recognition-payment-faqs>

As set out in the FAQ, work is ongoing to examine qualifying criteria and potential mechanisms for payments to longer term agency workers.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Health whether he intends to lift the ban on the use of UK-sourced plasma for fractionation.
(AQW 15009/17-22)

Mr Swann: There has been a ban on the use of UK sourced plasma for fractionation (PFF) since 1999 to minimise the risk of transmitting variant CJD (vCJD). However, over the last 15 years scientific evidence has indicated that the risk of contracting vCJD through the transfusion of UK-sourced plasma is much lower than initially thought and there have been no known transfusion transmissions of vCJD from any blood components since 1999.

The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) carried out a detailed review in 2020 and following this, the independent Commission on Human Medicines (CHM) has recommended that UK-sourced plasma can be used for the manufacture of immunoglobulins (Ig) subject to several risk-mitigation measures being put in place.

Along with the other UK Health Ministers, I have therefore decided to lift the current ban on the use of UK plasma for fractionation, pending further policy decisions on the model of supply. This means plasma from donations given in Northern Ireland will now be able to be used to produce medicinal immunoglobulin (Ig) products, meaning more critically-ill patients will soon be able to benefit from potentially life-saving treatments, particularly those with severely reduced immune systems due to long-term cancer treatment or people with antibody deficiencies.

The policy change should improve the UK's security of supplies of these medicines in future as we will not have to rely on imports from other countries, ensuring Northern Ireland patients will have improved access to treatments. Up until now, the UK has depended on imports of blood plasma from other countries to manufacture the treatments. Due to a large rise in global demand for immunoglobulins, both plasma and these treatments have been in short supply in the UK and around the world for years. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has also meant a significant drop in plasma donations, further increasing pressures on supply.

UK Health Ministers have also agreed to the inclusion of a condition in new authorisations granted to blood establishments by the MHRA, that plasma collected in the UK should be used for the benefit of UK residents, at least until domestic demand is met, before being exported elsewhere. All other existing vCJD risk mitigation measures will remain in place and collectors and manufacturers will be required to adhere to a number of robust safety standards and risk mitigation measures, including the ability to trace donations from donor to patient. Every medicine will be individually reviewed and evaluated by the expert teams at the MHRA.

I have been given assurances by the Chief Executive of the MHRA and DHSC Ministers that the NI Protocol will not prevent UK-sourced PDMP from being authorised for supply in Northern Ireland and our patients will therefore not be disadvantaged.

The Department of Health will now work closely with the NI Blood Transfusion Service to review options for the collection and use of plasma from donors.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Health to outline how the private sector has performed in addressing the backlog of 4,280 red flag cancer procedure cancellations between 18 March 2020 and 21 January 2021 across the Health and Social Care Trusts.
(AQO 1631/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is no doubt that the pandemic has had a devastating impact on our hospital services, particularly elective care. The downturn of elective surgery reflected the unprecedented pressures that the COVID-19 pandemic is creating in our hospitals.

The HSC is also continuing to work closely with local IS providers in order to increase the elective capacity available to the HSC in the coming months. From 1 April 2020 to 7 February 2021 approximately 4,300 patients have been treated by local independent sector providers. This capacity has been prioritised for cancer and time critical procedures. In addition, capacity has been secured from RoI private providers and discussions are ongoing with NHS England for in-house and IS capacity for Northern Ireland patients.

I have established a new regional approach to ensure that any available theatre capacity across Northern Ireland is allocated for those patients most in need of surgery both during surge and as we come out of this surge. This approach will include seeking to fully maximise all available in-house HSC and Independent Sector capacity. This may mean that patients will need to travel further for their surgery.

I am assured that every attempt will continue to be made to protect the most urgent surgery where this is achievable, and that postponed operations will be rescheduled as quickly as possible. I deeply regret any patient experiencing postponements of this nature.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health what practical and financial assistance is being given to GPs to administer vaccinations to the over 70s and the clinically vulnerable to ensure those groups are vaccinated at the earliest opportunity. (AQO 1632/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am deeply grateful for the dedication of GPs across Northern Ireland. They have been working tirelessly to deliver our COVID-19 vaccination programme while simultaneously continuing to provide primary care services at this immensely challenging time.

As members will know, Northern Ireland GPs have delivered a very successful seasonal flu vaccination programme for many years. The skills and organisation for flu vaccinations have placed GPs in a good position to provide the COVID-19 vaccination.

In order to support this vital work, which is a key element of our road map out of lockdown restrictions, we have provided practices with financial assistance via a Northern Ireland Local Enhanced Services agreement. Under this agreement, practices can be paid £12.58 per vaccine administered to all relevant patients. Additional support money in recognition of the challenges of social distancing, need for staff training, data collection and possible indemnity costs based on practice population is also included within the agreement. The Health and Social Care Board has also offered practical support to GPs including advice on the ordering and safe storage of vaccine, advice on the eligible groups as set out in the guidelines from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. In addition, the Public Health Agency has 252 Sessional Vaccinators available to help support GP Practice Clinics. If a GP practice needs additional help with the delivery of the Covid-19 vaccination programme, they can submit a request for vaccinator support with their clinic.

We all recognise that an effective vaccination programme both enables us to offer protection to individuals from COVID-19 and will also gradually relieve pressure across our health and social care service. Our GPs are playing a key role in ensuring that we can achieve this. I would like to reiterate my thanks to them, and to all those involved in the vital work of delivering our COVID-19 vaccination programme in Northern Ireland.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the backlog of general surgery appointments in hospitals throughout Northern Ireland. (AQO 1633/17-22)

Mr Swann: In September 2020 the number of patients waiting longer than nine weeks for a first outpatient appointment for general surgery was 29,415 and the number waiting longer than a year was 13,185.

Reducing elective care waiting lists to an acceptable level will require significant and sustained investment and additional staffing. I have made it clear that hospital waiting lists must be a major Executive priority in 2021 and beyond.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister of Health whether a shortage in healthcare staff in rural GP practices is hampering the roll-out of the vaccine to those aged 70 to 80 years. (AQO 1634/17-22)

Mr Swann: I would like to reiterate my gratitude for the dedication demonstrated daily by GPs and their staff across Northern Ireland. Our primary care practitioners have been working incredibly hard to continue providing primary care services at this very challenging time while also working alongside HSC Trust colleagues to deliver our COVID-19 vaccination programme.

Thanks to the hard work of our local GPs, HSC Trust staff and others, the COVID-19 vaccination programme is progressing well across Northern Ireland. This programme is a vital part of securing protection for our citizens, our health care system and our economy from the threat posed by COVID-19 and it is crucial that we all work together to achieve its successful delivery.

All GPs have been under sustained pressure over this past year. I recognise that rural GPs may face particular challenges – especially where they are operating as single-handed practitioners or in geographically more remote settings. I can confirm that in circumstances where a GP practice needs additional support with the delivery of the Covid-19 vaccination programme, they can submit a request for vaccinator support. Every attempt is made to secure vaccinator support where such a request is made and the sessional vaccinator workforce can cover and travel to all rural areas.

In addition to the specific support available in relation for GP-run COVID-19 vaccination clinics, support has also been available to enable GPs to continue to delivery primary care services during the pandemic. For example, since the start of the pandemic, a significant number of retired/returner GPs have been added to the NI GP Performers List. Some of these GPs have been working in GP practices and providing cover whilst the GP partners have worked their allocated shifts in the local Covid centres.

Similarly, if GPs require locum cover but are finding it difficult to secure cover as is sometimes the case for more rural practices, the local GP Federation Support Unit can be contacted for an urgent assessment of resources required and to enable appropriate support measures to be put in place. Support is also available to practices through the Health and Social Care Board Practice Support Managers who work on a daily basis with GPs to support and assist them in the delivery of general practice services to their patients.

Over and above these day-to-day practical measures, we continue to press ahead with our efforts to secure a sustainable model of healthcare into the future which helps to address challenges facing rural GP practices. Multi-Disciplinary Teams are a cornerstone of this approach and this model is designed to support GPs and strengthen primary care services for patients. By creating an improved skills mix in primary care, we are able to ensure that service users receive care from those best placed to provide appropriate support and treatment. The MDT model is now well progressed in 5 of the 17 GP federations across Northern Ireland – Causeway, Down, West Belfast, Derry/Londonderry and Newry & District – with each local project a partnership between the federation and its local HSC Trust. Aligned to the MDT roll out, work continues to strengthen the wider primary care workforce, with both the Advanced Nurse Practitioner and the General Practice Nursing workforce continuing to expand as funding permits. This wider strengthening of the primary care workforce and the MDT model as a whole are key elements of ensuring that all areas of primary care – including rural areas - have a staffing model in place which is sustainable into the future.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health what options are available to people unable to attend a testing centre to be tested for COVID-19.

(AQO 1635/17-22)

Mr Swann: Testing in Northern Ireland will continue to be a vital tool in our response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Everyone in Northern Ireland is eligible for a COVID-19 test if they are showing symptoms of infection. Priority groups eligible for testing continues to be kept under active review and adjusted appropriately in line with emerging evidence and as we continue to scale up in testing capacity.

Testing in Northern Ireland is currently undertaken through two routes: the Trusts' Health & Social Care laboratories, and Consortium laboratory network (referred to as Pillar 1) and the National Testing Programme (referred to as Pillar 2) managed by the Department of Health and Social Care in London.

Symptomatic members of the public are tested via the National Testing Programme, Pillar 2.

In Northern Ireland we have a number of testing locations for symptomatic members of the public, which are usually available within a very short distance for most people.

As this is a national programme, it is managed centrally by the Department of Health & Social Care and all tests are booked through the online booking portal or by calling the free 119 helpline.

The online booking portal will offer a COVID-19 test at a site closest to the person's home address; this includes at an MTU if one has been deployed locally, and if appointments are available at that location at the time of the booking being made.

If an individual is, for any reason, unable to attend one of the testing sites, they can arrange for a home test kit to be delivered to their own home.

There are five fixed testing sites and eight mobile testing units (MTUs) currently operating in Northern Ireland. The MTUs are deployed by the Public Health Agency in towns and villages across the province, often for shorter periods, in response to local need and/or to provide additional testing capacity.

There are now also seven permanent walk through testing centres available, located in towns and cities across the province.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether he has applied any exceptions to the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation recommendations of COVID-19 vaccination priority groups.

(AQO 1636/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Northern Ireland vaccination programme has been rolled out in line with JCVI guidance on priority groupings, Trusts and GPs are working very hard to roll out an unprecedented vaccination programme at pace. Trusts/GPs have used their clinical judgement on occasions or in order to avoid a dose being wasted offered the vaccine to someone which may not have been strictly in accordance with the priority vaccination order as recommended by JCVI. This is entirely sensible and appropriate. It is likely there may be some missteps along the way but this should not detract from the work and commitment of those delivering the programme.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health what powers he has to introduce further protective measures in order to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 as a result of people entering Northern Ireland.

(AQO 1637/17-22)

Mr Swann: The powers to introduce emergency public health legislation are contained in the Public Health Act (Northern) 1967 and are conferred by sections 25B and 25F(2) of that Act.

These powers enable my Department to make regulations relating to international travel to prevent, protect against, control or provide a public health response to the incidence or spread of infection in Northern Ireland.

While the legislation confers certain powers on the Department of Health, since the beginning of the pandemic my actions have been part of the collective response of the Executive.

All the regulations introduced as part of this response have been agreed by the Executive. The Executive is united in its determination to get on top of the pandemic and restore normal life as quickly as we safely can, and we will continue to act together to that end.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health what action he is taking to reduce the over 6,000 preventable premature deaths in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 1638/17-22)

Mr Swann: Reducing preventable deaths is at the core of ensuring that the population in Northern Ireland enjoy long, health, active lives.

Preventable mortality is defined as “Causes of death that can be mainly avoided through effective public health and primary prevention interventions”. The number of preventable deaths according to this, now officially used by the Office for National Statistics, stood at 2,621 for Northern Ireland in 2019, a decrease of 3% from the 2,692 in 2018.

While the total for 2019 is slightly higher than the average of 2,553 over the last ten years, it is important to factor in that our population has aged and grown in size over that period. In order to make a direct comparison of mortality over time it is appropriate to look at age standardised rates

The provisional age standardised death rate for preventable causes stood at 170 deaths per 100,000 population in 2015-19 which represents a decrease of 13% over the last ten years from 195 deaths per 100,000 population in 2005-09.

That being said however, similar to life expectancy at birth, there has been a slowdown or stalling in improvements in the death rate in recent years. The recent slowdown in life expectancy improvement is not unique to NI but has been seen across the whole of the UK and in many developed countries throughout the world.

My Department therefore continues to deliver a range of actions to reduce preventable deaths. This approach is at the heart of Making Life Better, which is the Executive’s overarching strategic framework to improve health and address health inequalities.

Many of the drivers of preventable deaths sit outside the direct remit of my Department. Under Making Life Better we are therefore working closely with the Public Health Agency, Health and Social Care system and other Government Departments and will continue to work collaboratively to address the factors that impact on health and wellbeing in Northern Ireland.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health for an update on the vaccination of special schools staff.

(AQO 1639/17-22)

Mr Swann: With regard to staff working in special schools, we fully understand the anxiety of those staff, the parents and carers of the pupils. It is recognised that staff supporting these children will undertake roles which will align to the multi-agency educational and care plans for these children who are the most clinically vulnerable. Discussions have taken place between the Education Authority, Public Health Agency, Paediatricians and my department to identify a cohort of children and young people with the most complex additional healthcare needs who are clinically vulnerable to severe effects of COVID. These children have now been identified, and operational arrangements are being finalised to help EA and special school staff to identify the educational staff who support them in the special school sector and undertake procedures with the children identified that require them to work in close proximity for prolonged periods of time with the children and young people identified. The eligible staff will be able to book in for vaccination at one of the seven regional vaccination centres. I would like to commend the excellent, collaborative work which has taken place between the health and education sectors to facilitate this process.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health for an update on the operation of the Nightingale facility at Whiteabbey Hospital.

(AQO 1640/17-22)

Mr Swann: I opened the first phase of the Whiteabbey Nightingale facility on 20 November 2020. This provides additional regional ‘step-down’ beds to help lift pressures across the system caused by COVID-19. The Whiteabbey facility is focused on patients who have recovered beyond the acute phase of infection, but still require intense rehabilitation. In light of the increased length of stay for COVID-19 patients, this facility is helping to aid the flow of patients from ICU and acute care and helping to release bed capacity at acute sites.

As of 16 February 2021, 111 patients from across all five Health and Social Care Trusts have been treated at the Whiteabbey Nightingale hospital.

The lessons learned from the first eight weeks of operation suggests that the model has been successful. This has been assessed by engaging with both patients and staff and by looking at measures such as patient outcomes, length of stay and staff absenteeism.

As pressures from the current wave of COVID-19 begin to ease, I have asked my officials to explore how best to utilise the Whiteabbey Nightingale to help with rebuilding HSC. I remain acutely aware, however, that the virus remains unpredictable, so the Whiteabbey Nightingale will retain the ability to refocus quickly back to COVID-19, should the need arise.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on flood alleviation schemes for Newtownstewart.
(AQW 14171/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): As you may know, following the significant flood event that affected large areas of the Northwest in August 2017, my Department carried out a flood study to assess the flood risk to Newtownstewart from the River Strule. The aim of this study was to assess the level of flood risk to properties in the town and to identify if there were any economically viable engineering solutions to alleviate this risk. Unfortunately, this study has shown that a flood alleviation scheme at this location would not be cost beneficial. I recognise that this will be a disappointment to the owners of properties that are known to be at risk from flooding, but I can confirm that my Department will continue to carry out watercourse maintenance and regular grille inspections in the area, to help ensure that there is no increased risk of flooding. The potential for other mitigation measures to reduce the risk of flooding to properties in Newtownstewart is being explored. One practicable option is for domestic property owners to avail of the Home Owner Flood Protection Grant Scheme run by my Department. Successful applicants receive 90% of the costs (up to £10,000) to modify their properties to make them more resistant to flooding.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many schemes her Department has brought forward to assist businesses since the beginning of the pandemic.
(AQW 14224/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In recognition of the challenges faced by these sectors, I acted swiftly at the onset of the pandemic to put in place a number of regulatory easements amounting to over one million pounds of support. This has included introducing regulations to allow the automatic renewal of taxi vehicle licences, free of charge and without prior test and extending the issue of automatic licences for bus and taxi licences. All bus and taxi vehicles with a licence expiry date between 10th March 2020 and 31st May 2021 had their licence extended for a maximum period of 12 months. I also authorised the delivery of on-line periodic training and renewed 5 year licences without a medical report.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, I have brought forward the following schemes to assist businesses:

- Irish Sea Ferry Support Package;
- Airport Support Package;
- City of Derry Airport (CODA) Support Package;
- Taxi Driver Financial Assistance Scheme 1;
- Taxi Driver Financial Assistance Scheme 2;
- Bus Operator Financial Assistance Scheme 2020 Northern Ireland.

In addition on 26 January 2021, I asked for a further Determination and Designation under the Financial Assistance (Northern Ireland) Act 2009, from the First and deputy First Ministers, for a further financial support scheme for bus and coach operators, to cover the period from October 2020 to March 2021. My officials and I have engaged with the sector on the second scheme and the Executive provided their approval for the scheme on 18 February, which should launch in early March, subject to all the necessary approvals and regulations being in place.

Ms Brogan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 12674/17-22, what measures have been introduced to allow for a more flexible approach or scaling back of on-street parking enforcement in towns like Omagh.
(AQW 14378/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As indicated in my previous I took the decision to scale back the parking enforcement service during this difficult time. While parking restrictions will remain in place, only a small team of Traffic Attendants will continue to be deployed on a priority basis to locations where they can contribute most to road safety and traffic progression. The normal additional flexibility for Blue Badge holders is not affected by my decision.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 13680/17-22, whether her Department will assist ESB in attaining funding to replace the public charging network.
(AQW 14453/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Responsibility for the operation, maintenance and development of the public charge point network transferred to the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) with effect from 30 July 2015. This was in order to allow the e-car public charge point network to be commercialised. The market is also open to other commercial operators.

My officials are currently considering the future requirements in terms of public charge point infrastructure and will continue to liaise with ESB to consider any specific requests to ensure the public network can meet the needs of EV owners now and in future. Officials continue to engage with OZEV regarding funding for "Project Rapid" and we are awaiting confirmation as to whether it applies in the North at this time, and/or if it is allocated via the Barnett Consequential.

My Department has also been leading a Transport Working Group, set up to inform the transport elements of the Department for the Economy's Energy Strategy currently under development. A number of key areas have been identified for consideration including the electrification of transport.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how much COVID-19 pressure funding has been issued to Translink to date; and (ii) how this compares to other public transport organisations during COVID-19.
(AQW 14455/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) As you will be aware, COVID-19 has significantly impacted on our public passenger transport numbers and, in turn, has led to a large reduction in revenue for Translink. In light of this, and my commitment to the future of our public transport services given the key role they play in our wider Executive priorities, I have secured a commitment from Executive colleagues to protect the future of our public transport services. This commitment has been underlined by the significant financial support made available to my Department in the current financial year to support the contractual and legal obligations in relation to the delivery our public transport network and £90m has been issued to Translink.
- (ii) Based on available information, this funding sits below levels of COVID-19 pressure funding provided to other public transport operators as detailed in the following table.

Area	COVID-19 Pressure Funding
South of Ireland: Bus & Rail	€340m
England: Rail	£4,000m to date (Expected to exceed £7,000m)
England: Bus & Tram	£1,100m
Scotland: Bus & Rail	£400m
Wales: Bus & Rail	£210m
Translink: Bus & Rail	£90m

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will be conducting a feasibility study into expanding rail services from Derry to Strabane.
(AQW 14481/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My priority as Minister is to work on transport infrastructure that improves people's lives, connects communities and tackles the climate emergency through prioritising active and sustainable transport options. I believe that rail has huge untapped potential to deliver multiple benefits across our island.

My Department is currently preparing the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP), this plan will set out the priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks up to 2035. This will include high level assessments on a variety of potential rail extensions and new routes, in association with Translink. I am keen to examine how best to optimise the existing network through increased frequency of services and reduced journey times; whilst also looking at practicalities of expanding the network.

It is anticipated this plan will be published for public consultation later this year providing the opportunity for representations to be made for projects including proposals on extending the rail network from Derry to Strabane.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether (i) those areas defined by NI Water as having insufficient wastewater capacity; and (ii) those in the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council area since 2017, will be prioritised as part of the PC21 Business Programme.
(AQW 14568/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The prioritising of PC21 investment by NI Water for new and upgraded wastewater treatment works (WwTW) during a Price Control period, involves an evidence-based approach. NI Water and NIEA have an agreed scoring system to convert the evidence-based assessments into an overall prioritisation that encompasses wastewater treatment works, sewer networks and wastewater pumping stations investment needs. This process aims to maximise the benefit the solution provides to NI Water's customers and the environment.

In the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council area, wastewater system upgrades totalling ca £18 million are prioritised for investment during PC21. The specific areas and infrastructure which have been prioritised are as follows:

- Kilrea WwTW
- Aghanloo WwTW
- North Coast DA Strand Road WwPS
- Dernaflaw Sewerage
- Limavady Catchment Upgrades
- Limavady - Bovally WwPS
- Limavady UID-Ballyclose St CSO

In addition, base maintenance investments will also be conducted, throughout the 6-year PC21 period, to maintain the existing wastewater asset base.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for an update on the rural roads fund; and (ii) to detail where this additional money will be spent within Mid Ulster.

(AQW 14586/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As the Member is aware, I announced an investment of £75m in the structural maintenance of the road network in 2020/2021. Recognising the importance of investment in the roads network to improve connectivity, help communities and tackle regional imbalance, I instructed officials to allocate £12m to a Roads Recovery Fund, £10m of which is to be directed towards rural roads.

These improvements are targeting many short lengths of rural roads that are in particularly poor condition and it is estimated that, upon completion of the programme, over 500 locations on the rural road network will have benefitted from this initiative.

I am pleased to be able to advise that an extensive list of rural roads in the Mid Ulster area are included within this programme with work either planned or already having been completed on the following roads:

- A29 William Street / Molesworth Street junction, Cookstown;
- A42 Church Street / Station Road mini roundabout, Maghera;
- A54 Kilrea Road, Clady;
- B73 Battery Road, Moortown
- B73 Coagh Road, Cookstown;
- B160 Annaghquinn Road, Cookstown;
- B160 North Street, Stewartstown;
- B181 Ballymulligan Road, Magherafelt;
- B181 Springhill Road, Moneymore;
- C547 Lismoyle Road, Swatragh;
- C551 Halfgayne Road, Maghera;
- U0607 Knockanroe Road, Drumullan;
- U0615 Gort Road, Ballinderry;
- U0616 Mullan Road, Ballinderry;
- U0616 Moss Road, Ballinderry;
- U0622 Ardboe Road, Ardboe;
- U0622 Killycanavan Road, Ardboe;
- U0625 Albany Road, Ardboe;
- U0631 Woodhouse Road, Ardboe;
- U0632 Back Lower Road, Ardboe;
- U0635 Drumkern Road, Stewartstown;
- U0637 Ballygittle Road, Stewartstown;
- U0707 Mill Road, Dunamore;
- U0709 Crockbane Road, Dunamore;
- U0709 Kinnagillan Road, Dunamore;
- U0729 Drumgarrel Road, Drumullan;
- U0812 Aghafad Road, Pomeroy;
- U0812 Lurganeden Road, Pomeroy;
- U0818 Cashel Lane, Pomeroy;
- U0822 Ballynakilly Road, Sandholes;
- U0824 Gortfad Lane, Sandholes;
- U2203 Ballyloughan Road, Drumullan;
- U2208 Tamlaghtmore Road, Cookstown;
- U2209 Drumgrass Road, Churchtown;
- U5005 Old Tyanee Road, Clady;
- U5109 Barnside Road, Swatragh;
- U5084 Rocktown Road, Knockloughrim;
- U5085 Rocktown Road, Knockloughrim;
- U5089 Killyberry Road, Bellaghy;
- U5090 Killyberry Lane, Bellaghy;
- U5091 Tamlaghtduff Road, Bellaghy;
- U5100 Annagh Lane, Bellaghy;
- U5155 Tullynagee Road, Moneymore;
- U5160 Tirgan Road, Moneymore;
- U5172 Chambre Park, Stewartstown;
- U5239 Brackaghreilly Road, Maghera;
- U5346 Hillhead Park, Castledawson;
- C0637 Tullydraw;
- U0920 Tullyaran;
- U7502 Windmill Drive;
- U1106 Killybracken Road;
- C0646 Killyliss Road;
- U0935 Frenchmans Road;
- C0635 Finulagh Road;
- U0925 Garvagh Road;
- C0635 Lurgylea;
- U0923 Mullaghroddan;
- C0634 Altmore;
- C0635 Reclain;
- U1027 Gortgonis Road;
- C0637 Agharan Road;
- C0638 Quintinmanus Road;
- C0638 Mullaghteige;
- C0639 Drumkee;
- U1005 Cullion;
- U1018 Derrylaughan;
- U1005 Mineveigh;
- C0637 Agharan;
- U1031 Lower Corr;
- U1402 Leghamaghery;
- U1413 Alderwood Road;
- U1421 Corleaghan;
- U0411 Tullycorker;
- U0310 Knockconny;
- U0310 Greenhill;
- C0647 Carricklongfield;
- U0519 Derrylattinee; and
- B0128 Rehaghey.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how many electric charging points for vehicles there currently are in Northern Ireland; and (ii) how many of these are currently in disrepair or otherwise out of use.

(AQW 14592/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The e-car public charge point network is owned, operated and maintained by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB). ESB can be contacted at ecars@esb.ie or enquiries can be sent directly to ESB, Two Gateway, East Wall Road, DUBLIN 3, D03 A995.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has any proposals to bring forward an amendment to legislation to enable greater private provision of electric charging points for vehicles, as in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 14593/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has made a number of changes regarding the provision of electric charging points for electric vehicles and is working to identify further action to support the decarbonisation of transport and infrastructure services that will help to reduce carbon emissions and address the climate emergency. My Department has also been leading a Transport Working Group, set up to inform the transport elements of the Department for the Economy's Energy Strategy currently under development. A number of key areas have been identified for consideration including the electrification of transport. I look forward to considering these proposals to help deliver a change in the way we travel that also helps us to tackle the climate crisis.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure what regulations she has introduced to alleviate parking issues for new housing developments in Belfast city centre.

(AQW 14603/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Belfast City Council as the planning authority will assess all new housing planning applications on their individual merits, taking account of relevant regional planning policy and guidance, including the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) and Parking Standards, the Local Development Plan (LDP), the views of statutory consultees, such as DfI Roads and all other material planning considerations. The relevance and weight to be afforded to all material considerations is a matter for the planning authority in determining the planning application.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) what her Department is doing to address traffic management issues in the Bogside and wider Bishop Street area; and (ii) a timeframe for delivery.

(AQW 14607/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Many of the traffic management issues in the Bogside area relate to visitor parking and I am sure you are aware that a residents' parking scheme was planned for this area, however there was a significant level of local opposition to it expressed during the public consultation. A revised scheme is currently being considered and its final design will need to be consistent with the findings in the Residents' Parking review. This review is completed and draws on the experience of the residents' parking scheme implemented and other such schemes which were not implemented. When I have considered the findings of the review, I intend to make public the lessons learnt.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the rationale as to why resident parking schemes or parking solutions are not being looked at in Derry until a review of an area in Belfast takes place; and (ii) a timeframe for the completion of the review and next steps.

(AQW 14608/17-22)

Ms Mallon: You are aware that a residents' parking scheme was planned for the Bogside area, however there was a significant level of local opposition to it expressed during the consultation in 2018. A revised scheme is currently being considered and its development is not being held up by the review of the residents' parking scheme in the Rugby Avenue area of Belfast, although the final design will need to be consistent with the review findings.

My officials have completed the review into residents' parking scheme and I will be considering the findings shortly. The report on this review will inform how such schemes are implemented in the future.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Infrastructure why a pilot area for the Bogside Residents' Parking Scheme in 2019 was scrapped.

(AQW 14609/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As public representatives in Derry have been made aware, DfI remains committed to introducing a local restricted residents' parking scheme. There was a significant level of local opposition to the Bogside Residents' Parking Scheme, therefore a reduced scheme for the Rossville Street area of Derry, which there is local support for, is currently being considered.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, following the collapse of trees in Westend Park, Derry, in February 2020, and the scoping work her officials undertook, (i) for an update on the status of that work; and (ii) what action her Department is taking in regards to tree height and safety.

(AQW 14610/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I understand that a local councillor has been in consultation with the residents of Westend Park with the objective of seeking agreement on a way forward. Two options were put to them:

- (i) Complete removal of the trees: and.
- (ii) Significant reduction in the height of the trees with trimming back of any remaining branches.

She has advised local officials that the majority of residents are in favour of option (ii); that is, that the trees are reduced in height and the branches are trimmed back.

The work will be undertaken as soon as arrangements can be made.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail all unadopted streets across North Down.

(AQW 14639/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Listed below are all of the unadopted streets across North Down recorded on the Department's Private Streets Database that are subject to Private Streets Order Legislation through the Planning Process:

- Gransha Road, Bangor;
- Skipperstone Road, Bangor;
- Rathgill Parade, Bangor;
- Linen Crescent, Rathgill Parade, Bangor;
- Linen Road, Bangor;
- Linen Lane, Bangor;
- Shaftesbury, Bangor;
- Belfast Road, Bangor;
- Bloomfield Road, Bangor;
- Kilclief Gardens, Bangor;
- Forthill Parade/Close, Henderson Road, Bangor;
- Crawfordsburn Lane, Bangor;
- Hill Street, Hollywood;
- Primacy Road, Bangor;
- Bryansburn Road, Bangor;
- South Circular Road, Bangor;
- West Link/Abbey Ring, Hollywood;
- Old Belfast Road, Bangor;
- Gibson's Lane, Bangor;
- Green Road, Conlig;
- Glendowan Way, Bangor;
- Main Street, Conlig;
- Coppers Green, Green Road, Conlig;
- Evesham Lane, Bangor;
- Balmoral Dale, Bangor;
- Faulkner Road, Bangor;
- Fairfield Road, Bangor;
- Hanover Hill, Bangor;
- Balloo South Industrial Estate;
- Upritchard Court, Bloomfield Road South, Bangor;
- Rathmore Road, Bangor;
- Clandeboye Road, Bangor;
- The Banks, Bangor;
- Ashfield Hall, Ballycrochan Road, Bangor;
- Hanover Chase, Bangor;
- Rockfield Glen, Bangor;
- Ballymenoch Road, Hollywood;
- Helens Wood, Rathgael Road, Bangor;
- Lynn Hall Park, Rathgael Road, Bangor;
- Main Street, Crawfordsburn;
- Brunswick Road, Bangor;
- Rathgill Avenue, Bangor;
- Balloo Retail Park, Balloo Link, Bangor;
- Abbington, Old Belfast Road, Bangor;
- Seafront Road, Cultra;
- Faulkner Road/Clandeboye Road, Bangor;
- College Avenue, Bangor;
- Ballymacconnell Road, Bangor;
- Cedarfield 4, Bloomfield, Bangor;
- 1 Green Lane, Conlig;
- Central Avenue, Bangor;
- Rosstown, Bangor;
- Hawthorn Court, Bangor;
- Old Quay Road, Ballycultra, Hollywood;
- Rowanvale, Green Road, Conlig;
- Rosstown Meadows, Bangor; and
- Priory Apartments, Hollywood.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what she is doing to address the lack of funding for road resurfacing across North Down, given that the reserve road resurfacing list already includes Grays Park, Helen's Bay; Kinnegar Drive, Hollywood; Ballyvester Grove, Bangor, including a parking bay; Shandon Park West, Bangor; Church Avenue, Hollywood; Cultra Avenue, Hollywood; Bexley Parks, Bangor; High Street, Hollywood; Moore Drive, Helen's Bay; Riverside Road, Bangor; Sandhurst Park, Bangor; Silverstream Estate, Bangor; Clifton Road, Bangor; Croft Street, Bangor; Richmond Crescent, Bangor; Ardmillan Grove, Bangor; Ardmillan Park, Bangor; Ardmillan Gardens, Bangor; Ardmore Park, Hollywood; The Green, Conlig; Hillside Gardens, Bangor; Towerview Avenue, Bangor; Ardlee Avenue, Hollywood; Church Drive, Bangor, Newtownards Road to end; Kilbourne Park, Bangor; Chippendale Estate, Bangor; Clanmorris Avenue, Bangor; Marlborough Avenue, Bangor; Main Street, Conlig; Alandale, Bangor; Carrowdore Gardens, Bangor; Manse Road, Bangor; Fernmore Park, Bangor;

Fernmore Avenue, Bangor; Linden Gardens, Bangor; Linden Park, Bangor; Station Road, Carnalea, Bangor; Elmwood Drive, Bangor; Hawthorne Court, Bangor; Woodlands, Holywood; Rutherglen Gardens, Bangor; Sinclair Road, Bangor; Hawthorne Drive, Bangor; Henderson Avenue, Bangor; Fernbank Road, Bangor, Rodney Park to Fernbank Road; Golf Road, Helen's Bay; Grange Road, Bangor; Moyne Road, Conlig; Grove Hill Gardens, Bangor; Summerhill Gardens, Bangor; Greenway, Conlig; Rathgill Parade, Bangor; Lyndhurst Crescent, Bangor; Beechwood Gardens, Bangor; Troutbeck Avenue, Bangor; Station Road, Crawfordsburn; Southwell Road, Bangor; Beechfield Park, Conlig; Beechfield Avenue, Conlig; Beechfield Drive, Conlig; Tower Road, Conlig; Downshire Road, Bangor; Clandeboye Road, Bangor at football ground; Ballyblack Road East and Four Road Ends junction; Moss Road, Millisle; William Street, Donaghadee; and Meadowbank Avenue, Donaghadee.
(AQW 14640/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Finance Minister has announced a Draft 2021-22 budget which is currently out for consultation led by the Department of Finance (DoF) with a Final 2021-22 budget announcement due in March.

I continue to stress to my Executive colleagues the need for investment in road maintenance and for funding to be made available in 2021-22 to allow my Department to adequately maintain the road network.

The outcome of the 2021-22 Budget process will determine the level of funding available for my Department from which I will decide a road maintenance budget that in turn will be allocated on an equitable basis across all council areas. When the outcome of the budget is known, officials in my Department will prepare a programme of resurfacing schemes for the 2021/22 financial year in the Ards and North Down Council Area that will include consideration of the reserve list held by the local Roads Maintenance Office.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure what processes her Department has in place to inspect and monitor reinstatements made to roads and footpaths by utilities.
(AQW 14641/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Utility companies are responsible for permanent reinstatement of roads to an agreed specification. When utility companies do not reinstate roads in a satisfactory manner, the Department applies the procedures for inspection of reinstatements and for dealing with reinstatement failures as set out in the Northern Ireland Road Authority and Utilities Committee (NIRAUC) Code of Practice for Inspections.

My Department inspects 10% of utility openings, selected at random, within six months of the completion of the reinstatement to ensure the footway or road has been restored to the specified standard. A further 10% of randomly selected openings are inspected during the final three months of the guarantee period to ensure the reinstatement has complied with the specified performance requirements.

In addition, any surface defects which are identified outside of these inspection regimes, for example, those reported by members of the public or as the result of routine maintenance inspections, are also notified to the relevant utility company for remedial work to be undertaken.

Additional inspections are carried out by my officials, at the company's expense, to ensure the defects have been corrected.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many instructions have been issued to utilities to carry out further work to road and footpath reinstatements made by them during 2020.
(AQW 14642/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Utility companies are responsible for permanent reinstatement of roads to an agreed specification. When utility companies do not reinstate roads in a satisfactory manner, the Department applies the procedures for inspection of reinstatements and for dealing with reinstatement failures as set out in the Northern Ireland Road Authority and Utilities Committee (NIRAUC) Code of Practice for Inspections.

There were 760 failed inspections in 2020 when a utility company failed to carry out a reinstatement to an acceptable standard. The reinstatement defects were subsequently notified to the company responsible for repair.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure what discussions her Department has had with local councils in relation to the need for more efficient and easily accessible electric vehicle charge points.
(AQW 14651/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My officials have had regular discussions with local councils in relation to the need for more efficient and easily accessible electric vehicle charge points, including more recently with regard to the On-Street Residential Charge Point Scheme (ORCS). My officials have also been engaging with the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV) and with the Energy Saving Trust (EST), who administer the scheme, with reference to councils in Northern Ireland. The EST held a workshop with local councils in Northern Ireland about the scheme in Autumn last year.

I appreciate that not everyone can install a charge point as this requires either a garage or a driveway at the home. Therefore, the installation of on-street residential charge points is essential going forward. The British Government has just announced that grant funding for the On-street Residential Charge Point Scheme (ORCS) will continue for 2021/22 and £20 million will be available for local authorities to provide charge points for residents without off-street parking. The application process for the ORCS is open to relevant local councils in the North. I would, therefore, encourage local councils, where possible, to access this funding for the installation of charge points on residential streets. My officials are continuing to engage with OZEV and

EST to provide further support for councils that are interested in applying and will continue to make themselves available to local councils to provide assistance, advice and guidance in respect of electric vehicle related matters.

I fully recognise the importance of having modern, reliable public electric vehicle charging infrastructure in providing confidence for users of ultra-low emission vehicles and in respect of the connectivity improvements this would bring.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure what financial support her Department makes available for electric vehicle owners to erect charging points on private property.

(AQW 14652/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Funding for the installation of charge point infrastructure in Great Britain and in the North is provided by the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV). This includes funding for the provision of grants for home, work and on-street residential charging infrastructure. This includes installing charge points on private property.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure what steps her Department is taking to make electric vehicle charging points more accessible for all across Northern Ireland.

(AQW 14653/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The e-car public charge point network is owned, operated and maintained by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB). It is operated on a commercial basis and funding opportunities for the installation of charge point infrastructure in Great Britain and in the North are provided by the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV). OZEV continues to provide a broad range of funding in Great Britain and in the North including the provision of grants for home, work and on-street residential charging infrastructure.

My Department has recently been engaging with ESB on its plans to replace approx. 70 charge points i.e. 35 charge posts to upgrade and improve the reliability of the existing public network. In addition, I am also making changes to the planning system, through permitted development rights, to make it easier to expand the charging infrastructure for electric vehicles. This will allow expansion work to proceed without the need to apply for planning permission helping to make e-charging more accessible across the North.

I have also been able to support the EU INTERREG VA Funded FASTER electric vehicle network project. The project is to install a total of 73 EV Rapid charging points across the island of Ireland and the West of Scotland by 31 March 2023. I am pleased to be able to inform you that my Department will be contributing €513,945 (£455,371) of Match Funding towards the FASTER project.

The Utility Regulator's decision in March 2020 to remove the Maximum Resale Price on the electricity cost of charge points will allow commercial operators to charge above cost price of electricity supply. This should give clarity for operators wishing to provide commercial services and strengthen network provision in the North.

My Department has also been leading a Transport Working Group, set up to inform the transport elements of the Department for the Economy's Energy Strategy currently under development. A number of key areas have been identified for consideration including the electrification of transport. I look forward to considering these proposals to help deliver a change in the way we travel that also helps us to tackle the climate crisis.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number of electric vehicle charging points available across Northern Ireland, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 14654/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are currently 320 22kWh (Fast) charge points at 160 locations and a further 17 50kWh DC (Rapid) public charge points in the North. The e-car public charge point network is owned, operated and maintained by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB). ESB can be contacted at ecars@esb.ie or enquiries can be sent directly to ESB, Two Gateway, East Wall Road, DUBLIN 3, D03 A995.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her Department's plans to upgrade the electric vehicle charging network across Northern Ireland.

(AQW 14655/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The e-car public charge point network is owned, operated and maintained by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB). It is operated on a commercial basis and funding opportunities for the installation of charge point infrastructure in Great Britain and in the North are provided by the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV).

My Department has recently been engaging with ESB on its plans to replace approximately 70 charge points i.e. 35 charge posts, to upgrade and improve the reliability of the existing public network. In addition, I am also making changes to the planning system, through permitted development rights, to make it easier to expand the charging infrastructure for electric vehicles.

I have also been able to support the EU INTERREG VA Funded FASTER electric vehicle network project. The project is to install a total of 73 EV Rapid charging points across the island of Ireland and the West of Scotland by 31 March 2023. I am

pleased to be able to inform you that my Department will be contributing €513,945 (£455,371) of Match Funding towards the FASTER project.

My officials are currently considering the future requirements in terms of public charge point infrastructure and will continue to liaise with ESB to consider any specific requests to ensure the public network can meet the needs of EV owners now and in future.

My Department has also been leading a Transport Working Group, set up to inform the transport elements of the Department for the Economy's Energy Strategy currently under development. A number of key areas have been identified for consideration including the electrification of transport. I look forward to considering these proposals to help deliver a change in the way we travel that also helps us to tackle the climate crisis.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the number of e charging points across Northern Ireland; (ii) how they are maintained; and (iii) whether she plans to increase the number of e charging points across Northern Ireland.
(AQW 14657/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are currently 320 22kWh (Fast) charge points at 160 locations and a further 17 50kWh DC (Rapid) public charge points in the North. The electric vehicle public charge point network is owned by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and it is responsible for the operation, maintenance and development of the network. ESB can be contacted at ecars@esb.ie or enquiries can be sent directly to ESB, Two Gateway, East Wall Road, DUBLIN 3, D03 A995.

The public network is operated on a commercial basis and funding opportunities for the installation of charge point infrastructure in Great Britain and in the North are provided by the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV).

My Department has recently been engaging with ESB on its plans to replace approximately 70 charge points i.e. 35 charge posts, to upgrade and improve the reliability of the existing public network. In addition, I am also making changes to the planning system, through permitted development rights, to make it easier to expand the charging infrastructure for electric vehicles.

I have also been able to support the EU INTERREG VA Funded FASTER electric vehicle network project. The project is to install a total of 73 EV Rapid charging points across the island of Ireland and the West of Scotland by 31 March 2023. I am pleased to be able to inform you that my Department will be contributing €513,945 (£455,371) of Match Funding towards the FASTER project.

My officials are currently considering the future requirements in terms of public charge point infrastructure and will continue to liaise with ESB to consider any specific requests to ensure the public network can meet the needs of EV owners now and in future.

My Department has also been leading a Transport Working Group, set up to inform the transport elements of the Department for the Economy's Energy Strategy currently under development. A number of key areas have been identified for consideration including the electrification of transport. I look forward to considering these proposals to help deliver a change in the way we travel that also helps us to tackle the climate crisis.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given the number of vehicles ending up in Strangford Lough or hitting stone walls, (i) what action her Department is taking to reduce the number of crashes on the A20 Portaferry Road; and (ii) why crash barriers have not been installed along this stretch of road.
(AQW 14664/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware of the recent incidents on the Portaferry Road and my officials will consider the findings of the investigations being undertaken by the PSNI and in particular any issues identified that fall within the remit of my Department.

I am advised that the Department has introduced a number of traffic management measures along the A20 Portaferry Road over the past 15 years including new road markings, warning signage, reflector posts and edge of carriageway road studs.

All requests for improvements to the road network, including a large minor works scheme to provide a vehicle restraint system, are assessed in line with DfI's current policies and guidance. All works are subject to prioritisation, with all viable proposals competing for the limited funding currently available.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there is any exception for speed camera vans when it comes to parking restrictions.
(AQW 14687/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Article 4(g) of the Roads (Restriction of Waiting) Order (Northern Ireland) 1982 states:

"Nothing in Article 3 shall render it unlawful to cause or permit a vehicle to wait in a public road for so long as may be necessary to enable the vehicle to be used for fire brigade, ambulance, police or customs purposes".

This Article would apply when a Safety Camera vehicle is being used for police purposes.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many parking fines have been issued to speed camera vans in each of the last three years.

(AQW 14688/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The function of a vehicle is not recorded by a Traffic Attendant so it is not possible to determine if any Safety Camera vehicles have been issued with Penalty Charge Notices. In any case such vehicles are operated for Police purposes so Article 4(g) of the Roads (Restriction of Waiting) Order (Northern Ireland) 1982 applies.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the criteria for the provision of a scheme to provide additional parking in a residential area.

(AQW 14703/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is not responsible for the provision of parking at residential properties, as this is not one of our statutory functions, however, RSPPG E053 sets out the protocol for dealing with such requests in social housing estates (usually pre-1960s). The RSPPG can be viewed at: <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/car-parking-facilities-existing-social-housing-estates-rsppg-e053>

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure how the criteria for traffic calming measures has been adapted in circumstances where the PSNI do not attend all accidents.

(AQW 14704/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I understand that the PSNI attend all serious injury collisions, and my Department uses their data in traffic calming assessments. This ensures a consistent approach to our assessment as the collision evidence has been gathered in a consistent manner. The PSNI injury collision statistics is the only reliable source of information available to the Department.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number of electric vehicle charging points (i) in Northern Ireland; (ii) in Belfast; (iii) in East Belfast; and (iv) planned for installation in each of these areas over the next 12 months.

(AQW 14706/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are currently 320 22kWh (Fast) charge points at 160 locations and a further 17 50kWh DC (Rapid) public charge points in the North. The electric vehicle public charge point network is owned by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB). It is responsible for the operation, maintenance and development of the network. ESB can be contacted at ecars@esb.ie or enquiries can be sent directly to ESB, Two Gateway, East Wall Road, DUBLIN 3, D03 A995.

I have, however, been able to support the EU INTERREG VA Funded FASTER electric vehicle network project. The project is to install a total of 73 EV Rapid charging points across the island of Ireland and the West of Scotland by 31 March 2023. The responsibility for the delivery of projects sits with the project partners, and more specifically the lead partner, which have agreed a timeline for delivery with the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). I am pleased to be able to inform you that my Department will be contributing €513,945 (£455,371) of Match Funding towards the FASTER project.

My officials are currently considering the future requirements in terms of public charge point infrastructure and will continue to liaise with ESB to consider any specific requests to ensure the public network can meet the needs of EV owners now and in future.

My Department has also been leading a Transport Working Group, set up to inform the transport elements of the Department for the Economy's Energy Strategy currently under development. A number of key areas have been identified for consideration including the electrification of transport. I look forward to considering these proposals to help deliver a change in the way we travel that also helps us to tackle the climate crisis.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will increase the number of days the marshalling system is in place to manage ferry queues in Strangford.

(AQW 14715/17-22)

Ms Mallon: This clearly has a cost implication and so can only be justified when it is absolutely necessary. The Ferry Service will continue to work with local groups and use historic traffic data to identify when large volumes of traffic are likely, to seek to minimise the impact on the surrounding road network.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the estimated car journeys made on the A2 Bangor to Belfast road, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 14723/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Department publishes an Annual Traffic Census which details traffic volumes on arterial routes and inter urban corridors. Copies of these reports can be downloaded at <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/traffic-and-travel-information-incorporating-annual-traffic-census-and-variations>

Using data from the count site on the A2 at Cultra east of the Folk Museum, the following data has been collated:

Year	7 day AADT*	Yearly flow
2016	36,350	13,304,100
2017	36,330	13,260,450
2018	35,970	13,129,050
2019	36,280	13,242,200
2020	27,466	10,052,556
2021 (to 19/2/21)	22,874	-

* 7 day AADT is the Annual Average Daily Traffic flows are calculated using data from the 7 day week

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) to detail the law in respect of the retention and disposal of planning files for (a) minerals permissions; and (b) old minerals permissions that require reviewing under Section 129 of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011; and (ii) whether no old minerals permission files were destroyed or lost before or during the transfer of planning functions to local authorities.

(AQW 14724/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Retention and Disposal schedules are required under the terms of the Public Records Act (NI) 1923. It is therefore a legislative requirement for NI Departments and the wider NI public sector to implement Records and Information Management as set out in this Act and in the Disposal of Documents Order (S.R. & O. 1925 No.167) and the Imperial Records Order (1925 No. 170).

There is also recommended best practice under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, section 46 Code of Practice on the keeping, management and destruction of records. Each Planning Authority should have their own Retention & Disposal Schedule in place.

Disposal does not necessarily mean destruction of a file; the term also encompasses, for example, permanent preservation at PRONI. Planning Authorities are required to maintain a planning register and the information needed for this should be retained.

The Department would not be in a position to confirm that no planning files were lost or destroyed before or during the transfer of planning files to local councils. Files were transferred from the storage facilities both on site and off site to each local council in 2015 and thereafter. It is possible that files were returned and may have been catalogued erroneously or transferred to the wrong council due to the changes in local government district boundaries.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the R Plate requirement contained within Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 was last reviewed.

(AQW 14725/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In 2011, the Department of the Environment carried out a review of the L and R driver schemes due to the over-representation of young, novice drivers involved in fatal and serious road collisions, and undertook a public consultation entitled 'Consultation on Proposed Changes to the Learner and Restricted Driver Schemes and on Graduated Driver Licensing'.

Proposals on amending the 45mph speed restriction for learner and restricted drivers and on options for a new system of Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) to build on the current R driver scheme were subsequently brought forward. The statutory framework for GDL is contained in the Road Traffic (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016.

The main purpose of GDL is to establish a revised training, testing and post-test regime for new drivers (and riders) to reduce the over representation of new (mainly young) drivers in fatal and serious road collisions.

Draft Subordinate Legislation is being prepared which will amend the Motor Vehicles (Specified Restrictions) Regulations (NI) 1998. The legislation will set out the precise details of a new two-part 'R' plate that will apply to new drivers for a period of two years after passing the practical driving test. It will also set out details of new post-test passenger restrictions. These amending regulations will be subject to affirmative resolution.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of pedestrian numbers, including those travelling between home and nearby schools, whether she will consider the installation of a pelican crossing on the East Circular A2, where both the Ballymacconnell Road South and the Ballymacconnell Road, Bangor, meet.

(AQW 14728/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In order to ensure that requests are considered consistently across all council areas, assessments for the provision of controlled crossing facilities are carried out in accordance with my Department's Road Safety Engineering policy.

An assessment completed at this location has confirmed there would be merit in providing a controlled crossing, however, other proposed schemes in the Ards and North Down Borough Council area have scored higher. This situation will be kept under review and consideration will be given to the scheme's inclusion in a future Local Transport and Safety Projects works programme, the extent and scale of which will be dependent upon funding allocated to my Department.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether her Department is responsible for cleaning motorway verges and slip roads; and (ii) if so, how often are they scheduled for cleaning.
(AQW 14733/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that my Department is responsible for cleaning motorway verges and slip roads. Daily, driven inspections are carried out in order to identify and remove objects that might represent a hazard to motorists.

Weekly inspections are also carried out to remove general litter and detritus as well as to identify those locations that may need sweeping or cleaning.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what actions her Department has been taking to address pavement potholes.
(AQW 14754/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Article 8 of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 places a duty on my Department to maintain all public roads in reasonable condition. We fulfil this duty by complying with a set of Maintenance Standards for Safety. These standards are designed to ensure a consistent level of service across the network and safe highways for all road users.

My Department utilises a system of regular inspections of the road network. Inspection frequencies vary between daily cycles for motorways to six monthly for carriageways carrying low volumes of traffic. Our current maintenance standards, under the severe funding constraints imposed on my Department, specify a range of response times for the repair of road defects which depend on factors such as their severity and the volume of traffic on the road. Response times range from one calendar day for the most serious defects, to periods of five working days and four weeks for less serious defects. Similarly inspection and repair of footpath defects are prioritised based on usage and this seeks to ensure that higher risk defects, such as those identified in busier town and city centres, are quickly addressed.

My Department bid for additional capital funding during 2020-21 as set out in the table below.

Monitoring Round	Bid Description	Bid £	Allocation Received £
June	Road Maintenance and Street Lighting repairs	11.0	0.0
October	Structural Maintenance	4.5	2.0
	Minor Works	1.0	
	Street Lighting	1.0	

From the partially successful bid of £2.0m received in October monitoring, I allocated £1.1m as a priority to Structural Maintenance with the balance allocated to Street Lighting repairs and Minor Works.

In addition, I internally reallocated Departmental capital funding of £4.5m to Structural Maintenance in January monitoring to utilise remaining available capacity to deliver additional work on the road network over the remainder of the current financial year. As a result of these efforts and a number of technical adjustments, there has been an 11.7% increase to the structural maintenance capital budget from its opening allocation this year.

As part of the Budget 2021-22 information gathering exercises, I included a bid to the Finance Minister of £120.0m for Capital Structural Maintenance. I will continue to stress to my Executive colleagues the need for investment in road maintenance and for funding to be made available in 2021-22 to allow my Department to adequately maintain the road network.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to meet with the Friends of Knock Iveagh group.
(AQW 14755/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council (ABC) is the local planning authority with jurisdiction and responsibility for the planning issues at Knock Iveagh. The Council is continuing to examine this matter and, whilst I am aware of the issues and concerns raised by the Friends of Knock Iveagh and the considerable time and effort they have put into presenting their concerns, it would not be appropriate for me to meet with the group at this stage while the Council decision making process continues.

I have corresponded with the Chief Executive of ABC on this matter and my officials will meet with Council officials in the near future with a view to ensuring that these matters are concluded as quickly as possible.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of conducting driving tests for essential workers during COVID-19, as is the case in the 26 counties.

(AQW 14756/17-22)

Ms Mallon: During the initial lockdown period, the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) assessed requests from key workers to provide them with priority driving tests appointments, once driving tests resumed. From 1 September 2020, the DVA resumed priority driving tests for key workers, and those who had their driving tests cancelled between the end of March and late June. The DVA continued to accept and assess requests for consideration as a key worker until 5 October 2020 when the application process for key workers closed and the booking system opened to all customers.

The DVA has received a number of requests from key workers requesting that they reinstate a priority service for them to avail of early appointments. The DVA is actively considering the facilitation of priority requests from key workers whose jobs are ancillary to medical, health or social care services and who are required to drive for the purposes of their work. However this approach, if implemented, would be based on engagement with the relevant employers, rather than with the individual learners, to provide the DVA with a list of any relevant staff that fall within this priority group.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail her plans to improve electric vehicle infrastructure across Northern Ireland in line with the UK Government's commitment to end the sale of petrol and diesel cars by 2030.

(AQW 14757/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The electric vehicle public charge point network is owned by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and it is responsible for the operation, maintenance and development of the network. The market is also open to other commercial operators who would wish to provide charging infrastructure.

The public network is operated on a commercial basis and funding opportunities for the installation of charge point infrastructure in Great Britain and in the North are provided by the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV). My officials continue to liaise with OZEV and the Department for Transport in relation to plans under development to support delivery of the 2030 target. I have also written to British Ministers to ascertain what support will be provided to Devolved Administrations.

My Department has recently been engaging with ESB on its plans to replace approximately 70 charge points i.e. 35 charge posts, to upgrade and improve the reliability of the existing public network. In addition, I am also making changes to the planning system, through permitted development rights, to make it easier to expand the charging infrastructure for electric vehicles.

I have also been able to support the EU INTERREG VA Funded FASTER electric vehicle network project. The project is to install a total of 73 EV Rapid charging points across the island of Ireland and the West of Scotland by 31 March 2023. I am pleased to be able to inform you that my Department will be contributing €513,945 (£455,371) of match funding towards the FASTER project.

My officials are currently considering the future requirements in terms of public charge point infrastructure and will continue to liaise with ESB to consider any specific requests to ensure the public network can meet the needs of EV owners now and in future. Officials continue to engage with OZEV regarding funding for "Project Rapid" and we are awaiting confirmation as to whether it applies in the North at this time, and/or if it is allocated via the Barnett Consequential.

My Department has also been leading a Transport Working Group, set up to inform the transport elements of the Department for the Economy's Energy Strategy currently under development. A number of key areas have been identified for consideration including the electrification of transport. I look forward to considering these proposals to help deliver a change in the way we travel that also helps us to tackle the climate crisis.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) what action is being taken to protect (a) Driver and Vehicle Agency staff inspecting vehicles; and (b) their customers; (ii) how staff bubbles are used to minimise risks; and (iii) to what degree extended opening hours are used to increase working distances between staff and to minimise the risks of COVID-19 transmission in the workplace.

(AQW 14763/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) has carried out an extensive review of its risk assessments to ensure that all relevant control measures relating to Covid-19 have been incorporated into its vehicle testing processes to keep staff and customers safe. This enabled MOT centres to safely reopen in July 2020 and remain open during the current period of restrictions.

One of the key risks identified is the potential of contracting or spreading Covid-19 through the interaction between members of staff and customers. In order to mitigate against this risk, and to meet Public Health Agency guidelines in relation to social distancing, customers are required to vacate their vehicle before the commencement of each test. It has also been necessary for the DVA to take steps to reduce the number of people in the test hall and reception areas and to determine safe building capacity for the premises, including test centre offices. These arrangements are currently in place and local management ensure that maximum capacity numbers are not exceeded.

All vehicle examiners are provided with face coverings and are required to wear a range of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) while conducting vehicle tests. Single use disposable seat covers are also provided and only one examiner will enter each vehicle presented for test. All customers have access to hand sanitiser and toilet facilities at each test site.

As a precautionary measure it is also recommended that customers bring their own hand sanitiser and /or wipes to clean and sanitise all internal surfaces in their vehicle after the test has been completed. Vehicle test reminders and booking confirmations also advise customers not to present a vehicle for test if they are feeling unwell, have been told to self-isolate or have any Covid-19 symptoms.

The Health and Safety Executive NI recommends additional controls such as 'cohorting' work teams, so they consistently work together, "where it is impossible to maintain 2m social distancing". As DVA risk assessments require the number of persons in any work area to be reduced to comply with the 2m gap it is not currently necessary to cohort teams. Nonetheless the movement of staff around test centres is not common practice and only takes place when it is necessary to provide additional capacity as well as cover for scheduled vehicle tests, where due to a variety of unforeseen reasons such as sick absence or the requirement to self-isolate, examiners are unable to attend work.

DVA risk assessments advocate the review of work schedules including start and finish times and shift patterns in order to reduce the number of workers on site at any one time and therefore facilitate social distancing to minimise the risks of Covid-19 transmission in the workplace. A number of test centres are also opening on Sundays to address the demand for vehicle tests.

Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA will continue to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time.

It is my priority to ensure that our staff and customers remain safe and the DVA will continue to be guided by the latest public health and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the budget available in her Department for electric vehicle charging infrastructure; (ii) future investment plans of her Department to expand and improve this area; and (iii) her assessment of the consequences of a lack of investment in this area, including for a net carbon-zero target and encouragement of new electric vehicle users.

(AQW 14780/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not have a budget for EV charge point infrastructure. The electric vehicle public charge point network is owned by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and it is responsible for the operation, maintenance and development of the network. The public network is operated on a commercial basis and the market is also open to other commercial operators who would wish to provide charging infrastructure.

Funding opportunities for the installation of charge point infrastructure in Great Britain and in the North are provided by the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV). My officials continue to liaise with OZEV and the Department for Transport and I have also written to British Ministers to ascertain what support will be provided to Devolved Administrations in line with the British Government's commitment to end the sale of petrol and diesel cars by 2030.

The British Government has just recently announced that grant funding to provide charge points for residents without off-street parking will continue for 2021/22 and £20 million will be available for local authorities including local councils here in the North.

I have also been able to support the EU INTERREG VA Funded FASTER electric vehicle network project. The project is to install a total of 73 EV Rapid charging points across the island of Ireland and the West of Scotland by 31 March 2023. I am pleased to be able to inform you that my Department will be contributing €513,945 (£455,371) of Match Funding towards the FASTER project.

My officials are currently considering the future requirements in terms of public charge point infrastructure and will continue to liaise with ESB to consider any specific requests to ensure the public network can meet the needs of EV owners now and in future. Officials continue to engage with OZEV regarding funding for "Project Rapid" and we are awaiting confirmation as to whether it applies in the North at this time, and/or if it is allocated via the Barnett Consequential.

In respect of the consequences of a lack of investment in this area, including for a net carbon-zero target and encouragement of new electric vehicle users, my Department has been leading a Transport Working Group, set up to inform the transport elements of the Department for the Economy's Energy Strategy which is currently under development. A number of key areas have been identified for consideration including the electrification of transport. I look forward to considering these proposals to help deliver a change in the way we travel that also helps us to tackle the climate crisis.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the adoption of Riverview Manor, Castlederg.
(AQW 14784/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Work at Riverview Manor in Castlederg is ongoing with a number of houses still to be constructed. The final surfacing to the roads and footways has still to be laid and the street lighting has still to be put into service.

The developer has indicated that when construction of all of the houses has been completed, he will lay the final wearing course before applying for his Preliminary Certificate of Adoption.

My officials will continue to liaise with the developer to assist him achieve final adoption at the earliest opportunity.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on sewerage works at Primrose Park, Sion Mills.
(AQW 14785/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can advise that NI Water has carried out major investigation work on the sewerage network at Primrose Hill, and this has highlighted problems with infiltration and network issues. NI Water is carrying out repairs at present and it is expected that it will take approximately two to three weeks to complete. Following this repair work, a more detailed plan will be considered for wider improvement work on the sewerage infrastructure at this location.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for an update on the rural roads fund; and (ii) to detail where this additional money will be spent within Upper Bann.
(AQW 14787/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As the Member is aware, I announced an investment of £75m in the structural maintenance of the road network in 2020/2021. Recognising the importance of investment in the roads network to improve connectivity, help communities and tackle regional imbalance, I instructed officials to allocate £12m to a Roads Recovery Fund, £10m of which is to be directed towards rural roads.

These improvements are targeting many short lengths of rural roads that are in particularly poor condition and it is estimated that, upon completion of the programme, over 500 locations on the rural road network will have benefitted from this initiative.

My Department does not hold or collate information on the basis of Parliamentary Constituencies, therefore information specific to the Upper Bann constituency is not readily available in the format requested.

For road maintenance purposes, the constituency of Upper Bann falls within two DfI Road Section Offices for which information is available.

I am pleased to be able to advise that an extensive list of rural roads across the two DfI Road Section Office areas, which include the Upper Bann constituency, are included in the Roads Recovery programme, with work either planned or already having been completed on the following roads (these lists also contain roads outside of the Upper Bann constituency area):

Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon East

- | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| ■ Ballymore Road; | ■ Clonmacash Road; |
| ■ Old Newry Road; | ■ Ballynagarrick Road; |
| ■ Ballykeel Road; | ■ Brankinstown Road; and |
| ■ Boghead Bridge Road; | ■ Annadroghal Lane. |
| ■ Cannagola Road; | |

Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon West

- | | |
|----------------------|--|
| ■ Tirnascoke Rd; | ■ Curragh Lane; |
| ■ Aghory Rd; | ■ Unnamed Road off Monaghan Rd; |
| ■ Mullaghbane Rd; | ■ Armaghbreague Rd; |
| ■ Drumcoote Rd; | ■ Tullynawood Rd; |
| ■ Tonagh Road; | ■ Grange Road; |
| ■ Cavanbellaghy Rd; | ■ Drumcoose Rd; |
| ■ Tyrone Ditches Rd; | ■ Derryhirk Rd; |
| ■ Shilling Hill Rd; | ■ Kilmore Rd; |
| ■ Ballysheil Rd; | ■ Mulladry Rd; |
| ■ Lough Rd; | ■ Dundrum Rd; |
| ■ Lisnagat Rd; | ■ Clarkes Lane; |
| ■ Mossview Rd; | ■ Unnamed Road off Marlacoo Rd; |
| ■ Derrynoose Rd; | ■ Unnamed Road off A29 Darkley Road; and |
| ■ Crossdall Rd; | ■ Carnavanaghan Rd |
| ■ Rowan Road; | |

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to providing sustainable transport links to support a green recovery, for an update on the restoration and extension of the Knockmore rail line.
(AQW 14811/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to improving transport connectivity for the benefit of our economy and communities across the North. Our rail network, whilst relatively small, does present a unique opportunity to improve the sustainability of the Department's transport operations.

My Department is currently preparing the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP), which will set out the priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks up to 2035. The RSTNTP will primarily consider capital investment for road and rail networks, but will also consider resource costs for improved bus and rail services. It is anticipated

this plan will be published for public consultation later this year providing the opportunity for representations to be made for projects including a feasibility study into the opening of the Lisburn to Antrim railway line through this process.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail each occasion, since the reform of local government, her Department has intervened in a planning decision using powers contained within Section 75 of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. (AQW 14848/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am not aware of any occasion where my Department has intervened in a planning decision using powers contained in Section 75 of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the Bus Operator Financial Assistance Scheme managed by her Department is available to private coach operators who operate routes in public service. (AQW 14854/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Bus Operator Coronavirus Financial Assistance Scheme 2020 related to the period 1 April 2020 to 30 September 2020. It was launched on 27 November 2020 and closed on 18 December 2020 and was open to all private operators who operate routes in public service. Eligible operators must have held a valid bus operator licence, declared their main business as the carriage of passengers and their luggage for reward, had received no other funding from the Department for Infrastructure and suffered a significant adverse impact on their income of at least 40% compared to previous years. Buses operated by Translink and the Education Authority were not eligible. This criteria was published on the Department's website on 27 November 2020.

It is expected that private operators who operate routes in public service and who meet the criteria will also be eligible for the second bus and coach financial support scheme, which relates to the period 1 October 2020 to 31 March 2021, when it is launched in March.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure what action she is taking to increase the average charging speed of charge points for electrically powered vehicles. (AQW 14875/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are currently 320 22kWh (Fast) charge points at 160 locations and a further 17 50kWh DC (Rapid) public charge points in the North. The electric vehicle public charge point network is owned by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB). It is responsible for the operation, maintenance and development of the network. ESB can be contacted at ecars@esb.ie or enquiries can be sent directly to ESB, Two Gateway, East Wall Road, DUBLIN 3, D03 A995.

I have, however, been able to support the EU INTERREG VA Funded FASTER electric vehicle network project. The project is to install a total of 73 EV Rapid charging points across the island of Ireland and the West of Scotland by 31 March 2023. The responsibility for the delivery of projects sits with the project partners, and more specifically the lead partner, which have agreed a timeline for delivery with the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). I am pleased to be able to inform you that my Department will be contributing €513,945 (£455,371) of Match Funding towards the FASTER project.

My officials are currently considering the future requirements in terms of public charge point infrastructure and will continue to liaise with ESB to consider any specific requests to ensure the public network can meet the needs of EV owners now and in future. Officials continue to engage with OZEV regarding funding for "Project Rapid" and we are awaiting confirmation as to whether it applies in the North at this time, and/or if it is allocated via the Barnett Consequential.

My Department has also been leading a Transport Working Group, set up to inform the transport elements of the Department for the Economy's Energy Strategy currently under development. A number of key areas have been identified for consideration including the electrification of transport. I look forward to considering these proposals to help deliver a change in the way we travel that also helps us to tackle the climate crisis.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure what consideration she has given to the expansion of electric vehicle charge points in East Belfast. (AQW 14892/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are currently 320 22kWh (Fast) charge points at 160 locations and a further 17 50kWh DC (Rapid) public charge points in the North. The electric vehicle public charge point network is owned by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB). It is responsible for the operation, maintenance and development of the network. ESB can be contacted at ecars@esb.ie or enquiries can be sent directly to ESB, Two Gateway, East Wall Road, DUBLIN 3, D03 A995.

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My officials have also had regular discussions with local councils in relation to the need for more efficient and easily accessible electric vehicle charge points, including more recently with regard to the On-Street Residential Charge Point Scheme (ORCS). My officials have also been engaging with the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV) and with the

Energy Saving Trust (EST), who administer the scheme, with reference to councils in the North. The EST held a workshop with local councils in Northern Ireland about the scheme in Autumn last year.

My officials are currently considering the future requirements in terms of public charge point infrastructure and will continue to liaise with ESB to consider any specific requests to ensure the public network can meet the needs of EV owners now and in future. Officials continue to engage with OZEV regarding funding for "Project Rapid" and we are awaiting confirmation as to whether it applies in the North at this time, and/or if it is allocated via the Barnett Consequential.

My Department has also been leading a Transport Working Group, set up to inform the transport elements of the Department for the Economy's Energy Strategy currently under development. A number of key areas have been identified for consideration including the electrification of transport. I look forward to considering these proposals to help deliver a change in the way we travel that also helps us to tackle the climate crisis.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will give consideration to changing the criteria for the provision of grit boxes to include all residential areas.

(AQW 14893/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Grit piles and salt bins are provided on roads which do not qualify for inclusion on the gritted road network for use by the public, on a self-help basis. Approximately 5,500 salt bins and over 52,000 grit piles are currently provided on public roads.

Whilst I appreciate the difficulties severe cold weather presents to motorists and pedestrians, unfortunately my Department does not have the resources to be able to extend our winter service to include the provision of salt boxes to all residential areas.

As you will be aware, my Department is operating within severe budget constraints and this year was reliant on in-year monitoring funds being made available to allow the current service to be provided. In these circumstances, there are no current plans to review the criteria that my officials use for the provision of salt bins.

I will nevertheless continue to make representations to the Executive for increased funding for infrastructure given its importance to communities, the economy and the environment.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many instances of graffiti in South Belfast have been reported to her Department, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 14895/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Details of the number of reports of graffiti in Belfast South, in each of the last 5 years, are shown in the table below:

Year	Number of Reports
2016	7
2017	5
2018	5
2019	8
2020	10
2021	1

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans Transport NI has for its Bangor depot.

(AQW 14930/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Balloo Road depot in Bangor comprises office accommodation and a road maintenance yard. A small number of Section Office staff are located within this site and a review in 2019 concluded that all Ards and North Down Section Office staff should be located in one building at Jubilee Road, Newtownards.

Refurbishment work on the Jubilee Road building to facilitate this move was originally planned for the 2020/21 year but has been delayed due to Covid. This is now expected to be completed by early summer 2021 and the Section Office staff will then move out of the Balloo Road site.

The provision of road maintenance services from the Balloo Depot is not affected by the move of the Section Office staff and will continue to be delivered from this site for the foreseeable future. This includes pothole repair, grass cutting, gully emptying, road drainage repair and winter gritting.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the powers, budget and responsibilities of her Department for the provision of electric vehicle charge points; (ii) her assessment of the current provision of electric vehicle charge points, including rapid-charge points, with particular reference to current and anticipated future need; (iii) what discussions she has

had with the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) in relation to fixing the broken charge points and the installation of more AC and rapid charging points throughout Northern Ireland; and (iv) any funding provided by her Department to ESB during the current mandate.

(AQW 14958/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The electric vehicle charge point infrastructure is operated on a commercial basis. Responsibility for the operation, maintenance and development of the public charge point network transferred to the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) with effect from 30 July 2015. My Department has no budget for the provision of electric vehicle charge points, however, we do maintain an interest in ensuring the network is up to standard and working effectively.

There are currently 320 22kWh (Fast) charge points at 160 locations and a further 17 50kWh DC (Rapid) public charge points in the North. My officials are currently considering the future requirements in terms of public charge point infrastructure and will continue to liaise with ESB to consider any specific requests to ensure the public network can meet the needs of EV owners now and in future. Officials continue to engage with OZEV regarding funding for "Project Rapid" and we are awaiting confirmation as to whether it applies in the North at this time, and/or if it is allocated via the Barnett Consequential.

My officials have also had regular discussions with local councils in relation to the need for more efficient and easily accessible electric vehicle charge points, including more recently with regard to the On-Street Residential Charge Point Scheme (ORCS). My officials have also been engaging with the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV) and with the Energy Saving Trust (EST), who administer the scheme, with reference to councils in the North. The EST held a workshop with local councils in Northern Ireland about the scheme in Autumn last year.

My Department has recently been engaging with ESB on its plans to replace approximately 70 charge points i.e. 35 charge posts, to upgrade and improve the reliability of the existing public network. In addition, I am making changes to the planning system, through permitted development rights, to make it easier to expand the charging infrastructure for electric vehicles.

I have also been able to support the EU INTERREG VA Funded FASTER electric vehicle network project. The project is to install a total of 73 EV Rapid charging points across the island of Ireland and the West of Scotland by 31 March 2023. The responsibility for the delivery of projects sits with the project partners, and more specifically the lead partner, which have agreed a timeline for delivery with the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). I am pleased to be able to inform you that my Department will be contributing €513,945 (£455,371) of Match Funding towards the FASTER project.

As set out above, the electric vehicle charge point infrastructure is operated on a commercial basis and my Department has no budget for the provision of electric vehicle charge points. My department has, therefore, not provided any funding to the commercial company ESB during the current mandate.

Funding opportunities for the installation of charge point infrastructure in Great Britain and in the North are provided by the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV).

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure what contact her Department has had with local businesses on the Ormeau Road in relation to the Open Ormeau initiative.

(AQW 14974/17-22)

Ms Mallon: To date the engagement which my Department has had with local businesses regarding the Open Ormeau Initiative proposals have been with four businesses which are directly impacted with the relocation of two bus shelters on the Ormeau Road, in order to assist with social distancing measures.

My Department will consult with all local stakeholders, in line with legislative requirements, before any decisions are taken regarding the wider Open Ormeau proposals.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) how much water was extracted from the River Strule at Newtownstewart; and (ii) the number of days the extraction license was breached, for (a) 2017/18; (b) 2018/19; and (c) 2019/20.

(AQW 14988/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

(i) NI Water has advised me that it reports abstraction figures to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency on a calendar year basis. Therefore, during the requested period, it has abstracted the following volumes of water from the River Strule:

- 2017- 2506130 m3
- 2018- 1797869.9 m3
- 2019 - 2077080 m3

The abstraction figures for 2020 are not yet available.

(ii) NI Water reports that it has not breached the abstraction licence on any days during this period.

NI Water is happy to directly answer any further queries you have on this matter.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she will visit North Down to see the condition of the road network.
(AQW 15005/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am very aware of the general condition of the road network across all Council areas including in Ards and North Down, and do not believe that a site visit would provide me with a fuller understanding of this position at this time.

Due to historic underinvestment in the road network over many years, the situation in the Ards and North Down Council area is common across many areas and is one that can only be addressed by higher levels of investment in structural maintenance over a sustained period of time. I will therefore continue to seek the best possible financial settlement for my Department in order to attempt to address this issue and the many other priorities facing my Department.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will address the concerns of bus and coach sectors representatives regarding the de minimis limit.
(AQW 15107/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Officials are actively considering the implications for the outworking of the second financial assistance scheme for bus and coach operators, in relation to the State Aid rules (which applied up until 31 December 2020) and the new subsidy rules under the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (which apply from 1 January 2021) in order to avoid any further constraints on each bus operator, where possible.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider the vicinity of Markethill Primary School and the neighbouring play park on Mowhan Road, Markethill, for the pilot 20 mph scheme.
(AQW 15118/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I was therefore delighted to be able to commit funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools on a daily basis.

Given the restricted budgets for works of this nature, as well as the practicalities of delivery, it was necessary to limit the number of schools to around 100 in this year's programme. Unfortunately, based on the assessment scores, Markethill Primary School was not ranked as highly as the other schools included within this year's programme. However, I do intend to take forward a further tranche of part-time speed limits at schools and Markethill Primary School will be considered for inclusion in future programmes the extent and scale of which will be dependent on the funding available to me.

Department of Justice

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice how many incidents of interface trouble have been reported to the PSNI in the vicinity of (i) mid-Crumlin Road; (ii) Hillview Road; (iii) Lower Oldpark Road; and (iv) Cliftonpark Avenue, over the past two years.
(AQW 14305/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): The locations noted in the request for information fall within the reporting district of the Tennent Street PSNI and the Waterworks Ward.

As crime statistics are recorded using national coding, there is no specific measure for 'interface trouble'. However, I can confirm that records in relation to anti-social behaviour (ASB) and public order issues over the past 2 years across the ward area are as noted on the following table:

Year	ASB	Public Order
Jan - Dec 2019	693	24
Jan - Dec 2020	801	15
Total	1494	39

The figures shown are reflective of the entire Waterworks Ward reporting area.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Justice what legislation is in place to protect the public from intimidation and threats from posters and graffiti placed in public places as seen over the recent period, or the promotion of the use of violence on posters or graffiti.
(AQW 14329/17-22)

Mrs Long: There is a range of legislation in place to protect the public from intimidation and threats from posters and graffiti in public places or promotion of the use of violence on posters or graffiti including -

- Section 1 of the Protection of the Person and Property Act (Northern Ireland) 1969 relating to Intimidation;
- Article 9 of The Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 relating to Use of words or behaviour or display of written material;
- Article 3 of The Protection from Harassment (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 relating to Prohibition of harassment;
- Article 16 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861 relating to Threats to kill;
- Section 3 of the Criminal Damage (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 relating to Destroying or damaging property.

There are also a number of other powers vested in other public authorities in Northern Ireland such as –

- The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 Article 18 enables district councils to remove graffiti or posters and placards in its district that don't have planning permission; and
- The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment (Northern Ireland) Act 2011 provides powers in relation to graffiti and posters and placards, including powers to issue defacement removal notices.

These issues were considered by Judge Desmond Marrinan in his Review of Hate Crime Legislation Report published on 1 December 2020. Judge Marrinan has recommended that "There should be a clear and unambiguous statutory duty on relevant public authorities including Councils, the Department for Infrastructure and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, to take all reasonable steps to remove hate expression from their own property and, where it engages their functions, broader public space" (Recommendation 15).

Officials have commenced work to consider all the recommendations in the Hate Crime Legislation Review Report with a view to informing a Departmental response in due course.

Judge Marrinan also noted that the Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) Report will require careful consideration in this area. Given the potential overlap, I have written to the First Minister and deputy First Minister in December 2020 asking for an update on when the FICT Report will be shared with Executive Colleagues for wider consideration.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Justice (i) whether Woodvale residents will be consulted before any decision is made to open the Flax Street barrier or gate; and (ii) whether it will remain closed if residents object to it being opened.

(AQW 14349/17-22)

Mrs Long:

- (i) Woodvale residents were consulted about the proposed removal of the security interface barriers on Flax Street and their replacement with an automated gate with CCTV coverage as part of a survey conducted in the area. The survey was concluded in March 2020.
- (ii) Newly installed gates will create vehicular and pedestrian access on Flax Street. The opening times of the gates are yet to be agreed, however, similar interface security gates elsewhere in the city open at 6.30am and close at 6.30pm daily. The gates will be DoJ-owned interface security structures, erected for the preservation of peace or the maintenance of order. As such, security advice will inform any extended or ad hoc opening times beyond the daily schedule agreed. Similarly, such advice will inform the need to close such gates outside of these times, as the need arises.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice for an update on discussions on funding for the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme with the UK Government.

(AQW 14436/17-22)

Mrs Long: Discussions on the funding, structure and activities of Phase 2 of the Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality, and Organised Crime Programme are at an advanced stage. I expect to be in a position to inform the Executive and the Assembly on the overall financial package and the financial allocations for projects in the near future.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) each bid made by her Department for in-year monitoring monies during 2019/20 and 2020/21; (ii) additional allocations to her Department in

each monitoring round during 2019/20 and 2020/21; and (iii) any unsuccessful bids made by her Department rejected by the Minister of Finance in each monitoring round during 2019/20 and 2020/21.

(AQW 14472/17-22)

Mrs Long: Details of the information requested by financial year are as follows:

All figures are Non Ringfenced Resource DEL unless otherwise stated.

- (i) The following bids were made by my Department for in-year monitoring monies during 2019/20;
 - £5.6m - Legal Aid - September Monitoring round.
 - £1.8m - PSNI - September Monitoring round.

The following bids were made by my Department for in-year monitoring monies during 2020/21

- £4.5m - EU Exit – October Monitoring round.
- £1.1m – EU Exit - Capital DEL – October Monitoring round.

(ii) The following additional allocations were made to my Department in each monitoring round during 2019/20;

- £8.8m – Pension Allocation – September Monitoring round.
- £5.8m - Fresh Start – June £5.1m, September £0.8m & January £-0.1m Monitoring rounds.
- £3.2m - EU Exit – September Monitoring round.
- £1.0m – Consolidated Fund Standing Services – September Monitoring round.

The following additional allocations were made to my Department in each monitoring round during 2020/21;

- £8.5m - Fresh Start – June £6.5m, October £1.1m & January £0.9m Monitoring rounds.
- £1.0m - Consolidated Fund Standing Services – June Monitoring round.
- £0.7m - Shared Future – June Monitoring round.
- £19.3m – Covid-19 Net Funding*

(iii) The following unsuccessful bids were made by my Department in each monitoring round during 2019/20;

- £2.8m received from the £5.6m Legal Aid bid therefore £2.8m was unsuccessful - September Monitoring round.
- £1.8m PSNI - September Monitoring round.

Note the unsuccessful bids set out above, were not rejected by the Minister of Finance, as the restoration of the NI Assembly did not occur until later in the 2019/20 financial year.

No unsuccessful bids were made by my Department for in-year monitoring monies during 2020/21.

*The Covid-19 funding process was handled by the Department of Finance in a series of financial exercises, and was treated separately from the normal monitoring round process. My Department received £25.9m additional funding from the Executive in 2020-21, which subsequently reduced by £6.6m to £19.3m following reduced requirements.

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Justice whether she will undertake to support those survivors of clerical abuse in a non-clerical setting who have not been included in previous inquiries.

(AQW 14561/17-22)

Mrs Long: I am committed, along with my Executive colleagues, to ensuring that there is support for all survivors of institutional abuse whether it be in a clerical or non-clerical setting.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Justice (i) for an update on the Executive action plan on Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime; (ii) for her assessment of the impact of the absence of a Programme for Government on furthering this plan; and (iii) for her assessment of the rising cases of gun attacks in the East Londonderry area.

(AQW 14564/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Action Plan to Tackle Paramilitary Activity, Criminality, and Organised Crime is a cross Executive initiative, co-ordinated by a Programme Team within my Department.

The latest Delivery Update Report can be found here:

<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/executive-action-plan-delivery-updates-tackling-paramilitary-activity>

The Programme was subject to a comprehensive review in June 2020, and the review document is accessible online:

<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/tackling-paramilitary-activity-criminality-and-organised-crime-action-plan>

The initial funding period for the Action Plan is due to end on 31st March 2021. The Executive has agreed with my proposal that the Action Plan be extended, in order to build on work to date and ensure that we take a long term, holistic approach to addressing the challenges associated with paramilitarism and organised crime.

I have been impressed with the collaboration which has been fostered under the Action Plan. Departments have taken a collaborative 'One Team' approach which involves a cross-Departmental Programme Board, joint problem solving around key issues, and regular information sharing and discussion. The Programme structures associated with the Action Plan have been important in developing this approach. I trust that this co-operation will continue as a new Programme for Government is developed.

I share the Member's concern about gun attacks in the East Londonderry area. Unfortunately such incidents highlight the need for ongoing efforts to create the conditions in which our society can be free of those who use violence to coerce, control and abuse communities. It is vital that those responsible for these attacks are brought to justice and I would urge anyone with information to pass it to the police or the independent charity Crimestoppers.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister of Justice whether planning permission has been sought for any changes to the interface barrier at Flax Street/Crumlin Road.

(AQW 14580/17-22)

Mrs Long: The removal of two solid interface barriers on Flax Street and their replacement with automated vehicular and pedestrian access gates covered by CCTV will be progressed under the provisions of the Justice and Security (NI) Act 2007. As with the barriers, the new gates will be classified as interface security structures, installed for the preservation of peace or the maintenance of order; planning permission is not therefore required.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Justice, following a number of so-called punishment shootings in Foyle, (i) what her Department is doing to prevent these ongoing attacks; and (ii) what support her Department has put in place for both the victim of these attacks and the communities where they take place.

(AQW 14606/17-22)

Mrs Long: Dealing with paramilitary style attacks in our communities is a societal issue that requires a sustained response from across all government departments. My Department co-ordinates the cross Executive Action Plan to Tackle Paramilitary Activity, Criminality, and Organised Crime. There are a number of initiatives under the Action Plan which are aimed at preventing vulnerable people and communities becoming involved in or harmed by paramilitarism and which cover the Foyle area. These include the Probation Board's Aspire Programme, the Education Authority's START Programme, and multi-agency working in Derry, Mid and East Antrim, and Belfast. My Department has been responsible for the public awareness campaign under the Action Plan which has sought to highlight the brutality of these attacks and to challenge attitudes to them. In addition, there is a wide range of early intervention initiatives and wider support for communities. Details can be found in the latest update report:

<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/executive-action-plan-delivery-updates-tackling-paramilitary-activity> .

It is vital that the Executive continues to take a collaborative approach to addressing the underlying issues that can make our communities vulnerable to paramilitary influence and harm.

In addition to the Executive Action Plan, my Department provides funding of £1.8m to Victim Support Northern Ireland to provide a range of support services to all victims and witnesses of crime, including the victims of these attacks. These services include the provision of emotional support, advocacy, information and advice to victims; assistance with claiming Criminal Injuries Compensation; and ongoing help and support to witnesses.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Justice what plans she has to address domestic violence.

(AQW 14713/17-22)

Mrs Long: Tackling domestic abuse is a key priority for my Department and along with our partners we are committed to ensuring that victims have access to services as well as the help and support that they need.

The provision and funding of domestic and sexual abuse services is not solely a matter for the Department of Justice, rather this is a cross cutting Executive issue. Along with the other sponsoring Ministers of the Executive's Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse strategy, I recently wrote to the Executive with an update on our work in this area. A new cross Departmental year six action plan (and progress report on year five) will also be published at the start of the new financial year.

Going forward, my Department has a number of planned initiatives including a new domestic abuse offence (covering both physical and non-physical abuse behaviours, including coercive control); a proposed new advocacy support service; legislation on information sharing under an Operation Encompass model (informing a school where there has been an incident of domestic abuse at a child's home); progression of proposals on domestic abuse protection notices and orders; domestic abuse awareness raising; behavioural change programmes for those demonstrating abusive behaviours in an intimate relationship where children are involved; and continued funding for the 24hour Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline among others.

In addition, I commenced legislation in December 2020 to introduce domestic homicide reviews locally. While tragically these reviews only commence following a domestic abuse related death, they are primarily about improving services through lessons learned and highlighting best practice, to help prevent such instances in the future and better support victims and families of domestic abuse.

Home should be a safe place for all in society but this is clearly not the case for victims of domestic violence and abuse; with Covid-19 restrictions only serving to heighten their sense of isolation. My Department continues to work with statutory and voluntary sector partners on a multi-agency basis to ensure an effective and joined up response for victims and their families at this time.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Justice how much her Department has paid in consultancy fees since the beginning of the current Assembly mandate.

(AQW 14743/17-22)

Mrs Long: The amount my Department has paid in external consultancy fees during the current Assembly mandate, for the last three completed financial years is detailed in the table below:

Financial Year	£
2017-18	1,000
2018-19	43,552
2019-20	21,350

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) what plans she has to address the increase in anti-social behaviour in Newry city; and (ii) what discussions she has had with agencies and arm's-length bodies under her Department's responsibility in relation to anti-social behaviour in Newry city.

(AQW 14769/17-22)

Mrs Long: Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) have a key role to play in my Department's response to anti-social behaviour (ASB) in local council areas given their extensive local networks with a range of organisations. Funded jointly by the Department of Justice and the Northern Ireland Policing Board, PCSPs liaise with the local community and local partners to address local community safety issues and ASB. Recognising the harm this can cause, my Department has made improving community safety by tackling anti-social behaviour a strategic objective for PCSPs.

In Newry City, the Newry, Mourne and Down PCSP lead on the Department's response on this issue. I understand, through continual assessment of issues on the ground, the PCSP is aware of the recent increase in ASB in Newry City and is working in partnership with other statutory agencies, the voluntary sector and community groups to address this issue.

Some of the actions the PCSP has recently undertaken relate to awareness raising and diversionary approaches which include increased deployment of Community Safety Wardens across the city, specifically in the Meadow and Armagh Road areas, providing a high visibility deterrent to ASB. Almost £20,000 has been provided via PCSP Financial Assistance grants to support local community-based projects aimed at tackling ASB in the city and they are liaising with the PSNI and Education Authority to support the implementation of detached youth work provision in high risk areas.

The PCSP has also been involved in the development of COVID compliant programmes, funded via Council's Good Relations Plan, which are aimed at engaging young people at risk of participating in ASB. These programmes are due to begin shortly.

However, where engagement and diversion is not working or not deemed appropriate, other disposals will be used including fixed penalties and arrests for ASB related offences.

At a wider level, my officials regularly engage with PCSP Managers allowing for any localised issue, which requires an enhanced intervention at a strategic level, to be identified. They have also recently been liaising with PCSPs on finalising their Action Plans for 2021/22 which are aimed at capturing priorities identified for delivery.

Officials have also recently facilitated a workshop with PCSP Managers, aimed at strengthening the links between ASB strategic aims and operational delivery. This will help to ensure central policy on tackling ASB is being delivered effectively on the ground and that operational and emergent issues are being fed back in a way that can assist the Department and community safety partners in the formulation of policy and support.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice, when the Official Solicitor is involved in Private Law Family contact cases with unassisted parties, to detail (i) who funds the Official Solicitor; (ii) who funds the employment of the Counsel(s) for the Official Solicitor; and (iii) why the Official Solicitor would appoint and fund both a Barrister and Queen's Counsel for cases where the other parties are unrepresented.

(AQW 14775/17-22)

Mrs Long: In proceedings where the Official Solicitor agrees to act on behalf of a child or children at the request of the Court, the Official Solicitor and any counsel instructed by the Official Solicitor is funded through the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service, Department of Justice.

The Official Solicitor is only able to act in cases heard at County Court or High Court level and above. Family cases normally begin in the Family Proceedings Court with only the most complex cases requiring transfer to the higher Court tiers where the Official Solicitor is able to act.

The Official Solicitor will allocate resources following an assessment of the complexity and history of each case to ensure that the children's rights are protected. Where there is a history of serious allegations or risk of harm to the children and/or substantial involvement of other professionals and statutory agencies with the family, then greater legal expertise and resources will be necessary to ensure the protection of the interests of the children in the proceedings.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of reports of domestic violence in each year since 2015.

(AQW 14802/17-22)

Mrs Long: The recording of information on the number of reported incidents of domestic violence and associated statistics is a 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 role of the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

You may, therefore, wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

You may wish to note that the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill makes provision on a range of information that is to be reported on, in relation to the domestic abuse offence (including where there is a child aggravator) and offences that are aggravated by domestic abuse.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Justice to detail how many people have been arrested, charged or fined in 2020 while near to or attending a protest.

(AQW 14803/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department does not hold the information requested. The recording of information on arrests, charges and fixed penalty fines is a 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 role of the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

You may, therefore, wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice what direct perpetrator-focused interventions her Department currently funds in relation to stalking offences.

(AQW 14822/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department directly funds the Promoting Positive Relationships Programme (PPRP) delivered by the Probation Board (PBNI). This innovative programme, designed for those who have demonstrated the potential to be abusive in intimate partner relationships, covers a broad range of behaviours including those associated with stalking type behaviour.

Perpetrator interventions will be a key element in addressing stalking behaviours. I am committed to working collaboratively with partner organisations to develop and promote such interventions.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Justice whether she will introduce specific legislation on so-called revenge porn.

(AQW 14866/17-22)

Mrs Long: The offence of disclosing private sexual photographs and films with intent to cause distress (revenge pornography) has already been introduced to Northern Ireland, legislated for in section 51 of the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2016. The offence can be tried summarily in the magistrates' court or on indictment in the Crown Court, with a range of penalties available.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice (i) for an update on phase 2 of the Tackling Paramilitarism program and its funding; and (ii) whether there is any end of year flexibility for phase 1 projects for the 2021/22 financial year.

(AQW 14913/17-22)

Mrs Long: Discussions on the funding, structure and activities in Phase 2 of the Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality, and Organised Crime Programme are at an advanced stage. I expect to be in a position to inform the Executive and the Assembly on the overall financial package and the financial allocations for projects in the near future.

Phase One of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme is funded through ring-fenced money originating from the Fresh Start Agreement. As such, it is not eligible for the Devolved Administration budget exchange scheme for agreeing end year flexibility. In previous years, HM Treasury has provided end of year flexibility for the Programme on an ad hoc and non-recurrent basis within a ring-fenced period. It will be a matter for the Department of Finance and HM Treasury as to whether this is provided again.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice how many people have been convicted for using their mobile phone whilst driving, that resulted in a fatality, since 2017.

(AQW 14928/17-22)

Mrs Long: The information requested is not readily available. Prosecutions and convictions data held in Departmental datasets are on the basis of offence description and there is no specific offence for using a mobile phone whilst driving resulting in a fatality.

To identify cases which related to illegal using a mobile phone whilst driving resulting in a fatality would require a manual search of case records for offences which involved driving offences relating to causing death or injury, as offence descriptions do not always specify whether it was a death or injury which occurred, of which there have been more than 200 dealt with at courts in the last three years for which information is available. We estimate that to locate, retrieve and extract any information that might be relevant to your request would involve work of more than the appropriate limit.

The appropriate limit is specified in regulations and for central government is set at £700. There were 227 potentially relevant cases over the period. It is estimated that to search systems manually for relevant information to identify whether offences for which a conviction was handed down related to illegally using a mobile phone whilst driving resulting in a fatality, it will take one member of staff approximately ten minutes per case, giving a total of over 37 hours work. At a cost of £25 per hour, this equates to over £925 which is higher than the appropriate limit.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice how many people have been convicted for drink driving, which resulted in a fatality, since 2017.

(AQW 14931/17-22)

Mrs Long: An examination of cases that were dealt with at courts in the period 2017 to 2019, the most recent year for which statistics are available, indicate that there were fewer than three cases that resulted in a conviction for a drink driving offence that resulted in a death.

Note:

- 1 Figures relate to cases where there was a conviction for at least one of the offences specified.
- 2 Figures relate to initial disposals at court. Appeals are not included.

Department for the Economy

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 7380/17-22 (i) for an update on the process of dealing with ineligible payments; (ii) whether recipients of ineligible payments have received notification that the payment was made erroneously and should be repaid; and (iii) to detail the categories of businesses, and number in each category, to which ineligible payments were made.

(AQW 9628/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy):

- (i) The Department for the Economy continues to develop its process for dealing with ineligible payments that have arisen through the Covid Business Grant schemes. A dedicated project has been set up to deliver post-payment validation activity and to provide assurance on fraud & error issues in all of my Department's Covid Grant schemes to date.

The main aims of the Project are to analyse payments made for potential fraud or error; to pursue recovery of overpayments where appropriate and justified; to review scheme fraud and error rates; to document lessons learned; to produce recommendations in relation to the design of future schemes, and to assist in the development of Post Project Evaluations.

Recovery procedures for individual overpayments on the Schemes will be instigated, where justifiable and appropriate to do so. Should it be determined that a case involves the possibility of criminal activity, the Department will consider such cases for referral to the PSNI in the normal manner.

- (ii) The Department has written to some categories of recipient, informing them that payments were made erroneously and has begun to receive repayments. Work continues to identify all recipients of ineligible and erroneous payments and further communication will issue to the relevant recipients in due course.
- (iii) My Department has not finished its validation and assurance assessment of the Covid Business Grant Schemes and are not yet in a position to provide a sufficiently robust listing of business categories to which ineligible payments were made.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy for a full list of ineligible payments made under the Coronavirus: £10,000 Small Business Support Grant Scheme.

(AQW 9643/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has not finished its validation and assurance assessment of the Covid Business Grant Schemes and is not yet in a position to provide a sufficiently robust listing of ineligible payments under the £10k Small Business Support Grant Scheme.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) her Department's current estimate of the value of payments made in error in regards to the Coronavirus £10,000 Small Business Support Grant Scheme; and (ii) how this compares with the estimate of the Auditor General of around £13.5 million.

(AQW 9909/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department for the Economy continues to develop its processes for dealing with ineligible payments that have arisen through the Covid Business Grant schemes. A dedicated Covid Schemes Fraud and Error Oversight Project has been set up to deliver post-payment validation and to provide post-payment assurance on all Covid Business Grant schemes

to date. It is too early to say what the final figures for the value of such payments in the £10k Scheme will be and further investigate work needs to be carried out before a final value on ineligible payments can be provided.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for the Economy when the criteria for the Directors Scheme will be released.
(AQW 11441/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The criteria for the Limited Company Director Support Scheme was released on 14 January 2021. The scheme opened for applications at 6pm on Thursday 21 January 2021 and it will close to applications at 6pm on Thursday 4 March 2021.

Additional information regarding the scheme, including its eligibility criteria can be accessed via the following NI Business Info website <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/limited-company-directors-support-scheme>

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy when (i) AQW 9596/17-22; (ii) AQW 9597/17-22; (iii) AQW 9598/17-22; (iv) AQW 9599/17-22; (v) AQW 10295/17-22; (vi) AQW 10686/17-22; (vii) AQW 10755/17-22; (viii) AQW 11056/17-22; (ix) AQW 11057/17-22; and (x) AQW 11399/17-22 will be answered.
(AQW 12287/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As a result of the significant additional workload created by the Department's response to the Covid 19 crisis, and the associated resourcing challenges, I regret that it has not been possible to adhere to the required timeline for Assembly Question responses.

All referenced questions have now been answered.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy when AQW 12208/17-22 will be answered.
(AQW 12598/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: AQW 12208/17-22 was answered on 22 January 2021.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for the Economy when AQW 11441/17-22 will be answered.
(AQW 12648/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: AQW 11441/17-22 was answered on 24 February 2021.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on allowing businesses to provide a click and collect service under the current restrictions related to COVID-19.
(AQW 13411/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restriction) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 currently do not allow for the provision of a click and collect service by non-essential retailers. However following an Executive meeting on 18th February it was agreed to allow contactless 'click and collect' services for baby equipment shops, clothing shops, footwear shops and electrical goods shops from Monday the 8th of March 2021.

Department of Health Officials are currently updating the regulations and guidance document to reflect these changes. The extant Regulations can be found here [Guidance to accompany The Health Protection \(Coronavirus, Restrictions\) \(No. 2\) \(Amendment\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2021 | Department of Health \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

My officials continue to liaise with both the Department for Health and the Executive Office on this matter.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on her Department's work to secure the future of HMS Caroline in Belfast.
(AQW 13446/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: During the period of temporary closure of HMS Caroline my officials have been working to identify a range of options for the long term future of the Ship in Belfast. Consultants were appointed to identify potential delivery models and options that support the retention of the Ship in Belfast and to make value for money recommendations. Discussions are ongoing with representatives of the National Museum of the Royal Navy and the National Lottery Heritage Fund on the long term options for the future of the attraction. I re-emphasise that I remain committed to finding a solution that ensures that this important cultural and heritage visitor attraction remains in Belfast and I will make further comment on the matter in due course, once the discussions have concluded.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for the Economy whether she intends to introduce a top-up business support package similar to that which was introduced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer.
(AQW 13449/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am aware of the announcement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding a new financial support package which includes one-off top up grants for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, worth up to £9,000 per property, dependant on the rateable value of the property from which the business operates.

I have indicated that I would be supportive of a similar property based scheme in Northern Ireland, but ultimately it will be for the Executive collectively to determine how any additional or new budget allocations will be used and distributed across our economy and wider society.

In the meantime, I have announced and introduced a number of new support schemes in recent months.

These have included:

- Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme, Part A and B;
- Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme;
- Wet Pubs Business Support Scheme;
- Limited Company Director's Support Scheme;
- Large Tourism and Hospitality Business Support Scheme; and
- Bed and Breakfast, Guest House and Guest Accommodation Scheme.

To date, my Department has provided over £370 million of lifeline support to over 30,000 businesses and individuals, and through the list of schemes above, is currently delivering millions of pounds to thousands more.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on recouping grant payments made in error as part of the £10,000 Coronavirus Small Business Support Grant scheme.
(AQW 13496/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department for the Economy continues to develop its processes for dealing with ineligible payments that have arisen through the Covid Business Grant schemes. A dedicated Covid Schemes Fraud and Error Oversight Project has been set up to deliver post-payment validation and to provide post-payment assurance on all Covid Business Grant schemes to date. The Project will deliver a programme of further analysis and testing of payments made which will, in turn, inform a recovery strategy and an ultimate assessment of the Scheme's impact.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy, in light of the Minister of Finance's announcement that there is a £300 million COVID-19 underspend, whether she will submit a bid to increase the scope of the Newly Self Employed Support Scheme to widen the eligibility of the scheme to ensure those who reported less than 50 per cent of income through self-employment in the 2018/19 tax year can receive financial support.
(AQW 13673/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme (NSESS) is specifically targeted at the 2019/20 group excluded from the UK government's Self Employed Income Support Scheme.

There is a £10 million funding envelope for the scheme and the eligibility criteria was designed within this funding envelope. Extending the scheme beyond the current eligibility criteria would be a decision for the Executive to make collectively.

I along with my Executive colleagues continue to consider all options to provide support to as wide a range of businesses as possible during this pandemic.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 13200/17-22, what measures are being taken by her Department to ensure prompt payments due under the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme are made.
(AQW 13995/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I refer the Member to the reply I gave to AQW 9788/17-22.

By way of an update as of 17 February 5,095 CRBSS Part A applications have been made of which 3,880 have been paid, totalling £40.5million and 1,607 CRBSS Part B applications have been made of which 678 have been paid, totalling £1.5million.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy whether (i) Northern Ireland students studying in Britain, the Republic of Ireland and elsewhere will receive the £500 payment; (ii) part-time students will receive the £500 payment; and (iii) mature students will receive the £500 payment.
(AQW 14061/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Covid Disruption Payment is for full-time UK and EU students at Northern Ireland publicly funded Higher Education Institutions and full-time Higher Education students at the Further Education Colleges, in recognition of the disruption suffered by students to their studies due to the impact of Covid-19 and subsequent Executive decisions. There is no upper age limit on the payment.

I recognise that many Northern Ireland domiciled higher education students are enrolled in universities in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland, and that these students will have been adversely impacted by the pandemic, just as those in local institutions have been. It is important to note, however, the funding agreed is for Northern Ireland institutions to support their students. Payments will issue directly from the institutions, not from the Department. It should also be noted the only feasible way in which a payment scheme of this size can be implemented is to work through the students' institutions; that is, either

their university or further education college. The Department does not have the legal power to make payments through public bodies outside of Northern Ireland, such as a GB or ROI university or the Student Loans Company.

However, Northern Ireland students elsewhere in the UK and the Republic of Ireland are not without support. The other jurisdictions have all recently announced significant increases to their student support packages.

An additional £50m to support students in England was recently announced which is in addition to £20m announced in December. Students in Scotland who are experiencing hardship as a result of coronavirus will be supported by £20m of Government funding. A further £10m has also been allocated to universities and colleges in Scotland for income lost in providing rent rebates. In January, the Welsh Government announced a £40m package of support for students facing financial hardship.

I would encourage any Northern Ireland student studying outside of Northern Ireland to contact their university, should they be in financial hardship, and to avail of the support which is in place there.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the commitment specified in the New Decade, New Approach agreement of increasing the maximum student numbers cap on universities.

(AQW 14107/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Under the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) Agreement, the Executive committed to bring forward proposals for the development and expansion of the Ulster University (UU) campus at Magee College, including the necessary increase in maximum student numbers (MaSN) to realise the 10,000 student campus target and a Graduate Entry Medical School.

With the exception of the Graduate Entry Medical School, for which no business case has yet been approved by the Department of Health, no further proposals have been brought forward. I remain committed to working with the University around the consideration of any expansion proposals for either its Coleraine or Magee campuses following its decant from Jordanstown. At a meeting on 03 February, I asked the University to provide me with its strategic plans for all of its campuses.

In relation to any further increasing of MaSN at the universities, while I remain committed to growing the higher education sector in Northern Ireland, any increase in the number of students in the sector requires a corresponding growth in budget availability.

Under existing higher education funding arrangements in Northern Ireland, capacity at Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions is directly linked to funding from the Department and therefore a more sustainable teaching funding solution for our universities needs to be considered alongside any increase in MaSN.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether she has made a decision to withdraw from operation of the North/South institutions; and (ii) if so, what departmental areas are affected by her withdrawal from the operation of the North/South institutions.

(AQW 14179/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for her assessment of the comparative value for money of allocations made under the Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme for converting properties from oil to gas and alternatively improving home insulation; and (ii) the comparative gains in terms of reductions of carbon emissions and heating bills.

(AQW 14207/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEP) is delivered by the Utility Regulator and offers a range of energy efficiency measures, with 80% of funds targeted towards vulnerable consumers.

- (i) NISEP does not offer oil to gas conversions in isolation, rather they are offered as part of a Whole House Solutions package where priority (vulnerable) customers can be offered a range of measures which may include oil to gas conversion and appropriate insulation and other measures. Given that NISEP's strategic objectives include saving energy and doing so in a manner which has due regard for vulnerable consumers, the Utility Regulator's view is that offering a package of measures to these customers (who otherwise could be left without any form of affordable heating) is appropriate. I would agree with this.
- (ii) In terms of the comparative gains in terms of reductions of carbon emissions and heating bills, it is estimated that replacing an old G-rated oil boiler with some controls, with an A-rated gas boiler with a full set of heating controls could save around £280 and 3,000kg of carbon dioxide a year. Cavity wall insulation could save up to £180 and 920kg of carbon dioxide a year where there has been no insulation present. (Figures based on a 3 bed detached house, heated by oil).

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to her letter CORR-4700-2021, dated 4 February 2021, regarding electric supply to Downpatrick, for her assessment of whether (i) it is acceptable that it has taken nearly four months to reply with a statement from Northern Ireland Electricity from 8 October 2020; and (ii) it is an appropriate and acceptable public service to the people of Downpatrick and beyond.

(AQW 14264/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department has been faced with a hugely increased workload for the last 12 months due the ongoing covid-19 pandemic and EU Exit. This has resulted in an unprecedented volume of correspondence, which has meant that the time taken to respond to some cases has unfortunately fallen outside normal timescales.

The subject of your original correspondence is a matter for NIE Networks.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy what support her Department is providing businesses seeking to reorientate and develop their supply chains across the island of Ireland.

(AQW 14276/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I recognise that companies and supply chains, both within Northern Ireland and further afield, have been impacted due to the Covid-19 pandemic and EU Exit. My priority is to ensure no disruption to supply chains disrupted by the NI Protocol, given that GB is our largest and most important market. Any company needing assistance can speak to Invest NI or InterTradeIreland.

Invest NI is in the process of launching a new Supply Chain Resilience and Development Framework which will provide a framework for NI-based businesses to build resilience into their supply chain in response to Covid-19 and EU Exit. Invest NI also continues to engage with local companies to assist in adapting supply chains with a range of other support for better supply chain management, collaboration with other companies and stakeholders, and skills interventions.

InterTradeIreland has been supporting firms in adapting supply chains through the Brexit Advisory Service since 2017. The Service has provided firms with dedicated advice in planning for and mitigating the impact of Brexit through events, clinics and online webinars on impacts and preparation.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department will review the eligibility criteria for the Limited Company Director's Support Scheme requiring Directors to hold more than 25 per cent of the company's shares.

(AQW 14291/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Limited Company Directors Support Scheme (LCDSS), which was agreed by the Executive on 8 January 2021, opened to applications 6pm Thursday 21 January 2021. The aim of the LCDSS is to provide financial assistance to company directors who have personally been adversely impacted by COVID-19. Eligible applicants, i.e. the director, will receive a taxable grant of £3,500. The closing date for applications to the scheme is 6pm on 4 March 2021.

The scheme, including the grant amount, was agreed in the context of the £20 million budget that was pledged by the Executive on the 23 November, and an additional £20 million allocated to the scheme in January 2021. There are no plans to review any of the eligibility criteria of the scheme.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the process engaged by her Department to identify the properties which have (a) no or inadequate broadband; and (b) over 30mps broadband supply and therefore not eligible for Project Stratum; and (ii) whether she is confident all the properties identified by her Department as having 30mps actually do have that level of service.

(AQW 14326/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In line with State aid guidance, the intervention area was determined following an Open Market Review (OMR) exercise carried out through June and July 2018, followed by an OMR State aid public consultation, which ran from the start of December 2018 to January 2019. Details of this can be found on my Department's website at <https://www.economy.ni.gov.uk/consultations/extending-broadband-across-northern-ireland-projectstratum> and also includes an Addendum published on 5 February 2020. The OMR process allowed the Department to seek the most up-to-date information from internet service providers on their current and planned broadband coverage. This could then be tested and verified by citizens and businesses through the public consultation. This process provided my Department, as Contracting Authority, with the most recent data at a specific point in time.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 12567/17-22 and AQW 13362/17-22, whether the total financial support of £28,105,492.15, contributed by her Department and predecessor Department over the last ten years, covers all the several gas network projects in Northern Ireland including the North-West and South-North gas transmission pipeline and the Gas to the West project referred to in AQW 13362/17-22 as being supported by her Department and predecessor Department.

(AQW 14375/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The figure of £28,105,492.15 listed in my response to AQW 12567/17-22 concerns financial support provided to the Gas to the West project only. This was the only gas network extension project assisted within the ten year period in question.

Financial support for construction of the North-West and South-North gas transmission pipelines, as referenced in my response to AQW 13362/17-22, was provided in earlier years. These pipelines were completed in 2004 and 2006 respectively. The Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment administered financial support of £38 million towards these pipelines which included a £8.5 million contribution from the Irish Government, and €16.24 million towards the North-West pipeline from the European Regional Development Fund.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the timeframe for processing the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme applications; and (ii) what steps have been taken to increase application turnaround time.

(AQW 14424/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) As at 15th February 2021, Invest NI had received 2,771 applications under the Newly Self Employed Support Scheme (NSESS), with payments made to 1,341 applicants (c48%) to a value of £4.7m.

Unfortunately within NSESS, in the vast majority of cases (between 80%-90% of applications) the initial evidence submitted by applicants has not been of a sufficient quality to allow a final decision to be made quickly. This has resulted in multiple interactions, quite regularly 8-10, between the processing team and the applicants to gather together a satisfactory level of evidence on which to base a decision. These multiple interactions understandably greatly increase the length of time it takes to fully process each individual application.

These added difficulties have resulted in a much longer processing timeframe between an application being submitted and an application being paid. NSESS applications take on average 29 days to process in comparison to CRBSS applications which are, on average, processed within 15 working days.

- (ii) Having engaged extensively with my officials, I can assure you that they are working tirelessly to accelerate processing across all emergency COVID schemes, including NSESS. My Department and Invest NI have:

- Allocated additional resources, to process applications, particularly the more complex NSESS applications, as quickly as possible;
- Engaged more extensively with applicants to assist the completion of applications and the gathering of sufficient evidence;
- Engaged extensively with key stakeholders and partners to identify issues and take steps to mitigate and improve processing times;
- Continuously reviewed and improved information that is available via the NIBusinessInfo.co.uk website to ensure applicants have access to the latest and most up to date information to assist their applications; and,
- Increased adviser resource to respond to and answer telephone and online enquiries regarding the application and assessment process for NSESS and all COVID schemes.

I am hopeful that, based on the above steps, Invest NI can move to accelerate payments as much as possible. I do, however, caution that given the challenges experienced to date with regards to the quality of evidence received, NSESS processing times are likely to be longer than other similar emergency COVID schemes.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for her assessment of the plans from Mutual Energy for the construction of a bi-directional gas pipeline between Northern Ireland and Scotland; and (ii) whether the business case for the bi-directional flow is based on the possible establishment in Northern Ireland of an indigenous gas extraction industry.

(AQW 14533/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Mutual Energy has advised that the proposal to provide for bi-directional flow of gas on the existing Scotland to Northern Ireland pipeline is solely related to development of the Islandmagee gas storage project.

Mutual Energy has also advised that the business case for bi-directional flow on the pipeline is not related to indigenous gas extraction in Northern Ireland.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy how many (i) on site inspections; (ii) complaints; and (iii) actions against employers were undertaken by the Health and Safety Executive in the last twelve months.

(AQW 14648/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: HSENI has carried out 1595 onsite inspections in the 12 months since the 18th February 2020. There were 650 site visits in relation to complaints. There have been 3726 complaints lodged with HSENI in the past 12 months up to 18th February 2021. 2071 of these related to premises which fall under the remit of HSENI and 1655 were passed to the local authority (who have responsibility for retail, office (non-government) and leisure businesses). Approximately half of the complaints dealt with by HSENI related to social distancing and other COVID-19 related concerns of employees or others. There were 115 enforcement notices served relating to a variety of health and safety issues. 4 enforcement notices were served in respect of Covid-19. HSENI will use enforcement action where necessary, but will always seek to engage with employers and staff to ensure that things can be resolved swiftly. In regards to complaints relating to social distancing, measures can frequently be implemented quickly to ensure staff are kept safe.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what support is available from the Newly Self Employed Support Scheme for workers who became self-employed from the start of the first lockdown in March 2020; (ii) whether travel agents, tour guides, tutors and auction room staff qualify; and (iii) what support exists for those who have fallen between the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme, because they are more recently self-employed, and the Newly Self Employed Support Scheme, because they became self-employed too long ago.

(AQW 14670/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) I launched the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme (NSESS) on 3 December 2020 which is specifically targeted at those individuals who became self-employed during 2019/20 as they were excluded from the UK government's Self Employed Income Support Scheme. The scheme provides a one-off taxable grant of £3,500 to newly self-employed individuals (sole traders and those in partnerships) that meet the eligible criteria. To date over 1,300 payments have been made totalling £4.7m.
- (ii) Travel agents, tour guides, tutors and auction room staff are able to apply for the scheme should they meet the eligibility criteria.
- (iii) I appreciate that there remain self-employed individuals impacted by the limits on the NSESS and SEISS, including those who became self-employed in 2018/19 or before. However, there is a £10 million funding envelope for the scheme and the eligibility criteria was designed within this funding envelope. Extending the scheme beyond the current eligibility criteria would have a significant financial impact and would be a decision for the Executive to make collectively.

Whilst the Executive and my own Department continue to receive calls for specific targeted support, it is simply not possible to design and fund schemes for every type of business or employment across our society. However, I along with my Executive colleagues continue to consider all options to provide support to as wide a range of businesses as possible during this pandemic.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the rationale and background for Invest NI Expected Credit Loss January 2021 monitoring bid of £12.7 million.

(AQW 14729/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The bid of £12.7m ECL includes £10m relating to one large project funded under the Sustainable Utilisation of Poultry Litter (SUPL) Scheme. The balance of £2.7m relates to several adjustments made in relation to a number of smaller projects. Expected Credit Loss (ECL) is an accounting adjustment required under International Financial Reporting Standard (IFRS) 9 where organisations must make provision for "Expected Credit Losses" based on estimated risk factors. Some of these ECLs therefore may not materialise.

The details of the large SUPL project for which £10m has been bid, are as follows. Invest NI, alongside a private investor, provided funding towards the build and operation of an Anaerobic Digestion (AD) plant.

The aim of the project was to help resolve a significant local environmental and economic issue, and to help Northern Ireland comply with EU nitrates targets to positively impact the poultry sector and the wider Northern Ireland economy. Invest NI's support was by way of a £9.3m commercial loan.

Initial indications show that the project might not reach an outcome that fully covers the investment in the project. Therefore, Invest NI has included a provision in their accounts to cover the capital and interest accrued, should they not be able to achieve a return on the investment. This provision is in line with current accounting standards.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) how many Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) participants have been invited to her Department's RHI audit workshops; and (ii) how many participants have attended.

(AQW 14736/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) In total, 248 participants were invited to attend one of four RHI Inspection Information sessions. The programme of information sessions commenced in spring 2019 and was designed to continue throughout the remainder of the inspection process. Due to restrictions imposed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the programme of information sessions had to be cancelled in March 2020.
- (ii) In total, 69 of the 248 participants invited attended one of the sessions.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will seek funding from the Minister of Finance for additional support to be made available to those within the nightlife economy; and the rationale for her decision.

(AQW 14739/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Executive and the UK Government have introduced a wide range of business support schemes to help ease the extraordinary burden that has been placed on entire communities and our local economy, due to the ongoing global pandemic. These schemes and other financial packages have supported businesses, individual and employers across every sector and industry.

Many of those in the nightlife sector will have been eligible for support under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme which is administered by the Department of Finance. Eligibility for this scheme is directly linked to the Health Protection Regulations.

My Department has also announced a number of new support schemes in recent months, which those in the nightlife sector may have been eligible to apply for.

These have included:

- Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS), Part A and B;
- Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme;
- Wet Pubs Business Support Scheme;
- Limited Company Director's Support Scheme;
- Large Tourism and Hospitality Business Support Scheme; and
- Bed and Breakfast, Guest House and Guest Accommodation Scheme.

Those that work in the nightlife economy will have been eligible for support under UK Government schemes such as the Job Retention Scheme (Furlough) and the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme. Decisions about the extension of these schemes to cover sectors subject to longer restrictions will be made by the UK Government. I, along with Executive colleagues, have asked the Chancellor to make this support available for as long as possible to allow businesses time to recover.

Outside of my Department, The Arts Council of Northern Ireland opened a new funding programme to support artists and performers with grants of up to £5,000 during the COVID-19 crisis. This programme has now closed.

Whilst the Executive and my own Department continue to receive calls for specific targeted support, it is not possible to design and fund schemes for every sector of business or employment group across our society.

Ultimately however, it will be for the Executive collectively to determine how any new or additional Covid related funding should be allocated.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy, considering that COVID-19 restrictions may be in place for the nightlife sector for longer than many other parts of the economy, what plans she has for specific support for the sector, and those that work in it.

(AQW 14766/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Executive and the UK Government have introduced a wide range of business support schemes to help ease the extraordinary burden that has been placed on entire communities and our local economy, due to the ongoing global pandemic. These schemes and other financial packages have supported businesses, individual and employers across every sector and industry.

Many of those in the nightlife sector will have been eligible for support under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme which is administered by the Department of Finance. Eligibility for this scheme is directly linked to the Health Protection Regulations.

Those that work in the sector will have been eligible for support under UK Government schemes such as the Job Retention Scheme and the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme. Decisions about the extension of these schemes to cover sectors subject to longer restrictions will be made by the UK Government. I, along with Executive colleagues, have asked the Chancellor to make this support available for as long as possible to allow businesses time to recover.

Whilst the Executive and my own Department continue to receive calls for specific targeted support, it is not possible to design and fund schemes for every sector of business or employment group across our society.

Ultimately however, it will be for the Executive collectively to determine how any new or additional Covid related funding should be allocated.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy whether the buy-out payment in the Renewable Heat Incentive consultation is anticipated as being tax free.

(AQW 14796/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Any RHI payments received by a business would be a business receipt and the normal Income tax and Corporation tax rules for receipts and deductions would apply.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether her Department is committed to achieving the Paris accord net zero carbon emissions target by 2050; (ii) for her assessment of the analysis of the Climate Change Commission that Northern Ireland is such a high carbon emitting society that this is unrealistic and that an 82 per cent reduction of carbon emissions by 2050 should be the target; and (iii) whether she seeks a different objective.

(AQW 14828/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) My Department is committed to contributing to overall emissions reductions as determined by the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) who set climate change policy for Northern Ireland. DAERA lead on input to the wider UK position on emissions reductions as required by the Paris Agreement.

- (ii) I welcome the recent advice by the Climate Change Committee (CCC) in their 6th Carbon Budget. The CCC advice is that a reduction of at least 82% in all greenhouse gases – not just carbon emissions – in Northern Ireland by 2050 represents equivalent effort and a fair contribution to the UK Net Zero Target. The advice clarifies that this reduction reaches Net Zero Carbon Dioxide (CO₂) emissions by 2050 in their Balanced Net Zero Pathway.
- (iii) The objective of the Energy Strategy will be consistent with climate change targets set by DAERA as a result of the CCC advice.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the annual costs associated with the administration of the Non-Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme.

(AQW 14850/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Responsibility for day-to-day administration of the NI Non-Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive (ND RHI) Scheme has been delegated by DfE to Ofgem since 2012. The annual costs associated with the administration of the ND RHI scheme by Ofgem, including work associated with the 100% programme of inspections and compliance, are shown below.

FY	£
2012/13	573,000
2013/14	89,180
2014/15	211,936
2015/16	279,190
2016/17	444,724
2017/18	564,599
2018/19	824,161
2019/20	814,870
9 months to December 2020	728,591
Total	4,530,251

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW14161/17-22, whether full-time students undertaking higher education courses at the Belfast Bible College and the Irish Baptist College are eligible for £500 Covid Disruption Payment.

(AQW 14860/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Covid Disruption Payment is for full-time UK and EU students at Northern Ireland publicly funded Higher Education Institutions and full-time Higher Education students at the Further Education Colleges, in recognition of the disruption suffered by students to their studies due to the impact of Covid-19.

It is important to note, however, the funding agreed is for Northern Ireland institutions to support their students. Payments will issue directly from the institutions, not from the Department. It should also be noted the only feasible way in which a payment scheme of this size can be implemented is to work through the students' institutions; that is, either their university or further education college.

As the payment is for Northern Ireland publicly funded Higher Education Institutions, this excludes Belfast Bible College and the Irish Baptist College as well as other alternative providers which are not in receipt of recurrent grant funding from the Department. The Department simply does not have the legal basis to make payments to such institutions.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister for the Economy what her Department is doing to promote Ulster University's Coleraine campus.

(AQW 14889/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I met with the Vice-Chancellor of Ulster University on 3rd February, following his announcement on the future relocation of undergraduate health science courses to the University's Magee campus. I made it very clear to him that as a multi-campus university, dependent on funding from my Department, that I expect the Ulster University to be transparent and equitable in its distribution of teaching provision across all of its campuses. I have requested sight of the University's strategic plans to consider its proposals for future growth at its Coleraine campus.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the postcodes of those premises which were in the original Project Stratum intervention area of 97,000 premises, but not the 79,000 premises which were included in the tender for Project Stratum.

(AQW 14969/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The postcodes containing the premises that were de-scoped following new information from Internet Service Providers, including a national data refresh exercise undertaken by a major supplier, are contained in the Annex below.

It is important to note that not all of these postcodes have been removed from the Project Stratum intervention area, as some still contain premises categorised as 'white' and, therefore, are still eligible for inclusion.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether she has engaged with her counterparts in the UK Department for Transport, Tourism and Sport with regards to maintaining funding for the City of Derry Airport to London Public Service Obligation route post-21 March 2021; and (ii) whether she will submit a bid for funding to ensure that any potential gap in funding does not emerge.

(AQW 15002/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The UK Department for Transport (DfT) is the legal competent authority in the UK to grant Public Service Obligations (PSOs) for air routes. In May 2017 DfT granted a PSO between City of Derry Airport (CoDA) and London. The current contract with the airline operating the route to London Stansted, Loganair, is due to end on 31 March 2021, although the existing contract allows for an extension of 2 years until end March 2023. My Department has confirmed its funding up until 31 March 2021.

Since September 2020, DfE officials have had ongoing engagement with representatives from CoDA, Derry City & Strabane District Council and DfT on the funding required for the PSO route beyond March 2021.

As DfE has no baseline for the CoDA PSO route, I submitted a bid for the funding as part of the Spending Review process. As this was unsuccessful, I will be seeking a commitment from the Executive to fund the PSO route for the two year period to March 2023.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy (i) how many students from Northern Ireland study in Britain; (ii) how many students from Northern Ireland study in the Republic of Ireland; and (iii) whether these students access Student Finance from Student Finance NI in the same way as a student studying in Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University.

(AQW 15028/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: For answers to parts (i) and (ii) of your question please refer to the answer to AQW 14155/17-22.

In answer to part (iii), Higher Education students from Northern Ireland who are studying in Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland apply through the same channels as those who are studying at home. Applications for student finance should be made through the Student Finance NI offices within the Education Authority.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy how many staff are working processing Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme applications; and whether she plans to increase staff numbers to quicken the process.

(AQW 15029/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I would refer the Member to the reply I gave to AQW 11219/17-22

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy when the £500 Covid Disruption Payment will be issued to students.

(AQW 15098/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: We anticipate that the Covid Disruption Payment will be paid to eligible students by the end of March 2021. The institution they attend will make the payment and the precise process for this will be communicated shortly. It is not expected that students will need to make an application; however, their institution may need to validate details with them in advance of payment.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will reopen the Limited Company Directors Support Scheme with relaxed criteria in light of low take-up.

(AQW 15164/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Limited Company Directors Support Scheme (LCDSS) was agreed by the Executive on 8 January 2021 and opened to applications on 21 January 2021. The aim of the LCDSS is to provide financial support to company directors who have personally been adversely impacted by COVID-19. A taxable grant of £3,500 will be paid to the applicant, i.e. the director.

While there are approximately 14,500 sole limited company directors registered for PAYE (and a minimum of 20,000 directors of small limited companies in total) it was acknowledged from the outset, that it was impossible to estimate with any degree of certainty how many applicants would apply and/or qualify for support. A key reason that has come to light regarding a lower than expected number of applications is an apparent lack of awareness amongst some businesses and company directors of the scheme. As a direct result, both my Department and InvestNI Press Offices, have been making a concerted effort to raise awareness and further promote the scheme.

To facilitate this work and allow additional time for applicants to gather evidence and submit applications, I have extended the closing date for applications to 4 March 2021. Further details of the scheme, including eligibility criteria can be found on the NI Business Info website at www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk.

I would encourage any company director who has been personally impacted by Covid-19 and believes they meet the eligibility criteria to make an application as soon as possible.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has any plans to expand the criteria for the £500 Covid Disruption Payment to include students who attend further education colleges not studying a higher education degree, but face the same financial hardship and disruption as their counterparts who are eligible for this one-off payment.
(AQW 15229/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Covid Disruption Payment is for full-time UK and EU students at Northern Ireland publicly funded Higher Education Institutions and full-time Higher Education students at the Further Education Colleges, in recognition of the disruption suffered by students to their studies due to the impact of Covid-19. As such, an FE student not studying a higher education course is not eligible.

The Department has, however, already put in place a range of support measures for further education students. Funding of £4.8 million was used to provide additional IT equipment to allow continued access from home for both college staff and students, and help address the challenge of reducing digital poverty.

Colleges have obtained data SIM cards for students to access mobile broadband and to date at least 1,197 have been made available to FE students.

A further £1.7 million has been secured from the Executive, and the Department is currently working with the FE colleges on the provision of this funding to full time FE students to further combat digital poverty and provide additional devices. A similar scheme is being developed for part time learners, at an approximate cost of £1.2m

The Department has been working with the colleges to flex their policies in this area and in addition to putting in place the arrangements for free school meals and holiday payments have agreed to implement the following:

- Additional Living/Costs associated with Learning the Dependant Student rate to be adjusted to match the Independent Student Rate, allowing all eligible Further Education students to receive an extra £15 per week;
- Part Time students eligible to apply to all elements of Hardship Fund; and
- Students repeating courses/modules will be permitted to avail of all elements of Hardship Fund.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) what representations her Department has made to the Competition and Markets Authority in relation to the lack of competition and diversity in the poultry production market in Northern Ireland; and (ii) what response her Department has received from the Competition and Markets Authority if it has made representations.

(AQW 15279/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Officials in my Department have not corresponded with the Competition and Markets Authority in relation to competition and diversity in the poultry production market in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Easton asked the Assembly Commission to detail the annual cost of storing Assembly artefacts; and whether a more cost-effective way of storing such items is being considered.

(AQW 14450/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly Commission currently avails of a Department of Finance contract for off-site storage facilities. This is used primarily for the storage of large furniture items, a small number of which are classified as artefacts. The facility includes a small amount of climate-controlled storage for specialist items including paintings and smaller artefacts.

The current contract for the storage of surplus furniture and Assembly artefacts has a value of £8,633 per annum. There is no breakdown of the costs for storage of large surplus furniture (which constitutes approximately 80% of the total area being utilised) and the storage of artefacts.

In relation to artefacts specifically, the display of artefacts within Parliament Building is currently under discussion by the Commission and the need for storage for artefacts will be reviewed in that context, as well as taking account of any requests the Commission receives for the loan of individual items.

However, while the Commission will always seek to deliver its services in a cost-effective manner, Parliament Buildings does not have sufficient space or any specialist storage facility so the need for off-site storage is likely to continue, particularly for furniture.

Journal of Proceedings

Minutes of Proceedings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 16 February 2021

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Public Petition

2.1 Adoption of Ravensbrea Waste Water Treatment Plant, Garrison

Ms Jemma Dolan was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition on the Adoption of Ravensbrea Waste Water Treatment Plant, Garrison.

2.2 Sanctions for Cyber Bullying

Ms Joanne Bunting was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition on Sanctions for Cyber Bullying.

3. Assembly Business

3.1 Motion: Suspension of Standing Order 20(1)

Proposed:

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 16 February 2021.

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. Private Members' Business

4.1 First Stage: The Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 15/17-22)

Mr Paul Givan introduced a Bill to amend the Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations 2020 to remove the ground for an abortion in cases of severe fetal impairment.

The Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 15/17-22) passed First Stage and was ordered to be printed.

5. Question Time

5.1 Communities

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the chair.

5.2 Economy

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for the Economy, Mrs Diane Dodds.

5.3 Education

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir.

6. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 1.05pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

16 February 2021

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 9 February 2021 to 16 February 2021

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

The Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 15/17-22)

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

Annual Report On The State Of The Recognition System (Press Recognition Panel)

Northern Ireland Central Investment Fund for Charities Annual Report and Accounts for year ended 31 September 2019 (Department for Communities)

Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland Police Discretion inc. Penalty Notices Follow-Up Review (Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland)

5. Assembly Reports

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Twenty-third Report of Session 2020 – 2021 (NIA 76/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Twenty-fourth Report of Session 2020 – 2021 (NIA 77/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Twenty-fifth Report of Session 2020 – 2021 (NIA 78/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2021/00 Draft SR - The Direct Payments to Farmers (Simplifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

SR 2021/28 The Loans for Mortgage Interest (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)

SR 2021/29 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

SR 2021/30 The Rates (Making and Levying of Different Rates) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Finance)

SR 2021/31 The Local Government (Capital Finance and Accounting) (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)

SR 2021/32 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

SR 2021/33 The Taxi Driver (Coronavirus, Financial Assistance) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Infrastructure)

Draft SR - The Direct Payments to Farmers (Simplifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

Draft SR - The Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

SR 2021/37 The Explosives (Appointment of Authorities and Enforcement) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Justice)

SR 2021/38 The Pension Protection Fund and Occupational Pension Schemes (Levy Ceiling) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)

For information only

SR 2021/34 The Schools (Part-Time 20mph Speed Limit) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2021/35 The Waiting Restrictions (Bryansford) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2021/36 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Belfast) Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Infrastructure)

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2021/27 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2021/29 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

2020-21 Public Expenditure Allocations (Minister of Finance)

Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report April 2019 – March 2020 (Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

8. Consultation Documents

Consultation on the Future of the Northern Ireland Non-Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme (Department for the Economy)

9. Departmental Publications

Report on the Analysis of Responses of the Consultation: 'Continuing Healthcare in Northern Ireland: Introducing a Transparent and Fair System' (Department of Health)

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 16 February 2021

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 Civil Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)	31/03/20	28/04/20	15/10/20	15/10/20	17/11/20	15/12/20	18/01/21	
Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA Bill 04/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/	28/04/20	/	28/04/20	04/05/20
Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA Bill 05/17-22)	26/05/20	26/05/20	/	/	01/06/20	02/06/20	02/06/20	17/06/20
Housing Amendment Bill (NIA Bill 06/17-22)	26/05/20	01/06/20	/	/	16/06/20	23/06/20	30/06/20	28/08/20
Pension Schemes Bill (NIA Bill 07/17-22)	23/06/20	07/07/20	29/01/21	19/11/20				

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Executive Committee (Functions) Bill (NIA Bill 08/17-22)	06/07/20	06/07/20	/	/	21/07/20	27/07/20	28/07/20	25/08/20
Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22)	19/10/20	20/10/20	/	/	02/11/20	09/11/20	10/11/20	25/11/20
The Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 10/17-22)	19/10/20	03/11/20	15/05/21					
The Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill (NIA Bill 11/17-22)	03/11/20	16/11/20	11/06/21					
The Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill (NIA Bill 12/17-22)	23/11/20	01/12/20	/	/	14/12/20	19/01/21	25/01/21	
Protection from Stalking Bill (NIA Bill 14/17-22)	18/01/20	08/02/21						

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	11/11/20	24/11/20	19/01/21	02/02/20	
Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill (NIA Bill 13/17-22)	14/12/20							

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
The Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 15/17-22)	16/02/21							

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 16 February 2021

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Tuesday 16 February 2021:

Andy Allen	Dolores Kelly
Martina Anderson	Gerry Kelly
Caoimhe Archibald	Liz Kimmins
Kellie Armstrong	Naomi Long
Rosemary Barton	Gordon Lyons
Roy Beggs	Séan Lynch
John Blair	Chris Lyttle
Cathal Boylan	Nichola Mallon
Paula Bradley	Declan McAleer
Sinead Bradley	Fra McCann
Paula Bradshaw	Daniel McCrossan
Nicola Brogan	Patsy McGlone
Thomas Buchanan	Colin McGrath
Jonathan Buckley	Philip McGuigan
Pam Cameron	Maolíosa McHugh
Pat Catney	Sinead McLaughlin
Alan Chambers	Justin McNulty
Stewart Dickson	Gary Middleton
Linda Dillon	Karen Mullan
Diane Dodds	Conor Murphy
Jemma Dolan	Mike Nesbitt
Gordon Dunne	Robin Newton
Mark Durkan	Carál Ní Chuilín
Alex Easton	Michelle O'Neill
Sinéad Ennis	Edwin Poots
Arlene Foster	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
Cara Hunter	Robin Swann
William Irwin	Peter Weir
Declan Kearney	

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 22 February 2021

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Public Petition

2.1 Extend the Covid Disruption Payment

Mr John O'Dowd was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition to Extend the Covid Disruption Payment.

3. Assembly Business

Motion: Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Ms Paula Bradley replace Mr Gary Middleton as a member of the Committee on Procedures.

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mrs Pam Cameron

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

4. Executive Committee Business

4.1 **Motion: The draft Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021**

Proposed:

That the draft Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Motion: The draft Direct Payments to Farmers (Simplifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Proposed:

That the draft Direct Payments to Farmers (Simplifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

A single debate ensued on both motions.

The Question being put, the motion on the draft Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 was **carried**.

The Question being put, the motion on the draft Direct Payments to Farmers (Simplifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 was **carried**.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

5. Private Members' Business

5.1 Motion: Recovery and Investment Strategy

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the deep and lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on people, communities and businesses across Northern Ireland; further recognises the severe impact that restrictions have had on our society and economy and the devastating impact that the conclusion of the furlough scheme will have on jobs; regrets that the Minister for the Economy and Minister of Finance have failed to produce a comprehensive COVID-19 recovery plan prioritising employment and efforts to build back better; expresses concern that the Minister for the Economy has failed to outline a strategy for maximising the potential for job creation and growth as a result of dual market access guaranteed under the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland; and calls on both Ministers to work with their Executive colleagues to establish a comprehensive recovery and investment strategy that will transform public services, create more jobs and help build back better from the crisis.

Mr Matthew O'Toole

Mr Colin McGrath

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'will have on jobs;' and insert:

'agrees that all Executive Ministers must contribute towards delivering a comprehensive economic recovery strategy; and calls on the Executive to develop a comprehensive recovery and investment strategy that will transform public services, create more jobs and help build back better from the crisis.'

Dr Caoimhe Archibald

Mr John O'Dowd

Mr Philip McGuigan

Ms Jemma Dolan

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 1.48pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

6. Question Time

6.1 The Executive Office

Questions were put to, and answered by, the deputy First Minister, Mrs Michelle O'Neill. The junior Minister, Mr Declan Kearney, also answered a number of questions.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

6.2 Finance

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy.

7. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

7.1 Motion: Recovery and Investment Strategy (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made**.

The Question being put, the motion as amended was **carried**.

8. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 4.12pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

22 February 2021

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 17 February 2021 to 22 February 2021

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

Special EU Programmes Body Annual Report and Accounts for year ended 31 December 2019 (Department of Finance)

Funds in Court in Northern Ireland - Statement of Accounts 2019-2020 (Department of Justice)

North West Regional College Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 July 2020 (Department for the Economy)

South Eastern Regional College Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 July 2020 (Department for the Economy)

5. Assembly Reports

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Twenty-sixth Report of Session 2020 – 2021 (NIA 80/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2021/39 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

For information only

Approved version of SR 2020/331 The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period for Meetings of Registered Societies and Credit Unions No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for the Economy)

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2021/32 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

Connect2 Regional Hubs (Minister of Finance)

Review of Health Protection Regulations (Minister of Health)

8. Consultation Documents

9. Departmental Publications

Prison Grades Pay Settlement 2020 (Department of Justice)

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Audit Committee Position on the 2021-22 Draft Budgets for the Northern Ireland Audit Office, Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (Audit Committee)

Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 22 February 2021

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Monday 22 February 2021:

Andy Allen	Dolores Kelly
Martina Anderson	Gerry Kelly
Caoimhe Archibald	Liz Kimmins
Kellie Armstrong	Naomi Long
Rosemary Barton	Gordon Lyons
Roy Beggs	Séan Lynch
John Blair	Chris Lyttle
Cathal Boylan	Nichola Mallon
Paula Bradley	Declan McAleer
Sinead Bradley	Fra McCann
Paula Bradshaw	Daniel McCrossan
Nicola Brogan	Patsy McGlone
Thomas Buchanan	Colin McGrath
Jonathan Buckley	Philip McGuigan
Pam Cameron	Maolíosa McHugh
Pat Catney	Sinead McLaughlin
Alan Chambers	Justin McNulty
Stewart Dickson	Gary Middleton
Linda Dillon	Karen Mullan
Diane Dodds	Conor Murphy
Jemma Dolan	Mike Nesbitt
Gordon Dunne	Robin Newton
Mark Durkan	Carál Ní Chuilín
Alex Easton	Michelle O'Neill
Sinéad Ennis	Edwin Poots
Arlene Foster	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
Cara Hunter	Robin Swann
William Irwin	Peter Weir
Declan Kearney	

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 23 February 2021

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Executive Committee Business

2.1 **Statement: North/South Ministerial Council Inland Waterways Meeting**

The Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon, made a statement regarding the recent North/South Ministerial Council Inland Waterways Meeting, following which she replied to questions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

2.2 **Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021**

Proposed:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

Minister of Health

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Proposed:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

Minister of Health

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Proposed:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

Minister of Health

A single debate ensued on all three motions.

The sitting was suspended at 12.56pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, in the Chair.

3. Question Time

3.1 Health

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann.

4. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

4.1 Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (cont'd)

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (cont'd)

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 was **carried**.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 was **carried**.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 was **carried**.

The Speaker took the Chair.

5. Private Members' Business

5.1 Motion: North-South and East-West Trade

Proposed:

That this Assembly acknowledges the importance of North-South and East-West trade to our local economy; notes that the EU-UK Joint Committee is working to reduce trade barriers, and to prevent the creation of new barriers so that businesses can trade freely within the legal framework agreed by the Westminster parliament and European Commission; further notes the new trading reality as a result of the end of the Brexit transition period; further acknowledges our continued access to the European single market with its 450 million consumers; and calls on the Executive to develop an overarching economic strategy, including the establishment of an Executive Sub-Committee on the Economy, to give a clear vision and direction to our representative agencies, including Invest NI, InterTradeIreland, Northern Ireland Co-operation Overseas, Northern Ireland Executive Office in Brussels, and the Northern Ireland Bureaux in the United States of America, Canada, and China.

Dr Caoimhe Archibald

Ms Sinéad Ennis

Ms Nicola Brogan

Mr John O'Dowd

Amendment**Proposed:**

Leave out all after 'economic strategy' and insert:

'which recognises the opportunities created by the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland in giving businesses located in Northern Ireland open access to both the European Union single market and UK market, and also recognises the need to create a fairer and more regionally balanced economy as we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic; and further calls on the Executive Office to provide clear vision and direction in pursuit of these objectives to our representative agencies, including Invest NI, InterTradeIreland, Northern Ireland Co-operation Overseas, Northern Ireland Executive Office in Brussels, and the Northern Ireland Bureaux in the United States of America, Canada, and China.'

Mr Matthew O'Toole

Ms Sinéad McLaughlin

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **negatived**.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried** (Division).

6. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.28pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

23 February 2021

Northern Ireland Assembly

23 February 2021

Division

Motion: North-South and East-West Trade

Proposed:

That this Assembly acknowledges the importance of North-South and East-West trade to our local economy; notes that the EU-UK Joint Committee is working to reduce trade barriers, and to prevent the creation of new barriers so that businesses can trade freely within the legal framework agreed by the Westminster parliament and European Commission; further notes the new trading reality as a result of the end of the Brexit transition period; further acknowledges our continued access to the European single market with its 450 million consumers; and calls on the Executive to develop an overarching economic strategy, including the establishment of an Executive Sub-Committee on the Economy, to give a clear vision and direction to our representative agencies, including Invest NI, InterTradeIreland, Northern Ireland Co-operation Overseas, Northern Ireland Executive Office in Brussels, and the Northern Ireland Bureaux in the United States of America, Canada, and China.

Dr Caoimhe Archibald
Ms Sinéad Ennis
Ms Nicola Brogan
Mr John O'Dowd

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 49

Noes: 39

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, 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: Dr Archibald, Ms Ennis.

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 Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Harvey, Mr Stalford.

The motion was **agreed**.

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

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

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mrs Cameron, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey [Teller: Noes], Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford [Teller: Noes], Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Aiken voted for Mr Beattie

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald [Teller: Ayes], Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis [Teller: Ayes], Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, 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.

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

Ms Bailey voted for Ms Sugden.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 23 February 2021

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
 - Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2020-2021 (Department of Finance)
 - Northern Ireland Estimates Vote on Account 2021-2022 (Department of Finance)
 5. Assembly Reports
 6. Statutory Rules
 - SR 2021/41 The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)
- For information only**
- SR 2021/40 The Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)
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 23 February 2021

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 Civil Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)	31/03/20	28/04/20	15/10/20	15/10/20	17/11/20	15/12/20	18/01/21	
Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA Bill 04/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/	28/04/20	/	28/04/20	04/05/20
Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA Bill 05/17-22)	26/05/20	26/05/20	/	/	01/06/20	02/06/20	02/06/20	17/06/20
Housing Amendment Bill (NIA Bill 06/17-22)	26/05/20	01/06/20	/	/	16/06/20	23/06/20	30/06/20	28/08/20
Pension Schemes Bill (NIA Bill 07/17-22)	23/06/20	07/07/20	29/01/21	19/11/20				

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Executive Committee (Functions) Bill (NIA Bill 08/17-22)	06/07/20	06/07/20	/	/	21/07/20	27/07/20	28/07/20	25/08/20
Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22)	19/10/20	20/10/20	/	/	02/11/20	09/11/20	10/11/20	25/11/20
The Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 10/17-22)	19/10/20	03/11/20	15/05/21					
The Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill (NIA Bill 11/17-22)	03/11/20	16/11/20	11/06/21					
The Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill (NIA Bill 12/17-22)	23/11/20	01/12/20	/	/	14/12/20	19/01/21	25/01/21	
Protection from Stalking Bill (NIA Bill 14/17-22)	18/01/20	08/02/21						

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	11/11/20	24/11/20	19/01/21	02/02/20	
Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill (NIA Bill 13/17-22)	14/12/20							

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
The Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 15/17-22)	16/02/21							

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 23 February 2021

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Tuesday 23 February 2021:

Andy Allen	Dolores Kelly
Martina Anderson	Gerry Kelly
Caoimhe Archibald	Liz Kimmins
Kellie Armstrong	Naomi Long
Rosemary Barton	Gordon Lyons
Doug Beattie	Séan Lynch
Roy Beggs	Chris Lyttle
John Blair	Nichola Mallon
Cathal Boylan	Declan McAleer
Paula Bradley	Fra McCann
Sinead Bradley	Daniel McCrossan
Paula Bradshaw	Patsy McGlone
Nicola Brogan	Colin McGrath
Thomas Buchanan	Philip McGuigan
Jonathan Buckley	Maolíosa McHugh
Pam Cameron	Sinead McLaughlin
Pat Catney	Justin McNulty
Alan Chambers	Gary Middleton
Stewart Dickson	Karen Mullan
Linda Dillon	Conor Murphy
Diane Dodds	Mike Nesbitt
Jemma Dolan	Robin Newton
Gordon Dunne	Carál Ní Chuilín
Mark Durkan	Michelle O'Neill
Alex Easton	Edwin Poots
Sinéad Ennis	George Robinson
Arlene Foster	Emma Rogan
Órlaithí Flynn	Pat Sheehan
Colm Gildernew	Emma Sheerin
Paul Givan	Christopher Stalford
Deirdre Hargey	John Stewart
Harry Harvey	Mervyn Storey
David Hilditch	Claire Sugden
Cara Hunter	Robin Swann
William Irwin	Peter Weir
Declan Kearney	

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 1 March 2021

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Executive Committee Business

2.1 **Statement: British/Irish Council Joint Housing and Collaborative Spatial Planning Ministerial Meeting**

The Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon, made a statement regarding the recent British/Irish Council Joint Housing and Collaborative Spatial Planning Ministerial meeting, following which she replied to questions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

2.2 **Statement: British/Irish Council Joint Housing and Collaborative Spatial Planning Ministerial Meeting**

The Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey, made a statement regarding the recent British/Irish Council Joint Housing and Collaborative Spatial Planning Ministerial meeting, following which she replied to questions.

2.3 **First Stage: The Damages (Return on Investment) Bill (NIA Bill 16/17-22)**

The Minister of Justice, Mrs Naomi Long, introduced a Bill to make provision in relation to the assumed rate of return on investment of particular damages awarded in personal injury cases.

The Damages (Return on Investment) Bill (NIA Bill 16/17-22) passed First Stage and was ordered to be printed.

2.4 **Motion: Suspension of Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4)**

Proposed:

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 1 March 2021.

Minister of Finance

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support.

2.5 **Motion: Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2020-2021**

Proposed:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £22,220,328,000, 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 £25,124,542,000, 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 Columns 2 (c) and 3 (c) of Table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2020-2021 that was laid before the Assembly on 23 February 2021.

Minister of Finance

Motion: Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates Vote on Account 2021-2022**Proposed:**

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £10,081,611,000, 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 2022 and that resources, not exceeding £11,194,733,000, 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 2022 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 4 and 6 of Table 1 in the Northern Ireland Estimates Vote on Account 2021-2022 that was laid before the Assembly on 23 February 2021.

Minister of Finance

A single debate ensued on both motions.

The debate stood suspended for Question Time.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair

3. Question Time

3.1 Infrastructure

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon.

3.2 Justice

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Justice, Mrs Naomi Long.

The Speaker took the Chair.

4. Question for Urgent Oral Answer

4.1 Port Inspection Facilities

The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Mr Gordon Lyons, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Mr Declan McAleer.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

5. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

5.1 Motion: Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2020-2021 (cont'd)

Motion: Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates Vote on Account 2021-2022 (cont'd)

Debate resumed on both motions.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion on the Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2020-2021 was **carried** with cross-community support.

The Question being put, the Motion on the Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates Vote on Account 2021-2022 was **carried** with cross-community support.

5.2 First Stage: Budget Bill (NIA Bill 17/17-22)

A Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the years ending 31 March 2021 and 2022; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources for those years; to revise the limits on the use of certain accruing resources in the year ending 31 March 2021; and to authorise the Department of Finance to borrow on the credit of the sum appropriated for the year ending 31 March 2022.

The Budget Bill (NIA 17/17-22) passed First Stage and was ordered to be printed.

The Speaker informed the Assembly that he had received a letter from the Committee for Finance informing him that the Committee was satisfied that the consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill had been appropriate, as required under Standing Order 42(2).

6. Adjournment**Proposed:**

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 6.29pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

1 March 2021

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 24 February 2021 to 1 March 2021

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

The Damages (Return on Investment) Bill (NIA Bill 16/17-22)

Budget Bill (NIA Bill 17/17-22)

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

Southern Regional College: Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 July 2020 (Department for the Economy)

The North/South Language Body Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 December 2018 (Department for Communities)

Supplementary Page of the Spring Estimates 2020-2021 (Department of Finance)

5. Assembly Reports

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Twenty-seventh Report of Session 2020 – 2021 (NIA 81/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

Report on the Review of the Assembly's Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members: Stage 1 (NIA 82/17-22) (Committee on Standards and Privileges)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2021/43 The Police Service of Northern Ireland and Police Service of Northern Ireland Reserve (Injury Benefit) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 (Department of Justice)

SR 2021/44 The Zoonoses (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

SR 2021/45 The Covid-19 Heating Payment Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)

SR 2021/46 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

For information only

SR 2021/42 The Direct Payments to Farmers (Simplifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2021 39 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

Affirmed version of SR 2020/334 The Road Traffic Offenders (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Order 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2021/41 The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

8. Consultation Documents

Consultation Response on Options to Address Age Discrimination in Transitional Arrangements to the 2015 Public Service Pension Schemes (Department of Finance)

9. Departmental Publications

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 1 March 2021

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 March 2021:

Andy Allen	Gerry Kelly
Martina Anderson	Liz Kimmins
Caoimhe Archibald	Naomi Long
Rosemary Barton	Gordon Lyons
Roy Beggs	Séan Lynch
John Blair	Chris Lyttle
Cathal Boylan	Nichola Mallon
Paula Bradley	Declan McAleer
Sinead Bradley	Fra McCann
Paula Bradshaw	Daniel McCrossan
Nicola Brogan	Patsy McGlone
Thomas Buchanan	Colin McGrath
Jonathan Buckley	Philip McGuigan
Pam Cameron	Maoliosa McHugh
Pat Catney	Sinead McLaughlin
Alan Chambers	Justin McNulty
Stewart Dickson	Gary Middleton
Linda Dillon	Andrew Muir
Diane Dodds	Karen Mullan
Jemma Dolan	Conor Murphy
Gordon Dunne	Mike Nesbitt
Mark Durkan	Robin Newton
Alex Easton	Carál Ní Chuilín
Sinéad Ennis	Michelle O'Neill
Arlene Foster	Edwin Poots
Órlaithí Flynn	George Robinson
Colm Gildernew	Emma Rogan
Paul Givan	Pat Sheehan
Deirdre Hargey	Emma Sheerin
Harry Harvey	Christopher Stalford
David Hilditch	John Stewart
Cara Hunter	Mervyn Storey
William Irwin	Robin Swann
Declan Kearney	Peter Weir
Dolores Kelly	

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 2 March 2021

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

Royal Assent

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, advised Members that Royal Assent had been signified on 1 March 2021 to The Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021, and that Royal Assent had also been signified on 1 March 2021 to The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021.

3. Assembly Business

3.1 Motion: Assembly Commission Budget for 2021-22

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes the position of the Audit Committee on its scrutiny of the Assembly Commission's budget for 2021-22, as set out in its letter to the Minister of Finance, on 14 December 2020, and laid before the Assembly on 22 February 2021; and agrees the Assembly Commission's budget for 2021-22.

*Mr Keith Buchanan
Mr John O'Dowd
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr Robbie Butler
Mr John Blair*

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

4. Executive Committee Business

4.1 Motion: Suspension of Standing Order 42(5)

Proposed:

That Standing Order 42(5) be suspended in respect of the passage of the Budget Bill 2021.

Minister of Finance

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support.

4.2 Second Stage: Budget Bill (NIA Bill 17/17-22)

Minister of Finance

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, moved the Second Stage of the Budget Bill (NIA Bill 17/17-22).

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.59pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

5. Question Time

5.1 Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Mr Gordon Lyons.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the chair.

6. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

6.1 Second Stage: Budget Bill (NIA Bill 17/17-22) (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The debate stood suspended at 3.43pm.

The Speaker took the chair.

6.2 Statement: Pathway out of COVID-19 Restrictions

The deputy First Minister, Mrs Michelle O'Neill, made a statement regarding the Pathway out of COVID-19 Restrictions, following which she replied to questions.

6.3 Second Stage: Budget Bill (NIA Bill 17/17-22) (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The Budget Bill (NIA Bill 17/17-22) passed Second Stage with cross-community support.

7. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 8.37pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

2 March 2021

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 2 March 2021

1. **Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly**
Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021
Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021
2. **Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly**
3. **Orders in Council**
4. **Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly**
Land and Property Services Annual Report and Trust Statement Accounts for year ended 31 March 2020
(Department of Finance)
5. **Assembly Reports**
Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Twenty-eighth Report of Session 2020 – 2021 (NIA 83/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)
6. **Statutory Rules**
SR 2021/46 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No.5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)
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 March 2021

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 Civil Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)	31/03/20	28/04/20	15/10/20	15/10/20	17/11/20	15/12/20	18/01/21	01/03/21
Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA Bill 04/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/	28/04/20	/	28/04/20	04/05/20
Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA Bill 05/17-22)	26/05/20	26/05/20	/	/	01/06/20	02/06/20	02/06/20	17/06/20
Housing Amendment Bill (NIA Bill 06/17-22)	26/05/20	01/06/20	/	/	16/06/20	23/06/20	30/06/20	28/08/20
Pension Schemes Bill (NIA Bill 07/17-22)	23/06/20	07/07/20	29/01/21	19/11/20				

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Executive Committee (Functions) Bill (NIA Bill 08/17-22)	06/07/20	06/07/20	/	/	21/07/20	27/07/20	28/07/20	25/08/20
Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22)	19/10/20	20/10/20	/	/	02/11/20	09/11/20	10/11/20	25/11/20
The Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 10/17-22)	19/10/20	03/11/20	15/05/21					
The Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill (NIA Bill 11/17-22)	03/11/20	16/11/20	11/06/21					
The Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill (NIA Bill 12/17-22)	23/11/20	01/12/20	/	/	14/12/20	19/01/21	25/01/21	01/03/21
Protection from Stalking Bill (NIA Bill 14/17-22)	18/01/20	08/02/21						
The Damages (Return on Investment) Bill (NIA Bill 16/17-22)	01/03/21							
Budget Bill (NIA Bill 17/17-22)	01/03/21	02/03/21	/	/				

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	11/11/20	24/11/20	19/01/21	02/02/20	

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill (NIA Bill 13/17-22)	14/12/20							
The Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 15/17-22)	16/02/21							

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 2 March 2021

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 March 2021:

Andy Allen	Gerry Kelly
Martina Anderson	Liz Kimmins
Caoimhe Archibald	Naomi Long
Rosemary Barton	Gordon Lyons
Roy Beggs	Séan Lynch
John Blair	Chris Lyttle
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Sinead Bradley	Fra McCann
Paula Bradshaw	Daniel McCrossan
Nicola Brogan	Patsy McGlone
Keith Buchanan	Colin McGrath
Thomas Buchanan	Philip McGuigan
Jonathan Buckley	Maoliosa McHugh
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Alan Chambers	Justin McNulty
Stewart Dickson	Gary Middleton
Linda Dillon	Andrew Muir
Diane Dodds	Karen Mullan
Jemma Dolan	Conor Murphy
Gordon Dunne	Mike Nesbitt
Mark Durkan	Robin Newton
Alex Easton	Carál Ní Chuilín
Sinéad Ennis	Michelle O'Neill
Arlene Foster	Edwin Poots
Órlaithí Flynn	George Robinson
Colm Gildernew	Emma Rogan
Paul Givan	Pat Sheehan
Deirdre Hargey	Emma Sheerin
Harry Harvey	Christopher Stalford
David Hilditch	John Stewart
Cara Hunter	Mervyn Storey
William Irwin	Claire Sugden
Declan Kearney	Robin Swann
Dolores Kelly	Peter Weir

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 8 March 2021

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speakers' Business

2.1 The late Mr Jimmy Spratt

The Speaker announced the death of Mr Jimmy Spratt, a former Member for the South Belfast constituency.

Members paid tribute to Mr Spratt.

3. Public Petition

3.1 Urgent Provision of a Detox and Centre of Excellence for Addiction for the Derry City and Strabane District Council Area

Ms Karen Mullan was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition on the Urgent Provision of a Detox and Centre of Excellence for Addiction for the Derry City and Strabane District Council Area.

4. Matter of the Day

4.1 Withdrawal Agreement Grace Periods

Mr Declan McAleer, under Standing Order 24, made a statement on the Withdrawal Agreement Grace Periods. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

5. Assembly Business

Motion: Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill - Standing Order 34

Proposed:

That the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission be asked to advise whether the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill is compatible with human rights.

Ms Paula Bradshaw

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

6. Executive Committee Business

6.1 First Stage: The Health and Social Care Bill (NIA Bill 18/17-22)

The Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, introduced a Bill to dissolve the Regional Health and Social Care Board; to make provision for and in connection with the exercise by the Department of Health and Health and Social Care trusts of the functions of the Board; and for connected purposes.

The Health and Social Care Bill (NIA Bill 18/17-22) passed First Stage and was ordered to be printed.

6.2 Consideration Stage: Budget Bill (NIA Bill 17/17-22)

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, moved the Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill.

No amendments were selected for debate.

Clauses

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clauses 1 to 8 stand part of the Bill.

Schedules

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Schedules 1 to 4 stand part of the Bill.

Long Title

The question being put, the Long Title was **agreed** without division.

NIA Bill 17/17-22 stood referred to the Speaker.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

7. Committee Business

7.1 Motion: Extension of Committee Stage: Protection from Stalking Bill (NIA Bill 14/17-22)

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 10 December 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Protection from Stalking Bill (NIA Bill 14/17-22).

Chairperson, Committee for Justice

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

7.2 Motion: Amend Standing Order 112

Proposed:

Leave out Standing Order 112(8) and insert:

- (8) Except where paragraph 8A applies, a notice under paragraph (3) must be given to the Speaker's Office not later than 9:30am on the sitting day (or as the case may be the first sitting day) on which M intends P to vote on M's behalf.
- (8A) This paragraph applies where M becomes aware, in the course of a sitting day, that he or she is required to self-isolate in order to comply with public health regulations or guidance. Where this paragraph applies a notice under paragraph (3) may be given to the Speaker after 9:30am but such notice:
 - a. must be given as soon as possible and in any event a reasonable time before any vote on the item or items of business to which the notice applies; and
 - b. must state when M became aware that he or she was required to self-isolate in order to comply with public health regulations or guidance.

Chairperson, Committee on Procedures

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried** with cross-community support.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

7.3 **Motion: Committee for the Economy Skills Strategy and Economic Output Micro Inquiry Special Report**

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes the Committee for the Economy's Special Report (NIA 79/17-22) providing evidence from stakeholders to inform the forthcoming Skills Strategy; supports the development of a cross-departmental and inclusive approach to skills development; recognises the need for collaboration between the public sector, employers, industry, and all levels of education to ensure that our people have the right skills and access to lifelong learning; and calls on the Minister for the Economy and her Executive colleagues to use this evidence in planning for the new Skills Strategy

Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

Debate ensued.

The Assembly was suspended for Question Time.

The Speaker took the Chair.

8. Question Time

8.1 **The Executive Office**

Questions were put to, and answered by, the First Minister, the Rt Hon Arlene Foster. The junior Minister, Mr Gary Middleton, also answered a number of questions.

8.2 **Communities**

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

9. Committee Business (cont'd)

9.1 **Motion: Committee for the Economy Skills Strategy and Economic Output Micro Inquiry Special Report (cont'd)**

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

10. Private Members' Business

10.1 **Motion: Promoting a Gender-sensitive Assembly**

Proposed:

That this Assembly, on International Women's Day, notes Recommendation 12 of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee report, entitled Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly, which proposed that the Assembly should consider adopting measures to create a gender-sensitive Assembly; and endorses the recommendations in the Gender-sensitive Assembly Action Plan as put forward by the Northern Ireland Assembly Women's Caucus.

Ms Clare Bailey

Ms Jemma Dolan

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Sinéad Bradley

Ms Paula Bradley

Mrs Rosemary Barton

Debate ensued.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

11. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.40pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

8 March 2021

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 3 March 2021 to 8 March 2021

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

The Health and Social Care Bill (NIA Bill 18/17-22)

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

Local Government Auditor's Code of Audit Practice 2021 (Department for Communities)

20th Historic Buildings Council Report 2016-2020 (Department for Communities)

Revised Food Law Code of Practice (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland)

Triennial Weights and Measures Report for the period 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2017 (Department for the Economy)

5. Assembly Reports

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2021/Draft The Energy Performance of Buildings (Certificates and Inspections) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Finance)

SR 2021/47 The Recovery of Health Services Charges (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

SR 2021/48 The Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)

SR 2021/49 The Ballyboley Road, Larne (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2021/50 The Education (Student Support, etc.) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for the Economy)

SR 2021/54 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No.8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

For information only

Revised version of SR 2021/46 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No.5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2021/46 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No.5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

Appointment of Chair of the Southern Health Trust Urology Public Inquiry (Minister of Health)

8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 8 March 2021

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Monday 8 March 2021:

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Martina Anderson	Liz Kimmins
Caoimhe Archibald	Naomi Long
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John Blair	Chris Lyttle
Cathal Boylan	Nichola Mallon
Paula Bradley	Declan McAleer
Sinead Bradley	Fra McCann
Paula Bradshaw	Daniel McCrossan
Nicola Brogan	Patsy McGlone
Thomas Buchanan	Colin McGrath
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Pat Catney	Maolíosa McHugh
Alan Chambers	Sinead McLaughlin
Stewart Dickson	Justin McNulty
Linda Dillon	Gary Middleton
Diane Dodds	Andrew Muir
Jemma Dolan	Karen Mullan
Gordon Dunne	Conor Murphy
Mark Durkan	Mike Nesbitt
Alex Easton	Robin Newton
Sinéad Ennis	Carál Ní Chuilín
Arlene Foster	Michelle O'Neill
Órlaithí Flynn	Edwin Poots
Colm Gildernew	George Robinson
Paul Givan	Emma Rogan
Deirdre Hargey	Pat Sheehan
Harry Harvey	Emma Sheerin
David Hilditch	Christopher Stalford
Cara Hunter	John Stewart
William Irwin	Mervyn Storey
Declan Kearney	Robin Swann
Dolores Kelly	Peter Weir

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 9 March 2021

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker, in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

2.1 Resignations/Nominations

The Speaker informed Members that he had received notification from the First Minister and deputy First Minister that Mr Gordon Lyons had resigned the office of Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs effective from 8 March 2021, and that Mr Gary Middleton had resigned the office of junior Minister effective from 8 March 2021. The Speaker also informed Members that he had received notification from the nominating officer for the Democratic Unionist Party that Mr Edwin Poots had been nominated as Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Mr Poots accepted the nomination and affirmed the pledge of office in the presence of the Speaker and the Clerk/Chief Executive on Monday 8 March 2021.

2.2 Appointments

The Speaker informed Members that he had received notification from the First Minister and deputy First Minister that Mr Gordon Lyons had been appointed to the office of junior Minister. Mr Lyons accepted the nomination and affirmed the pledge of office in the presence of the Speaker and the Clerk/Chief Executive on Monday 8 March 2021.

3. Public Petition

3.1 Call for a Review of the Burial Grounds Regulations (Northern Ireland)

Mr Alex Easton was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition to Call for a Review of the Burial Grounds Regulations (Northern Ireland).

4. Executive Committee Business

4.1 Statement: British/Irish Council Digital Inclusion Ministerial Meeting

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, made a statement regarding the recent British/Irish Council Digital Inclusion Ministerial meeting, following which he replied to questions.

4.2 Further Consideration Stage: Budget Bill (NIA Bill 17/17-22)

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, moved the Further Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill (NIA Bill 17/17-22).

No amendments were tabled to the Bill.

NIA Bill 17/17-22 stood referred to the Speaker for consideration in accordance with Section 10 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the chair.

4.3 **Second Stage: Damages (Return on Investment) Bill (NIA Bill 16/17-22)**

The Minister of Justice, Mrs Naomi Long, moved the Second Stage of the Damages (Return on Investment) (NIA Bill 16/17-22).

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.51pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

5. Question Time

5.1 **Economy**

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for the Economy, Mrs Diane Dodds.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

6. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

6.1 **Second Stage: Damages (Return on Investment) Bill (NIA Bill 16/17-22) (cont'd)**

Debate resumed.

The Damages (Return on Investment) (NIA Bill 16/17-22) passed Second Stage.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the chair.

6.2 **Final Stage: Budget Bill (NIA Bill 17/17-22) (cont'd)**

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, moved that the Final Stage of the Budget Bill (NIA Bill 17/17-22) do now pass.

Debate ensued.

The Budget Bill (NIA Bill 17/17-22) passed Final Stage with cross-community support.

7. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 6.15pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

9 March 2021

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 9 March 2021

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 Twenty-Ninth Report of Session 2020 – 2021 (NIA 84/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)
6. Statutory Rules

SR 2021/52 The COVID -19 Study Disruption Payment Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for the Economy)

SR 2021/53 The Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 (Coronavirus, Calculation of a Week's Pay) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

SR 2021/55 The Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)

SR 2021/56 The Public Service Pensions Revaluation Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Finance)

SR 2021/57 The Planning (Development Management) (Temporary Modifications) (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Infrastructure)
7. Written Ministerial Statements

Expansion of the Asymptomatic Testing Programme - Workplace Testing (Minister of Health)
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
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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.

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Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as 9 March 2021

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 Civil Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)	31/03/20	28/04/20	15/10/20	15/10/20	17/11/20	15/12/20	18/01/21	01/03/21
Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA Bill 04/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/	28/04/20	/	28/04/20	04/05/20
Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA Bill 05/17-22)	26/05/20	26/05/20	/	/	01/06/20	02/06/20	02/06/20	17/06/20
Housing Amendment Bill (NIA Bill 06/17-22)	26/05/20	01/06/20	/	/	16/06/20	23/06/20	30/06/20	28/08/20
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Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
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Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22)	19/10/20	20/10/20	/	/	02/11/20	09/11/20	10/11/20	25/11/20
The Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 10/17-22)	19/10/20	03/11/20	15/05/21					
The Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill (NIA Bill 11/17-22)	03/11/20	16/11/20	11/06/21					
The Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill (NIA Bill 12/17-22)	23/11/20	01/12/20	/	/	14/12/20	19/01/21	25/01/21	01/03/21
Protection from Stalking Bill (NIA Bill 14/17-22)	18/01/20	08/02/21						
The Damages (Return on Investment) Bill (NIA Bill 16/17-22)	01/03/21	09/03/21						
Budget Bill (NIA Bill 17/17-22)	01/03/21	02/03/21	/	/	08/03/21	09/03/21	09/03/21	
Health and Social Care Bill (NIA Bill 18/17/22)	08/03/21							

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	11/11/20	24/11/20	19/01/21	02/02/20	
Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill (NIA Bill 13/17-22)	14/12/20							
The Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 15/17-22)	16/02/21							

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