



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

Volume 137

(15 March 2021 to 11 April 2021)

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Assembly Members

A

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

B

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

C

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

D

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

E

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

F

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

G

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

H

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

I

Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)

K

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

L

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

M

McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)
McCann, Fra (West Belfast)
McCrossan, Daniel (West Tyrone)
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)
McGrath, Colin (South Down)
McGuigan, Philip (North Antrim)
McHugh, Maolíosa (West Tyrone)
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
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McNulty, Justin (Newry and Armagh)
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Maskey, Alex (West Belfast)
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)
Muir, Andrew (North Down)
Mullan, Ms Karen (Foyle)
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)

N

Nesbitt, Mike (Strangford)
Newton, Robin (Speaker)
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, Ms Pat (West Belfast)
Sheerin, Ms Emma (Mid Ulster)
Stalford, Christopher (South Belfast)
Stewart, John (East Antrim)
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)

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Weir, Peter (Strangford)
Wells, Jim (South Down)
Woods, Miss Rachel (North Down)

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Minister for Infrastructure.....	Ms Nichola Mallon
Minister for the Economy.....	Mrs Diane Dodds
Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	Mr Edwin Poots
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The Executive Office	Mr Declan Kearney Mr Gordon Lyons
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Official Report (Hansard)

Assembly Sitings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 15 March 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matter of the Day

Death of Sarah Everard

Mr Speaker: Miss Rachel Woods has been given leave to make a statement regarding the death of Sarah Everard, which 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 who are called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. Before we begin, I remind Members that there are possible sub judice issues related to the matter. I do not want to inhibit comments, but, in accordance with my responsibilities under Standing Order 73, I caution Members to be particularly careful that they say nothing that may prejudice the outcome of criminal proceedings. As ever, no points of order will be taken during this item until it is concluded.

Miss Woods: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The death of Sarah Everard has brought violence against women and girls into sharp focus. This is not a single death, a single incident or a single tragedy. It is not a rare event. We know that domestic abuse has worsened since the start of the pandemic. Many women cannot stay at home and stay safe because of domestic abuse, and we know that women and girls are not safe on our streets. That will not stop when restrictions are lifted. The problem will remain. Where are women safe?

The death of Sarah has sent shock waves throughout society. Public debate has ensued throughout the UK, and women and girls in Northern Ireland have spoken out to say that they do not feel safe and have had experience of violence and threat visited upon them. It is our turn to listen. Last Monday, many MLAs spoke of their experiences as elected politicians. The harassment, misogyny and, at times, abuse are something that we mostly shared, but this is not about us. This is about every woman and girl who has experienced violence or fear of violence against them. According to the WHO, one in three women globally, which is around 736 million, have been subjected to physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. How many of us have been told not to walk home alone at night? I certainly have. My grandmother used to offer to pick me up from finishing my shift in the bar at 2.00 am to leave me literally up the road, and my mother used to do the same when I started in the bakery at 6.00 am.

How many of us have been groped, touched, told that we were asking for it, assaulted or verbally abused? How many of us have been given a rape alarm? How many of us have been followed home? How many of us have been told, "Don't run at night. Stay in well-lit places. Don't get

into the front seat of a car"? How many of us have texted our friends when we got home after a night out or made sure that our friends were safe? How many of us have been victim-blamed or heard that it was our fault that something happened to us? We are not the reason we get attacked.

We are the only part of the UK that does not have a violence against women and girls strategy to take male violence seriously. Despite my attempts in the Domestic Abuse Bill and the lobbying for many years by the women's sector, this is still the case. It is not for just one Department; this must be a whole-government approach. As I said last week, on International Women's Day, there is a worrying trend in government policies to neutralise gender and the realities that we live in. If we fail to recognise the gendered nature of specific societal issues, we will fail to deal with them, and 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 like domestic abuse and sexual violence are gendered issues, and, if we fail to recognise this in our government, we fail to effectively tackle such issues. We cannot bury our heads in the sand any more. We need evidence-based strategies to deal with these issues head-on.

My thoughts are with Sarah's family and friends and with every single person who has been a victim.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Miss Woods: These are our streets, too, and we will reclaim them.

Mrs Cameron: The death of Sarah Everard was an appalling and tragic act. It has, understandably, reignited the debate about how we tackle violence against women and girls and ensure that they are safe on our streets, in their homes and in society. The dignified acts of individual remembrance for Sarah in Portstewart and Londonderry, among other places, over the weekend highlighted the extent of the outpouring of grief for this young woman. The reality is that this could have been any one of our daughters, sisters or mothers. Communities and households across Northern Ireland stand with the Everard family in their fight for justice and in the determination to drive out unhealthy and violent attitudes towards women in our society. Government need to consider the kind of strategy needed for these issues, and my party will reach out to organisations such as Women's Aid in Northern Ireland to talk to them about what is a very important subject.

Ms Kimmins: I send my condolences to the family and friends of Sarah Everard and express solidarity with all the women and, indeed, men who have come out over the past number of days to share their shock, anger and sadness at

the events surrounding Sarah's death. As others said, last Monday, we all came together to celebrate International Women's Day. This Matter of the Day is in stark contrast to everything that that day represents and everything that we celebrated.

It is important to recognise the stark gap created by the lack of a gender-based strategy to deal with violence against women and girls, with the North being the only area in these islands that does not have such a strategy in place. It is time that we get that in place immediately. Gender-based violence has a devastating impact on the lives of thousands of women and children in the North every year, and, as others have said, the COVID pandemic has heightened this to frightening levels. This will continue long past COVID, and it is important that, if we truly want gender equality for all, we put a strategy in place now and try to eliminate it.

I also want to point out the disproportionate response from the Met to the peaceful vigil over the weekend. People showing solidarity in a peaceful way to try to send comfort to the friends and family of Sarah should be allowed to do so without being treated in that way.

Mrs D Kelly: I, too, want to be associated with the condolences to Sarah's family. I have five sisters and three daughters, two of whom are roughly the same age as Sarah. I cannot even begin to imagine the heartbreak of her mother today.

Miss Woods is right about the strategy. Women's Aid warned the previous Executive that the strategy was not good enough, that it was gender-neutral and that it did not recognise that women and girls were more likely to be the subject of violence and abuse from men.

At the Policing Board's performance committee meeting last week, we heard from a senior police officer about the past year's crimes against women, including sexual assault and domestic abuse. Over 65% of those crimes were committed against women and girls. The remainder were against men and cases involving children abusing parents. It is nuanced, but the stark fact is that domestic violence is more likely to be against women and girls. That is why I support the call of Women's Aid, which launched a petition last week calling on the Executive and the Justice Minister to put forward a strategy. We have a sterling report by Judge Gillen that is sitting on a number of Ministers' bookshelves. Money is required to bring forward the recommendations that Judge Gillen listed. Some of the steps will not cost much money, but there has to be collaboration right across government. That is what we should all be asking our Ministers to get their head around. They need to roll up their sleeves and say, "Enough is enough".

Mrs Barton: I, too, send my condolences to Sarah's family at this very sad time. I also have a sister and a daughter. My daughter is slightly younger than Sarah, so I empathise in many ways with what her family is going through at the moment. Sarah was a young woman going about her daily business. She disappeared off our streets without sight and without trace. Nobody saw it happen. Sadly, it is not the first time that that has happened. Women should have the right to walk our streets, to feel safe on our streets and in our countryside and to go out for walks alone. They should not be terrorised. They should not go out with fear in their mind. It is very concerning that, in a UK poll

recently, 80% of women reported having been harassed in public and 97% reported having been sexually harassed. That should not be allowed. It cannot go on. Violence is wrong. Catcalling is also wrong.

We have just had International Women's Day. We listened to examples of the abuse that women have to tolerate, from social media abuse to the asides and comments that are made as they walk along the street. We need to drive out those unhealthy attitudes towards women. A strategic plan must be worked on here in Stormont and put in place post-haste for the betterment of everyone.

Mr Blair: It is right and proper that we are discussing this Matter of the Day. I believe that a number of Members submitted a Matter of the Day on the issue. I, too, send my condolences to the family and friends of Sarah Everard and to all victims.

A nation has been reflecting for over a week now on the matter of violence by men against women. There has, of course, also been much analysis of the Metropolitan Police response to women and their supporters taking a stand on the matter at the weekend. The Matter of the Day before the Assembly, however, is to highlight the fact that, generally, men are the culprits and women are the victims. We, as an Assembly, need to address that fact and tackle that issue before we can move forward with this debate. We cannot address concerns for women's safety without putting men at the centre of the discussion. The collective socialisation of men has led to some becoming predatory. That is why we are at a tipping point. We need to ask what we, as men, can do to protect brothers, partners, friends and colleagues from becoming a perpetrator and a statistic themselves. Research from the femicide census, information collected on men's violence against women, calculates that, across the UK, 1,425 women were killed in the 10 years up to 2018. That is one killing about every three days. Of those killers, 90% were men. Of all women killed by men, 62% were killed by a current or former partner.

My hope is that legislation such as the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill, which was recently passed in the House, will go some way towards tackling male violence against women at home.

12.15 pm

As the police investigation of the disappearance of Sarah Everard ramped up last week, local women were warned to be careful about venturing out alone. When a police officer was arrested and subsequently charged with Sarah's murder, the head of the Metropolitan Police, Cressida Dick, acknowledged that women in London and beyond will be worried and may well feel scared. She said that a woman being abducted in the street is an "incredibly rare" event. The fact is that it is not an incredibly rare event, and nor is it an issue that is localised to London. On 16 August 2020, Susan Baird was murdered in her south Belfast home. She is the fifth woman to die in suspected violent circumstances in Northern Ireland since the start of lockdown.

Sadly, violence against women is not incredibly rare in this country, and it is very much not just a local issue here. The case of Sarah Everard is the tipping point. It is our George Floyd moment, a catalyst for change to end male violence against women. Women should be able to walk

the streets free from harm, fear and threat. We should also acknowledge, up front and openly, that women of colour and trans women are particularly at risk.

I hope that the discussion continues in the Assembly and that we have the opportunity to debate further what more men can do to be better allies, which includes addressing and challenging the problematic behaviour of fellow men. I look forward to working with colleagues to address the issue further.

Ms Bailey: I, too, extend my sympathies to the family of Sarah Everard and to the families of the five women in Northern Ireland who, we know, have been murdered in their own homes since lockdown began.

Last Monday was International Women's Day. Yesterday was Mothering Sunday. The images being beamed across the world and across social media really show how we as a society respect and value women. Legislation is not enough. If it is not resourced, it is simply legislation. If it is not understood, it is simply legislation. Male violence against women is endemic in our society and is largely accepted.

My grandmother suffered the same as I would have. My mother suffered the same as I would have. I have grown up and suffered as every other women has. I am now teaching my daughter how to keep herself safe, how to report and how to stand up and be heard. I do not want my grandchildren to repeat the same behaviours. In the UK, 97% of sex crimes are committed by men, and 90% of murders are committed by men. It is time for men to step up and address why that is.

As an Assembly, we have much to do. We know that the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which carried out a full inquiry in the UK, including Northern Ireland, made a series of recommendations about how we need to step up, yet we have done nothing. The Gillen review made plenty of recommendations about how we can step up, yet we have done nothing. The pilot domestic violence courts showed us where we need to step up, yet we have done very little. The Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) recommended what we could do to step up, yet we have done nothing. Women's Aid, Nexus NI and the charity sector have all been dealing with the fallout, yet we continue to reduce their access to resources. We had an Executive gender strategy that did not even mention the word "woman".

We have much to do, so let us commit to being human rights compliant and to stepping up to protect women at every opportunity. Today, let us commit to stop being gender-blind.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for bringing the important Matter of the Day to the House. I offer my sympathies to Sarah Everard's family and friends following her tragic killing. It goes without saying that what happened last week was disgusting and should never happen to anybody: not to any woman in any circumstances. The fact that a woman can be attacked and killed while trying to get home reflects the danger that women are in in today's society.

I also offer my solidarity and sympathy to all the women who have spoken out in the last week as they have been impacted by this devastating and awful news. We have a problem with male violence towards women in our society.

It needs to be stamped out and eradicated. Women should be able to walk, run, cycle or use public transport at any time of day or night without having to fear for their safety or their lives, as, tragically, so many do.

The tragedy puts a focus on the need for states and political systems to stop criminalising and targeting women and instead to put the resources into protecting and defending women. There has been a common thread throughout the COVID pandemic that, when people who are oppressed and want to peacefully and safely protest their disgust at injustice, they are met by the repression of police. That should be called out whether it is in London, Belfast or anywhere else. On Saturday, it was outrageous to see people who were standing against the murder of Sarah Everard and against violence against women being targeted in a dangerous and violent way by the Met Police. It is cruelly ironic that women who are not protected or safe when they are alone are then, when they are standing in unison, intimidated and arrested by the people who, they are told, are there to protect them.

It is disgraceful to hear the police say that the protests are unsafe when daily life for women is unsafe. Oppressed people, be they women or people who are subjected to or impacted by racism, have a right to organise and protest. Disgracefully, we are seeing an attack on that not only at the weekend in London but as the Tories try to ram through legislation that will criminalise protests. The Tories' disgraceful new legislation aims to ban protests that are noisy or disruptive. That is exactly what protests are and should be. They are places where people who are shut out of mainstream society have their say. They are designed to disrupt the normal running of things and to force those in power to rethink their positions and actions. Solidarity with those impacted by this awful murder. Let us redouble our efforts to fight for a world without sexism or misogyny.

Ms Sugden: I offer my condolences to the family and friends of Sarah Everard. My thoughts are also with every woman who has felt fear because she is vulnerable in a way that she should not be.

On Friday, I spoke out about the incident. I deliberately edited my comments, knowing that people would come back on me and say that this is not just about women. We need to face the fact that this is disproportionately about women. When we talk about violence against women, we should also look at violence against men. Do you know what the common factor is? Men tend to commit these crimes against both men and women. We need to call that out. I ask every man in the Chamber to stand up for this issue and recognise it for what it is. Of course we know that it is not all men. That is not the point. The point is that it is a disproportionate issue. I call on the Minister of Justice immediately to bring forward a strategy to address violence against women and girls; indeed, I call on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to do it, because it is a gendered issue, and that falls within the remit of their Department.

I was pleased to hear the First Minister talk about this last week. We really need to shine a light on it. Yes, I appreciate what people say about the need to protect ourselves, but we need to get to the root cause of the problem so that that does not need to be our first consideration. We need to understand why it happens, and we need to address it in that way.

I was triggered by some of the commentary at the weekend. I was really saddened when I thought that this would never change until we genuinely recognise where the issue is. I call on every man in the Assembly; I call on every man in the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland and every man across the world to recognise this for what it is. Women are disproportionately victims of this type of violence. Violence that happens against men is disproportionately perpetrated by men. We need to get on top of it now if we genuinely want to address the issue. Otherwise, we will have to edit our comments. Otherwise, even smaller parts of the issue do not get heard. It worries me that we are not focusing on the right issue. That is a really important message to come from the Assembly today and across the UK.

Ms S Bradley: I too put on record my condolences to Sarah Everard's mother, family and friends. I simply cannot begin to imagine the pain that they must be going through at this time.

In addition to that, the appalling scenes that we all witnessed over the weekend in London cannot have offered any comfort to those people who are so deeply grieving.

In the context of Northern Ireland, I want to register my absolute disgust at the lack of support that we have been able to offer women, especially those women who were murdered during lockdown. Their families have been left grieving in an absolute void of silence, where there is nothing happening to support them.

During our hearings on the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill, we repeatedly heard quite distinctly about the different crime that is targeted towards women. Rightly, I accepted the argument that, at the very highest level of legislation, there was a need to be gender-neutral, but that does not allow us to walk away from the responsibility that we have in this House to understand the gender crime that is targeted towards women, which is horrific and persistent.

It is one thing for us to stand here in unison and call for a strategy, but it must be fully understood and resourced, with all the training and back-up that is required. This is an ask about keeping women safe and keeping women alive.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with other similar motions, this motion will be treated as a business motion and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

*That Mr Gary Middleton replace Mrs Pam Cameron as a member of the Business Committee. —
[Mr K Buchanan.]*

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

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

Ministerial Statement

Public Expenditure: Additional Business Support Schemes

Mr Principal Deputy 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 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 by way of rising in their place as well as notifying the Business Office or the Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions. This is not an occasion for debate and long introductions will not be permitted. 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.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I wish to update the House on further schemes that my Department will deliver to provide financial support to businesses that have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In my written statement of 25 February, I noted that if funding remained unallocated, my Department would bring forward contingency plans to ensure that the funding that is available is used. The Executive have now agreed to a number of financial support schemes for businesses, which my Department has brought forward. Those schemes will be implemented rapidly to make use of the remaining COVID funding within the current financial year.

12.30 pm

I bring forward three schemes of financial assistance for business, worth £178 million. These schemes will provide a lifeline to over 19,600 businesses, as they continue to confront the challenges of COVID-19. The proposals will help some businesses that have not received any grant funding so far during the pandemic, as well as some businesses that have experienced a significant reduction in trade because of the recent restrictions but which cannot access one of the Executive's current support schemes.

The first is a scheme that will provide a one-off grant of £50,000 for certain businesses that occupy premises with a net annual value (NAV) over £51,000 and are eligible for the 12-month rates holiday. Those businesses were not able to access grant funding during the first lockdown. Examples of the kinds of business that will benefit are shops, car showrooms, garden centres, gyms and fitness suites, equestrian centres and caravan parks. Businesses will have to apply for the grant. It is estimated that approximately 1,125 businesses will benefit, and the cost of this scheme is estimated at up to £56.3 million.

The second scheme will provide a one-off grant of £25,000 to industrial businesses operating from premises with a total net annual value of between £15,000 and £51,000.

Again, those business received no financial support during 2020. Approximately 1,100 businesses will benefit, and the cost of the scheme is estimated at £27.9 million.

The third scheme will make an additional payment to businesses that received either the £10,000 small business grant or the £25,000 grant for retail, hospitality, tourism and leisure in the first lockdown but have been unable to access financial support over the autumn or winter from one of the Executive's current support schemes. Although those businesses have been permitted to continue trading during the most recent phase of restrictions, many have experienced significant reductions in their trade and revenues. Those who received the £10,000 grant last year will receive a further payment of £5,000, while those who received the £25,000 grant will receive a further payment of £10,000. It is estimated that almost 17,500 businesses will be eligible for this payment.

The schemes will be delivered by my Department. Using the exceptional circumstances powers under the Financial Assistance Act 2009, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have designated my Department as the relevant Department to provide the assistance. My Department will urgently bring forward regulations for the schemes. I ask Members to note that payments can be issued only after the regulations are made.

These financial support schemes for businesses will be implemented rapidly to make use of the remaining COVID funding in the current financial year. Achieving that speed means that the risk of errors cannot be eliminated. There will, by necessity, be a trade-off between rapid delivery and quality assurance, but the perfect should not be the enemy of the good. In the absence of other Departments coming forward to spend this money, the choice facing me, as Finance Minister, was between using the available funding rapidly on these schemes, with the risks that that entails, or surrendering it to the Treasury. Having said that, I assure Members that lessons have been learned from the previous grant schemes and measures are being put in place to prevent previous errors from reoccurring. In particular, wind turbines and constituency offices, previously paid in error, will not receive the additional payments.

Given the time available, it has not been possible to undertake the detailed analysis and economic appraisal that would normally underpin schemes of this nature to inform a determination on value for money. My accounting officer has informed me that delivery of the scheme cannot be recommended without bringing her into conflict with her duties under 'Managing Public Money NI' and that, as such, she will require a ministerial direction to proceed.

As an Executive, we have been obliged to introduce severe restrictions on businesses as part of our efforts to control the pandemic. It is incumbent on the Executive to make maximum possible use of the resources available to them to mitigate the economic impacts. Therefore, I will provide a ministerial direction to implement the Executive's decision.

The Executive continue to respond to the rapidly changing and highly challenging environment that COVID-19 places us in. The schemes that I have announced will contribute to our aims of supporting businesses and assisting with our economic and social recovery and will provide a welcome lifeline to many businesses that have been

struggling with the impacts of the pandemic. In protecting businesses, many of which are small, locally owned companies, we protect their workers and the families that rely on the income that workers provide.

I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Frew (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): On behalf of the Committee for Finance, I thank the Minister for his statement and for meeting me this morning. That was much appreciated.

The health pandemic and, indeed, the economic and societal lockdown have been long and painful for individuals, families and businesses. Those new schemes, along with the extension of the business rates holiday, are good news, which will, I know, be welcomed by hard-pressed businesses up and down Northern Ireland. It is important to acknowledge the provision of support packages to some of the smaller sectors that felt left out of previous support packages. Hopefully, lessons were learned from errors there.

Will the Minister advise the House whether, after the roll-out of those schemes, he expects to have to return any money to Westminster for 2021? The Minister indicated that, owing to the compressed timescales, a value-for-money evaluation cannot be completed, and thus ministerial direction is required for the schemes. When will the necessary value-for-money evaluation be undertaken and when will he revise the transparency process and publish all ministerial directions when they are given?

Mr Murphy: I do not expect to return any unspent money. There still remains, relatively speaking, a small amount of unspent COVID money, which, as the Member and Committee know, has to be spent out within this financial year. There are a number of allocations that I hope to bring to the Executive next week in order to finalise that, but that was to take up a significant proportion of that remaining funding.

Some Departments may return money even at this late stage; we always anticipate some return. However, there is a carry-over capacity in the normal circumstances of carrying over unallocated money, so we do not anticipate or intend to return any money to the Treasury. Trying to spend out at the end of the financial year is not the best way of conducting budgetary processes, but there is an opportunity through the scheme to provide support to businesses that previously did not get it.

This is one of a number of schemes that required ministerial direction from a range of Departments. Of course, we want to make sure that the background to those directions is published. We intend to improve transparency in all that, and we will get that out as quickly as we can.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, agus ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghlacadh fosta leis an Aire as a ráiteas. Thank you, Minister, for your statement. I commend the Minister for the expediency that he has shown in bringing forward proposals. Constant demand was out there for all Departments to bring forward proposals, and the Minister assured us that, at the end of the day, if they did come forward, he would be in a position to respond.

Minister, has a time frame been established for when people can apply for the £50,000 grant, given that it is not paid automatically? Secondly, in the event of that time

frame being established, how do you hope to communicate that to the public in order to ensure that the funds go to those who deserve them?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the Minister, I remind Members of my remarks at the opening of the debate about having focused questions. I gave a little leeway to the Deputy Chair of the Committee, as I would have to Dr Aiken had he been here, but we should try to focus.

Mr Murphy: Yes, there is an application process for the larger figure. We cannot start making payments until the regulations are made, so we will be working closely with the Member and the other Finance Committee members in order to make that happen as quickly as possible.

Even though, as he correctly identified, we waited to give other Departments the opportunity to bid for some of the unspent COVID money, we were in the background developing contingency plans. We had to step in at the end to make sure that we could put some support out there. There will be an application process. Some of the other payments are automatic, but, for the larger payment, there is an application process. We will get that information out as quickly as we can, but we cannot pay out until the regulations are made.

We are confident that we will do this within this financial year and that the money will be allocated within this financial year, so spending will be approved on that basis.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, I welcome the fact that that money will be spent rather than simply handed back to the Treasury, but it is clear that we are now, unfortunately, in the 'Brewster's Millions' phase of our budgetary process.

Money is being sent out without there being clear data on the sectors that most need it and the people who have not had support yet. Notwithstanding that, as I said, it is good that more support is happening. What specific research are his Department and the Economy Department doing to find out exactly what the impact of that money will be? That information will be critical to understanding where our economy is. At the minute, it seems as though we are flying blind with regard to what will greet the high street when it reopens in the weeks and months to come.

Mr Murphy: I do not think that the Member is correct about how the money is being given out. It is not an ideal way in which to do it, and we have always acknowledged that. Every Member has acknowledged that our budgetary system puts us in a position where we end up trying to spend our underspend at the end of the year. Obviously, the support will be valuable and welcome for an awful lot of businesses across the North, particularly as it is targeted to reach those that did not get support previously or during the autumn and winter and to give them some support as we move into the phase of reopening and economic recovery.

The process is underpinned by data. We had done analysis through the Ulster University, and we did that again. Any data on rates and on how businesses have been affected by the pandemic and on schemes that we ran previously has been put in to inform future rates decisions and make sure that some of the mistakes in previous schemes, including when businesses got support that they did not require, were weeded out. There is data. I accept that the schemes are not ideal, given that we are

spending significant amounts, but I am sure that most people on the ground will be pleased that we are allocating money to them, not sending it back to London.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for his statement. It is, undoubtedly, good news for those businesses. The process will never be perfect when we have to work within the current time frame, but I acknowledge that that money will go out to them.

I want to raise two aspects, if I may. First, can the Minister clarify whether the extension of rate relief to retail businesses will also apply to close-contact services, including salons and hairdressers, given the impact that COVID has had on them? Secondly, we are waiting for information on the COVID restrictions business support scheme (CRBSS), which is run through Invest NI via the Department for the Economy, to see whether it will be extended past 1 April. The concern among businesses that have availed themselves of the scheme is that they are unsure whether it will be extended if restrictions continue. Can the Minister give some assurances that the scheme will continue?

Mr Murphy: The statement released last Thursday evening addressed the point about rate relief. Premises that availed themselves of rate relief during the eight months of the past financial year up to this point can avail themselves of it for the 12 months. That includes close-contact services.

On the Department for the Economy's scheme, I have made it clear that, as long as restrictions apply, the localised restrictions support scheme (LRSS) will continue to pay out. We have set aside contingency COVID money for the next financial year to do that. Obviously, the sooner we are out of restrictions and lockdown, the better it will be for everyone. While all those businesses very much welcome any support, all they want is to get back to trading; in essence, that is what they want to do. I have said to the Economy Minister that I believe that the scheme that she has run should continue as long as restrictions are in place. There is money there to support that, so I hope that it continues to run.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for his statement. I particularly thank the Minister for the action for those with a net annual value of over £51,000. They have been banging their heads off a wall trying to get support for the past year. It is good to see that coming forward.

How can we ensure that value for money is associated with the £10,000 and £25,000 grants and with the £5,000 and £10,000 grants to businesses? Will there be, for example, an honesty box to enable those who do not need the financial support to return it? From what I have read in the statement, it seems that there will be no application process associated with those grants.

Mr Murphy: Lessons from the previous experience have been applied. Certainly, some things that were designated as "businesses" did not require that support. There has been a deliberate approach to ensure that they are not included again. Those lessons have been learnt.

With regard to receipt of the grant, there is a notice to tell businesses that, if they wish to pay it back or are not entitled to receive it, they should pay it back. There are clear instructions on how to do so. With all the schemes, given the timescales that we are working in, the question

is this: do we try to make them absolutely perfect and risk not getting the scheme done in time to spend that money in this financial year; or do we try not to make perfection the enemy of the good and get some support out where we can?

I would be surprised if there is not some slippage. We have to try to manage that and recoup that, as the Department has done in conjunction with the Department for the Economy with previous schemes, and we have to learn the lessons from those, as has happened with this scheme. I hope that we see fewer problems with this scheme than we did with previous ones.

12.45 pm

Mr Buckley: I welcome the statement insofar as I agree with the Minister that it is a lifeline to many thousands of businesses that are struggling at this time. Sadly, despite the statement, some business sectors will still feel that they have been totally excluded throughout the entire COVID-19 pandemic. Minister, as you know, I approached you in person and through written communication about the plight faced across Northern Ireland by the owners of dog and other animal kennels, which have had no access to funding throughout the pandemic. What comfort can those industries take from today's statement?

Mr Murphy: The Member will know that, in the absence of other Departments bringing forward schemes to target support at and tailor support to certain business sectors, including the one that he mentioned, we are obliged to operate off the rates base. That is the only vehicle available to the Department of Finance. We are not a business support Department. That is not really our function. I certainly hope, once this scheme and rate relief for next year are done, that we will be out of that game and that responsibility will go back properly to the Department for the Economy and other Departments to continue to support businesses in the time ahead as we get into economic recovery mode. As I said, that is not a function of the Department of Finance, and I had to take additional powers to do the schemes so that we could get some support out.

Some people who look after animals may have rateable premises and some may not. We can devise schemes only around the rates base, so we are restricted in that regard. I recognise that people whose businesses rely on other people going on holidays, travelling or going off to do other things have not been able to do their normal business. We have tried to use these schemes to reach some businesses that have suffered from a lack of footfall this year, by which I mean businesses that were not required to close but that clearly could not trade to any level at all. We have done that through the rates scheme, but we are restricted in what we can do and in what sectors we can reach. I brought forward that scheme in the absence of other Departments bringing forward more specific schemes for other businesses.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for his statement. The money is going to some business sectors that have had no specific supports and that I and others have been highlighting for months. I am really glad to see the Minister put this support scheme in place, because I have been frustrated at the lack of further business supports being proposed by the Economy Minister, despite the need and despite the funding being available.

Minister, the previous business grant schemes last year — the £10,000 scheme and the £25,000 scheme — were jointly administered by the Department of Finance and the Department for the Economy. What role does the Department for the Economy play in these schemes?

Mr Murphy: We have engaged with that Department, because, as I say, we had to learn some lessons from the way in which schemes were rolled out last time. We have taken the power in that regard this year, and we asked the Executive Office to give us the power to do so. The Department for the Economy has said that it is busy with a range of other schemes that it is rolling out. That Department is moving more into economic recovery mode than continuing to pay out, so we have taken on the role of being responsible for this. We will work closely with the Department for the Economy to identify businesses that require support and businesses that perhaps should not have received support through the previous schemes, and we are trying to reach some of the businesses that, as you identify, we did not manage to support over the year.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Minister. I welcome the statement. I am still aware, however, of many businesses that have been refused support. In order to fill the funding gaps and better tailor future support schemes, is your Department reviewing the data from the sectors that are still impacted on by the pandemic but have not yet received support?

Mr Murphy: The Member will know, as a member of the Finance Committee, that there are parameters within which we can do schemes. We can really only use the rates base to identify businesses. I am sure that he has engaged with and knows of sectors that have not received support. I waited and encouraged people to bid and develop schemes to target businesses that had yet to receive support or did not receive sufficient support. I am sure that the Member has heard me say that on many occasions over the last number of months. At the end of the day, if bids do not come in, I can only allocate accordingly. In allocating through this scheme, we have hit some sectors that previously did not receive support. It will not include all the people that the Member has, correctly, identified, and I know that because I have engaged with many of those businesses. We do not have the wherewithal to reach all of them, and I am sorry about that. However, it is the responsibility of other Departments. As we move into the economic recovery phase, I hope that businesses that need more assistance to recover economically can be given more attention in the time ahead.

Mr McGuigan: Minister, I welcome the announcement today of £178 million of support for businesses. I also welcome your statement on Friday that announced a £230 million allocation for rate relief, and that will be welcome news to many businesses. The allocation means that businesses across many key sectors will have benefited from a rates holiday for two full years. Minister, can you detail the total amount of rate relief funding that has been provided to businesses since the start of the pandemic?

Mr Murphy: The Member will be aware that there was an initial four-month rates holiday for all businesses. On the back of some research and data gathered by the University of Ulster's economic policy unit, the support was tailored more closely to businesses that were going to suffer most as a consequence of the pandemic. In doing that, we took large food stores out of the scheme, and that

policy proved to be correct because those stores returned rate relief money in England.

Between the four-month rates holiday that was extended for a further eight months and this scheme, there will be rates support for two years. Some people will have a complete two-year period without paying any rates, which is a huge benefit to a lot of businesses. This scheme takes rate support to over £0.5 billion.

Ms Dolan: Minister, thank you for your statement. The announcement of the £25K support grant for manufacturers will be warmly received by that sector, particularly as manufacturers were not included in previous grant support schemes. How many manufacturers will benefit from this support grant?

Mr Murphy: In the statement, I said that over 1,000 manufacturers will benefit. It applies to businesses that operate from industrial derated premises with an NAV between £15,000 and £51,000. As you say, the manufacturers were not covered by the business support grants paid last year. However, LPS can readily identify those businesses, having recently extended the 12-month rates holiday, and that was a late add-on to the 12-month rates holiday last year for the manufacturing sector. Those payments will be made automatically without the need for an application. From my original statement, the figure was 1,100 businesses.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his announcement. A number of businesses missed out last year because of the complexity of the rating system, as a portion of their rates was determined as industrial derated or small business rates relief. Will those businesses be picked up by the grants this time around?

Mr Murphy: Yes, if the businesses meet the established criteria. If any business owner is in doubt about the criteria, nibusinessinfo.co.uk is the place to go, even though the regulations need to be made before the Department can pay out. However, people can get early information to see how they fit into the scheme. Of course, as I said in my previous answer, we did revisit the previous scheme and included the small and medium manufacturing base later in the year and backdated the rates holiday for that sector. Some of those that are eligible will come under this scheme, but if anyone is in any doubt, they can visit the nibusinessinfo website to get a clear picture of the businesses that are included.

Mr Dickson: Minister, somewhat uncomfortably, you have had to acknowledge in your statement that you had to proceed under a ministerial direction and your chief accounting officer had to point that out. Do you agree that you have, unfortunately, had to deploy a rather blunt instrument to distribute these funds at the end of the financial year? Would the grant scheme not have been done better, throughout the whole year, with better strategic planning with other Departments? What action will you take for the next financial year to ensure that actions are more strategic and more in cooperation with other Departments?

Mr Murphy: The Member is correct. However, as I said in my statement, I had the choice, as Finance Minister, between returning unspent money to Treasury — people have identified many sectors here that have not yet received any support — or giving it out and giving direction

to the accounting officer in my Department to do that. Of course, that is not the ideal way to do any of that.

We received money late on. We were told last summer that what we received was the guaranteed Barnett outcome for the year, but that was added to at least another three, and possibly four, times. Doing it that way has not been ideal. The money has been very welcome, and a lot of Departments have stepped up admirably to deliver support where they could. There is a huge amount of extra money. Including the money given to the health service, we will have spent an additional £3.3 billion this year.

Next year, we will want to improve. We have a sense of the amount of funding that we will have available next year. We have already identified rates support so that we could make an early announcement about a 12-month rates holiday for people next year. We also have an economic recovery plan that the Department for the Economy has brought forward, and we have identified money for that. We have also identified money for Health and Education and for social support. A number of things have been identified.

If we get additional money throughout the year, we will probably be in the same scenario of trying to find ways to spend it. We are trying to identify, as far as possible, the amount of extra money that we will have next year, which I think is about £900 million. That has improved from the Chancellor's Budget statement last week. We were originally looking at £0.5 billion, so you can see that that has changed already. We will try to identify it and spend it more strategically. If other money comes throughout the year, we will have to fit it into the strategic plans as best as we can.

Ms Anderson: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, on behalf of the near thousand businesses in Derry, I want to thank you for the grant support that they have received. It has been a lifeline. The owners of the businesses that previously received £10,000 will deeply appreciate what they heard. Will you give more details to the owners of those businesses that were not eligible before for any of the grant schemes but who will now be eligible? They would deeply appreciate getting more information.

Mr Murphy: The north-west — Derry city and Strabane — was the first area to go into lockdown when the localised restrictions began last autumn. In that regard, businesses there have been in lockdown restrictions longer than anyone else. Some larger businesses were not included in previous grant schemes, including shops, car showrooms, garden centres, gyms, fitness suites, equestrian centres and caravan parks. I am not sure how many equestrian centres there are in Derry city, but I am sure that a number of businesses will be able to avail themselves of that funding.

We know that LRSS has been paying out in a substantial way and at about double the amount that businesses in England have been able to avail themselves of. On average, people at the lower end of the LRSS grant will have received about £10,000 or £11,000 during the restrictions, and some of the larger businesses in the larger payment schemes will have received up to almost £40,000. The purpose of today's announcement is to give some assistance to businesses that have not received that support. Some of them were not obliged to close down, but, in effect, lost all their footfall. Businesses in the

city centre in Derry have suffered from a drop in footfall, even though, as essential businesses, they were able to remain open. They will welcome the support that the grant provides.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he provide clarity on a couple of points? Will he tell me about applications where a business has multiple properties and where there may be multiple applications? What does he advise in that instance? Will he also consider widening the scope of the localised restrictions support scheme to ensure that sports clubs, such as GAA and social clubs, are not left behind?

Mr Murphy: I would very much have liked to address businesses with multiple premises as part of this statement. However, the Department for the Economy is involved in an ongoing legal case on a previous scheme that involved the paying out of money to multiple premises. We were not able to include multiple premises because that legal action is ongoing, and to take any action contrary to that would cut across that case.

The Member has asked the question about payments to clubs many times and has been given the same answer many times.

The GAA's Ulster Council was involved in designing the very programme to support GAA clubs. That was the programme that it encouraged all its clubs to go for. It was involved in the co-design of that programme, as were the Irish Football Association (IFA), Ulster Rugby and all those other sectors.

1.00 pm

Mr McNulty: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister must be allowed to answer without interruption.

Mr Murphy: The Member is mumbling away. I cannot quite pick him up.

The sports clubs and their sporting authorities worked with the Department for Communities to devise a scheme to provide support for them. The Member keeps asking me to put them into a scheme that was not designed for them. It may have paid out more frequently and may have paid out more money, but it was done on the basis of what those sporting organisation bodies did. They devised and co-designed the scheme for their clubs and have encouraged their clubs to avail themselves of that scheme, and that is the one that is for them. The Member keeps trying to fit a square peg into a round hole here no matter how many times I give him the same answer, but I hope that the penny will drop eventually.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for his statement. So many businesses and people have been unfairly excluded, so I welcome the support that they have been given.

The Minister refers to lessons learnt from the previous scheme. Is there any legal basis for recalling grants that may have been given in error?

Will the Minister outline whether dry-cleaners will be eligible for the third scheme that he announced, as they have had to take loans over the last year?

Mr Murphy: In answer to the last question, we are trying to target the businesses that were not obliged to close

because they were considered essential. However, in effect, some dry-cleaners managed to get support because they were considered to be part of the supply chain for the tourism industry. People who worked with hotels and restaurants and so forth have managed to get some support from the Department for the Economy, but others clearly have not, so it is about trying to provide some support.

On the legal side, the Department for the Economy was responsible, working with Land and Property Services (LPS), for trying to get back any money from people who were paid incorrectly. I am not sure of the legal enforcement powers that it has in that regard, but I can find that out and give the Member some update on it.

Mr Allister: I would like clarification of an earlier answer about the first scheme and the £50,000. That is rates-based per premises, but the Minister seems to be saying that an independent retailer who has multiple premises or more than one, for example, will get only the one £50,000. That group has already been discriminated against in previous grants. Is he really saying that, on a rates-based qualification, you will just pick and choose between which premises will qualify because a particular business might have more than one premises? Surely, that is grossly unfair. Does the same apply to the third scheme? In the third scheme, how are there 17,500 businesses? Have we really had 17,500 businesses permitted to continue to trade?

Mr Murphy: With regard to the first scheme, as I said in response to a previous question, I would have liked to be able to pay multiple premises because I recognise that that is a situation where, you could argue, there is an unfairness. In Scotland and possibly in Wales, they have developed a scheme where they have a reducing scale going from one premises down. If somebody had 25 premises and was getting five £25,000 grants, that would be a substantial amount of money, but there could be a sliding scale down to a number of premises. The Department for the Economy is involved in legal proceedings, and we were not able to cut across those by devising a scheme that contradicted that legal action in relation to previous schemes. While I would have liked to pay and find some formula to address multiple premises, that was not possible.

We all know that small businesses that have been open in tourism facilities and in train stations have suffered from a huge lack of footfall and that small convenience kiosks and the like have been open and have not really received any footfall. Businesses in Belfast city centre that rely on office traffic were not obliged to close and were not entitled to LRSS, but, in effect, they were closed. The figures have been provided from the rates base. If the Member has a particular question on that, I am sure that I will hear from him, and I will ask LPS to give him some sense of where those businesses are and how it identified that number.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his statement. My question relates to the fact that there are still issues with smaller companies not getting access to business support grants while bigger companies get grants when they do not need them. There are small businesses in my constituency that, despite meeting the criteria for support during the first round of funding and doing everything that they had to do — applying and appealing multiple times — got no support at a time when MLAs' offices were given financial support

and assistance. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that those businesses, which were eligible but did not get any support, will get it? If he needs it, I am happy to provide him with further detail on that.

Mr Murphy: If the Member has specifics on businesses in West Belfast that have not received funding, I am happy to receive that information. I assume that he is referring to the LRSS. More than 98% of those cases are now resolved, albeit that some were told that they were not eligible. There will be businesses that are not eligible to apply, but, if someone has looked at the criteria and feels that they are entitled to support, there are appeal mechanisms for that. I am happy for the Member to forward any details to me so that I can make sure that that is addressed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Members. That concludes questions on the Minister of Finance's statement. I ask that Members take their ease before we move to the next item of business. If you are leaving the Chamber, Members, do not forget to wipe down the area where you were sitting and to adhere to social-distancing regulations. Thank you.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Private Members' Business

Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill: Second Stage

Mr Speaker: Members, I wish to make a few remarks before we proceed to the Bill. I remind Members of our standards of debate: good temper, moderation, courtesy and respect. I raise that because I did not think that some elements of the discussion last week on the Standing Order 34 motion provided, in all aspects, the best start to consideration of the Bill. We are discussing an issue on which, as we all know, there are strong and deeply felt opinions. Members will have the ability to express those views, and there is absolutely no problem with that. Members will be aware that the issues that we are talking about today are highly emotive and that how the matters are discussed can exacerbate the experiences of people on any side of the argument that we are addressing. I therefore appeal to Members to be mindful of not just those in the Chamber but all those who may be watching the debate and have been affected by the issues. I appeal to Members to be mindful of their language and their tone. If Members follow that guidance, there will be no need for the Chair to intervene. It is particularly essential that Members respect the right of others with a differing view, no matter which side of the House they come from, to be heard. I personally think that how this debate is addressed sets a marker for the integrity of the Assembly. This is a serious and sensitive debate, and Members should approach it in that manner. I am confident that I can look to the sponsor of the Bill to set the tone for the debate, so thank you.

Mr Givan: I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill [NIA Bill 15/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Speaker: In accordance with convention, the Business Committee has not allocated any time limit to the debate.

Mr Givan: I am delighted to bring the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill before the Assembly today. The Bill tackles disability discrimination and how the law perpetuates stereotypes. No one expresses that better than Heidi Crowter, and I express my sincere gratitude to her as she tirelessly fights for the rights of those with disabilities. I think that we all agree that she is an incredible and passionate young woman, whose contribution to our society is immeasurable. It was in May last year that Heidi called on the Assembly to make it clear that we did not accept the abortion regulations that Westminster had imposed on us, which make it legal to abort on the basis of non-fatal disabilities right up to birth, while affording non-disabled babies a far higher degree of protection. My party responded to Heidi's intervention when we tabled the motion:

"That this Assembly welcomes the important intervention of disability campaigner Heidi Crowter and rejects the imposition of abortion legislation that extends to all non-fatal disabilities, including Down's syndrome."

That motion passed by a simple majority. Sinn Féin, at the time, tabled an amendment to the motion to make it clear that it did not wish to reject the regulations in any respect other than their imposition of abortion on the basis of non-fatal disability up to birth. The impact of its amendment on the DUP motion would have meant that it read:

"That this Assembly welcomes the important intervention of disability campaigner Heidi Crowter and rejects the specific legislative provision in the abortion legislation that goes beyond fatal foetal abnormalities to include non-fatal disabilities, including Down's syndrome."

Thus, in the space of two votes on 2 June, 75 out of 90 MLAs voted to make it clear that they did not support the regulations to the extent that they made provision for abortion on the basis of non-fatal fetal abnormality. The Bill before us today is very much the outcome of that process.

The Bill has one clause of substance, which gives expression to the determination of an overwhelming majority of Members, representative of our whole community, to reject the provision of abortion on the basis of non-fatal disability. At this stage, let me put on record my thanks to colleagues in other political parties who support the Bill on that basis: Robbie Butler MLA, Dolores Kelly MLA and Trevor Lunn MLA. All three have publicly endorsed the Bill, and I pay tribute to them for doing so.

The Bill makes it clear that there is no place for disability discrimination in Northern Ireland in 2021. Regulation 7(1)(b) of the abortion regulations permits abortion up to term in cases of non-fatal disability for conditions such as Down's syndrome, cleft palate and club foot, something that is not permitted in relation to preborn babies of the same gestation who do not have a disability. It thereby perpetuates the myth that people with non-fatal disabilities such as Down's syndrome have less to contribute or are expendable. That sends out the message loud and clear, as Heidi has eloquently demonstrated, that the lives of people with disabilities are less valuable and less worthy of protection than the lives of people without disabilities. A law that fosters that thinking in 2021 is completely unacceptable.

1.15 pm

Last June, I described regulation 7(1)(b) as being years out of date and:

"a regressive and backwards step in the campaign against discrimination and equality for people with disabilities."- [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 128, p336, col 1].

That is why I have introduced the Bill, which, through clause 1, deletes regulation 7(1)(b). The purpose of the Bill is to tackle the disability discrimination that is so obvious in our current abortion regulations and right a wrong that the Assembly acknowledged in June last year.

There is no way that you can allow abortion on the basis of a severe fetal impairment such as Down's syndrome without perpetuating stereotypes about people with disabilities. It is desperately sad that it is perceived that the birth of a child with Down's syndrome or another non-fatal disability is something to be avoided. That does not reflect how people with Down's syndrome see the world, and nor

does it reflect the particular joy that individuals like Heidi bring to their communities.

Let me tell you some different stories. Let me tell you about Lily, who has Down's syndrome. Her parents say:

"The last 20 months have been the hardest, most challenging time of our lives. They have also been the best, most rewarding, loving, funny, busy, amazing time of our lives."

Let me tell you about Daisy, who has spina bifida. Her parents say:

"she's just perfect and we can't imagine life without her. She lights up any room we enter and is our absolute hero."

Let me tell you about Kirsty, who also has spina bifida. She says:

"My mam was told I'd never go to a mainstream school nor walk. I have achieved both and now I am in university."

Kirsty now has a baby boy of her own. Let me tell you about Clara. Her mum says and says honestly:

"hearing that your unborn baby would have a special need was very, very frightening."

However, she also says:

"[t]he love we have for Clara is immense, she is her own little character, she's funny, happy, mischievous, and knows what she wants!"

Let me tell you about Aiden. His parents say:

"[w]e feel so lucky to have Aiden in our lives and can't imagine a world without him. Aiden is Aiden, Down Syndrome does not define who he is."

Those individuals bring such richness into our community and society, and I do not want to have or to imagine a world without such individuals.

If we do not repeal regulation 7(1)(b), however well intentioned our decision may be, the message that we will send to those with non-fatal disabilities is clear. I do not want to be part of a society that describes such children as a "diagnosis" or a "risk", and nor do I want to be part of a society that communicates the worth of a person's life on the basis of their perceived ability. That is not what we intend, but, sadly, the lived experiences of individuals tell us that that is the legacy that screening with a view to termination can leave. Too many women have spoken of the pressure that they felt to terminate, and individuals and families have spoken of the attitudes that persist. Our Assembly should not tolerate that.

After years of campaigning for equality and the eradication of disability discrimination, we must not permit the existence of laws such as regulation 7(1)(b). The similar provision in Great Britain was introduced to the Abortion Act in 1990. That was more than 30 years ago. It is hopelessly out of date and is, of course, being challenged by Heidi Crowter in the High Court.

One of the issues that have been raised with the Bill is the perception of the struggle that parents may face as they navigate the challenges associated with disability. Might

we recognise that part of the struggle that parents may face is not about their child but about our misconceptions? One of the things that can make life harder for parents of a child with Down's syndrome is the belief that a particular health condition or delay is normal for those who have Down's syndrome. Those assumptions can lead to a failure to diagnose accurately or to provide timely and needed medical care. That is called diagnostic overshadowing.

In 1900, the normal life expectancy for a child with Down's syndrome was just nine years old; now, people with Down's syndrome live into their 50s and 60s. That shows that what is normal depends massively on environment and standards of care. The Bill is about tackling the attitudes and myths that lead to failures to provide high-quality support and care. The Bill is about ensuring that attitudes towards disability are not based on fear.

The support from many people in the medical profession for the Bill speaks volumes for the positive attitude within our health service to providing the best care for families and preborn children. Members will just have received an email, and the number cited in that continues to rise. Almost 200 doctors have now challenged the inaccuracies contained in the briefing paper circulated to Members last week by the political adviser of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in London. Those doctors are calling for MLAs to support the Bill. That includes doctors and consultants in Northern Ireland who practise in obstetrics and gynaecology, sexual and reproductive healthcare, palliative medicine, psychiatry, general surgery, emergency medicine and general practice, to name but some areas. Let me quote Dr Claire Sinton, a paediatrician working in the Royal Belfast Hospital:

"As a paediatrician I have cared for many babies and children with disabilities. The lives of these children are no less valuable or meaningful because of their differing levels of mental or physical ability. To offer additional access to abortion for babies diagnosed antenatally with non fatal abnormalities sends a clear signal that we, as a society, place less value on the life of a disabled individual. I feel strongly that to be human is to have intrinsic value, regardless of gender, race or ability. I oppose a law that seeks to single out disabled babies as being less worthy of protection or even the opportunity to live."

John Wyatt is emeritus professor of neonatal paediatrics at University College London. He says:

"As a doctor who has cared for many newborn babies and older children with disabilities I strongly support this Bill. It is absolutely right that the law recognises that an unborn baby with a non-fatal disability deserves the same protection as an unborn baby without a disability. We should be a society which welcomes and celebrates the lives of children with disabilities rather than exposing them to the threat of abortion."

We are richer for the presence and contribution of individuals like Heidi in our society. I think about my great uncle Samuel. I have enjoyed listening to the many stories about him. He had the condition Down's syndrome, but he has made a profound impact on my family, and his legacy lives on.

In 2011, the 'American Journal of Medical Genetics' published a series of articles about Down's syndrome. One of those covered a study of people with Down's syndrome who were older than 12 on information that could be shared with new and expectant parents of children with Down's syndrome:

"Among those surveyed, nearly 99% of people with DS indicated that they were happy with their lives, 97% liked who they are, and 96% liked how they look. Nearly 99% people with DS expressed love for their families, and 97% liked their brothers and sisters."

Another article surveyed the views of siblings:

"96% of brothers/sisters that responded to the survey indicated that they had affection toward their sibling with DS; and 94% of older siblings expressed feelings of pride".

Seventy-nine per cent of parents said that their outlook on life was more positive because of their child. Does that not show that those individuals have value and contribute? What value do you want Northern Ireland society to place on those individuals?

Allow me to talk about real people rather than statistics. Edwin and Karen Wilson from County Fermanagh, whose daughter Hannah has Down's syndrome, describe their parenting journey as:

"a roller-coaster of emotions, from elation at attained milestones, to frustrations at well-meaning bureaucracy. We always believed that Hannah's greatest hurdle in life, would be other people's attitudes and this has proven to be correct. As a family, we are adamant that we would not change anything about Hannah. God has entrusted us with a unique young lady, who has so much to give society, her warmth, compassion and generosity of spirit are qualities we all need more of, and we thank God for the blessing that Hannah is to us".

I firmly believe that we should not accommodate laws that contribute to a negative attitude towards those with disabilities. We should ensure that legislation affords them the same level of protection as that afforded to babies without a disability. Let us think about the message that we are sending to such parents as Edwin and Karen, or parents who have just received the news of a Down's syndrome condition, or another non-fatal disability. As Belfast mother Laura Denny, whose son Nathan has Down's syndrome, so aptly reminded us:

"It wasn't until my son Nathan was in my arms that I realised I had a baby and not just a diagnosis".

This is our opportunity to ensure that babies such as Nathan receive the protection that they deserve. It is tragic that, in 2018, a survey conducted in Great Britain revealed that, of parents who received an antenatal diagnosis of Down's syndrome, 69% were offered a termination on receiving news of the diagnosis. After advising that they were continuing with the pregnancy, 46% of women were asked again if they wished to terminate. It was only at the beginning of this year that St George's University Hospitals and various charities developed an alternative care pathway for an antenatal diagnosis of Down's syndrome that is not simply an offer of an abortion in Great Britain.

We want an alternative pathway for families in Northern Ireland.

I commend my Bill to the House, and I urge Members to join me in sending a clear and unequivocal message that, in Northern Ireland, people with disabilities are equally valued.

Ms Hargey: I am speaking in a private capacity from the Back Bench as a Sinn Féin MLA. It is clear that this debate is an attempt by the DUP to distract from the fact that women are still being denied the compassionate healthcare services that were promised with the introduction of legislation over a year ago. One year on, women are still being failed. Whilst there is deliberate blocking of attempts emanating from the legislation to commission modern and compassionate healthcare services for women, the DUP is also intent on unpicking the legislation. We must not allow the debate to detract from the fact that women are still being denied services. Women are still being denied care. Women are still being forced to travel to England, which is inhumane and traumatic, especially in the midst of a global health pandemic. That is not compassionate healthcare for women.

The DUP has talked about rights, yet it is the DUP, aided by others, that has consistently opposed the extension of rights to people in society. This Bill is a crude attempt to pit vulnerable women and couples against people with disabilities. It is a crude attempt to roll back on the legislation that is in line with international human rights requirements.

In spite of the law being enacted to advance women's healthcare, it has not been implemented by the Health Department or the Minister. In my capacity as the Minister who has responsibility for taking forward the strategy on gender equality, I will be raising the issue at this week's Executive meeting and calling on the Minister to commission the services without further delay. If the DUP is seriously telling us that it cares about rights, will it support my proposal for an urgent commissioning of the services without further delay? Will the DUP address the long-standing human rights gaps that still exist, the tackling of which was committed to in the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent agreements? Or, will it continue to block the rights and services, forcing women to travel?

The current position disproportionately impacts women who suffer from socio-economic disadvantage, thus compounding their hardship and further denying their rights. That cannot continue. Sinn Féin's priority is about ensuring that women receive compassionate healthcare, which they are entitled to under the law and have been for over a year. Those services must be commissioned now.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Ms Hargey: I am finished.

1.30 pm

Ms S Bradley: I begin by thanking the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Givan for bringing this Bill to the Floor of the House. In preparation for today's sensitive debate, I listened to the Health Committee discussion and wish to note the informative and very helpful contributions of Lynn Murray from Don't Screen Us Out and, I have to say, the

mightily impressive campaigner Heidi Crowter and her mum, Liz. Thank you. I will take a moment, if you do not mind, Mr Speaker, to congratulate Heidi and her husband on their marriage.

Heidi, in her presentation to the Committee, said that the law tells her and people with Down's syndrome that they are worth less than those without disabilities. Sadly, Heidi is correct. The law, as it stands, does just that. Furthermore, the legislation that was imposed on us from Westminster gave no consideration to the lack of support that should accompany women through any pregnancy. How can we have arrived at a point where we debate the rights and the wrongs of abortion up to birth when there has never been a concerted effort to address the absence of the critical support needed by women who feel that they are in crisis? Where is their support?

On 19 January this year, the Royal College of Midwives (RCM) identified that more investment and training is needed to enable midwives and maternity support workers to offer better mental health support for women throughout pregnancy and postnatally. It reported that as many as a fifth of new and expectant mothers are likely to experience some form of mental health problems and that at least half of women cannot access the help and support that they need. The RCM says that there are barriers such as women fearing that they may be judged as being unable to look after their baby or not recognising that they need help. Poor service provision is also a factor. That must be addressed so that women can get the support that they often desperately need. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, Westminster did not choose to deliver on this for the women of Northern Ireland. Abortion has been offered as the solution.

Turning to the technical part of the Bill, the current legislation offers some safeguards for some children at 24 weeks. Regulation 7(1)(b), however, denies those safeguards to children who have physical or mental impairment. It specifically profiles the child on the grounds of disability and sets them apart as not deserving equal treatment due to their disability. In the absence of those safeguards, the profiled disabled child, unlike the child with no known disability, can be aborted at any stage. We could debate, and courts might engage in determining what the definition of "seriously disabled" might mean, and we might never agree, but to dwell on that detail today, in my view, is to miss the point of the Bill.

The crux of the matter is that current legislation profiles and separates children based on their having or not having a disability. Surely, that is the very definition of discrimination, discrimination that is, unless we change it, legislated for and delivered in a calculated and targeted way. We cannot claim to be supporters of the Disability Discrimination Act yet ignore this blatant breach of the principles in the current abortion regulations. To my many constituents who have shared emails with me in the lead-up to this Bill, I thank you. I thank you for the personal content that they contained and the show of affection and love, where they recognise the disabled person in their family and the love that they bring to that family.

I wish to put on record today that I choose to see your ability, not your disability. I will therefore support the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill.

Mrs Barton: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to express my wholehearted support for the Bill today. I add my voice to those who have commended the work of the disability campaigner Heidi Crowter and a number of others, including Edwin and Karen Wilson from my constituency, who have bravely spoken about the impact of discriminatory abortion laws on their lives. What a joy Hannah is to the Wilson family.

For anyone who remains unconvinced about the disability discrimination problem that the legislation has been designed to address, imagine, if you will, that you or your partner are just three weeks shy of the long-anticipated arrival of a much-wanted child. I appreciate that, for some of us, that may be more of a distant stretch into our past than for others. Imagine that heady mixture of excitement and not a little fear as you prepare for life as you know it to be turned upside down. Imagine the checklist of the preparations that are to be made running through your mind. Now imagine sitting with the nurse at the maternity unit, and these questions then come: "Are you sure? Do you know that we still terminate up to term in cases like this?". How do you think that it would feel for that woman and her family to realise that the maternity team that will care for her during those very vulnerable moments is contemplating, just weeks prior to birth, the possibility of a termination? How confident do you think that she and her family will be that their child will be given the best possible chance at life and the highest standard of care?

Sadly, we know that some women and families do not have to imagine. Women in England and Wales have sat with the clinicians involved in their antenatal care and, just weeks before their due date, have been forced to consider their pregnancy ending with the intentional death of their much-wanted child. Cheryl Bilsborrow is one of those women. She said:

"at 38 weeks, when I went for a scan, the sonographer said: 'You do know we abort babies full term with Down's syndrome.'

Shocked, I replied, 'I'll pretend I didn't hear that.'"

She was offered an abortion just three days prior to giving birth to her little boy Hector.

For quite some time now, in those jurisdictions, termination of pregnancy has been the only pathway for unborn children with an antenatal diagnosis of Down's syndrome. Therefore, it is unsurprising that those are the questions that clinicians regularly ask. How do we expect those women to feel reassured about their baby when the default pathway for their antenatal care is the deliberate ending of life? One woman, Emma Mellor, described her experience by stating:

"At 38 weeks they made it really, really, really clear, that if I changed my mind on the morning of the induction to let them know, because it wasn't too late".

She was offered 15 terminations. Many women have shared similar stories. In January of this year, St George's University Hospitals in London, working with two leading Down's syndrome charities, introduced at a regional level an evidence-based best-practice pathway for the care of women whose babies are diagnosed with Down's syndrome prenatally. That is the first pathway to be introduced in an NHS trust anywhere in the UK. It is an

indictment of our culture and laws that it is groundbreaking in 2021.

Let us not think that the impact of those discriminatory laws stops at birth. Dr Elizabeth Corcoran, from the Down's Syndrome Research Foundation, said:

"Research into the health issues affecting people with Down's syndrome has been hampered and blocked by the ingrained belief that the only way to help the Down's syndrome community is to reduce their numbers. Millions (of pounds) in funding has been poured into running and refining the screening process whilst only £5.33 per person per year is spent on research that could improve the lives of people with Down's syndrome."

That mindset has no place in the 21st century, nor is that a culture that we want to tolerate here. The Bill that we are debating today sends a very clear message that people with Down's syndrome or any other disability are equally valued members of our society, as the friends and families of those with Down's syndrome will testify.

I will close by reminding Members of the comment by the special rapporteur on the rights of persons with disability. The rapporteur said of the UN Convention on the same:

"Article 10 recognizes and protects the right to life of persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others, which is critical for contesting legislation, policies and practices whereby the lives of persons with disabilities have been put at risk because of perceived low quality of life. The right to life includes the right to survive and develop on equal basis with others. Disability cannot be a justification for termination of life."

Today, we have an opportunity to uphold that right and to celebrate children like Tess and courageous women like Heidi by removing from our laws a provision that perpetuates discrimination. I implore Members to vote for the Bill.

Ms Bradshaw: I recognise that this is, in broad terms, a matter of conscience. I am reserving my position on the general issue until I have further guidance on the legal and human rights aspects of the Bill, specifically its legal compatibility, its human rights compliance and, most notably, whether legislation is, in fact, the most appropriate way to deliver the outcome sought. By outcome, I mean, essentially, the outcome desired by the Don't Screen Us Out campaign, which wishes to ensure that people with Down's syndrome are and feel equally valued.

While I reserve my position on the issue, I cannot do so on the Bill. As presented, it is utterly inadequate. Leaving aside its obvious incompatibility with primary legislation at Westminster, as contained in section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019, it has been presented without consideration of the human rights implications, with no thought given to the practical outcomes or unintended consequences and with no clarity on what its actual effect would be. At best, it is a lazy attempt to play off rights against each other as part of what is, in fact, fundamentally, an attempt to incrementally reverse abortion liberalisation.

It is clear from what we have heard in the Health Committee that the proposer has approached this process without any serious engagement with the key people or

on the key issues. Are we content to pass a Bill, the main effect of which will be to force women to take action, rather than our supporting them? Regardless of our position on the issue, we may be sure, because it breaches the requirements of that primary legislation from Westminster, that, if we pass the Bill simply as it is, it will be reversed in the courts as it breaches the Westminster legislation that puts into law the UK's human rights obligations.

Mr Stalford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Ms Bradshaw: No, I will not take a point of order.

Mr Wells: You have to take a point of order; you have no choice. Sit down. You have no choice.

Mr Stalford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It seems to me that the Member for my constituency is veering dangerously close to questioning the decisions of the Speaker's Office.

You, sir, determine whether items of legislation come before the Assembly. Can you speak to that?

1.45 pm

Mr Speaker: The Bill has passed all the admissibility tests, as you are aware, and that is why we are having the debate. The fact that the Bill is on the Floor for debate tells its own story: it has passed the admissibility tests. I make the Member aware of that. After the Bill has concluded its passage through the Assembly, whatever happens in other places will happen.

Ms Bradshaw: I apologise, Mr Speaker: I misheard. I thought that the Member was asking for an intervention. I was not questioning your authority over points of order.

The point that I was making is that it is highly likely that this will end up in the Supreme Court, where it will be reversed.

If we are genuine — *[Interruption.]* Excuse me, please. I did not interrupt anybody else.

Mr Speaker: Order, please.

Ms Bradshaw: If we are genuine about the disability rights issues that have been legitimately raised by Heidi Crowther and others, the Bill, on those grounds alone, will clearly not deliver.

To be clear about my position, which others intentionally misrepresent, I am keen to explore whether we may be able to do something arising out of the debate along the lines of much of what the Don't Screen Us Out campaign requests. I will take the opportunity later to put on record some of the issues that we need to consider urgently in that regard. A priority among them is support for mothers taking pregnancy to term. That is something that the Bill does absolutely nothing about. That is because the Bill is not really about disability discrimination. If it were, it would surely take a different form. There is no trace at all of any serious attempt to gather evidence. The Bill is really about the ongoing denial of women's rights. It sets out to pit disability rights against women's rights in a divisive manner rather than to recognise that they are parts of the same human rights standards.

It has been a long struggle for women to get the same right to choose as has existed in the rest of the UK for half a century. Of course, certain parties fought that every step of the way and continue to do so; indeed, had they not

played a part in bringing down the Executive, it is likely that parties in the Assembly would still be working to deny women full or even any bodily autonomy. Even though I do not like how it was done — I believe in devolution — one of the few advantages of having had the Assembly in cold storage for three years is that a historical wrong was put right.

The Bill is about chipping away at the newly won right for women to choose. If it were to pass, no one should doubt that that is how it would be presented. That refusal to trust women and, indeed, specialist medical professionals is not restricted to one party by any means. We see an ongoing refusal by the Health Minister to commission services, as required by law. That is not the only failure on women's reproductive rights. We have also seen, for example, failures to ensure access to IVF on the same basis as in the rest of the UK. It is a pity that, over the decades, unionists were so unconcerned about an Irish Sea border when it came to women's rights.

Let me move on to abortion principles. It is worth emphasising that we also have to judge the Bill on its content. There, it becomes rather interesting. The Bill accepts the abortion law as it appears in the regulations that it seeks to amend. Far from seeking to abandon all those regulations or even to amend most of them, it leaves almost all of them completely untouched. I hear claims that this is not about pro-life and pro-choice, but let us be clear: passing the Bill will be claimed by some who are pro-life as a victory. It will, however, merely reinforce the fact that the law in Northern Ireland has been liberalised and that an incremental attempt at repealing it is bound to fail.

Nevertheless, let us leave the pro-life and pro-choice designations aside and focus on the Bill. It seeks to confuse the grounds on which abortion may take place late in pregnancy, and nothing else. Everyone in the House would like to get to the stage at which abortions do not take place late in pregnancy; indeed, none of us is pro-abortion. This is about women's rights and women's autonomy, not about wanting to see abortions take place.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Member for giving way. I respect her comments about not getting into the debate around pro-life and pro-choice.

I ask the Member and others in the House whether they share my condemnation of the anti-abortion protest that has been happening at the John Mitchel Place clinic in Newry over the past number of weeks. It is a clinic that provides a range of services for women and children, including speech and language therapy, health visiting, family planning, and support and counselling for women who have suffered miscarriage and stillbirth. Over the past number of days, particularly in the lead-up to the debate, I have been flooded with messages from women who have been impacted by the horrific imagery and disturbing slogans being displayed by protesters who claim to be pro-life. I want to read out a message that I received yesterday from a lady who has had to deal with those protesters every day on her way to work.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Sorry. I am afraid that you are not able to do that in an intervention, so could you simply wind up your remarks? Thank you.

Ms Kimmins: OK. Thank you, Chair.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is a well-known precedent in the Assembly that a point of order is a short intervention —

Mr Speaker: I have already addressed that, Mr Wells.

Mr Wells: — not a speech.

Mr Speaker: I have already addressed that. Thank you.

Ms Kimmins: Apologies. I just want to highlight the fact that we are talking about rights — the rights of everyone. Surely, the rights of the women accessing services, for whatever reason, should be respected as part of the conversation. If we were not having this conversation and if the services that have been legislated for had been commissioned, those women would not have to endure the disgraceful scenes they face every day. I am glad that the Member —

Mr Wells: On a point of order.

Mr Speaker: Mr Wells, just remain seated. Could I ask you to conclude your remarks? It is an intervention, and an intervention should be much shorter than you have made it. Thank you.

Ms Kimmins: OK. Thank you, and apologies, Chair. I just wanted to raise that because it is a pertinent issue, particularly in this conversation and discussion. It has caused a lot of tension and concern in my constituency in particular, and when we are —

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Ms Kimmins: — a part of this conversation —

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Ms Kimmins: — we should keep that in mind.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Ms Bradshaw: Is it not interesting how, last week, I was heckled and disrupted and, this week, another woman who is trying to stand up for the rights of other women is heckled and disrupted? It is absolutely ridiculous, and it speaks to the behaviour of the Members behind us.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Please make sure that it is a point of order.

Mr Wells: I want to make it absolutely clear that I would have made exactly the same series of interventions had the contributor been a male Member of the House.

Ms Bradshaw: I put on record my support for my colleague Councillor Michelle Kelly, who is seeking, through legal services at Belfast City Council, to outlaw the graphic imagery that is used in the high street. What they do to women who have miscarried, had abortions or any sort of trouble with their pregnancies is very triggering and brings back the trauma.

What the Bill does nothing about, despite its stated intent, is the need to address the key issue of support for women taking pregnancies to full term where possible when they are told about severe fetal impairment. There is a question about whether that support should be given a legal footing, but the Bill does not touch on that. I can well understand the bewilderment of pro-life groups seeing the proposer introduce a Bill that fundamentally reinforces the law on abortion and, indeed, highlights the need for it. Maybe he would like to make further attempts at chipping away at

women's choice and bodily autonomy, but he will always be the proposer of a Bill that reinforced a Westminster law that would never have been passed had the Executive in which he served not crumbled.

What bewilders me and should bewilder all of us is why a Bill that is supposedly about disability rights and ensuring that support for people with Down's syndrome is equally valued would focus solely on abortion regulations. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has been widely quoted, and we would do well to adopt the convention into law. We would also do well to interpret it correctly. The chair of the committee has stated:

"I am very concerned that opponents of reproductive rights and autonomy often actively and deliberately refer to disability rights in an effort to restrict or prohibit women's access to safe abortion."

Let us talk about what happens during pregnancy. Here, some of us have a clear idea, and some of us have no idea. The diagnoses come at around the 20-week stage of much-wanted pregnancies. What is presented by proponents of the Bill is a society in which women, finding out that the fetus they are carrying is seriously impaired, decide, solely in their own interests, to opt for termination. What kind of ogres do proponents of the Bill think we women are? Do they seriously think that a woman who has begun to develop an emotional attachment and connection with a fetus would be so utterly callous? We need, once and for all, to end the nonsense that a woman faced with a complexity or crisis in her pregnancy will simply want abortion on demand. That is a scurrilous phrase, which completely misrepresents how decisions are made in practice. Again, I have to add that the proposer has made no effort to understand the situation by engaging, for example, with women's groups, a wider range of disability campaigners or medical professionals. At the Committee for Health, he admitted to having been selective and — I quote — engaging with whom he wants to engage with.

Moving on to disability, we need to consider whom we trust on sensitive issues like this. Most of us watched on with dismay, for example, when a man who had openly mocked a disabled reporter was elected leader of the free world. For most of us, that appalling mockery should have ended his campaign. That said, others among us actively supported that campaign, cheered his election and even advocated his re-election. Others can judge what that tells us about their priorities.

With regard to disability rights, we need to look at the general lack of support for people with disabilities and, indeed, mothers who have been given a diagnosis of what is now termed "severe fetal impairment". Again, the question arises of why other action to support them has not been taken. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) report is clear that mothers who choose to take their pregnancies to term must be supported, yet the Bill seeks only to force them to do so, not support them. That speaks to a particular set of priorities. I wonder whether the Health Minister has given thought to the outworkings of his failure to deliver on the commissioning of the full contents of the abortion regulations: probably not. I want to add at this point that, given the current rightful focus in the media on gender-based violence and the need for respect for women, that intransigence on the commissioning of those services has

also delayed the requirement for appropriate, science-based relationships and sexuality education (RSE) in schools. That is still outstanding. The Health Minister needs to consider that.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bradshaw: Yes.

Mr Allister: Can the Member tell us where in the regulations there is a compulsion to commission services?

Mr Speaker: As Question Time starts at 2.00 pm, I ask that Members take their ease for a few minutes before we move to the next item. When we resume this item of business, the next Member to speak will, obviously, be Paula Bradshaw.

The debate stood suspended.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Education

Schools: Sporting Activities

1. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Education when he intends to permit the return of sporting activities to schools. (AQO 1731/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I thank the Member for his question. My focus is on achieving a return to face-to-face education for all children, and I must reluctantly accept that some activities associated with schools that have a somewhat higher risk due to mixing within and between year groups, such as school sports, must remain paused at the moment. Those activities will therefore remain paused until public health advice permits them to recommence.

There are many issues around the return to school, including sport, and they will form part of the wider Executive considerations. Indeed, the next stage of that will be tomorrow. The resumption of sport forms part of the Executive's pathway out of restrictions. Opportunities for children and young people to participate in school sports help them build upon the knowledge and skills they develop through the PE curriculum. Schools often build effective relationships with the communities that they service through the medium of sport. Community use of school sports facilities makes an important contribution to community cohesiveness as well.

I recognise that participation in physical activity, both inside and outside of school, makes an important contribution to the well-being and personal development of all our young people. That is why I am very keen to see a return to sport as soon as possible.

Mr McGrath: I welcome some of the Minister's remarks. Sports are done outdoors, are good for physical and mental health and provide an opportunity to mix in a socially distanced way. Is any planning taking place to see whether sports could be introduced in a safe manner? It does not automatically have to be team-based sports but could be sports that allow people to participate. However, at the same time, it could happen a bit quicker.

Mr Weir: I take that on board. Maybe they are looking to this House. We are not always on the same team. Team-based sports are always a little bit of a dubious issue in that regard.

The broader return to education will, in part, be done on the basis of a range of mitigations that we will put in place, and the same can be done with sport. Perhaps there is a slight misunderstanding among some people, because, when the pathway document was produced, it put school sports specifically at strand 4, but the wider sports side was put at strand 2. Those two can move along together, and it is important that, if we see a movement in sport in general, that should also include school sports. That is why, when reference was made to the issue of spectators,

a particular provision was included in the pathway document to allow a level of spectators at school events. It is important that there is a balance.

From that point of view, it is important that we move as quickly as possible to the resumption of sports activities. Whatever mitigations need to be put in place can be examined and will be dependent upon what information the Executive receive from the Public Health Agency and the Department of Health on those mitigations. There is interlinkage between the two. Part of my old school song was "sana mens in corpore sano", which means a healthy mind in a healthy body, and the interlinkage between the two is important, not just for the physical advantage of our young people but because the impact on mental health and well-being is critical.

Mr Lyttle: The impact of school closure and the closure of youth sport has been severe on children and young people, so I welcome the planned resumption of outdoor sport training and games without spectators in phase 2 of the Executive's COVID recovery plan. Will the Education Minister work with his Executive colleagues to ensure a coordinated response to the resumption of school and club sport as soon as possible?

Mr Weir: As well as being Chair of the Education Committee, I know that the Member has a strong interest in sports and comes from a very strong sporting background. Sport is very important to give a wider context to our young people. Everything that we do should be coordinated as much as possible and use a level of cooperation. Clearly, with sport and education, there is a strong nexus between the Departments of Communities, Health and Education. Therefore, I am happy to commit to work towards a coordinated response. Whatever sport we follow, many of us associate St Patrick's Day as a great school sports occasion. Unfortunately, that will not happen this year, but the sooner that we can resume sporting activities to benefit all our young people, the better.

Mr M Bradley: I welcome the Minister's announcement about the return to sport. Can I ask the Minister about the possibility of opening the schools estate to youth clubs and community organisations that work with children over the summer months? Sometimes children attend the same schools and clubs, and it will make sure that the time lost in physical education can be made up over the summer months.

Mr Weir: Yes, very much so. I know that there is good interaction and working between our schools and community organisations. In particular, we see that interaction in the sporting context. Often, school sports grounds are linked with community sports facilities. I will bring proposals to the Executive on a wider recovery package for our young people and their education. While there will be a focus on the academic side, there will also be a focus on broader mental health and well-being.

Physical activity, particularly over the summer, will be critical. As part of the overall package that will, hopefully, run throughout the year, there will be specific activities targeted for the summer months. By that stage, I hope that the vast majority of restrictions will have been lifted. Coordination between the community and schools can happen, particularly on the sports field. I am acutely aware that activities can be delivered through a sports club or a community-based organisation that can take sport over

and above what can be directly delivered in schools. I know that sporting initiatives have happened down the years, and I am keen to see those embraced during the summer months.

Bullying in Schools: Zero Tolerance

2. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister of Education how the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 will contribute to a zero-tolerance approach to bullying across the sector. (AQO 1732/17-22)

Mr Weir: The intention of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 is to provide greater consistency in how schools respond to bullying incidents and allegations and to ensure that all pupils are protected to the same best-practice standards. The Act is an important piece of legislation that builds on schools' existing duty of care for their pupils and strengthens the protection that pupils can expect if they experience bullying in school.

The Act, which will commence on 1 September this year, will provide a common definition of bullying; require all schools to centrally record incidents of bullying, the motivation and outcome; and require each school's board of governors to take greater collective responsibility for the development, implementation, monitoring and periodic review of a school's anti-bullying policies and procedures. The recording requirements of the legislation will allow schools to monitor patterns and trends of bullying and ensure that instances of bullying are addressed promptly and effectively.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am sure that the Minister will agree that bullying is a scourge on our society and, particularly, in our classrooms. Bullying has a devastating and long-lasting impact on a child that can go on throughout their life. Can the Minister elaborate on the duty that the Act imposes on boards of governors?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. I agree with the Member on the longer-term impact that bullying can have on individuals. Sadly, we are seeing a difficulty with bullying that happens entirely outside the remit of the school, and that is beyond the reach of any legislation. We can see what happens on social media. Specifically, boards of governors, as a corporate body, are legally responsible for all the decisions and actions taken in their name by individual governors, the principal, or by committees to which they have delegated functions. The Act will place a statutory duty on boards of governors to determine the detailed measures that are to be taken at schools in order to prevent bullying and to ensure that the measures are properly implemented and are kept under periodic review. They should be reviewed at least every four years in order to ensure that they are fit for purpose. The legislation will require a review at intervals not exceeding four years.

Governors will be actively involved in developing and monitoring the effectiveness of their schools' anti-bullying policies. It is important that those policies do not simply sit on a shelf but are directly implemented. Governors will also be better informed when supporting or, indeed, challenging how staff handled an incident.

In many ways, as I mentioned, this is about dealing with best practice. Most schools will already have policies on

bullying in place, and it is important that that is the case. A lot of schools are very proactive on that front, and these duties will just create a situation in which that best practice is shared across the system.

Ms Flynn: The Minister mentioned some of the guidance and direction for schools. Will any additional support be given to schools and principals on how they should fulfil their obligations in implementing the legislation? I ask that given the challenges and pressures that school environments are under with the pandemic.

Mr Weir: I understand that. We will give as much support and guidance as we can. Guidance has been developed and designed to accompany the Act. It is important to say that this is not something that is just imposed from on high. On the input, we have done a considerable amount of work in working out the implementation with, for instance, the teachers' unions to ensure that the guidance is fit for purpose. There will also be significant input from teachers and wider educational professionals so that what is there is fit for the present. For example, while there are opportunities for schools to develop the methodology for the recording requirements, a bullying incident recording system has been developed and will be available on C2k should schools wish to use it. The Education Authority has also provided training and online resources for schools and their governors.

While we should have a strong system and one that protects our young people, it is important that we also ensure that recording bullying incidents does not become an additional administrative burden. We believe that the online recording of incidents means that it can be done in such a way that does not add any significant administrative burden to schools.

In many ways, it is about taking a belt and braces approach. We believe in trying to create a very similar approach because the vast bulk of schools will have procedures in place already anyway. Hopefully, we will simply be building on good practice.

Mrs Barton: Minister, while an abhorrent action, bullying often masks underlying issues with perpetrators. Given that victims unequivocally deserve every support, what steps will be taken to reform and educate the perpetrators?

Mr Weir: I think that we will have individual cases. It is important that, first of all, levels of support are given to victims of bullying. There will not always be a one-size-fits-all type of situation, and individual interventions will need to take place. Clearly, one of the things that will need to happen is good education in the classroom to help to prevent bullying in the first place. Again, rather than trying to deal with the consequences of something, we should try to ease it at the start. That will also not only go down in the guidance but will play to the actions that schools will take in the policies that are developed by governors. Teachers are wise enough to know what levels of interventions are there.

Also important and why, for instance, motivation is one of the areas that will be recorded, is that it is important for schools to see where there are potential trends. If, for example, they see particular problems with racism, misogyny or whatever, they will be able to have a bit of a data capture. At least they will be able to see where the bullying is coming from and, hopefully, be able to target any actions to directly deal with the problem.

Schools: Smaller Class Sizes

3. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Education what recommendations he has considered in relation to smaller class sizes post COVID-19. (AQO 1733/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. My Department already operates a policy of maximum class sizes for children in the foundation stage and Key Stage 1 as well as for practical subjects in the curriculum.

The available evidence on educational attainment suggests that, except in the very early years, class size reduction does not have a significant impact on student outcomes and that the main driver of the variation in pupil learning at school is the quality of teaching provided. Small reductions in class size are unlikely to be cost-effective relative to other strategies. Other interventions such as individual or small group tuition provided to those most in need through my Department's Engage programme are likely to have a greater impact.

2.15 pm

Using normal formative assessment approaches in the classroom, schools will work to understand where pupils are in their learning after the period of remote learning. I am confident that schools will identify and support the pupils who are most likely to experience difficulties in engaging with learning. However, I fully recognise that there will be a need to plan for and to fund ongoing, evidence-based interventions to support schools to limit the long-term effects of the current disruption. I plan to bring proposals to the Executive shortly for a further support programme for a range of educational settings. That will build on the work of the Engage programme in 2021, subject to Executive agreement and availability of funding.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his answer. His assertion that smaller class sizes do not have an impact on education may be disputed. They are important in protecting people from the virus, they can enhance learning, they allow for more one-to-one assistance, and they can be better for those with learning disabilities, sensory issues and so on. I and many others would say that they are better for education overall. Will the Minister commit to looking at international best practice, given that other countries have smaller classes, to see whether we can implement those measures here?

Mr Weir: I did not say that there was no impact at all. However, if we are looking at interventions, particularly on the academic side, there is limited evidence that, outside of early years, smaller classes make a significant difference.

Where there are learning difficulties and issues with special educational needs, there is a process that allows one-to-one interventions, particularly for somebody who is statemented. With that statement, intervention for an individual will be retained. That may mean that a particular classroom assistant is assigned to an individual, and that, I think, is the right way to tackle it.

As for the broader issue of class sizes and looking at best practice, I will try to ensure that we get the best results with the levels of investment and resources that are available. However, a move to much smaller class sizes would require a high level of resource-intensive commitment.

Ultimately, I can allocate only what is in the Department of Education's budget. While we are still in the draft Budget stage, the overall Education budget for next year, outside the COVID interventions, is likely to be fairly close to being flatlined in cash terms, meaning there will be no radical change.

I am also looking at where interventions will take place in the best possible way. By the summer, we are due to have the report of the expert panel on educational underachievement. I will study closely its recommendations and try to ensure that, as much as possible, they are implemented as well.

Ms Ni Chuilín: I thank Gerry for asking the question. Minister, as part of your priorities in bringing proposals to the Executive, will you confirm that you will look at prioritising capital expenditure on children, particularly those who are statemented, who are being educated in Portakabins that were supposed to be temporary but have been there for decades?

Mr Weir: With COVID, it is likely that that will be a resource rather than a capital issue. However, the overall capital Budget for the Executive is likely to be smaller next year than this year. That means that the overall quantum of the draft allocation that is made directly to schools for the capital programme will be smaller. However, there have been indications from the Department of Finance that it is looking to supplement that through the reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI). As part of that, part of our bid for next year will look at not only where we are with the mainstream baseline capital build but at what capital funding can be provided through RRI. That is likely to concentrate particularly on additional quick intervention for special needs education.

The Member is right to say that, where we can, moving from Portakabins to more permanent structures is better. The only caveat that I will add is that, as anybody who has been around schools will know, Portakabins now are light years away from what they were when the Member opposite and I were at school.

Ms Ni Chuilín: They didn't have Portakabins in my day.

Mr Weir: The Member opposite may —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order.

Mr Weir: — have dreamt of the prospect of Portakabins. Some of us, however, take a slightly old-fashioned attitude to how we see them. The modern mobile classrooms that are provided tend to be of a very high quality. However, the aim, as far as is possible, is to move towards having permanent structures.

In a more general sense, if there is capacity in the industry to deliver it and there is finance, there is always at least twice as much that could be done on capital builds. As with anything else, in education it is about choosing between good projects rather than between good and bad projects.

Mr Humphrey: Minister, thank you for your visit to the excellent Springfield Primary School last week. In 2005, it had 67 pupils; it now has over 200. The school has had an extension built, but it is no longer big enough. I ask the Minister to consider that school for any future investment in new buildings.

I ask the Minister what flexibilities schools have with class sizes and numbers.

Mr Weir: I was delighted to be at Springfield during the week. I value the professionalism of the staff, but the joy of the returning pupils showed the direct benefits of face-to-face teaching. I congratulate the school on the success that it has had.

Speaking directly about the COVID situation, I will say that class sizes have to be set in line with health and safety requirements. In post-primary schools, necessary assessments are carried out to allow flexibility of class sizes for practical subjects. Strictly speaking, while there are limits placed on what is allowed for the early years of primary school, there is more flexibility with the limits for P5 to P7.

We know that, particularly in years 1 to 4, smaller class sizes can have a positive impact on outcomes. The law in that circumstance requires that class sizes for the youngest children be kept to a maximum of 30. Flexibility for post-primary class sizes tends to be for subjects such as science, art and design, and PE. That level of flexibility has been in place unchanged since 2004 for class sizes that are in excess of 20 pupils, up to a maximum of 26. That also applies for years 8 to 10 and years 11 and 12 for practical subjects such as home economics, music, and design and technology. Some of that can mean an opportunity for schools to ensure that they are able to use their budgets as effectively as possible. There is a level of flexibility, but the health and safety of pupils remains paramount. Any school's board of governors must be content that any practical arrangements reflect that.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, they say that hindsight is a wonderful thing. Given the level of infection in classrooms when schools have been open and the huge numbers of pupils who had to isolate, if the Minister could go back in time, would he do anything different about classroom sizes? Would he have put in extra resources or, if possible, split the size of classrooms?

Mr Weir: With respect, we did not have those huge impacts. The position was very similar to what happened elsewhere. I make no apology for trying to ensure that we got the maximum number of pupils in.

The reality is that there is flexibility on class sizes, as has been said, for all schools, and some schools have been able to use the opportunity, where they can split classes and use extra space. The principal constraint is that, from a teaching point of view, if we simply disperse large numbers of children across the piece, there will be an issue with the number of available teachers. It is simply not an effective way of teaching. There will be barriers because of the volume of substitute teachers. A number of schools, particularly at primary level, are having difficulty getting substitute teachers, so there are restrictions on that. Obviously, I am always keen to take lectures on the basis of hindsight from the Member opposite.

Schools: Capital Projects in Foyle

4. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Education for a breakdown of major capital projects and contracts grant-aided by his Department in the Foyle constituency since March 2017. (AQO 1734/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her question. Ardnashee School in the Foyle constituency was announced under a major capital works call and is in planning, with an

approved business case of £33.92 million. The school is due on-site this summer. As well as the major capital works, three projects are progressing under the second call to the school enhancement programme (SEP2). Those projects are Chapel Road Primary School, Greenhaw Primary School and Holy Child Primary School. Each of those projects will see an investment of up to £4 million to improve the schools. In addition to that, there are four voluntary Youth Service schemes directly through the schools that received capital funding of £4.5 million under the two youth calls that have been made.

Ms Anderson: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, as you know, the Finance Minister has made social value a mandatory component of procurement contracts. Can you confirm that there will be social clauses in the procurement contracts coming on stream and that social value will be an integral part of the capital funding for Derry?

Mr Weir: Certainly, for any contract, we comply with the position across the Executive as a whole. There is no particular issue with that. As for the detail of what is in a contract, I am probably not in a position to comment directly on that. We want to ensure that, across the Executive, we produce a consistent approach to that.

Ms Armstrong: Given that we are talking about major capital projects, I am keen to hear from you about the roll-out of Fresh Start and how well that is performing across Northern Ireland. It seems to be extremely slow at the moment.

Mr Weir: We are confident that the full amount will ultimately be spent, and we will write to the Member on some of the detail. As she will be aware, and I think that this was tackled in the last mandate, one of the issues historically with the Fresh Start money was that it was largely agreed at prime ministerial level, without Treasury really wanting a penny to be spent. That meant that there were discussions with Her Majesty's Government about the detail, and a range of conditions was put in that had to be considered by my predecessor and me and will, indeed, have to be considered by my successor. First, everything has to be a completely new project, so, for example, Parkhall Integrated College, which had been announced at that stage, could not avail itself of Fresh Start money. Secondly, it has to be a complete new build, so SEP was effectively knocked out of the picture. Also, schools that, for instance, did not exactly fit with integrated status but had a high level of mixing — there is a small number of "super-mixed" schools, as they are called — were also excluded. At that stage, there was a bar on spend between years. That was successfully negotiated on by way of the confidence-and-supply arrangement, and it has been continued. There is some progression. That means that there will be peaks and troughs in the funding, but we are confident that the overall £500 million will be absorbed in the 10-year period.

BTEC: Irish-medium Provision

Mr Lynch: Ceist uimhir a sé. Question 6.

Mr Weir: It is question 5 rather than question 6.

Mr Lynch: Sorry about that.

5. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the provision of BTEC qualifications through the medium of Irish. (AQO 1735/17-22)

Mr Weir: Currently, BTEC qualifications through the medium of Irish are facilitated by a contractual arrangement between the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and the awarding organisation, Pearson. Towards the end of 2019, the Pearson awarding organisation had given notice of its intention to end that agreement and no longer provide the qualifications. While CCEA continued its discussions with Pearson about the decision, the school that was offering those BTECs was advised to consider and identify alternative qualifications. Unfortunately, in the past couple of weeks, Pearson has confirmed its intention to withdraw from the arrangement, withdrawing level 3 qualifications in September 2021 and level 2 qualifications in September 2022. Pearson's decision has been taken in the context of a significant change to all level 3 BTECs this year. Pearson 2010 BTECs are being withdrawn fully across the UK in September 2021, and the new-style 2016 BTECs will be the only BTECs available to any school, be it in the medium of English or Irish. The new-style BTECs introduce external assessment units, making them more like A levels in their assessment arrangements.

CCEA provides a range of applied A levels that are available in the medium of Irish. A total of 13 applied A levels are offered by CCEA. Other vocational qualification providers may wish to make their qualifications available in Irish, and CCEA has contacted other providers to explore that option. CCEA will continue to explore what further actions might be possible to address the matter.

2.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I will allow the Member to ask a brief supplementary.

Mr Lynch: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am sorry for the confusion, Minister. What I have asked you to do is to step up your engagement with the qualifying bodies to ensure that those qualifications are there for Irish-medium students.

Mr Weir: There are two aspects to that, and obviously the direct engagement is with CCEA through Pearson. Pearson is the only group that directly offers BTECs, and, as it is an awarding organisation, we have no means of directly compelling it to do things. It could withdraw entirely from the Northern Ireland market, and we want to make sure that there are no particular barriers.

It is not helpful when there is a narrowing of choice, but there are awarding organisations that also provide alternative vocational qualifications. CCEA is working with them and will step up to the mark to provide qualifications. The problem is that we are very much in the one boat with Pearson when it comes to BTEC.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That ends the period for listed questions. We will now have 15 minutes of topical questions to the Minister of Education.

Relationships and Sexuality Education

T1. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Education whether he agrees that standardised relationships and sexuality education (RSE) is fundamental to promoting appropriate

behaviour and to preventing serious sexual offences against women and girls and to state the action that he has taken to implement the Gillen review recommendations, including a school sexual offences awareness campaign, particularly in light of the fact that the outpouring of pain and anger in response to the heinous murder of Sarah Everard and in relation to male violence against women and girls has been palpable. (AQT 1101/17-22)

Mr Weir: We are working closely on that issue and met on Thursday specifically to discuss it. I join the Member in condemning and expressing horror at what appears to be the brutal murder of Sarah Everard. It is a clear sign of the terrible criminal action to which too many women have been subjected. We all stand in solidarity on that issue.

There are a number of aspects of the Gillen report that are related and where there is an interconnection between education and justice. Last Thursday, the Justice Minister and I met to discuss the implementation of those issues. That relates to what is taught in the classroom and to issues in the iMatter programme, what provision can be made for the CCEA's RSE Hub and work on ongoing teacher training on the issue. We had a productive meeting, and our two Departments will continue to work together to ensure that there is full implementation of the Gillen recommendations.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his update. Further to his meeting with the Justice Minister, Naomi Long, will he review the minimum content order to ensure that all fundamental matters, such as consent, are included in standardised relationships and sexuality education in schools?

Mr Weir: The Northern Ireland curriculum is not prescriptive, which can have advantages by providing flexibility, agility and ability to take on orders. As part of the meeting, we agreed for my officials and the Department of Justice officials to work together on that and other issues, such as consent, which is critical to education on that front. Another important issue among others is trying to break cycles of abuse, particularly domestic abuse, because we know that one of the added problems is that those who have experienced abuse as a young child have a greater propensity to be involved with abuse at a later age. It is important that that is addressed.

Under the current legislative position, imposing direct curriculum changes on any subject would require a change in primary legislation. Schools should be in a position to step up to the mark on these crucial issues. We all have to realise, particularly from a Justice point of view, that we are in a fast-moving environment. Issues that seem tangential at the moment may become central in one or two years' time. There has to be flexibility to ensure that we create as safe an environment as possible for everyone.

Face-to-face Teaching

T2. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Education whether, at tomorrow's Executive meeting, he will urge his ministerial colleagues to ensure that children can go back to school as soon as possible, given that many parents who have children in P4 and above are very much in the dark about when their children will return to face-to-face teaching. (AQT 1102/17-22)

Mr Weir: There will be wider discussion in the Executive tomorrow. I would have preferred it if decisions could have been made earlier, but we are where we are. Last week, we were able to agree that there would be no interruption to the education of P1 to P3 pupils and those of preschool age. That was an important step forward, but we will reach something closer to normality only when we have all students back, particularly those at primary level. I can understand that, when those at primary level see a younger sibling perhaps heading into school, they are confused as to why they are not. It is important that we bring a level of certainty tomorrow. I will certainly push for that return as soon as possible, in line with whatever public health mitigations need to be put in place. From the point of view of the academic side, where families are at and the mental health and well-being of young people, it is critical that we return to face-to-face teaching as soon as is practicably possible.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for that response. Minister, we hear from a lot of teachers and school leaders who want that clarity to be able to move from remote learning to face-to-face learning, but they need as much time for that as possible. I join him in urging all the other parties, which are doing a lot of shouting, to support our young people and students in getting back to school —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Do you have a question?

Mr Middleton: — and ensure that they can do so in a safe manner.

Mr Weir: That was like the old GCSE or A level question with the word “Discuss” at the end. I hope that the Executive will be able to unite around positions where we all value education and the role of our young people. While the focus has been on schools, I am acutely aware of the importance of a phased return of, for example, generic Youth Service provision. The very rapid return of child-centred activities like Sure Start, which concentrate on areas where there is disadvantage, will be critical as well. I hope that the Executive, in considering all those things at our discussion tomorrow, will make our young people a priority.

Hollywood Primary School: New Build

T3. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education for an update on a potential new build for Hollywood Primary School. (AQT 1103/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for the question. I have been at Hollywood Primary. There is nothing proposed for Hollywood Primary currently. It was not successful in any of the previous calls. On the need for new build, the aim is that, later this year, there will be a fresh call for major capital works. Those circumstances require, first, the managing authority to agree that Hollywood or, indeed, any other school goes forward. Those schools are then evaluated and, as part of that, ranked according to the level of support that is required. There will be that opportunity for Hollywood and others to apply. I also hope that, within the next year, there will be a further call for the school enhancement programme, which, particularly for primary schools, is often the best route.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, does your Department ever look at other types of funding,

rather than just capital funding, for potential new school builds?

Mr Weir: We look at any opportunities to draw in additional money. If it is a new build, it is, by definition, capital money. However, as I indicated, there are sometimes different strands of capital money. We operate major new builds. We also look at the school enhancement programme and minor works. Apart from the directly baselined money, as was indicated earlier, we can also bid for RRI money. Schools can apply in various ways. Major capital builds for primary schools tend to be a much longer and expensive process. The Member will know that a site search, for instance, will need to be done, as with Bangor Central Integrated Primary School, so it will be a longer process. The school enhancement programme can spend up to £4 million within that. When the streams are announced, there is nothing to stop any school applying for either or both of them, but, obviously, it can benefit from only one of them at a time.

Portadown College: New-build Plans

T4. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new-build plans for Portadown College, given that although the college is an educational jewel in the crown in Upper Bann, its current building is long past its best, with significant infrastructure issues that affect its ability to provide educational excellence, albeit a new-build scheme was proposed as far back as 2006, with a debate in the House in 2009, when the Education Minister, Cairtriona Ruane, said that it was estimated that a replacement school would be completed by 2012-13. (AQT 1104/17-22)

Mr Weir: At present, there are no direct plans for that. Primary and post-primary schools are on separate lists when assessments for capital builds are carried out. I assure the Member and the Member who asked the previous question that there will not be direct competition between Hollywood Primary School and Portadown College.

In the previous round, Portadown College was ranked at, I think, 15 among post-primary schools. At that stage, a high level of assessment was given on the basis of where mergers were taking place, and that disadvantaged schools that were not involved in a merger. One of the advantages of the previous occasion is that, as a result of that announcement, half a dozen schools were taken off the list. That means that, when a new capital build call is made, the potential rivals to Portadown and others for the money will have been removed, and they will be able to bid.

There was an expectation, in 2006, that capital finance would go up and up and up, but, unfortunately, we had the crash, and a lot of promises that had been made to schools had to be withdrawn. I assure the Member that, from my point of view, if Portadown, Hollywood or wherever is announced on a capital list, it will happen.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for his answer. The need for a new build at the location was identified in 2006. I am sure that the Minister will agree that the issues and the infrastructure have got worse since. Will the Minister agree to visit Portadown College with me to see at first hand areas in which we need urgent investment?

Mr Weir: I am always keen to visit schools and will be happy to go to Portadown College, if the Member sends me an invitation. It is important to see the issues at first hand. To some extent, opportunities to go to schools have been greatly reduced by the COVID restrictions. As restrictions ease, there will, hopefully, be greater opportunities. I will be happy to see at first hand the issues at Portadown. There is no lack of willingness to provide support for schools. Obviously, the one constraint will be available budget, and therefore any capital call will tend to be a competitive process, as it is on any occasion.

Children: Return to School

T5. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Education what he believes would be best for children in relation to returning them to school, their education and their mental health, given that many people, whether the public, politicians or teachers, have offered their opinion. (AQT 1105/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have always made it clear that I want to see children in school, getting face-to-face teaching. I want that as soon as is practical, given the public constraints.

Quite often, the focus is on academic catch-up, and there is no doubt that, despite the brilliant work that has been done by schools, teachers, parents and students themselves on remote learning, it is, at best, a secondary substitute for face-to-face teaching. To some extent, it is easier to put investment into achieving academic catch-up.

2.45 pm

What is a more difficult issue is the mental health and well-being of our young people, and that is why we need to see children back as soon as possible. I saw that at first hand amongst the very young children at Springfield during the week. Simply, the biggest single thing for, in particular, those P3s was seeing some of their friends who they had not seen during the lockdown and having that opportunity for interaction. The long-term damage that has already been done to mental health and well-being concerns me, so, for a range of reasons, including physical health, the sooner that we can get back to a situation where all children are directly in school, the better.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of our period of questions to the Minister of Education. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments until the Minister of Finance is ready.

Finance

Summer Schemes: Departmental Bids

1. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Finance to outline any bids made by the Department of Education or the Department for Communities for potential summer schemes to mitigate the effects of lost school and socialisation time due to COVID-19. (AQO 1746/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The Department of Education has submitted bids of £4 million for summer schemes for 2021 relating to primary, post-primary and education other than at school (EOTAS) settings as well as £5 million for the Youth Service summer scheme programme 2021 for consideration as part of the Budget for 2021-22. Those bids will be subject to consideration

in light of available funding and competing pressures. No bids have been received from the Department for Communities for that purpose, and neither are any such bids expected, as this is not within its area of responsibility.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, you may or may not be aware that eminent educational psychologists here in Northern Ireland and across the UK have called for the absolute need to integrate and assess our students before they return to full-time education. Will there be scope in your Department to meet any further funding bids that may be made from either Department in order to make sure that our kids get off to the best start post COVID?

Mr Murphy: The Member will know that next year's Budget is a flat-cash Budget, which means that Departments will get a stand-still rollover of the money that they had this year. That is very challenging, particularly for Departments, such as Education, that have a huge salary base. COVID money was available for the end of this year, and COVID money will be available into the new year. The Department of Education has bid for and been earmarked for some of that. I suppose that it will be up to the Minister to prioritise it. I listened to him as I was waiting to come into the Chamber, and I agree with his view on the benefits, particularly for younger kids but for schoolkids generally, of being in the school setting and with what he said about the absence from that setting and the pressures that that has created. There will need to be a close look at how they get back into the system again, and, if there are supports that we can provide for that, I will be more than happy to consider them.

Mr McNulty: Minister, you will be aware that some kids are participating in homeschooling on their mobile phones. What resources have you allocated throughout the pandemic to bridge the digital inclusion gap for young people in education via the provision of expanded IT support for schools and IT equipment for all children who do not have adequate IT at home for schooling?

Mr Murphy: The Member will know that it is for the Department of Education to provide such resources. Over the year, it bid for various COVID-related funds, some of which were to be used to support kids who were struggling with home learning. Of course, he knows, as I do, particularly given the constituency that we both represent, about the difficulty in accessing broadband. That is a matter for the Department for the Economy, which is rolling out Project Stratum. It has been very challenging for families and young people to try homeschooling in good circumstances, but it is even more difficult in circumstances in which the IT support is not there.

My Department has digital responsibility for the broader Civil Service. We have an initiative for rolling out IT support for vulnerable people, but not for the school scenario; that is the responsibility of the Department of Education. We have run a pilot scheme, which was oversubscribed. I am glad to say that we will continue to provide that support.

Zero-carbon Buildings

2. **Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Finance what plans he has to use his power regarding building regulations to achieve the aim of zero-carbon buildings. (AQO 1747/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department has prepared an ambitious draft programme of phased uplifts to the energy efficiency requirements of building regulations for inclusion in the Executive's forthcoming energy strategy options consultation. We will refine that further and consult as appropriate as part of our ongoing work. Officials are focused on an urgent uplift to the current requirements for new buildings, which we plan to bring forward within this Executive period, if possible. Officials are engaging with the Department's building regulations advisory committee and its specialist subcommittees on the details. Further uplifts will take into account technological advances and policy developments in other regions over the coming years. It seems likely that revisions made after 2025 will anticipate that all new buildings will routinely have very high building fabric standards and low-carbon heating.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for his detailed reply. A short while ago, I submitted a question for written answer to the Minister about whether his Department would take the lead in ensuring the removal of unsafe cladding from buildings in Northern Ireland. The Minister's response stated that he had recommended a building safety programme and supporting fund to the Executive but that he was still awaiting the outcome of his proposals. Will the Minister provide an update on that?

Mr Murphy: The responsibility for those matters rests across a range of Departments. Although there may be some merit in having a discussion on having a single home for all of them, it would be very difficult to extract from various Departments the associated responsibility. There is an urgency in trying to do this. I have brought propositions to the Executive to try to get an agreement, under the head of the Civil Service, across all Departments on where each responsibility lies and on a coordination function. I have also said that, if there were a retrofit-type scheme to address some of the issues that arose from that, I would be very happy to look at that proposition. We want to ensure that the proper degree of coordination across all Departments and all those responsibilities is brought to bear in these matters. Given the experience that he referred to, these are very serious issues, and they need to be addressed urgently.

Dr Archibald: Will the Minister, following on from Mr Muir's question, provide an update on the progress being made on the recommendations of the Grenfell Tower inquiry?

Mr Murphy: We will have to be cognisant of that and look at the recommendations that come from it. Some proposals have already been developed to look at buildings across Britain, and we have looked at whether Barnett consequential will flow from that. Clearly, there are very serious issues with building materials and with the approach to and verification of testing. A wide range of serious issues throws up questions for a range of Departments here. As I said, one of the difficulties is that the responsibility for various aspects of this lies across a range of Departments. We need to ensure that we coordinate as best we can across those Departments. We need a central authority to ensure that that coordination works and that all the component parts play their part and are resourced to do so, so that we do not have any such tragedy here.

Miss Woods: Has the Minister or his Department considered the 'Energy Governance for the Northern Ireland Energy Transition' research report, which was

commissioned by the Northern Ireland Executive? What is his position on the recommendation that a new Department for Climate and Energy Transition be set up?

Mr Murphy: I have not considered the report. Given the position of our Budget for next year, starting a completely new Department would probably be challenging and involve more resource than the Executive have. Arguments around setting up a completely new Department probably fit into the context of a longer-term strategic plan in the time frame of the Programme for Government and a multi-year budget, and I am certainly happy to look at that. Between now and the end of the mandate, with a rollover flat-cash Budget, we want to quickly bring our standards of building up to the highest level of environmental efficiency and other efficiencies. We have acknowledged that we have to catch up. We want to do that as quickly as we possibly can, but, for the longer term, the strategic projects to which the Member refers will more than likely be a matter for an incoming Executive beyond this mandate.

Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme

3. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on funding for the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme. (AQO 1748/17-22)

15. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister of Finance whether he will publish the information received by his Department from the Government Actuary's Department regarding the estimated cost of the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme. (AQO 1760/17-22)

Mr Murphy: With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will answer questions 3 and 15 together.

On 23 February, along with the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Minister of Justice, I met the Secretary of State to discuss funding for the scheme. At that meeting, I pressed him on the need to resolve the matter urgently so that victims can get the payments to which they are entitled. I highlighted the need for the British Government to make a fair contribution to the cost of the scheme in recognition of changes that they made to it.

I have since written to the Secretary of State to confirm that I am content to recommend that the Executive meet the full costs of a scheme, as envisaged in the Stormont House Agreement, as well as any implementation and administration costs. We were due to meet the Secretary of State again last week, and I hope that the meeting scheduled for tomorrow goes ahead as a matter of urgency.

I remain absolutely committed to resolving the question of funding for the scheme. It is important that victims have the certainty that they deserve about its longer-term funding. The Government Actuary's Department's report on the potential cost of the scheme is being produced for the Executive Office and not my Department. It will be for that Department to decide whether to release it.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for his answer. Has the Secretary of State indicated whether there is any intention to fund your Department in relation to the scheme, which would assure victims right across the North and across these islands that they will get payment when the scheme starts?

Mr Murphy: I have not had anything firm from the Secretary of State. I was told that the meeting that we were due to have at the latter end of last week was postponed so that he could have some discussions with the Treasury. I sincerely hope that that means that they are beginning to accept their responsibility for a scheme that they devised and legislated for and that goes well beyond the scope of the scheme that the parties had agreed to at Stormont House.

If those arguments have begun to land with the Secretary of State and the Northern Ireland Office, that is progress, but I have nothing firm to report in that regard. We look forward to the meeting with the Secretary of State tomorrow evening, which was postponed from last Thursday. That meeting needs to happen as a matter of urgency. As the Member knows, the courts and, most importantly, the victims await the outcome of those discussions.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Steve Aiken is not in his place.

Mr Nesbitt: As I understand it, the Government Actuary's Department has greatly increased its assessment of the cost of the scheme from several hundred million pounds to over £1 billion. Will the Minister explain why that is?

Mr Murphy: The report was produced for the Executive Office and not the Department of Finance, so I do not have the detail behind that. It varied from £600 million right up to £1.2 billion. I suppose that it depends on the number of people who come into the scheme and whether people want upfront or longer-term payments. The substantial expansion of the scheme under a previous Secretary of State created many uncertainties. That is why we have argued that we want to make sure that victims get the payments that they need. We are completely committed to making sure of that.

The Government need to work with us. As, I am sure, the Secretary of State will remember from the Stormont House talks, they took an original scheme on which we were having discussions about responsibilities and who would pay for that proportion of the scheme. We and the Government then talked about pre-1998 issues and the Executive's responsibilities from 1998. We ended up with a substantially larger scheme that brought in a whole range of new people. I am not disputing whether or not people are entitled, as that is a matter for somewhere else, but I am responsible for finding the resource to do that.

Given the state of our resources over the next year, the Executive want to make sure that they can meet the requirements of victims. That is why the Government need to work with us. Thus far, they have not. There are some indications that the Secretary of State and the NIO are beginning to engage, and I hope that they will have something to offer us tomorrow evening.

3.00 pm

Mr Frew: Minister, when you meet the Secretary of State this week, even if an agreement is achieved and funding secured, what lead-in time will be required before victims receive money?

Mr Murphy: The Department of Justice will operate the scheme, so that is really a question for it to answer. The Executive have made funding available for its

administration, which I proposed. We have already, on a number of occasions, made funding available for the administration and implementation of the scheme. When it begins, there will be an assessment made of whether people are looking either for upfront payments or for a pension-type scheme. Those things are unknown until the scheme opens. As I said, it will be for the Department of Justice to manage that. We want to ensure that, through our work with the Government in London, there is sufficient resource for the scheme so that, when it does open, we can meet whatever costs there are.

Mr Allister: Now that the Lord Chief Justice has directed that the Department of Finance should be a party to the ongoing legal proceedings, there really is shrinking ground on which to avoid the issue. Last week in the House, the First Minister gave a guarantee that the money will be paid, when due, to qualifying victims. Will the Minister give the same guarantee?

Mr Murphy: First, there has been no attempt to avoid the issue. The ground that has been created around it has been created by the Government in London. That is very unfortunate, because it is not the place in which any of us wanted to be. The Government in London took it upon themselves to expand significantly the scheme's scope. They added to the scheme interests that came from the Tory Party Back Benches. They therefore have a responsibility to meet the costs from those. Of course we are absolutely committed to making sure that funding is available for the scheme. The Executive have made that clear time and time again, and the First Minister reiterated that.

Localised Restrictions Support Scheme

4. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the total spend under the localised restrictions support scheme in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area. (AQO 1749/17-22)

14. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the total spend under the localised restrictions support scheme in Mid Ulster. (AQO 1759/17-22)

Mr Murphy: With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will group questions 4 and 14. As of the afternoon of Friday past, 12 March, the total value of payments made from the localised restrictions support scheme is £221.65 million. The amount paid to businesses in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area is £18,462,477. The total spend to date in the Mid Ulster District Council area is £17,950,305.

Mr McHugh: I thank the Minister for already having adequately answered my supplementary question.

Ms Sheerin: I, too, thank the Minister for answering my question. I place on record my appreciation to the Department and to the team in Land and Property Services (LPS), in particular Leona Lees, Ian Snowden and Lenny Peden, who, at this stage, must see my name and sigh. Minister, when can businesses that have not received it expect to receive their payment for the final phase of the scheme?

Mr Murphy: I hope that we are in the final phase of the scheme. If restrictions continue, we might be into further phases, and, if so, I am sure that we will hear from you many more times.

Ms Sheerin: *[Laughter.]*

Mr Murphy: We are down to a small handful of businesses that meet the terms of the scheme, and we are working our way through them. Some businesses will be disappointed, because they were not found to be eligible for the scheme and thus will not be getting a payment from it. I hope that the announcement that I made earlier today will help some of those businesses.

The businesses that have not yet received payment will receive it as soon as we can make it. Over 98% of cases have now been dealt with. It has been a very challenging scheme, because, as you and other Members will know, LPS is a rate collection agency. We have had to turn its role around and re-profile it as a grant-giving body. We have changed the payment schemes a number of times. The number of times that they have changed escapes me now. We have three different payments, and, at times, people have fallen under the wrong payment scheme, and we have had to go back and fit them into the correct one.

There have therefore been a lot of challenges. Nonetheless, I think that most people will accept that it was a very commendable scheme that provided a vital lifeline to a lot of businesses and kept them in a position from which, as hopefully we now move towards the ending of restrictions, they can get back to what they want to do, which is to start to trade again.

Mr Blair: Businesses will face many additional challenges as we move towards COVID recovery. Will the Minister detail any plans for restart grants to assist businesses when they are eventually able to reopen?

Mr Murphy: The Department for the Economy has put together a package for economic recovery. There are other aspects to recovery, such as social recovery and the recovery that was discussed earlier in relation to schools. A very broad recovery piece is needed. That Department has put together a package that I propose to deal with in our final Budget paper, which should come to the Assembly very shortly. I am not certain whether restart grants are included in that. It will be a matter for the Economy Minister to bring forward such proposals.

For our part in the Department of Finance, as I said earlier in response to some questions on my statement, I hope that this is the end of our involvement. We have done the rates relief for another year. We have a package of business grant support measures going out. Finance and LPS, in particular, are looking forward to getting back to doing what they do on rates and managing the money.

Social Enterprises: Public Contracts

5. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Finance, in relation to reform of the Procurement Board, whether the new security of supply and social value initiative will help increase the capacity of local social enterprises to bid for public contracts. *(AQO 1750/17-22)*

Mr Murphy: Recognising the importance of the social economy sector, I appointed Colin Jess, director of Social Economy NI, as an adviser on the board. The board is working as a first priority to develop an enhanced model for delivery of social value in public procurement, which is linked to Programme for Government outcomes. The board has also agreed to work to build more capacity and resilience in local supply chains to ensure continuity

of supply in future public contracts. Those initiatives and Colin's contribution will increase the opportunities for local social enterprises to bid for public contracts both as a main contractor and as part of the government supply chain.

Ms Anderson: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. I appreciate what has happened with regard to the appointment of Colin Jess. It is deeply appreciated by those who work in the social enterprise industry. As you know, Minister, 94p of every pound that is spent by the social enterprises is kept in the local economy in places like Derry. Minister, will you engage with representatives more widely? I am thinking of John McGowan in Derry who is very keen to explore additional ways for social enterprises to increase their capacity to compete for public contracts.

Mr Murphy: Part of Colin's function is to represent the social enterprise sector on the Procurement Board. It is a two-way street, not just to bring his experience into the board but for him to engage with the wider social enterprise sector. He will do that; he has been doing it. I know that the person from Derry whom you mentioned has been talking to the Department. I am very happy to engage with people to develop the best possible policy in the time ahead. We want to see opportunities for the social enterprise sector to engage with tendering and the provision of services, because, in my experience, where those have been provided by that sector, it has brought added value in respect of the communities that it works with. The broader government sector wants to engage with this as part of our Programme for Government commitments. I want to see that work progress as best it possibly can in the time ahead.

Mr O'Toole: A couple of weeks ago, the Finance Committee took evidence from the Construction Employers Federation. A concern was raised about clarity for firms here, particularly construction firms, on bidding for tenders in the South. They felt that there was not enough clarity. Ironically, with regard to protecting the all-island economy, that was not in the Ireland protocol in enough detail. They are concerned that Northern businesses — Northern construction firms — could be at a disadvantage. Will you ask your Department to look into that and, if possible, make representations via Dublin, London and Brussels to clarify that?

Mr Murphy: I am happy to do that. I am not sure whether it is the same issue or similar to one that we dealt with a number of weeks ago when we got clarity for building firms with a foot on both sides of the border. Their capital, or the value of the company, was being judged only on one side of the border and, therefore, that had an impact on their ability to bid for higher contracts. That anomaly was something that had not been considered pre-Brexit, and it was rectified. Sometimes, these things are a bit like the experiences with Brexit and the protocol; they are problems that either no one had envisaged or someone is misapplying what they think are regulations, which do not exist, to certain sectors. If the Member can give me the detail of that, I will be very happy to look into it and come back to him.

Mr Nesbitt: I understand that public procurement is worth around £3 billion per annum. Does the Minister have a figure in mind as to what the social enterprise sector should be pitching for?

Mr Murphy: That is part of the debate that the Procurement Board is having at the moment. Part of the value of the board, which was reconstituted just before Christmas, is that it brings the various sectors in rather than having the permanent secretaries: that is no disrespect to the permanent secretaries. We had the construction people in, as well as the social enterprise people and the small and medium-sized enterprises. We had the centres of procurement excellence from a number of Departments, and there was a kick around to say, "What is the balance and where does it lie?". That figure is currently under discussion. The social enterprise sector is giving advice as to what it thinks it could step up to achieve, and there are others who think that it might be a challenge for them. I hope that, in the near future, those discussions, which have been very productive and mature, will allow us to see where the balance should be now. We should, and we will always, have an ambition to do better, but let us get off to the right start.

Social Enterprises: Dormant Accounts Fund

6. **Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the roll-out of the dormant accounts fund for social enterprises. (AQO 1751/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The dormant accounts fund is being delivered by the National Lottery community fund, and it opened for applications on 12 January 2021. Phase 1 involves a flexible and responsive grant programme whereby individual organisations, including social enterprises, can apply for up to £100,000 to be able to adapt to future challenges and to be more financially resilient. The first phase will also support larger investments that will enable collaboration and will develop new and creative approaches to sustainability. It is expected that the first grant awards will be announced shortly.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will any more money be made available to social enterprises from the dormant assets scheme?

Mr Murphy: That will happen in the next phase, and I very much look forward to that. The dormant accounts fund has only just opened, but very substantial amounts of money are available to social enterprise projects to make them more financially sustainable and to encourage their growth. The last one I visited was a very progressive social enterprise in Colin, in the Member's constituency in West Belfast. The dormant accounts fund will assist people who have had to focus a lot of their time on sustainability, on access to finance and on trying to generate more money so that it is not always a question of trying to get more money in every year in order to stay alive, if you like. The dormant assets scheme is a much bigger fund, and we are waiting for more detail on that to come through. I hope that, on the back of the dormant accounts programme, the assets scheme will provide a substantially bigger boost to the social economy sector.

Civil Servants: Pay Award

7. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the pay award for civil servants. (AQO 1752/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I want to place on record my thanks to the Civil Service for its hard work and flexibility in response to the many challenges of maintaining and delivering services during the pandemic. I have met the recognised

trade unions about the Civil Service pay award, and my officials have had negotiation meetings with the unions. In considering the pay award, I aim to strike the difficult balance between recognising Civil Service colleagues for their work while managing public money carefully in the face of the most challenging economic position for many years. Although the pay award is for 2020, it will, obviously, have consequences for the future overall cost of the very large Civil Service pay bill, so affordability is more critical than ever. I have therefore been considering a range of different options. I have circulated an Executive paper, and the agreement of the draft paper will enable an offer to be made to the trade unions shortly.

Ms Dolan: I appreciate that the Minister has to strike a balance. Will the pay award prioritise those who are on the lowest pay?

3.15 pm

Mr Murphy: I am fully committed to the New Decade, New Approach aim of the Executive becoming a living-wage employer. Department of Finance officials are working to realise that aim for the Civil Service. I have also asked that other public-sector employers consider how pay awards can be targeted to ensure the payment of living-wage foundations. I am also considering ways in which the pay award for the Civil Service can deliver a better outcome for lower-paid workers.

Mr O'Toole: I will be brief. Minister, I appreciate that there are constraints, as you have just laid out. Do you accept that, given some of the last-minute spending allocations and the delay in announcing details, there is real frustration among ordinary civil servants, particularly those on low pay and those who have had to work extremely hard over the past year to keep public services going? A lot of them are very frustrated that there has been a delay in confirming a settlement.

Mr Murphy: They understand, as, I am sure, most Members do, that we have been grappling with a huge range of issues. The pay award for the public sector is not linked to the money that we are spending at the moment. Nonetheless, I want to get to a point of agreement quickly. I have put a paper to the Executive and hope to get agreement on it quickly. I will make an offer as soon as I can to the unions. I want to see the issue resolved to everyone's satisfaction.

Mr Muir: Like Mr O'Toole, I believe that it is important that the issue be brought to a conclusion. A number of months ago, the announcement was made about the £500 payment to Health and Social Care (HSC) staff. A recent update said that the costs associated with National Insurance and PAYE would also be covered. Can the Minister update us on when those payments will be made?

Mr Murphy: They are a matter for the Department of Health. The Department asked for more money to assist it in meeting those costs, because the British Government refused not to treat them as a taxation issue and a welfare receipt issue, so they intended to extract their take out of the £500 payment. We have assisted the Department of Health in moving that up to the level that will account for that.

As I say, it is a one-off payment. What we are talking about here is the pay settlement award, which will be an ongoing payment for civil servants. Nonetheless, we were happy

to assist the Department of Health, but it is responsible for the roll-out.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of the time for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions. I advise Members that question 3 has been withdrawn.

Green New Deal

T1. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Finance whether he will lead on a green new deal strategy for Northern Ireland, given that there is no doubt that the pressing issues of the climate emergency and environmental protection require interdepartmental strategy actions and budgeting. (AQT 1111/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I certainly hope so. The Member knows that we face a challenging Budget next year, which means that the possibility of new initiatives has been absolutely frustrated, because Departments have been able to carry over only the same amount of spend as they had in the previous year. To meet all their pressures and requirements will be a challenge.

I hope that we get to that stage and that Departments collaborate. When we move to a multi-annual Budget, aligned with the Programme for Government, we can plot ahead and get into that type of territory. A lot of things can be done in the Departments' current spend, with the level of collaboration that they should be trying to achieve with one another, to improve environmental outcomes. I certainly hope that we get a green new deal strategy as quickly as possible.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is there merit in requiring all Departments to review their baseline budgets and spending priorities with a focus on the climate emergency?

Mr Murphy: That is a matter for the Executive. I assume that the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs would, perhaps, bring a proposition to the Executive asking all Departments to do that, but it is a matter for the Executive to decide.

Sports Sustainability Fund

T2. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance, after thanking Land and Property Services for all the work that it has done to assist her office with many enquiries over the past year, whether there is any redress for clubs that although they should have applied for the sports sustainability fund — they are sports clubs — were led to believe that they would get localised restrictions support scheme (LRSS) money, but, when the mistake was realised, it was too late for them to apply for the sports sustainability fund, albeit she knows from correspondence that decisions have been overturned for some social clubs that have since received the LRSS money. (AQT 1112/17-22)

Mr Murphy: We had a discussion some time back with the Minister for Communities and some of her senior staff to make sure that the situation that you describe did not arise. We had a similar arrangement with the Department for the Economy when working between the schemes that we were running and it was running. People would apply to the wrong scheme and then find they were out of time when they eventually realised that they needed

to go onto a different scheme. We tried to pick those up so that we could consider an application to one in time as an application to another. That was the objective of the discussions. I am told that some progress was made between officials, so I hope that there is not a situation where people think that they are on the right scheme but then find that they are too late for the other. The overall number of applicants for both schemes would be relatively small, so I am hopeful that we will be able to pick those up.

A multitude of schemes have gone out between our Department, Communities, Economy and Infrastructure, and it is hard for the public and the organisations that need support to navigate their way through them. We should be flexible in order to make sure that nobody misses out.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer, and he has probably answered my supplementary. Many sporting organisations were really good and got out to their members quickly to say, "You need to apply for this", but others were absolutely dreadful and did not do that. One was lawn bowls, where there are lots of bowling clubs now —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Does the Member have a question?

Ms P Bradley: — facing closure. Will you continue to have those conversations with the Minister for Communities and, if possible, open a second tranche of funding for the clubs that missed out the first time around?

Mr Murphy: I am not sure about the latter part because that could take you into issues where somebody else missed out, and then you are into a legal challenge about favouritism or somebody being in early but having the wrong information and perhaps not being approved.

I think that you are right. The parent bodies of most of the organisations were good at advising their club members on what they needed to do and when. Sometimes, by default, they went through to the LRSS, which was paying out earlier and in a more consistent way, and that encouraged others to try the same route. We do not want people to suffer as a consequence of going to the wrong scheme if they were entitled to money from the other scheme, so we will continue to work together on that.

Fiscal Council/Fiscal Commission

T4. **Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Finance, after declaring that his mum is a retired member of the health and social care system, to outline, following his announcement on Friday of the appointment of members to the fiscal council and the fiscal commission, his plans for the relationship between those bodies and to ensure that the fiscal commission takes into account how we currently spend our money when considering tax-varying powers. (AQT 1114/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Member will know from the membership of both bodies that there are people in them with substantial experience and ability in these matters. Of course, there is an interconnection. The fiscal commission is a time-limited body, and, when it completes its work — hopefully, by the end of this calendar year — and presents a report to me, that report will become part of the ongoing work of the fiscal council. Should an incoming Executive decide to take up some of the issues on the transfer of tax-

varying powers, that will clearly become a matter for the council. There is an interplay between them.

I intend to meet the chairs of the council and commission this week and the membership next week. I would like to see them as early as possible given the circumstances that we are all in to begin that level of engagement with this institution, the Finance Committee and others to discuss their business.

There is a widespread welcome for the establishment of both bodies and for some of the personnel that we have been able to attract onto them. I look forward to working with them, and I am sure that Members also look forward to that engagement.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for his response. I congratulate him and the officials in the Department for the signings that he managed to secure for the council and the commission. How will the Minister ensure that the professional advice of the individuals whom he has managed to recruit to the council feeds into the budgetary process so that, when the Assembly is analysing the legislation, through which he often sits for days on end, it is taken into account?

Mr Murphy: That is the function of the council. It is not just for the Finance Department but for the Executive's finances as a whole. However, if we have a responsibility for managing those, there is a key relationship with our Department, and that is why it will bear the cost and administrative support of the council and the commission.

As the Deputy Speaker will recognise from our many conversations, I look forward to having a much simplified Budget process; to having the time to do it properly because we have had more timely announcements from Whitehall; and to having a multi-annual Budget that we can plan and to which we can align a Programme for Government. In that scenario, a fiscal council will have an important supportive role in not only advising the Executive but informing us all generally about public finances and how best to manage them.

Fiscal Council/Fiscal Commission

T5. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Finance, after admitting that he is slightly geeky about this subject, to give a timeline for when the legislation referred to in his statement regarding the fiscal council will be introduced and to clarify that the council will be fundamentally independent from the Department of Finance, which is critical given that, at times, the council will be required to say difficult things in order to do its job properly. (AQT 1115/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As I said, the experience in other jurisdictions has been to establish a fiscal council before legislating to underpin the work that it needs to do. I hope that, if that is required and it gets off to a good start, we will be able to do that in this mandate. If that is required, I would certainly like to get to work on it. I have had discussions with the Chair of the Finance Committee. I know that he cannot purport to speak for the whole Committee, but he said that it would be keen to see that happen and is willing to work with us in the time ahead to make sure that it is done.

Although the Department is providing the budget and some back-up resource for the fiscal council, it will have absolute independence from departmental control. As I say, the

people who will be involved in the council, such as Robert Chote, have broad experience in the matter and will know how to manage that line between the necessary resource and support that it gets from government and providing an independent advice service to government.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister. Further to that, first, can he confirm that both the fiscal commission and fiscal council will have resource for independent economic forecasting? It is mentioned in the statement, but it would be helpful if he could be specific about that. It might be the same for both in the sense that it might be the same people who do it. Secondly, can the Minister be clear that, when the fiscal commission reports, it will report not just to him or to the Department but to the public and the Assembly?

Mr Murphy: In relation to the commission, yes. It is much better if it is a public debate. For the debate to be public, the commission will have to go out and engage with Members of the House, business organisations and other people and organisations with an interest in the matter. Such a report will come to me in the Department, but it is my intention to have a public airing of that. A debate on the report in this institution would be appropriate at that time. It will be in the run-up to the end of the mandate. It is important for people to be able to speak on these matters. In the context of the next election — I do not mean that it is an election matter — and the creation of the incoming Executive, it would be helpful to understand the public mood and the public debate on these matters.

As regards the resource for the council or the commission, what we have put forward is the establishment of both bodies. We are happy and determined to work with them to ensure that they can do the job that they need to do. We are happy to consider whatever support they need.

Reform of Property Management Project

T6. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance, after welcoming the reform of property management project, which is focused on making a more efficient use of the government estate, and the Minister's commitment to promote regional recovery and regeneration in areas across Northern Ireland, to give his rationale for excluding Coleraine as a hub and, in doing so, preventing the people of the north coast and the north-east of Northern Ireland from being part of the recovery and regeneration. (AQT 1116/17-22)

3.30 pm

Mr Murphy: Forgive my geography, but I thought that Ballykelly was on the north coast. That is one of the first schemes that we are rolling out. We are not excluding anyone from the scheme. We are not saying, "These are the 10 that are under consideration, and that is it". The Member is right to say that we added a criterion on being able to support local economic development, and it is important that central government does that wherever it can in locating its services. People from various parts of the North travel into Belfast, so we map the travel routes of Civil Service staff who come in and out of here every day and see where the figures are highest. We are then able to work with local government or, indeed, any part of the central government estate that is readily available to do all of that.

There are a number of factors involved in the consideration of that, and, if the Member is keen that Coleraine be considered, I ask him either to engage with the council down there — I am sure that there is engagement with Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council — or to engage with officials in the Department of Finance to get an understanding of how that criterion was set and how it will apply in the future. This is not about excluding anyone, as this is not the end of the programme. We want to roll it out in the areas that meet the most criteria. I anticipate that it will be successful and that other areas will follow suit.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Maurice Bradley for a brief supplementary.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you very much, Deputy Speaker. I will be brief. I thank the Minister for his answer. I remind the Minister that County Hall in my constituency is a building that once held several Departments. It is currently half empty. During this rationalisation of the government estate, does the Minister have any plans to utilise that seven-storey building in the heart of East Londonderry?

Mr Murphy: I am sure that the officials who are tasked with working on this — some staff from the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) were tasked to work with us and with local government organisations on this — will look at the entire Civil Service estate and all other public buildings across the North to see what can be utilised. It will depend on what state a building is in and on who is using it.

This is not being done to relocate jobs but to allow people to do the job that they do here in Belfast closer to home a couple of days a week. It will mean that they can have a better work-life balance and can spend their money in the local economy while they are there. It will also cut carbon emissions from transport in and out of Belfast. We want to ensure that the facilities are ones that people want to go into, so there will have to be investment in them to make sure that they have all the connectivity that they need and that the surroundings are conducive to attracting people to work in them. I ask the Member to engage with the officials involved and put the case for County Hall in Coleraine.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That concludes time for questions to the Minister of Finance. I invite Members to take their ease for a few moments until the Minister and Members are in the Chamber for the next item of business.

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Health

Oxford-AstraZeneca Vaccine: Roll-out

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Mr Colm Gildernew has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Health. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise in their place continually to indicate that they still have a question to ask. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask the first supplementary question.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether the ongoing roll-out of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine is under consideration due to recent concerns expressed in other jurisdictions.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): As the House will know, the Northern Ireland health service administers COVID-19 vaccines under the expert direction of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). The MHRA is the internationally respected UK regulatory body for medicines and approves vaccines for public use only when it is satisfied on grounds of safety and effectiveness. While my Department is aware of the decision of the public health authorities in some other jurisdictions to suspend the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine as a precautionary measure, I will, in this instance, again be led by MHRA experts. They are very clear that members of the public should continue to come forward for their vaccination. Despite what individual EU member states are doing, it is also important to remember that the statement issued by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) on Thursday said that the available evidence does not confirm an association with the vaccine. It is also very clear that the benefits of the vaccine outweigh any risks. The World Health Organization has also stated that countries should continue to use the vaccine.

I recognise, however, that any talk about the safety of vaccines can be very worrying. I want to take the opportunity to reassure everyone listening that the evidence, as reviewed by the MHRA, shows no correlation between the vaccine and the reported blood clot events. To date, 11 million doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine have been administered in the United Kingdom, including 310,000 doses in Northern Ireland. The evidence available from the UK's very large data set shows no unusual correlation between receiving the vaccine and the frequency at which blood clots occur naturally. I therefore urge the people of Northern Ireland to keep their appointments.

In line with the MHRA guidance, the roll-out of Northern Ireland's vaccination programme will continue. As you may now be aware, as of this morning, we have expanded the programme to everyone aged 50 years and over. I can confirm that, within the first three hours of today alone, a further 30,000 people booked a vaccine. That is very reassuring, and we should take it as an indication that the vast majority of the local population have confidence in the vaccine. We are now looking to add slots.

The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine is helping to protect the most vulnerable in our community from COVID-19, saving lives and reducing hospitalisation levels. I urge everyone to look beyond the actions of others and have faith in the extensive evidence that the UK already has. The vaccine works, so I urge people to keep coming forward and ask all in the House to support me in that call.

Mr Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, Minister, for coming today and for your answer thus far. I am sure that the Minister shares my hope that everyone eligible will get and accept the vaccine when it gets to their cohort. I am delighted to say that I fall into the 50-to-59 age group, and I am one of the 30,000 who have booked a vaccine appointment for this week. I will be delighted and will ensure that it is an appointment that I will not miss.

Minister, what plans do you have to communicate the safety of the vaccine in order to maintain public confidence?

Mr Swann: The Chair of the Committee will know that I believe that actions speak louder than words. This morning, we saw the Chief Medical Officer come forward to take his vaccine. I now hear that the Chair of the Health Committee is going to take his vaccine. Those actions and displays of public confidence in the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine and the vaccination programme should be a sign to the people of Northern Ireland that the people who set this out are setting the example and taking the vaccine.

Unfortunately, I must say to the Chair that I do not fall into that cohort [*Laughter.*] However, I am looking forward to the stage when we can move down to the next age cohort. I can assure the Member that I will be in that line.

Mrs Cameron: I very much welcome the fact that the Chair of the Health Committee has booked his vaccine. I hope that it will not clash with his Committee on Thursday morning.

It is an important question. I very much welcome the success of the vaccination roll-out in Northern Ireland. I am delighted that we are taking an evidence-based approach to the concerns about the vaccine. Obviously, both the UK Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and the European Medicines Agency have reiterated support for the AstraZeneca vaccine, highlighting that the benefits continue to greatly outweigh the risks. Does the Minister agree that politicians need to be mindful of their language and the effect it may have on public confidence? Politicians should not allow themselves to be dragged into any anti-vax arguments that could harm the uptake of the vaccine.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for making that point. Today, I ask all Members to choose their words carefully. We are all laypeople, after all, and we must remember that the rash and uninformed words of some could have consequences and add fuel to the fire of the anti-vaxxers. The assessment of a vaccine's safety and efficacy is best left to the professionals and experts. That is why we have always followed the evidence-led advice that the Chair of the Health Committee rightly acknowledged.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for coming before the House. As I said when I was speaking to you outside, Minister, I recognise and appreciate the huge success in the roll-out of the vaccination programme. That is a huge credit to all those involved in delivering it, and huge thanks

should go to them. The security that the vaccine has given to so many people and families is phenomenal and cannot be overestimated.

Given the success of the vaccination programme roll-out, when do you and your Executive colleagues feel that you will be in a position to recommend the recommencement of youth and non-elite sports? It has been too long since too many children have had a ball in their hands or a puck at the end of their stick. Youth and non-elite sports need to recommence. When can that happen, given the success of the vaccination programme roll-out?

Mr Swann: I know that the Member is passionate about that. He will also know that the Executive are due to meet tomorrow to discuss regulations. I am sure that he knows that I do not make those discussions or any of our recommendations public until the Executive have had the chance to debate and decide on them as a whole.

Mr Chambers: Minister, it is perhaps disappointing that you have been called before the House this afternoon in what is undoubtedly a period when the demands on your time must be considerable.

It is clear that there is little evidence to suspend the current successful vaccination programme in the light of concerns that have been dismissed not only by all the local and national experts but by the World Health Organization. I can only guess at the major public concern that a suspension would cause the hundreds of thousands of our citizens who have already received their first dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine. Will the Minister reassure all those who have availed themselves of the vaccine that there has been no evidence of anyone locally being placed at greater risk of developing blood clots as a result of receiving the Oxford vaccine and that, rather than being a cause of concern, there is only cause to celebrate the protection that it offers against the COVID virus?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. He rightly acknowledged the statement from the World Health Organization, which has published a further statement today appealing to countries not to pause vaccination campaigns. It stated that its

“advisory panel was receiving reports relating to the shot and would release its findings as soon as possible”,

but that it was “unlikely to change its recommendations”. Its spokesperson also said:

“As of today, there is no evidence that the incidents are caused by the vaccine and it is important that vaccination campaigns continue so that we can save lives and stem severe disease from the virus”.

On the public messaging, the MHRA was clear when it came back to a request from us yesterday following the decision of the Irish authorities. It stated that it was:

“closely reviewing reports but given the large number of doses administered, and the frequency at which blood clots can occur naturally, the evidence available does not suggest the vaccine is the cause.”

The MHRA again advised people that they should still get their COVID-19 vaccine when asked to do so.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, will you please outline whether your Department has carried out any research into how many lives would be put at risk if there was a delay in our vaccination programme?

Mr Swann: That is not information that I have readily to hand for the Member. One of the benefits that can be seen from the vaccination programme is the number of care homes that we are supporting through outbreaks. In February, the number was 150; today it is 14. We can already see the benefits of the vaccination programme. Unfortunately, with the noise that was created by the announcement yesterday, what was missed was that we reported zero deaths for those who had tested positive for COVID-19. That is a big step for us. We have not been able to make that announcement since October of last year, and it shows the direction of travel that we are taking. That is not just because of the regulations; having a vaccination programme is a direct benefit and correlation to that.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for coming here today. Like Mr Gildernew, I fall into the bracket and welcome making the phone call to get my vaccination. If they offer me the AstraZeneca one, I will gladly and happily take it, as others in my family have done. Minister, if people are uncomfortable about taking that vaccine when they go for their vaccination, will they be able to request a different vaccine?

3.45 pm

Mr Swann: There is no opportunity to pick and choose vaccines in our current programme. Due to the supplies of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, we are migrating some of our regional vaccination centres across to that vaccine, so there will be a dual process whereby some centres will run a second dose of the Pfizer vaccine while still running first doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine.

I welcome the Member's commitment to and thankfulness for our vaccination programme. We should also acknowledge the large numbers of our health workers and volunteers who are coming forward to deliver this extensive programme across Northern Ireland.

Mr Allister: I congratulate the Department on the exemplary roll-out of vaccinations. We have heard much talk during COVID about the need for cross-border collaboration. Therefore, how and when did the Minister know that it turned out that the Republic of Ireland had issues with this vaccine?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his point. While not wanting to make a political issue out of the matter, the first that I became aware of it yesterday was through the media. I have asked my Chief Medical Officer to review the terms of the memorandum of understanding because it is disappointing that that is how we found out. When we took the decision to announce that we would continue, I communicated that to my counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, Stephen Donnelly, so that he knew of the steps that we were taking.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for coming to the House today. I have been increasingly concerned about the amount of misinformation and, frankly, fake news that has been circulated in Europe about the AstraZeneca vaccine. It appears for some that we have moved from

vaccine nationalism into the dangerous territory of vaccine jealousy.

I believe that, on Friday past, the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, was in contact with AstraZeneca calling for more vaccinations. Will the Minister reiterate the clear, strong and consistent scientific and medical evidence surrounding the safety of the AstraZeneca vaccine? Will he agree that it is important that Governments tread carefully in politicising a particular vaccine, as that, sadly, will result only in further delay in getting that vaccination to constituents?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his comments. I will refer back to comments that I made from supporting commentary that has been received not just from the MHRA but from the World Health Organization advising countries not to pause vaccination campaigns because of the difficulty that that would bring and of the importance of vaccination campaigns continuing so that they can save lives and stem severe disease impacts from the virus.

The Member will be aware that, as I said in my opening comments, the European Medicines Agency has also given its consent to the use of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, but we have seen many political challenges from a number of nations regarding the utilisation of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine. My Department and I have always been guided by the expert advice that comes from the MHRA, and that comes from the initial guidance that we got that the vaccines were right to use for the purposes that they were designed for and from the guidance on the intervals between the first and second doses. So far, the MHRA advice and guidance has stood us and the United Kingdom in good stead.

Ms Ni Chuilín: I thank the Minister for being here today. Is he aware of the number of cases of thrombosis that have been recorded since the start of the vaccination programme? I, too, am in that age bracket, and I will be getting my vaccination soon, hopefully, in Belfast. I have been offered the chance to go to Fermanagh, but there you go.

Mr Swann: I would not have believed that you are in that age group, *Carál*. [*Laughter.*] According to one of your colleagues, Fermanagh is a good day out for unionists [*Laughter.*] When the travel opportunity opens up, if she wants to go to Fermanagh for the vaccine, I am sure that they would be willing to support her.

With regard to her question, as of 14 March, the MHRA had received fewer than five reports of blood clots. As the Member will know, being a member of the Health Committee, fewer than five indicates a number that we cannot report.

Mr O'Toole: I echo the words of those who underlined the importance of people signing up for their vaccination when the slots for their age group come up. Obviously, I am a couple of decades too young for that to happen yet, but I will not rub that in, Members. It is very important that, when we get called for the vaccine, we take it.

Today's news that booking is open to the over-50s is welcome. Can the Minister indicate by when, if that goes well, the entire adult population will have been offered a vaccine? I urge people to take whatever vaccine is available to them, whether that be Pfizer, AstraZeneca or anything else. Does the Minister have an update on when supplies of the other vaccines that are coming online,

such as Johnson & Johnson, will arrive and be deployed in Northern Ireland?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. As I said in the initial update that I gave the House on the vaccination programme, in being part of the UK, we were part of the forward buying of seven different vaccines. At the minute, the MHRA has approved two: Oxford-AstraZeneca and Pfizer, so those are the two that we are using. We received a significant delivery last week, which has been dispatched around our GP centres and regional vaccination centres.

I am sure that the Member is aware that we hope to open, on the 29th of this month, another regional centre, at the SSE Arena. I hope that this will coincide with the greater availability of vaccine and our moving on to a different age cohort being eligible to be part of our vaccination programme, which, as the Member rightly indicates, is a great testament to the people working in the National Health Service and the volunteers who are coming forward.

Receiving 30,000 bookings in the first three hours after opening up to the over-50s shows confidence not just in the vaccines but in the programme that we are delivering.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for coming to the House today and for his answers so far. I thank those involved in the roll-out of the vaccine. I am not in the new cohort but look forward to my turn.

I was contacted by a person currently in my constituency about access to the vaccine. From Scotland, he is in Northern Ireland temporarily and cannot return due to the restrictions. He is eligible for the vaccine because of his age. However, he has been told that he is not entitled to a temporary GP registration or vaccine appointment because he is a permanent resident of Scotland, not Northern Ireland. Can the Minister outline what advice I can give him so that he can get his first jab?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. We are seeing a number of peculiarities such as that case. If she wants to forward the specific details to my private office, we will get a response to her. However, the nature of our booking system is that we insist on anybody who wants to receive the vaccine having a medical insurance number. If there is anything that we can do between us and the rest of the UK, I would consider looking at that. However, no clear pathway is yet established to allow mutual support for individuals living in another jurisdiction.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Minister for coming here and answering questions. I welcome the fact that the Minister is seeking to strengthen the memorandum of understanding with the South. Hopefully, he will not have to face those communication issues into the future. Will the Minister outline or detail what proposals he made, or intends to make, to Minister Donnelly to achieve a strengthening of the MOU?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. The Chief Medical Officers of both jurisdictions sign the MOU on the sharing of information, best practice and communication on our test, trace and protect systems. There is a mutual sharing of information. As I said before in the House, unfortunately, I was disappointed that we did not have at least some heads-up about the announcement that was made. There is still a challenge in sharing the passenger

locator form data. That is now a serious issue. We have been continually raising that, and it is becoming an issue with those travelling from England, Scotland and Wales. People are travelling through Dublin Airport using the common travel area, and some are avoiding the process of quarantining in hotels that they are asked to adhere to.

Most of the ongoing conversation that we are having is productive and positive. However, the latest announcement showed a weakness, and I have asked the Chief Medical Officer to make sure that neither jurisdiction is blindsided by such announcements in future.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That concludes that item of business. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments before we return to the debate on the Second Stage of the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Assembly Business

Extension of Sitting

Mr Speaker: I have received notification from members of the Business Committee of a motion to extend the sitting past 7.00 pm under Standing Order 10(3A).

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 15 March 2021 be extended to no later than 9.00 pm. — [Mr K Buchanan.]

Private Members' Business

Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill: Second Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Second Stage of the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill [NIA Bill 15/17-22] be agreed. — [Mr Givan.]

Mr Speaker: Before calling again the Member who was speaking previously in the debate on the Bill, I want to remind Members of a couple of remarks that I made earlier. Although I thought that the debate started appropriately, some tensions were beginning to emerge, and that was unfortunate. First, although I have shown Members some leniency in allowing them to set out the context, I remind them that this is a debate on the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill. It is not per se a general debate on the issue of abortion or, indeed, any of the issues related to it. Secondly, I said earlier that it is essential that Members respect the right of others with a differing view to be heard, no matter which side of the House they come from. If Members want to express their views, there is time to put their name down on the speaking list. What is not in order is for Members to make remarks from a sedentary position or to seek to interrupt others by abusing points of order. If Members can keep all of that in mind, we can resume the debate.

Ms Bradshaw: I will continue with my last point. I should add that people with disabilities should not be cast as a single community of like mind. As the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) puts it, it is as diverse as any other group. It is:

"a broad group with a diverse range of views"

that says:

"please do not use disability only when it suits your agenda".

I will move on to the issue of medical screening. It is worth noting that, at the Committee, when a question about screening was put to the Bill's sponsor, he had nothing to say about the ramifications for the future of antenatal care. That is an important practical issue. Screening is carried out by NHS England earlier than it is by Health and Social Care (HSC) in Northern Ireland. There is therefore the potential here for women not to be adequately informed about what is to follow, how to prepare and, depending on means, the differential impact.

Women who can travel to England for screening or pay for it in an independent hospital here for £320 will be at an advantage over those who cannot. That cannot be right, yet the Bill exacerbates the problem rather than solving it.

4.00 pm

Professionals pointed out that effectively forcing a 23-week time limit on abortions in certain circumstances may lead to more abortions taking place rather than fewer. The Bill's sponsor evidently had no idea why that would be the case, but the answer should be obvious. We should not force women to make life-changing decisions in a rush and when there is limited support for those who choose to continue their pregnancy, about which the Bill

does nothing. With limited support, what decisions are likely in such a scenario? The blunt reality is that the best people to judge what to do in cases of difficult diagnoses are the women, after they have taken advice from the professionals. It takes at least 18 years of training, learning and career progression to become a fetal medicine consultant. The Bill fundamentally attempts to interfere with a woman's right to choose, and, I repeat, forcing her to do something rather than supporting her.

I move on to commissioning. When asked which pro-life groups he had engaged with, the Bill's sponsor accepted the blunt reality that it was not many. Therefore, I do not know whether the proposer is aware that he is said to have guaranteed that commissioning abortion services will not be an outcome of the Bill.

The Bill claims to be about disability discrimination, but then it chooses, out of all the aspects of disability rights that it could have chosen, to be solely about abortion regulations. That not only brings into broad view the fact that it is the sponsor's party that stands in the way of a woman's right to choose but reinforces the failure of the Health Minister and the Assembly to commission health services. That failure is discriminatory against women and is another form of oppression.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bradshaw: I have a lot to get through; I might let you in later.

Ultimately, this legislation derives from Westminster, and there is a duty on the Secretary of State. There is a specific reason that commissioning is important and should be part of a Bill such as this. Legislating for commissioning would potentially enable a requirement for the Department to bring forward regulations, perhaps informed by a systems-wide review of maternity services by the RQIA or another regulatory body, to develop a robust framework for pregnant women who receive a diagnosis such as Down's. I have spoken to professionals who would have no objection to such a clear framework and, in fact, would welcome it. That could be informed by much of what the Don't Screen Us Out campaign is advocating.

The shameful situation in which vulnerable women are left to make horrendous choices without support could only be made worse by the Bill. When asked in Committee whether women who were seeking abortions would, as a result of the Bill, have to travel in some instances, again the sponsor gave no answer. That is, however, a likely practical outcome, as we have seen in the Republic. The sponsor specified that the Bill is not about condemning women, yet that is precisely what it does. It would condemn them by limiting their choices and risking ostracization if they chose to travel and force them to carry pregnancies to term without adequate support if they did not or could not travel. The Bill's sponsor accepted that point in Committee.

It must be emphasised that women in that position are entirely alone in every sense. They must book their own appointments in England, they must travel alone, they must seek their own information, and they must make their own decisions on who to involve and who not to involve. Probably the most crucial point is that they must ask for a post-mortem when they are there, because that

allows for an enhanced care package for them for future pregnancies.

No one ever thinks that it will happen to them, but, for women, it can become a horrendous reality. Anyone in the Chamber could be in that position or have a family member in that position: alone, frightened and uncertain. The Bill creates more of that, not less, so it is absolutely about condemning women.

It is worth re-emphasising that the proposer said that the lack of support for women speaks to the issue, yet he has elected to do nothing about it. There are no guidelines, even about the language to be used, for example, about Down's diagnoses, and there is certainly no support available in it. To be clear again, such support does not exist and there is no budget for it. There is scant counselling available, with some trusts having psychologists and social workers on hand while others do not. Frankly, there is very little information aside from that provided by professionals, whom the proposer has chosen not to consult.

Nothing in the health or welfare system will be changed by the Bill, yet women will be forced to proceed with pregnancies regardless. If lack of support is the issue, why does the Bill do nothing about that? It bears repeating that it could do something about it. A Bill could require a framework of support for pregnant women who receive a severe fetal impairment diagnosis that sets out statutory obligations for social, financial and emotional support, not just through the pregnancy but throughout childhood and potentially beyond. Such legislation would be about supporting women to carry pregnancies to term, not forcing them to. Had the proposer engaged properly in public consultation or a call for evidence, that point would no doubt have been made. Yet again, we have to note that he elected not to call for evidence. For him, disability discrimination refers only to abortion, not to ensuring a lifelong pathway of support for families.

If we want to have an impact on this issue, we also need to pass legislation that is human rights compliant. Otherwise, it will simply be overturned. The question is whether we want to look like we are doing something or actually want to do something. The Bill, as it stands, falls into the former category. It will take people on an emotional journey and then fail to deliver on the promise, because it will be overturned and no difference will be made. It cannot be repeated enough that it speaks only to forcing women to carry the pregnancy to term, not supporting them to. Indeed, it offers no explicit support whatsoever.

We need to be clear that, had the sponsor been confident on this point, he would not have skipped the usual stages through which a private Member's Bill normally goes. Indeed, he was intent on proceeding quickly without taking the time to run a public consultation or to consult the Equality Commission or the Human Rights Commission, as would be the norm before proceeding to First Stage. He hoped to push this Bill through without proper consideration. We need to address why he was so keen to do that. Let us be clear that that is what he did. His justification that the abortion regulations were consulted on is a peculiar one, given that he also goes on to claim that the Bill is not about abortion but about disability discrimination. Let us remind ourselves that, if this were really about disability rights, he would have run a public consultation on how to ensure that people with Down's

syndrome and other conditions could be and feel equally valued. Instead, without consulting, an ardent campaigner against trusting women just happened to present a Bill that focuses solely on abortion and specifically on forcing women to carry a pregnancy to term without support.

With regard to the human rights aspects of the Bill, it is reasonable to point to all the UN conventions, but, ultimately, the Bill focuses on regulations arising from just one. The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was agreed to by the UK Government in 1986. The 'Report of 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', chaired by Theresia Degener, was published in 2018. Its recommendations were in paragraphs 85 and 86. Section 9(1) of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 specifically requires the Secretary of State to ensure:

“the recommendations in paragraphs 85 and 86 of the CEDAW report are implemented”.

So, the scope of the regulations is specified: they must implement paragraphs 85 and 86. Paragraph 85(b)(iii) states:

“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 noted, it is not always possible to distinguish between severe and fatal when these things are being considered in practice. That is absolutely not a licence to ignore the aspects of disability discrimination that many may legitimately feel are inherent here. However, it does demonstrate that the Bill, as introduced, will not accomplish the stated objective, not least because it breaches requirements in primary legislation from the UK Parliament. Even more importantly, we also need to emphasise, as the Chair of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities put it:

“Disability rights and gender equality are two components of the same human rights standard that should not be construed as conflicting”.

She also notes that using the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, referred to by the proposer, in any effort to restrict or prohibit access to safe abortion:

“constitutes a misinterpretation of the Convention”.

Therefore, the sponsor of the Bill has misinterpreted the convention. He also says that, in his opinion, the Bill is human rights compliant, but it is clear that that is a point of significant contention.

However, the key point is that, of all the things that the sponsor could have brought forward to ensure appropriate and ongoing social and financial support for women to decide to carry pregnancies to term in cases of severe fetal impairment, he has chosen to focus solely on forcing the woman to travel. As a result, the premise of the Bill rests on a misinterpretation. It is legislation that will be overturned because it is based on a false premise. The task is to present policy and legislation that is, as Theresia

Degener said, a correct interpretation of the convention, which recognises that gender equality and disability rights are two sides of the same coin. This legislation is not it.

Ultimately, the question is about whether we are going to try to pass legislation, which will, inevitably, be judicially reviewed over whether the Assembly has the discretion to amend legislation that would run contrary to Westminster legislation, requiring the implementation of international human rights obligations, or —.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bradshaw: No, I will not.

Or, put simply, whether we are going to need another courageous woman to sort out intentionally muddied waters in our courts.

I return now to the remarkable absence of consultation on the Bill. It is standard practice for private Members' Bills to be publicly consulted on and for professionals to be involved in engagement and scrutiny. As we established in Committee, the sponsor could say only that he had a meeting with the GMC lined up subsequent to his appearance there, and he then went on to mention one individual but could not give any context as to who that person was. Therefore, he had put forward a Bill without any consultation with representative groups. That is not adequate for good legislation. He went on to add that the NIO had consulted on regulations on the entirety of abortion law, but he said that the Bill is not about abortion but disability discrimination. A Bill that is focused on disability discrimination requires a focused consultation about disability discrimination, not a reliance on a consultation that was fundamentally broader and about a different subject.

I repeat that I am highly sympathetic to finding ways, urgently, to provide greater support to women facing complexities in pregnancy to remove disability discrimination, but, regardless of Members' views on the issue, we need to consider whether it is adequate to pass legislation, even in general principles form, upon which there was no public consultation, no engagement with representative bodies or broad campaign groups, no understanding of the likely practical outcomes, and no evidence of consideration of alternatives which may achieve the objective more readily. Is ill-considered legislation, which is likely to be deemed to be unlawful in the courts, the best that we can do in this Chamber?

There are those who will demonstrate their interest only for political gains and create division by arguing that raising clear objections to the Bill, which is incompatible with existing law and about forcing women to do things rather than supporting them, is, somehow, anti-disability. In doing so, they are demonstrating that they are interested not in delivery but in playing to emotions and divisions for electoral gain. We do not advance disability rights by pitting one set of rights against another, by presenting a Bill that happens to be solely about abortion or by engaging only with those whom we feel comfortable engaging with. Nevertheless, we should not ignore the Don't Screen Us Out campaign. There may be an opportunity to use the debate to achieve most of the campaign objectives. Unlike the sponsor, I have consulted widely on this, and I was struck by the words of one campaigner, who put the objective very clearly: there is a time limit on non-fatal

abnormalities, and we are asking for that to be extended to Down's syndrome.

The sponsor raised a relevant issue in Committee regarding the need to avoid pejorative language, although, again, I note that he had not consulted with the healthcare professionals. Having engaged with many fetal medical consultants, I feel that the claim around abortion being mentioned in the same sentence as a diagnosis of Down's is questionable in Northern Ireland. It does not do justice to the extremely sensitive way in which our highly trained medical specialists approach the issue.

Again, I am concerned that legislation has been allowed to reach this stage without front-line healthcare workers having been engaged in any meaningful way whatsoever, and we need to reflect on why an attempt would be made to push legislation through various stages without such engagement and scrutiny.

4.15 pm

Ultimately, the proposer refers, with justification, to the need to change societal attitudes to Down's. Yet again, we have to ask why he has presented a Bill that does precisely nothing about it. I think that there may be a way to accomplish that fairly, and I continue to take soundings on whether and how an appropriate way can be found. We need to avoid a conflict about which rights predominate and instead recognise the need for the highest human rights standards that deliver respect, recognition and justice for all.

In conclusion, during the pandemic we have come to trust and even literally applaud our medical professionals. So, while every organisation will have different views, let us consider exactly what the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has to say on this issue:

"Removing these provisions in law will ultimately prevent a patient-centred, individualised approach to care for women who may already be distressed, ignore the clinical complexity of severe fetal impairment and result in women travelling to Great Britain to access healthcare".

If we consider these words carefully, we see that the Bill will prevent a patient-centred approach for distressed women, ignore clinical complexity, and result in women travelling for healthcare. Whatever the objectives of the Bill, these will be the outcomes if it becomes law. I have to ask of each of you: are you comfortable with those outcomes?

In closing, therefore, let me put on record two essential points. I want to see commissioning of abortion services that includes reference to the importance of support to enable mothers to make fully informed choices about whether to take pregnancy to term. What I do not want to see, however, is the Assembly endorsing a Bill designed to force women to do something rather than to support them to do something. Not least in the week that we have just had, I urge Members to reflect carefully on that.

Mrs Cameron: I am grateful for the powerful words of colleagues from across the House who have set out why this Bill is crucial to tackling discriminatory attitudes towards disability, and I want to add my very special thanks to disability campaigners Heidi and Liz Crowter and Lynn Murray of Don't Screen Us Out, who gave evidence to the

Health Committee last week; Ailis Cullinan Keown, mum to Tess, whose blog Little Hands speaks to the need for this Bill far more eloquently than I ever could; Ciara Smyth, mother to Jacob and founder of the Northern Irish charity Joy 21; and many more who have given painful personal testimony as to the need for this Bill.

At this point, I want to thank my colleague Paul Givan MLA for his work in introducing this private Member's Bill and for the great efforts to ensure that the voices of people with disabilities are heard loud and clear by the Assembly. These disability campaigners have schooled us on the richness and the joy that people with disabilities bring to their families and the wider community, and I hope that this is a lesson that we will think deeply on.

Today we have an opportunity to work together to ensure that our laws better reflect that truth. We should not need to be reminded that the value of an individual is not reliant on their possessing a particular physical characteristic, but hearing the stories from parents who, at the birth of their child, have been met with silence or have received expressions not of congratulations but of sorrow tells us that we have quite some way to go. I commend Joy 21, which is doing fantastic work and providing resources to new and expectant parents whose child has a diagnosis of Down's syndrome to ensure that they receive the warmest welcome, a welcome shaped by the voices, the stories and the encouragement of those who themselves have Down's syndrome and their families.

The regulation that permits abortion up to birth in the case of non-fatal disability should never have been made. The Disability Rights Commission, now the Equality and Human Rights Commission, has said of the equivalent disability selective abortion provision in the 1967 Act that it:

"is offensive to many people; it reinforces negative stereotypes of disability ... is incompatible with valuing disability and non-disability equally".

It concerns me greatly that, some 30 years after that provision was introduced in Great Britain, we have simply reiterated those negative stereotypes here.

We must fully comprehend the shadow that is thrown over these children's lives when one of the very first conversations that their parents have with their antenatal teams is about termination. Sadly, as others said, the impact does not stop there. One woman in England spoke out on social media recently about her experience of being asked at a hospital appointment why she chose not to terminate Betsy, her daughter, who was, by that point, three years old. It is appalling that people with certain non-fatal disabilities and their families must continually justify their very existence. Their lives are as valuable as everyone else's. Their lives matter.

Voting in favour of the Bill makes it plain to all that the harmful stereotypes that are perpetrated in conversations that suggest that life with certain disabilities is not worth living do not and should not have any place in our society. Screening for disabilities with the purpose not of providing the best possible tailored care but of offering terminations is deeply unethical. Those children are not of risk; they are a joy. Some have suggested that the Bill may pressure women into taking decisions too quickly in order to evade the 24-week limit. They have spoken of late diagnoses at 20 weeks or more. That misses the point entirely. No one

should be pressing women to have a termination for non-fatal disability at any stage of pregnancy. Women need to be provided with unbiased information about their child's diagnosis in order to reassure them that they and their child can thrive.

I am very conscious, in the context of the pandemic, of our duty to ensure that people with disabilities have all the support that they need to thrive. That has never been clearer. A recent survey that was conducted by Disability Action highlights significant concerns among people with disabilities and their families regarding the ability to access support during the pandemic and in the longer term. I am aware that a number of schools for children with special educational needs have been struggling to remain open for full-time education. We must listen to those with disabilities and ensure that improvements are made in those areas. The Bill is one such opportunity to do that, and I hope that there will be more.

More than 1,500 people with Down's syndrome and their families have signed an open letter that gives us a very clear message. Regarding regulation 7(1)(b), they say:

"This is discrimination and will likely have a devastating impact on the community of people with Down's syndrome."

They have called on us to vote for the Bill. My constituency office in South Antrim has received hundreds of emails, letters and calls from constituents urging the same. I know that every Member will also have received many such calls. I ask Members to join me in responding to their call.

Mrs O'Neill: I am taking the unusual step today of contributing to the debate in my role as an MLA as opposed to that of joint First Minister. I am doing so because I want to signal my deep unease about the narrow focus of the legislation.

I will start by stating the obvious: women are entitled to modern and compassionate healthcare. That is currently being denied to women here in the North. The private Member's Bill that is being debated today does nothing to address the immediate need to deal with that deficit in compassionate healthcare for women. In fact, I believe that the sponsor of the Bill is focused on rolling back legislation and progress that has been made while ignoring the failure to provide the essential services that are the direct outworking of the very same legislation that he is attempting to amend. I also have no doubt, just to call a spade a spade, that this is the thin end of the wedge. It is attempting to reopen a debate that has already been had on women's healthcare provision.

Over recent weeks, Members have, rightly, been outraged, disgusted and angered by the revelations of how women, babies and children were treated across this island by the state and religious institutions. That injustice and cruelty continued because people and women's voices were not heard. Is anybody going to tell us that that should continue to be allowed to happen? I am here today to give a voice to those women who find themselves in incredibly difficult and very vulnerable circumstances. The DUP, alongside the UUP Health Minister, is failing women by refusing to commission the services that were legislated for. They have failed to put in place modern, compassionate and accessible healthcare services. Those are still being

denied to women day and daily, which, at this stage, is so long after the legislation was enacted.

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: No, thank you. Women are entitled to compassionate healthcare. It is a human right to have compassionate healthcare. For that reason, the focus of the Assembly should be on how we commission services for women who need them, when they need them. That should be the focus and priority of the Assembly. Therefore, we will abstain from the vote on the Second Stage of the Bill.

Ms Bunting: At the outset, I express my sadness at the passing of Professor Jim Dornan and send my condolences and sympathy to the family that he leaves behind.

I welcome the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill introduced by Paul Givan. His Bill is in line with a motion that I brought to the Assembly on 2 June last year, in that it seeks to amend one element of the Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations 2020, namely regulation 7(1)(b) which allows abortion up to birth in circumstances where:

" if the child were born, it would suffer from such physical or mental impairment as to be seriously disabled."

At present, regulation 7 covers all disabilities: those referred to as fatal and non-fatal. This allows for abortion in the very difficult cases where a baby has a disability that is likely to be fatal before or shortly after birth. Under Paul's proposed Bill, there will be no grounds for an abortion on the basis that the baby has a non-fatal disability. As I said in the debate last June, in Great Britain, the equivalent section of the Abortion Act 1967, schedule 1 (1)(d), has been interpreted to allow for abortion up to term for conditions such as Down's syndrome, cleft palate and club foot. In England and Wales, we know from the statistics that abortions on the grounds of cleft palate, cleft lip or club foot — all conditions that can be addressed through surgery — are deemed to meet the threshold of seriously disabled, and they do happen. In 2018, in England and Wales, 3,269 abortions were undertaken because of fetal abnormality. These are known as ground E cases. The commentary on the statistics says:

"it is likely there is still a significant undercount presented in the ground E notification tables in this publication, so overall figures related to ground E notifications should be treated with caution."

Of these figures to be treated with caution, 618 abortions were when Down's syndrome was identified, and 18 of those were conducted after 24 weeks, the gestation limit for other types of abortion. It is highly likely that a similar interpretation will be adopted here in Northern Ireland. Regulation 7 is the only ground where the decisions are taken on the basis of a diagnosis made of the baby, and it allows for abortion up to birth. Regulation 7(1)(b) affords greater protection to viable human beings in the womb who are deemed to be without a disability than to viable human beings in the womb who have non-fatal disabilities. It is clearly saying that viable human beings with non-fatal disabilities and conditions are worthy of less protection under the law than viable human beings who are deemed to be able-bodied. In turn, it clearly says that people with

Down's syndrome or other disabilities are of less value than people without disabilities.

This is completely unacceptable in 2021. Again, I ask the question: why would we ever countenance the disability discrimination that the Westminster Parliament was persuaded to vote for 30 years ago? That happened in 1990, before the advent of disability discrimination legislation and before the UK became a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

I am sure that Members know the lovely Heidi Crowter. She is a brave young woman with Down's syndrome. She describes the current law as offensive and hurtful. This law is not only offensive, it is regressive and discriminatory.

4.30 pm

In the past 30 years, like every jurisdiction in the UK, Northern Ireland has introduced legal protections for individuals with disabilities. Those laws aim to foster equality and ensure that individuals with disabilities are treated equally to everyone else. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 protects the rights of persons with disabilities. The Northern Ireland Act 1998 placed a statutory duty on public authorities to:

"have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity"

for persons with a disability. The Disability Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 further amended the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to include a requirement that public authorities promote "positive attitudes towards disabled persons". In 2009, the UK as a whole ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Those laws reflect the fact that every person, regardless of their ability or so-called disability, is of value and worth. The Bill seeks to illustrate that those with disabilities are equal to everyone else, inside or outside the womb.

I remind Members that, in 2017, in its report on Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities stated:

"The Committee is concerned about perceptions in society that stigmatize persons with disabilities ... and about the termination of pregnancy at any stage on the basis of fetal impairment ... The Committee recommends that"

Great Britain "amend its abortion law accordingly."

Make no mistake: regulation 7(1)(b) of the 2020 regulations mirrors the very same legislation that the UN CRPD rejected. It fundamentally perpetuates stereotypes against individuals with disabilities.

In our deliberations today, we also have to bear in mind the cross-border dimension when considering the impact of that particular regulation. It seems from the explanatory memorandum on the current regulations that cross-border considerations, rather than the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), were the primary consideration in Westminster wanting to free itself from dealing with women from Northern Ireland who travelled to England for abortions.

The Government, as ever when it suits them, seem to forget, however, that there is another border. It is my

understanding that, in the Republic of Ireland, a woman cannot get an abortion up to birth on the basis of Down's syndrome or any other non-fatal disability. The regulations mean that we have a situation in which women from the Republic of Ireland are able to travel across the border to here to obtain an abortion on the basis of any serious disability right up to term. The regulations may have an impact on our neighbouring jurisdiction and the way in which people in the Republic view disability. I am aware that some TDs have already expressed real concern about the impact on attitudes to disability in the Republic.

If we do not pass the Bill, we are signalling to every person with a disability that their life is valued differently from that of others. Hannah Wilson, who is a young woman with Down's syndrome from County Fermanagh, pointed out:

"I felt very sad when this was explained to me, it feels so wrong ... The law should not treat some people differently from others."

Hannah's mother, along with the mothers of Eliab, Nathan, Aaron, Darren and Sara, and many other parents from Northern Ireland all agree that their children should be treated as being of equal value to any other child. Hannah's parents said:

"We are angered by the very notion that a life, however different, is viewed by some as expendable because it is deemed as less than perfect."

It is also important that we consider the kind of society that we are creating for pregnant women and mothers. Do we want them to be questioned as to why they will not terminate their pregnancy, as was the experience of one mother recently, or do we want to create a society in which people with disabilities are protected and valued? The Bill is about protecting women like Emma Mellor, whom Mrs Barton has already mentioned, who, at 24 years old, described feeling under pressure to abort her daughter, Jamie, throughout her pregnancy. Emma said that she and her husband:

"were offered 15 terminations, even though we made it really clear that it wasn't an option for us ... they really seemed to push and really seemed to want us to terminate."

The doctors made it very clear to her that, even at 38 weeks pregnant, if she changed her mind on the morning of the induction, she should let them know because it would not be too late. Until her baby had literally started travelling down the birth canal, she therefore could still have terminated her pregnancy.

We are trying to protect women like Rachel Mewes, who describes how she was pressured to consider having a late-term abortion at seven months, despite previously stating repeatedly that she would never terminate for Down's syndrome. She describes herself as having PTSD as a result of this experience. She said, "Being forced to imagine someone killing Betsy nearly destroyed me". The Bill will protect such women so that they do not have to fight for the right of their child to live and will not be pressured by medical professionals. The Bill will uphold their child's right to life.

Last June, I quoted Lord Shinkwin. His words are just as relevant now as they were then. He said:

"I utterly reject this medical mindset that clings to the idea that a disabled baby is a medical failure to be eradicated through abortion. I beg no one for my equality. I know I have as much right as anyone to be alive."

Disability Rights UK, commenting on Lord Shinkwin's Bill, said:

"fundamentally it is about equality. Wherever Parliament sets the number of weeks after which abortion is not permitted, it should be exactly the same whether the pregnancy is likely to result in a disabled or a non-disabled child. All lives are equal."

As I said last year:

"We cannot and must not separate the regulations from the people to whom they would apply." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 128, p324, col 2].

Members may not, on the one hand, promote equality for the disabled and, on the other hand, vote to have them aborted. These positions are incongruous. Either those with disabilities are equal, or they are not. If they are equal outside the womb, they are equal inside the womb. To my mind, they are equal.

Let us be clear: without question, regulation 7 unavoidably perpetuates stereotypes against individuals with disabilities. Any person with a disability, looking at when an unborn baby can be legally aborted, will recognise that their life is valued differently to others.

I want to remind the House of the words of Heidi Crowter last summer, before the regulations were approved. She said:

"My life has as much value as anyone else's."

She recently said:

"This Northern Ireland law at the moment makes me feel less valuable."

Heidi's previous intervention on the matter gave rise to a very moving piece on Sky News Australia. That reminds us that, as we approach the subject, we are not only being watched by our constituents and neighbours in the Republic but being watched by other parts of the world.

We now have an opportunity to change the law and uphold the rights of those born with a disability and at the preborn stage of their lives. Let us seize it with both hands. In the words of one mother:

"The right to life of a person with Down's syndrome should never be questioned simply because of a chromosomal variation. My daughter is meant to be here on this planet, and nobody has the right to suggest otherwise."

That is the message that we must send to people with disabilities: we value their lives equally to those whom we describe as able-bodied.

None of us knows for how long we will be here but, for as long as I am, I will stand for the unborn and the disabled. I will certainly support the Bill, which gives effect to the motion that I tabled last June and that encompasses the Sinn Féin amendment to that motion. I urge all Members to do likewise and, in so doing, send out the signal,

loudly and clearly, that there is no place for disability discrimination in Northern Ireland in 2021 and that Northern Ireland continues to be a country where disabled people are valued.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I will make some initial remarks on behalf of the Health Committee outlining the Committee's consideration of the Bill before speaking as my party's health spokesperson.

The Committee first considered the Bill at its meeting on 18 February, just after its introduction at First Stage. As the proposer outlines, the Bill seeks to remove the ground for an abortion in cases of severe fetal impairment.

At its meeting on 18 February, the Committee agreed to write to the Human Rights Commission to seek the commissioners' views on the Bill's compatibility with human rights. On 11 March, the proposer of the Bill, with representatives of the Don't Screen Us Out organisation, briefed the Committee on the principles of the Bill. A number of questions were put to the proposer and witnesses. Members asked about the consultation undertaken, statistical information around services, screening and inequalities, and the provision of supports and services following screening, before the proposer introduced the Bill. Following the briefing, the Committee agreed that it would not take a position on the principles of the Bill.

I will now make some remarks as Sinn Féin spokesperson for health. The right to access compassionate and legal personal healthcare, which the DUP seeks to deny, is a right that belongs to all, and no political party or political body should move to undermine or exclude anyone from that right. At no time in the Assembly have we seen evidence of the DUP fighting for an extension of rights to anyone. It fought against language rights, it opposed marriage equality, and now it seeks to deny women's rights to access safe and legal healthcare services for themselves and their families.

In 2017, the United Nations found the British Government guilty of grave and systemic violations of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Members will remember 2017 also to be the year that the DUP entered into the confidence-and-supply arrangements to form a Government with the same Conservative Party that oversaw those violations.

Is it the case that disability rights are right for the DUP only when it is politically expedient? As the DUP attempts to undermine women's right to access legally entitled health services, the Minister of Health has refused to commission those same healthcare services, and women, again, are suffering as a result. This DUP private Member's Bill does not distract anyone from the fact that the Minister of Health has the responsibility and the power to provide those healthcare services for women.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gildernew: I will not. He has failed to do so despite the change in the law almost two years ago. Members, we cannot continue to force women to go on long, torturous and expensive journeys to England and elsewhere to seek the healthcare that they need and to which they are entitled. It is inhumane treatment and should not be allowed to continue in light of the current legal position.

I support my colleagues in Sinn Féin who will bring forward a proposal to the Executive this week to ensure that the healthcare services so desperately needed by many women are delivered.

Ms McLaughlin: I rise in genuine sadness to debate this amendment Bill. This day last week, I joined many of my female MLA colleagues across the House to celebrate International Women's Day. We discussed issues relating to gender equality, gender barriers and the impact on women of COVID. All that any of us really want is a society that is fair and level. Today, we stand in this Assembly asking Members to roll back on the rights of women's health. What a roller coaster of a week we have had.

Like many others, I was saddened at the tragic circumstances surrounding the death of Sarah Everard. I joined in the calls to reclaim our streets and, like many others, was disillusioned and angry at the police response on Saturday evening. Women still receive second-class treatment in our society. Make no mistake: the attempt to roll back on women's health rights in the Assembly today hurts me to the core as I fear that there is a reluctance in our society to trust and treat women fairly and to afford them dignity and respect.

Like many Members, I celebrated Mother's Day yesterday. Mother's Day can be poignant and reflective for those of us who have lost our mum. This year, as a result of COVID, many of us could not celebrate with our families.

4.45 pm

I spent yesterday preparing for the debate. I thought about my mum a lot. My mum died 12 years ago. Yesterday, I thought about her, motherhood and how the world treats mothers and women, both past and present. In the 1960s, a few years after I was born, my mum gave birth to a full-term stillborn baby boy. He died a few minutes before birth. He was not given the dignity of a church burial, and he was buried in an unmarked grave. My mother never really knew exactly where he was buried. I tell this story, and there are many others like it, because it happened in my lifetime.

Respect for a woman's reproductive journey has always been resisted. It has always been challenged and is full of contradictions in this country. Sex, birth control and the actual physical process of giving birth were no-go areas for discussion and were, often, conflated with guilt, sin and judgement, rather than natural acts of love and compassion. Taking control of one's reproductive rights as part of their health and mental well-being is a choice that is not afforded to all women in the world today.

Back in the early 1960s, my mum could not even attend my christening as she had to remain at home for four to six weeks after she gave birth. My mum had to be "churched" after childbirth. "Churching" refers to a ritual or blessing as an act of cleansing mothers following recovery from childbirth. Only married women were eligible for that blessing. My mum said that many women felt the stigma of being labelled as "tainted" or "dirty" after going through the, often difficult but no-less-life-affirming, joy of childbirth. I tell that story of churching because, shockingly, it is one of the least extreme examples of how society tried to control female behaviour by imposing restrictive rules and beliefs on women's reproductive rights. Again, that happened in my lifetime. The swinging sixties they were

not. Women being in control of their reproductive rights was forbidden. Family sizes were testament to that.

I am glad that life has moved on. However, there is still a long way to go. Issues of gender equality and reproductive rights are still set in the past. It is up to this generation of political leaders to ensure that we challenge society and, particularly, public policy and legislation that continue to try to control and limit women's choices. I want to help women. It is time for us all to trust and believe in women. This amendment Bill does not help women. It does not contribute to the progressive, inclusive and equal society that I want for my daughters, Aoife and Clare, and the next generation.

Abortion is an essential component of women's healthcare. I do not deny — absolutely not — that the topics that are being raised here are incredibly sensitive. However, I take issue with the misleading language that is being used by many proponents of the Bill. It is important to state for the record that I have met many people who are pro-choice, but I have yet to meet anyone who is pro-abortion.

Let me talk specifically to that amendment. First, it is important to establish that abortions in cases of severe fetal impairment occur in extremely rare cases. Abortions that were beyond 24 weeks accounted for just 0.1% of the total number of abortions that were carried out in England and Wales in 2019. These abortions are carried out in cases where very severe, complex abnormalities that would shorten life or cause significant lifelong disability are detected. Women must undergo multiple tests, and a multidisciplinary team of obstetricians, midwives, genetic doctors etc are all involved in the decision-making process. As with all medical procedures, their care is patient-centred, and that array of clinicians would not take lightly a termination of pregnancy at such a late stage. To suggest otherwise, my friends, is quite frankly an insult to the medical profession.

Cleft lip diagnoses are often disingenuously brought up in this debate, yet there is absolutely no evidence to substantiate the claim that women have abortions for less severe fetal impairments at such a late stage of pregnancy. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists says that that simply is not true. Given that we are discussing such sensitive issues, I believe that we all have a responsibility to ensure that the debate is grounded in factual evidence. Moreover, we should take stock of the learning from the Republic of Ireland's abortion legislation, which only provides for fatal fetal impairment, not severe fetal impairment. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has outlined a key issue with it, namely that it is not always possible to clearly distinguish between a severe and a fatal fetal impairment. A recent study of stillbirths and neonatal deaths found that less than half of abnormalities could be classified as fatal fetal abnormalities, yet all were fatal.

Fetal medicine specialists point out that the legislation is too restrictive as it forces women to travel to access abortion care for conditions that are deemed not quite fatal enough, even when the fetus is not going to survive. Women will receive a devastating diagnosis only to be told that their doctor cannot provide the healthcare that they need. As a result of this flawed legislation, at least one woman a day continues to travel from the Republic of Ireland to Great Britain for abortion, denied access to family support or proper aftercare. Dr Alyson Hunter, a

fetal medicine specialist, has spoken about the further trauma that that inflicts on patients and their families when they are already going through difficult pregnancies. This, I am afraid, is the harsh reality of restricting access to abortion for severe fetal abnormality, and it is dreadful that this Bill seeks to follow the same pathway and continues to export our women and girls. We should, therefore, avoid replicating the failings of the Republic's legislation and instead provide comprehensive and compassionate abortion care.

The human rights implications of the Bill must be thoroughly interrogated. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women found that our previous abortion laws had resulted in human rights violations, and it subsequently made a range of recommendations, including that legislation should expand grounds to legalise abortion in cases of severe fetal impairment. Notably, that is compatible with the requirements under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which states that rights begin at birth. Amnesty International also highlights that forcing someone to carry an unwanted pregnancy is a violation of human rights, including the rights to privacy and bodily autonomy.

Our abortion legislation is required to be compliant with human rights and with CEDAW, yet it is clear that the Bill does not meet those requirements. CEDAW also recommended that abortion services and abortion access be expanded in tandem with ensuring appropriate and ongoing social and financial support for women who decide to carry such pregnancies to term, and that passage sticks out to me. It is clear that we have a long way to go until women and children, especially those with disabilities, are adequately supported.

In my constituency of Foyle, we need only cast our minds back to 2016, when it was revealed that there was a multimillion-pound black hole in the Western Trust's disability services. Those vital services had £8 million rerouted to other departments. Then we had the chronic underfunding of the Northern Ireland Hospice and the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice, which require £16 million to deliver their services each year. In 2019, only £4 million of that was funded by government. That is just a quarter of the necessary funding. That pattern of underfunding is replicated across the North.

I am sure that other Members are regularly contacted by constituents who raise the inadequate disability support services, lack of paid employment opportunities as well as the barriers to accessing healthcare, education, housing and benefits. COVID has heightened that inequality further, with people with disabilities being utterly abandoned. Parents are being denied contact with their children who are in supported accommodation, advances in speech therapy have been lost after a year of isolation and families are in complete and utter turmoil because of the pressures that they face without respite.

Those stories are utterly distressing, and they reflect the issues that are being faced on a daily basis. Yet, interestingly, they are often met with tumbleweed from many of those supporting the Bill. In fact, I will point out to certain parties that their support of welfare reform has further entrenched the systemic discrimination that people with disabilities face. We need to support the living. Given that we have heard much talk about the need to create a

rights-based culture, I urge Members to take heed of the following statement from Disabled Women Ireland:

“social and financial support to disabled people and their parents is the strongest way to deal with concerns for disability rights. Recognising the full extent of disabled people's rights from infancy to old age – to education, to early childhood support, to personal assistance – will make meaningful changes to the quality of disabled people's everyday lives. Restrictions on abortion will only place further restrictions on the reproductive rights and freedoms of people with disabilities.”

I emphasise how important it is that we allow women to have bodily autonomy. We must trust women to make the decision that is right for them. No woman reaches a late-stage pregnancy, having formed a parental bond, only to flippantly choose to have an abortion without deep deliberation. Very complex, serious abnormalities are detected at only a 20-week scan or even later during what are often much-wanted pregnancies. My heart goes out to all the women who are faced with the heartbreaking decision of whether to carry such pregnancies to term.

Ms Bradshaw: Will the Member give way?

Ms McLaughlin: Yes.

Ms Bradshaw: Will the Member agree that it is not just the women who feel that pain gravely but the men?

Ms McLaughlin: And the wider families. I agree totally.

Very emotive language has been used in the debate. I widely respect the variety of feelings that have been expressed, but, to be honest, it is not your emotions or, indeed, my emotions, that matter. It is the emotions of the woman who has to make an extremely difficult decision about whether she can progress with a pregnancy after being given a distressing medical diagnosis. It is, therefore, vital that the Health Minister commission services that will support women in making informed decisions that are based on their health and the wider circumstances.

Let me be very clear: this Bill is an overreaction to an extremely small number of abortions. It politicises the personal choices that women are forced to make in extremely difficult circumstances.

5.00 pm

In my constituency office in Foyle, I have an inspirational quote from Malala:

“I raise up my voice — not so I can shout but so that those without a voice can be heard ... we cannot succeed when half of us are held back.”

This Bill seeks to hold back women by taking away their choice. I cannot support that and I will vote against it.

Mr Butler: At the very start of my contribution, I take the opportunity to alert the Chamber to the fact that it is World Down Syndrome Day on 21 March — this Sunday. Unfortunately, we will not be in the position to light up the Building on the day or have a debate for those who have Down's syndrome, but I am sure that Members will join me in wishing all those with Down's syndrome a very special day on Sunday 21 March.

I am pleased to add my voice to those who have spoken strongly in support of the Bill that has been tabled by Mr Paul Givan from Lagan Valley. For the record, I am speaking on my own behalf, because abortion is a matter of conscience for the Ulster Unionist Party. I would like to echo the words of many, but not all, the Members who have spoken before me. I pass on my gratitude to and acknowledge the incredible work of Heidi Crowter, who will celebrate a very special day on 21 March. For Heidi to have the courage to advocate for the rights of those who, like her, have Down's syndrome but live in another part of the United Kingdom speaks of a great commitment and determination that we should honour and affirm.

The reality is that, unless the Bill passes, it is possible that, at some point in the future, we will be left in the very sad situation that there are no longer people like Heidi in our society. That, in my opinion, would be an absolute tragedy. It is clear that the Bill deals with disability discrimination. That is what a lot of the debate has missed; it is about one aspect of the legislation. As the chairperson of the all-party group on disability, I believe that it is of fundamental importance for me and the Assembly to take a stand against disability discrimination. It is our responsibility to promote equality and ensure that people with disabilities, including babies, have their whole persons recognised and their capabilities and dignity respected.

If left unamended, the abortion regulations that were forced on us by Westminster last year will have devastating consequences — I have heard the word “devastating” used a number of times in the Chamber but not in relation to the devastating impact that abortion has on the unborn child — leaving our society bereft of diversity and the unique qualities that those with disabilities contribute. However, crucially, that is within the power of the Assembly to change. In 2021, we should not permit laws like regulation 7(1)(b) to exist. We should remove them and support people like Heidi and their families. That is a point that most Members made. There is much work that we need to do to support those with disabilities and their families and allow them to enjoy their lives to the fullest. We should create a society that delights in them. That is the kind of society that I want to be part of.

The statistics from England and Wales that we have debated today are shocking and provide a worrying indication of how things are likely to develop in Northern Ireland if we do not amend the law. Some have referred to an indicative outcome of a 0-9% increase. When you look at the fact that there are upwards of 250,000 to 300,000 abortions a year, even 1% or 0-9% is an incredible number. It is not just a number; it is a life.

According to the 2018 national abortion statistics for England and Wales, there were 618 abortions on grounds of Down's syndrome. That figure, which is likely to be an underestimate, is far greater than the number of babies with Down's syndrome who were allowed to be born in 2018. When you look at the choice that is made — it is a difficult choice; it absolutely is — it is clear that we need to do more to support the mothers in that instance. The direction of travel is clear.

We also need to be very careful about the outdated stigma and stereotypes that a law like this could perpetuate. That was summed up best by Sara McNeill, mother to Tommy, a wonderful boy with Down's syndrome from Ballymena. Some Members will have seen him lately. She said:

“I would urge any parent faced with the decision of what to do, not to be blinded by poor, outdated preconceptions of what Down's syndrome is. I thought our outlook seemed bleak when our doctor first shared her suspicions about our brand new baby, but now I know better.”

If you have seen the videos and the singing, they are just marvellous. If you have not seen them, I ask you to look at them.

As has been pointed out by others today, the present law sends out the message that people with disabilities are less worthy of protection than those living without disabilities. Earlier, Paul Givan said that the current law tells those with disabilities that they are worth less, that their contribution is less valuable and that their lives are less valuable and less full. Is that really a message that we want to send out at the end of this day? For anyone who suggests that that is not the message that the law sends out, I remind them that, when asked about the current law, Heidi responded that allowing abortion up to birth on the basis of non-fatal disabilities:

“makes me feel that I am not as valued as anyone else.”

I also remind Members of the words of Hannah Wilson, a young woman from County Fermanagh. She said:

“I felt very sad when this was explained to me ... The law should not treat some people differently from others.”

She just wants to be treated the same.

These are people whose lives and perception of self are profoundly impacted on by this law. Imagine if it were you or your son or daughter who was confronting the fact that, because of a diagnosis, viable human beings with the same condition would no longer be entitled to the same right to life as those without that condition. How would that make any of us feel? I use the word “diagnosis” very reluctantly, because Down's syndrome and conditions like it are not diseases. We need to see those people's ability, not focus on their so-called disability.

I remind the Assembly of the debate that we had here on 2 June 2020, when, in two separate votes, 75 out of the 90 Members made it clear that they did not support abortion on the grounds of non-fatal fetal disability. On that occasion, our votes could not change the law. By voting for the Bill before us today, we can take the first steps in the process of translating that vote into an actual change in law that is not imposed on us by Westminster but that we adopt for ourselves.

To conclude, I am delighted and honoured to be taking a stand with Heidi, Hannah and their families, and countless others like them, against disability discrimination. I will be voting in support of this important Bill and strongly urge others to do the same.

Mr Buckley: I appreciate the opportunity to speak to this vital Bill today. As has been said by others, to do so on the day following Mother's Day, when we quite rightly look to the valuable contributions that mothers have played across our society, I, for one, am very proud to say that, if it were not for the intervention and help from my own mother and,

indeed, grandmother, I would not be standing before the House today.

I have witnessed a number of very courageous individuals and families speak about disability discrimination. I would like to say that it is a pleasure to walk in their footsteps, but the plain fact is that we should not need to be here debating this Bill today. More than 2,000 families and individuals with lived experiences of Down's syndrome — one of the conditions commonly screened for in pregnancy — wrote to Prime Minister Boris Johnson in Westminster to ask him not to introduce abortion regulations in Northern Ireland that would perpetuate stereotypes of people with certain congenital conditions, but, sadly, their request went unanswered.

Some have spoken about the delays in antenatal testing for congenital conditions as justification for a law that provides one limit for termination in pregnancies in which a congenital condition is suspected and another in pregnancies in which it is not. They suggest that those delays require the provision of termination up to birth. To that suggestion, I can do no better than to quote one mother, Nicola Sparrow, from elsewhere in the UK, who said:

"No test could have told us how strong, cheeky, determined, brave, funny and beautiful our baby would be."

As the Down's Syndrome Research Foundation has said:

"a prenatal diagnosis doesn't tell us of the full and love filled life that a child may have, the baby with Down's Syndrome will write their own story just like any other child."

The idea that late screening results justify a law permitting termination up to birth entirely misses the point. The desperately sad truth is that antenatal screening and tests are not being used to provide the best possible care for babies with Down's syndrome. They are not being used to give these children all that they need to write their own stories.

Allow me to give you an insight into where these tests lead. Nicola Sparrow writes:

"The first thing that the consultant said to me was if you come in and see us this week, we will arrange a termination for you. She sat us down and told us all the negative things about having a child with Down's syndrome."

She said, 'You are only 28, you are both so young. You should terminate and start again.' I was incredibly shocked that I was being asked this at 37 weeks pregnant, after just being told that I was being induced the following morning. I was being told that I still had options whether I was going to have my baby or not."

Then also, if she was born not breathing or struggling to breathe, that they were not willing to help my baby, they were willing to just leave her."

This should never be. This is not about individual clinicians. This is about a whole system that is shaped through the narrative of managing what is termed, so unhelpfully, "risk".

Despite some improvements, this week, I read the gov.uk website's guidance on screening for ultrasound practitioners. It says:

"Screening is a process of identifying apparently healthy people who may be at increased risk of a disease or condition. They can then be offered information, further tests and appropriate treatment to reduce their risk and/or any complications arising from the disease or condition."

While I appreciate that that is a headline definition of screening as it applies to many conditions, please note the purpose of the statement:

"They can then be offered information, further tests and appropriate treatment to reduce their risk"

That appears at the beginning of a document that talks solely about screening for the chromosomal conditions Down's syndrome, Edwards' syndrome and Patau's syndrome. Let me be very clear: none of those syndromes is an illness to be cured. The only so-called treatment to reduce what the authors describe as "risk" is a termination of pregnancy. That handbook uses the word "risk" 60 times, and the document has been updated as recently as 2019.

No wonder that parents are being met with the language of risk in antenatal care. We do not want to see a growth of that narrative in Northern Ireland, although I note that the language of risk is already used on the nidirect website with regard to congenital conditions. We need to act now.

Some Members said that the law as it stands is about giving women choices. In June last year, Members spoke about the need to provide compassionate care for women in extraordinary circumstances. At this point, I reference the brave disability rights campaigner, Heidi Crowter. Anybody who has had the pleasure of meeting Heidi cannot but be impressed by that young lady's vision and determination to see her rights as somebody with Down's syndrome being respected. That is why I take great notice of the comments of the Chair of the Health Committee, Colm Gildernew, because Heidi quoted to Colm his comments last June when Sinn Féin tabled the very amendment that gave effect to this:

"Sinn Féin does not support CEDAW's recommendations to provide abortion in the case of severe foetal impairment such as Down's syndrome. Our amendment welcomes the important intervention by disability campaigner Heidi Crowter, who has been referred to today, and rejects the specific legislative provision in the abortion legislation that goes beyond fatal foetal abnormalities to include non-fatal disabilities such as Down's syndrome. I support the amendment." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 128, p331, col 1].

5.15 pm

Let me acknowledge today that being a parent must be, without doubt, a scary thing, and all the more so when you are aware of particular hurdles that you and your child will have to navigate.

One woman has described her experiences of receiving a positive screening result for Down's syndrome, saying:

"I was 19 weeks pregnant. I had a much longed for baby growing inside of me that I suddenly felt so far detached from. ... I was left with a list of characteristics, a list of everything that could go wrong with my baby."

She goes on:

"we were scared. Scared of the unknown, scared if she would be accepted by others, scared if she would be ok, scared of the impact she would have on Florrie, scared for our future."

That is only part of that woman's story. Of the day on which she gave birth to her daughter, Matilda, she says:

"that was the moment everything changed. ... Once Down Syndrome was the worst thing that had ever happened to us. Today it is a very small part of what makes Matilda fabulous."

That is a point that, I am sure, many Members across the House can attest to, and certainly those who have met Heidi or others with Down's syndrome will know what incredible lives they live. She has been a trailblazer for disability rights, and I know that she will be watching intently the debate today. I thank her for her interventions thus far.

The Bill is about creating an environment that sees beyond the diagnosis. It is about creating an environment where women are, first and foremost, not given a description of perceived risks that fill them with fear but are told of all the ways in which their medical team will support them so that they can flourish. No woman should have to make a decision about pregnancy based on fear.

One of my colleagues on the Health Committee mentioned the question of growing waiting lists for support services, such as speech and language therapy, for children with disabilities. I appreciate the Member's intent and welcome the chance to discuss how we can better support those children and their families. We must ensure that appropriate wrap-around services are, indeed, in place. Let me say categorically that the length of waiting lists is not a reason to object to the Bill. We need to ensure that no family feels so under-supported that termination of pregnancy is seen as their only option.

Sinead McLaughlin referred to a number of statistics today, but, as Robbie Butler quite rightly pointed out, each statistic is a life. Sinead McLaughlin talked about the Bill being an overreaction to a small number of abortions. I say today that if, through the means of this Bill, we can save just one life, it will have been worth it. I implore Members to vote with me and vote for the Bill.

Ms Sheerin: As alluded to by others, it is unbelievable that, seven short days ago, we stood in the Chamber united across our party divides to celebrate International Women's Day in sisterhood and collaboration. It is a sad reality, as Sinead McLaughlin pointed out, that the good nature and solidarity shown last Monday did not set the tone for the week. This has been an incredibly weary time for anyone who identifies as a woman. I am sure that many of you saw the post on social media that went viral a few days ago. It related to a story that was making headlines at the time, and I think that it is apt for this conversation as well. It issued this warning:

"Meghan Markle won't see your post about how you don't believe that she was suicidal, but a friend or a loved one on your timeline who has had that same battle will".

Those are words to think about when we are discussing the issue of abortion. None of us knows what anyone else has gone through. None of us knows how we would react when faced with an unthinkable scenario. When we are standing here talking about this, we must remember that there are women and men out there who have lived through those same unthinkable situations. There are women listening to this debate who should have been mothers and are not. They are still getting over the trauma that something like Mother's Day invokes, trying to just get through a time that is meant for celebration when they are, instead, dealing with loss, emptiness and thoughts of what could have been.

This private Member's Bill is an attempt to change legislation that has never been implemented or acted upon properly. The real focus of the Assembly should be on delivering the services that women are entitled to. In the simplest of terms, people who are in need of abortion services need healthcare. That there is political or moral objection to abortion is understandable on a personal basis, and the views of those who have strong opinions on the issue should be respected, but we cannot allow personal objection to block healthcare that has already been legislated for.

Sinn Féin, as a party of rights, recognises that women in Ireland, North and South, have been treated as second-class citizens for long enough. In recent weeks, we have seen the publication of reports into the so-called mother-and-baby homes, North and South, both of which were damning and depressing and highlighted significant human rights abuses. Whilst services are denied in the North, those same human rights abuses continue. The veil of secrecy and shame that hung over our island, created and perpetuated by the Church and states working hand in hand, must be removed once and for all.

We had a system in both jurisdictions where sex education in schools was non-existent. So, whilst misogyny was internalised, gender roles were literally enforced in legislation and child bearing and rearing were the sole responsibility of our women, and they were not even afforded the dignity of information, let alone contraception. All those young women and girls, taken away from their family homes and forced into what was effectively slave labour, serving sentences without having committed any crimes. For the few who could afford it, an escape to England was the only option, where they were exploited by backstreet abortionists who masqueraded as clinicians. The shipping of women in crisis overseas should never have been the norm, but to all our shame, for far too long, it was. To think that that is still happening in 2021 is heartbreaking. Whilst services have not been properly commissioned, that is our reality: women being forced to fly to another country during a pandemic to access healthcare that they are, by law, entitled to here.

So, while the DUP complains about a border down the Irish Sea, when it comes to abortion provision, and indeed human rights in general, it is quite content for the North to be completely at odds with what Britain is doing.

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Ms Sheerin: No thank you.

What we should be doing in the Assembly is looking at ways in which we can better support people who are living with disabilities and ensure that they have access to the basic rights that many of us take for granted. Last week, at our Ad Hoc Committee on a bill of rights, we heard from a young woman with autism who told us that, when her personal assistant is off for the day, she does not get an education. We should be addressing matters like that. We should be prioritising the provision of better pre- and postnatal care for new mothers who struggle in the lead-up to giving birth and the period that follows. To re-traumatise women in the most difficult of circumstances imaginable is wrong, and attempting to score political points by pitting vulnerable women and couples against a minority grouping is reprehensible. I will be joining my Sinn Féin colleagues in abstaining.

Mr Lyttle: Alliance Party policy is that start- and end-of-life matters are a matter of individual conscience, and so I speak in an individual capacity on this important matter. I acknowledge the robust contribution of my Alliance Party colleague Paula Bradshaw MLA, which was self-evidently based on her sustained and extensive work on the matter.

I have spoken in the Assembly on the serious matter of abortion on a number of occasions. I have done my best to engage with health staff and families who have been affected by it and who have widely different views on it. I voted in favour of legislative provision for medical termination on the grounds of fatal fetal abnormality in the Assembly over five years ago, in 2016. On that occasion, I voted in favour of legislative amendments that were tabled by Trevor Lunn MLA and Stewart Dickson MLA; legislative provision that the courts have since required of this jurisdiction. I do, however, have concern regarding legislative provision for abortion on the grounds of severe fetal impairment, particularly if it provides for abortion on the grounds of disability. I will, therefore, vote, at this stage, to permit the Bill to progress for more detailed scrutiny at the Health Committee and Consideration Stage of the Assembly's legislative process; scrutiny that a public consultation ought to have already facilitated.

I acknowledge that there are people who support the legislative provision for abortion on the grounds of severe fetal impairment due to concern that its omission could limit and endanger access to termination in cases of fatal fetal abnormality. I will do my best to engage with and heed those concerns should the Bill pass to the Health Committee and Consideration Stage. I acknowledge that it remains to be seen whether Northern Ireland Assembly legislation can actually change a legal duty on the UK Government to implement the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women recommendations on abortion, which include the grounds of severe fetal impairment. I had hoped that the UK-enacted legislative provision for fatal fetal abnormality would have satisfied CEDAW recommendations on severe fetal impairment, but that does not appear to be the case.

It is also an inescapable fact that this abortion legislation exists because the Northern Ireland Executive did not. If MLAs were serious about delivering comprehensive, fit-for-purpose abortion legislation in Northern Ireland, they would have accepted that a three-year Executive hiatus and a narrow private Member's Bill of this nature are not the best way of achieving that aim.

Mr Lyons: I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. I thank the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Givan for bringing this legislation to the Floor of the House. Although there is much that could be said about abortion law in Northern Ireland and the manner in which changes have been made, that is for another day. We are here to discuss the Bill's Second Reading.

Second Reading, as we all know, is an opportunity for us to debate the general principles of a Bill. I believe that the general principles and aims of this short Bill are simple and easily understood. Quite simply, it is about equality and ensuring that everyone is equally valued, regardless of his or her abilities. Without this Bill, we are saying that children with disabilities while in the womb are not equal to other children. I cannot emphasise enough how strongly I disagree with that sentiment.

I want to share with the House not my views but those of a friend and former constituent of mine. She has sent a letter to many MLAs sharing the experiences of her son, who has Down's syndrome. It is important that we allow other people's voices to be heard today, not just those who have been elected to this place. She says:

"Harry was born at just over 37 weeks. Following his birth, we were told that he had some of the markers for Down's syndrome. A few days later, his diagnosis was confirmed. Were we shocked? Yes. This was totally unexpected as there had been nothing picked up in our scans. Did it change how we felt about Harry? Absolutely not. Are we anxious about the future? Yes; but then Harry amazes us with his strength, progress and determination. This reminds us, as a nurse did in the hospital, that Harry is not Down's syndrome; it does not define who he is or who he will become."

She goes on to say:

"This Bill is simply asking that babies who receive an antenatal diagnosis, or even when the parent is told that there is a possibility of a diagnosis of a disability, are given the same rights as other babies. This is about equality. We live in a society that constantly talks about equality and inclusivity, yet here we are taking away the rights of a baby before he or she is even born. My older son would be protected after 24 weeks, but my youngest could have been terminated right up to birth. Why?"

5.30 pm

She says:

"I hear the experiences of women in England who have been told their unborn baby may have a high chance of having Down's syndrome and how they are asked repeatedly at appointments if they are considering termination, at times right up to just before a baby is due to be born. It scares me that this could become the experience of women in Northern Ireland. Do we want to live in a country where Down's syndrome and other disabilities are viewed with such negativity, such fear?"

She then says:

"A close friend who has a daughter in her twenties who also has Down's syndrome came to visit me while I was still in hospital after having Harry. We were able to compare our experiences of the first few days following

diagnosis. Despite the amount of time that has passed, I will never forget her words to me as we sat in the hospital canteen, 'Grace, we consider it a privilege to be the parents of a child with Down's syndrome'. I have never forgotten these words".

She finishes her letter by saying:

"How would a change in this legislation impact adults and children with a disability? It would make them feel equal, help them know that their lives are valued. So let's work together to end this discrimination against those with a disability, or, as someone put it recently, those with a different ability. I ask you to consider your vote carefully when you are given the opportunity, and recognise the strength of feeling that exists within Northern Ireland".

I could not have put it better. I support the Bill.

Dr Archibald: Nothing that we debate and discuss in the Chamber is done in a vacuum. It is done in the context of the time. In years to come, if anyone is minded to look at what we have done in the Assembly, that is how it will be judged. Last Monday, as alluded to by a number of Members, we celebrated International Women's Day. International Women's Day began as a campaign for women's rights. It is a reminder that gender equality remains elusive. In the week since, the lack of equality and how women are subject to different treatment has become all too apparent. Unfortunately, we all came to know who Sarah Everard was, for the worst possible reason. Sarah was walking home and never made it. Instead, her life was brutally ended by a man. Sarah's murder touched many other women who have experienced harassment and violence, and when those women turned out in solidarity to say, "No more" to violence against women, they were subjected to a disgraceful and disproportionately harsh response from the police.

My party colleague Emma Sheerin referred to the publication of the mother-and-baby homes reports, North and South. They are a stark reminder of the result of the institutionalised misogyny of our not-too-distant past. The continuing impact of those homes is still felt by too many people. Mother-and-baby homes were how the establishment of the Church and state exerted control over women's lives and bodies in the past, showing how women were held to a different standard then. Gender inequality is one of the root causes of gender-based violence, which can manifest itself in rape and sexual violence and have devastating consequences. The DUP is seeking to perpetuate gender inequalities. It still seeks to control women through limiting their access to modern, compassionate healthcare. It is still holding women to a different standard.

Let no one be in doubt about what is happening here. The Bill that we are debating may be focused on one aspect of provision, but that is the thin end of the wedge. It is a transparent attempt to reopen abortion provision as a whole.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: No, thank you. The utter hypocrisy in the Bill seems to have escaped a lot of scrutiny. The DUP is trying to amend legislation that it is, apparently, opposed to in principle while being complicit in the UUP Health Minister's failure to implement the legislation that has been

passed. The DUP, along with the UUP, is failing women. Amidst the lack of leadership from the Health Minister, health trusts have been left to pick up the slack and put in place early medical abortion services that have, at times, led to a postcode lottery in access to them. That is unacceptable. As my colleague Liz Kimmins pointed out, women who access those services are subjected to protests and harassment. Disgracefully, a male Member of the House — he is a former Health Minister — is at those protests. The Health and Justice Ministers need to look at ensuring that there are safe zones around clinics. The Health Minister has also, disgracefully, failed to put in place adequate facilitation for women to access abortion services through telemedicine in the context of the pandemic.

There is a deep irony in what the DUP, which is never done demanding the same treatment as Britain when it suits it, is trying to do here. It has spent the past 10 or more weeks cosyng up to loyalist paramilitaries and ramping up tensions to try to undermine and roll back an international treaty because it is so exercised at the North being treated differently when it comes to trade arrangements. However, it has no such principles when it comes to human rights, as our LGBT+ citizens, Irish language speakers and victims of the conflict can all well attest to. The DUP certainly has no regard to the disparity in the rights of women here when accessing health services.

Of course, it is also worth remembering why Westminster has legislated for abortion, and marriage equality for that matter. It is because parties here — not just the DUP, but it predominantly — failed to deal with this issue. They left women to fight through the courts for access to healthcare. It is contemptible that the DUP would now attempt to roll back on the hard-won rights of women. Moving this Bill may well be an exercise in futility because the British Government have made it clear on a number of occasions that, while abortion is a devolved matter, any abortion legislation that is passed here in the Assembly must comply with the CEDAW recommendations in the 2018 report, and this Bill clearly does not do that.

Knowing that this Bill will not make any material difference, why is the DUP cynically pitting people with disabilities against vulnerable women and women in difficult circumstances? Why is it deliberately conflating the issues while standing shoulder to shoulder with the UUP Health Minister in failing to implement the legislation that is in place? Is it simply for electoral purposes, or is it, as I and others believe, also the case that this Bill is just the beginning of its attempts to unravel the legislation that is in place?

As a woman, I am tired of having to debate the right of women to access appropriate healthcare. I am tired of being lectured about morality. I am tired of women being held to a different standard, and I am tired of hearing about women and girls being subjected to abuse and violence. Anyone who thinks that those things are not related is deluded. Nothing happens in a vacuum. Women's rights to modern, compassionate and appropriate healthcare should not still be up for debate. Instead, the Health Minister and the DUP should quit obfuscating and ensure that the health services that have been legislated for are put in place as a matter of urgency. It is time that we all trusted women to make decisions about their lives and their health, and trusted doctors to do their jobs.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to speak in favour of the Bill. Many of my party colleagues will support it today. I was getting a bit confused about what debate I was involved in. I thought that we were dealing directly with this Bill. I cannot speak for the Health Minister, but I am quite sure that he very seldom gets a leg up from the DUP. We will see how that pans out for him in the coming weeks and months.

I have to say that I want to keep this very compassionate. We all have family members who were born with disabilities and who lead very fulfilling lives and have enriched our family lives. However, I have to comment on Ms Sheerin, who said that, with human rights abuses, a shadow of shame hangs over our land. I would welcome the opportunity to debate on some occasion with her the human rights abuses that have resulted in shame falling over this land in the past number of years. However, on the Bill, many people referred to the excellent briefing document that we have been provided with by Don't Screen Us Out campaigners. Given more recent comments, it might, I hope, be worth repeating that the Supreme Court has given a non-binding judgement that there is no human right to have an abortion on the grounds of a non-fatal disability. Lord Mance said about children with non-fatal disabilities:

"But in principle a disabled child should be treated as having exactly the same worth in human terms as a non-disabled child ... This is also the consistent theme of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, expressing concerns about the stigmatising of persons with disabilities as living a life of less value than that of others".

Lord Kerr said that the convention:

"is based on the premise that if abortion is permissible, there should be no discrimination on the basis that the foetus, because of a defect, will result in a child being born with a physical or mental disability."

He also said:

"many children born with disabilities, even grave disabilities, lead happy, fulfilled lives. In many instances they enrich and bring joy to their families and those who come into contact with them. Finally, the difficulty in devising a confident and reliable definition of serious malformation is a potent factor against the finding of incompatibility. For these and the other reasons given by the judge, I would refuse to make a declaration of incompatibility in the case of serious malformation of the foetus."

Many Members recognised the fact that we, as a society and as public bodies, do not give enough support to people with disabilities, their families and their carers. My goodness, we have seen the generosity of people during the pandemic, but we have also seen how difficult and straining it has been for sole carers. That is no reason to abort an otherwise healthy child, however. We do not abort people because they will grow up in poor families in which there are disadvantages, so, equally, why would this apply? I come at it from the perspective that we should deal with such sensitive matters compassionately. We are talking about two lives, not just one life. It is about not just women but the whole family. I hope that the message will go out from the Chamber that we have all recognised

that we can and must do better to support people with disabilities and women who receive that devastating diagnosis about their unborn child. We should help them support and care for that child throughout its life journey.

Some have talked about the thin end of the wedge for rollback of the legislation. Others might see it as the thin end of the wedge for who can and cannot be aborted, where that might start and finish and what it means later in life for those with acquired illness and disability. People are right to say that they are big decisions. History will reflect very much on what we have said in the debate today. I hope that I have contributed in a sensitive and compassionate way, Mr Speaker, and I am happy to support the Bill.

Mr Chambers: The Bill involves a sensitive and emotive topic that I do not find particularly easy to speak about publicly and one that I am not particularly comfortable speaking about. I am sure that there are many in the House who share that discomfort around debating the issue. I acknowledge the Speaker's cautious opening remarks. I agree with him in recognising the effect that what is said in the Chamber today may have on many individuals listening to or watching the proceedings. I understand that there are many people who fully back the pro-choice position on the availability of abortion; equally, a huge number of people support a pro-life position. I found it regrettable that a few Members who spoke chose to attack the messenger rather than the message. Such a tactic is a distraction that serves only to diminish their case.

I have received over 700 pieces of correspondence asking me to support the Bill. I have also received emails from two professional medical bodies asking me to oppose it. Just today, an open letter landed in my mailbox that was signed by 190 local GPs challenging some of the comments contained in the correspondence from those professional bodies.

Our task would be so much easier if every medical voice said the same on the subject. The challenge for us is deciding what is best for the unborn and for those who are carrying them.

5.45 pm

I listened closely and with admiration to what campaigner Heidi Crowter said in front of the Health Committee last week. She has not let her disability hinder her in any way and is making a huge contribution to society through her campaigning. She is loving and loved, as was evident from her interactions as she sat with her mother by her side and shared with the Committee her joy that she had recently married.

There are many examples of individuals just like Heidi who enjoy a full life and give much joy and love to those who care for them and help them to live as independent a life as is possible. Indeed, in many cases, those individuals enjoy a fully independent life. It cannot be right that the stroke of a legislator's pen could deny them the gift of life. The medical profession does not even have definitive definitions for "substantial risk" or "seriously disabled". How, then, can informed decisions be made about which babies should be aborted? On that basis, decisions can become subjective, and that cannot be right.

The Bill is a step in the right direction towards confirming that every baby has the right to be treated equally, no matter what the pre-birth scans show. What sort of a society would we be if we allowed the abortion of a baby with a cleft palate, a club foot or Down's syndrome? It is plainly wrong, and I will support the Bill.

I must challenge comments about the commissioning of general abortion services in Northern Ireland. I understand that the Health Minister brought before the Executive a number of options for an early medical abortion service but that there was no agreement. Since then, he has tried on a number of occasions to have the issue discussed and agreed to at the Executive, but with no success.

The Health Minister is bound, under the ministerial code, to bring the matter of the future commissioning of abortion services to the Executive to discuss and agree before it can proceed. That is a legal fact. Given the ongoing lack of political consensus, a decision about the scope of abortion services is likely to be regarded as controversial. If the Minister were to make a decision to commission and fund a new abortion service without Executive approval, he would be in clear breach of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and the Northern Ireland ministerial code. I suggest that those pointing the finger towards the Health Minister need to take further advice on this matter before they continue with their misleading attribution of blame to Minister Swann. I was amazed to hear two Sinn Féin members of the Executive demonstrating today that they seem to be unable to grasp the workings of the ministerial code. Other Members made similar erroneous statements today. Please check the facts. In the House, there seems to be an attitude that, if something is said often enough, it can become the truth. Sinn Féin is well-practised at that.

Mr Muir: I will be brief. I feel that it is important to outline the rationale for how I will vote today on this important and complex issue.

In approaching the vote, I was guided by the legislation that the Bill seeks to amend and by the legislative process in this place. For the legislative process, the Assembly website gives details on the Second Stage of a Bill:

"This is the first opportunity for all MLAs to debate the general principles of the Bill. Members may indicate the issues they are likely to want to debate in more detail at later stages.

The Minister or Member in charge of the Bill begins the debate by outlining the Bill's objectives. Other Members, including the Chairperson of the relevant Committee, give their opinion. The Minister or Member in charge speaks last in the debate, in order to respond to questions and comments about the Bill. At the end of the debate, MLAs vote to decide whether to agree to the Bill's Second Stage, meaning it can proceed to the next stage. The Assembly may reject the Bill if it disagrees with the general principles. If approved, the Bill is referred to the appropriate statutory Committee."

In approaching the Second Stage, I note that the first sight that I had of this Bill and its specific proposals was on 16 February this year, when the Bill was first introduced. No prior consultation was undertaken and, whilst permissible, this is a serious oversight. The argument has been made that the issue was previously debated in the Assembly on 2 June last year. That is no substitute for proper

consideration of the Bill and giving everyone, including those with specialist knowledge, the right to comment on proposals before legislation is tabled and debated.

The last time that the Assembly debated specific legislation about abortion was back on 10 February 2016, at which point Mr Dickson and Mr Lunn presented amendments concerning fatal fetal abnormality to the Justice Bill. Despite the fact that the then Justice Minister, David Ford, stated:

"The consultation made specific recommendations to allow for termination in the case of fatal foetal abnormality" — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 112, p309 col 2].

those amendments were rejected, with the need for proper consultation being cited. Yet, the Assembly is now being asked by the Bill's sponsor to enable the passage of this Bill without any prior consultation. It may be legally and procedurally in order to proceed as planned without a consultation, but it is not a fit and proper way to deal with such a sensitive, detailed and complicated issue.

The Bill seeks to amend the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women report from February 2018, which made clear findings and recommendations. The Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 was amended to give these recommendations from CEDAW legal effect, with regulations subsequently made, which this Bill seeks to alter.

Members will be aware that abortion is a matter of conscience in the Alliance Party, with a free vote for all elected representatives. Many genuinely held views exist in this House and throughout society, which I respect. It is, however, my view that the legal obligations enshrined in law at Westminster must be upheld, respecting and upholding the recommendations within the CEDAW report on the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls. The failure of the Department of Health to commission and fund services should be the current focus, including the recommendation of ensuring appropriate and ongoing support, social and financial, for women who decide to bring pregnancies to term.

The private Member's Bill under consideration by the Assembly seeks to amend regulations and is, I feel, contrary to the CEDAW report and the overarching legislation, namely the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act. The obligations arising from that Act and contained in the regulations must be implemented without any more delay. It is my sincere view that the legislative reform concerning reproductive rights, enacted at Westminster in 2019, should not be amended as proposed today. We need to trust women to make decisions in consultation with their doctor, recognising that there are many different circumstances faced by women and girls.

As I have outlined, the Second Stage of a Bill involves a debate and vote on the general principles of the proposed legislation, and since I disagree with the same, I cannot support and vote in favour of them. The Bill could not be improved to such an extent at Committee Stage, Consideration Stage or Further Consideration Stage that I could support its passage to those further stages. Thus, I cannot support the Bill today.

In conclusion, when considering the Bill and today's debate, I was struck by the fact that, for so many years, I stood on the outside of this place, seeing rights and equality denied by the DUP and others. Those actions have had a devastating impact on so many, particularly my fellow LGBT brothers and sisters, who had to wait for the collapse of these institutions to get marriage equality via the same Act that this Bill now seeks to amend. Now that Stormont is back, I stand here as an MLA. I cannot, in good conscience, see those rights for women and girls that were enshrined in law by the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act rolled back.

Mr Allister: As legislators, when we come to debate this issue of all issues, an obvious but important starting point when we discuss our right to decide who should and who should not be aborted is to remind ourselves that we are all here because we were not aborted. No one chose to abort any of us. That is a sobering starting point, particularly for those who are so willing to defend and support abortion. They would do unto others what was not done to them.

Of course when we talk about abortion, we are talking about the deliberate, calculated act of snuffing out human life. There is nothing accidental about it. Yes, in pregnancies, sadly, miscarriages occur, stillbirths occur, but abortion is so different. It is the deliberate killing of the babe in the womb. However you dress it up, that is what it is. It is quite shocking to me that today, from some, the saving of even one life of a Down's baby could provoke such opposition.

Tonight, this Assembly in this vote will decide whether it is on the side of life or the side of death. It will decide — this is the nub of the matter — whether disability justifies death. It will decide whether we as legislators are going to validate disability as justification, by the state, for death. That is how chilling and awful the proposition is: that if someone in the womb, which should really be the safest place for any unborn, has a serious impairment detected, the state can validate their death.

This House will decide tonight whether what some see as imperfection offends to the extent that we warrant the killing. I heard talk in this debate about ensuring — I heard Miss McLaughlin talking about it — that we have a progressive, inclusive society. It is neither progressive nor inclusive for the aborted, the unborn, whose only crime under this limb of the legislation is that they are not as others.

Really? Is that what we, as legislators, think we should be doing?

6.00 pm

Should we not be the voice for the voiceless — those who cannot speak but those whom we would authorise the killing of? Should we not pause and think, as legislators, of being the voice of the voiceless? I would have thought that we should.

What are we talking about? At our briefing, representatives from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists gave us a definition of severe impairment:

“Severe impairments are wide-ranging and can include chromosomal anomalies, congenital anomalies and anomalies related to the nervous system”.

If you look up congenital disorders in any respectable medical textbook, you will find this list. Common congenital disorders include the following: cleft lip and cleft palate, cerebral palsy, fragile X syndrome, Down's syndrome, spina bifida, cystic fibrosis and heart conditions. The legislation that the Member seeks to amend admits abortion for those suffering from congenital anomalies. I have listed them: that is what we are talking about.

When you go to the World Health Organization's website, you will discover, under a section called 'Treatment and care', that:

“Many structural congenital anomalies can be corrected with paediatric surgery and early treatment can be administered to children with functional problems”.

However, it seems that we do not need to worry about that: we can just abort them. How callous is that?

If we are a caring society, why do we not care for the unborn with congenital anomalies? Why do we not care about them? I say most forcefully to the House that we should, and shame on us if we do not. Yet, those who support abortion want the right to terminate — what an ugly word — such children, and without a blush of embarrassment they do it in the name of human rights. What a perversion.

I will tell you what offends me, Mr Speaker. It is the invocation of human rights to justify the deliberate killing of human beings. That is the greatest offence. Thus, I have to say, what a charter for death and destruction — the very antithesis of human rights — is the CEDAW report. It is that, we are absurdly told, to which we are tied by legislation. I say to the House that all of us have a choice to make. Are we on the side of the voiceless, the unborn and those who some would call imperfect, or are we on the ruthless side of terminating?

The legislation that brought in abortion will forever be infamously linked to the restoration of these institutions. The clue is in the title: the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019. Whether slipping through same-sex marriage and abortion in such legislation suited some, whose greater priority was a return to office, remains a matter for valid speculation. However, if we can roll back some of that, the bounden duty on us is to do so most assuredly.

Here, in the Bill, we are talking about a very modest step to deal with one specific and discrete aspect of the abomination of abortion. It is just one aspect, yet it infuriates those who defend and promote abortion that the House would dare to even think of protecting Down's syndrome babies or those with other classifications of serious impairment.

As for Sinn Féin, it told us that the debate was a distraction from the DUP doing this, that or something else. Yes, it was a distraction. Its contributions are a distraction from the fact its Members were the very people who, on 2 June last year, proposed the very premise of the Bill. It was Ms Sheerin, no less, who proposed the amendment in the House.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way and for raising that important point. It is worth noting on the record Ms Sheerin's comments that day when she said:

"To serve disabled people properly, we need to build infrastructure that is totally accessible. We need to have inclusivity to properly service section 75 obligations across all public-sector bodies and to raise awareness of the issues that face less-able people in their daily life.

Sinn Féin does not believe that a non-fatal foetal abnormality is an appropriate criterion for an abortion."— [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 128, p327, col 1].

Mr Allister: Absolutely. I have it here. That is word for word what Sinn Féin said, through Ms Sheerin, in proposing its amendment. Of course, in the Republic of Ireland, to which it wishes to join us all, this is exactly the legislation that they have. Yet, today, it is unwilling to support the very thing that it called for in the House nine months ago. It is the very thing that it voted for in the Republic of Ireland, but, today, it is a different tune. We had Ms O'Neill talking to us about "injustice and cruelty", but not a thought of the injustice and cruelty to the unborn who are to be terminated. Not a thought.

Not for the first time in the House, Sinn Féin stands exposed in its rank hypocrisy on the issue. The very people who proposed the very wording in its amendment, which lays the basis for the Bill, are today the people who are saying, "No, we must not do it". They find all sorts of excuses, none of which are credible. I have never heard such porous excuses in all my life for not standing up for what you told us nine months ago you believed in. Which was the real Sinn Féin? Maybe I had better not know the answer to that question; it might be even more disturbing.

So, here we are today, with a most modest proposal. I say to the House —.

Ms Sheerin: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Unlike the Member who seeks to intervene, who refused my intervention, I will.

Ms Sheerin: Unlike the Member, I did not quote you, Mr Allister. I am intervening because you are all quoting me. Do the Members referring to things that I said in the House in June last year acknowledge that the British Secretary of State has already said that any decision that this House takes that is not in line with the recommendations of the CEDAW report will be overturned in the same way as Westminster legislated on this issue for this jurisdiction in the first place? Therefore, the conversation that we are having is totally without point. It will not change anything, and that is the rationale for our decision to abstain.

Mr Allister: I have two points to make about that, if I might, Mr Speaker. Of course, the legislation had already been passed last June when the Member proposed her opposition to this tenet, so it is the Member who has shifted her ground, not anyone else. Is it not intriguing that, when it suits, the ally of the Secretary of State is Sinn Féin? It is Sinn Féin that is saying to the House, "We have to accept British rule. We have to accept what the Secretary of State has said on this issue." Of course, in doing that, Sinn Féin also seems to have forgotten that abortion is, in fact, a devolved matter. Is Sinn Féin not the great champion of wanting to extend the realms of devolution? My goodness, Sinn Féin even wants to put its hands in our pockets through taxation under devolution. However, when it comes to this devolved issue of abortion,

it is saying, "Oh no, we will kowtow to those who have put this upon us". Is that the best that Sinn Féin can do?

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. He will not be surprised to learn that the SDLP has a steadfast view of this particular British Secretary of State: we do not trust him as far as we could throw him. However, does the Member also recall that, when the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 was going through the Westminster Parliament, it was acknowledged by no less a person than Viscount Younger of Leckie that:

"As abortion remains a devolved issue, the Assembly is now able to legislate, or indeed amend the regulations, should it so wish"?

Mr Allister: Absolutely —.

Mr Speaker: Sorry, Mr Allister. We are in danger of straying way too far and for too long off the subject of the Bill, so I invite you to go back to the purpose of the Bill. That should not be so difficult.

Mr Allister: Yes, Mr Speaker. The Assembly is being invited to do the very thing that the Government said that it could do: amend the legislation on abortion. That seems to me to be what this Bill seeks to do.

I believe that we need to go further. Seventy-nine per cent of the people who responded to the Government's proposals expect us to go further, because they rejected those proposals. I regret to have to say to the Member that the long title of the Bill probably impedes much by way of amendment to make a real assault on the abortion trade. However, at least it is a start, and I hope that no one who supports it sees it as an end; rather, it should be seen as a beginning.

For as long as babes in the womb can be summarily killed by the gruesome practice of abortion, as legislators, we fail the unborn, and I do not want to be in that category.

Ms Bailey: I declare an interest as a board member of Informing Choices NI, formerly the Family Planning Association in Northern Ireland.

I also speak as a mother who supports my right to choose how many children to have, when to have them and whether I want to have them at all. I support my right to choose to continue with a pregnancy or to terminate it. I support the right of any woman and all women to have that choice. The only role for anyone else who is not me or the woman who has to make that choice is to support us in making our decision. At no stage should a state Government, never mind a devolved Assembly, even be involved in that decision and be able to legislate to remove or restrict my choice. The role of a state Government or a devolved Assembly lies in the commissioning of services to allow for free, safe and legal healthcare for all women at home.

6.15 pm

Back in 2014, as we all know, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women carried out a full inquiry in the UK, including us in Northern Ireland. That was a rare thing to have happened. To my knowledge, it has undertaken such action in only four other jurisdictions. When it was here, it held meetings with, among others, the Communities and Justice Ministers, the Attorney General and officials from

the Department of Health. It interviewed Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly from the five main political parties, members of civil society, academics, trade unions and numerous women who had sought or procured an abortion. I was part of that evidence-giving session. The committee's confidential inquiry took place under article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, to which the UK acceded back in 2004.

When the CEDAW inquiry published its report in February 2018, its findings on Northern Ireland were:

“thousands of women and girls in Northern Ireland are subjected to grave and systematic violations of rights through being compelled to either travel outside Northern Ireland to procure a legal abortion or to carry their pregnancy to term.”

It says:

“The situation in Northern Ireland constitutes violence against women”.

Earlier today, a Matter of the Day was accepted, and we had a debate in which everybody spoke against violence against women.

The pro-choice and anti-choice debate has been well rehearsed and acted out in the Chamber long enough for us all to know that this is not where we change mindsets. Where we have seen mindsets shift is when women have been forced to come forward and publicly bare their souls by telling their personal stories to us as legislators, to our media, to our courts and to the very states that have removed their right to choose. It is not and never has been my desire or that of the Green Party of Northern Ireland to legislate away a woman's right to choose.

The Assembly and the five-party Executive do not have a notable record on standing up for women's rights. The UK Government have rarely stepped in to uphold equal rights for our citizens. I know that every Member has been lobbied on this, so I know that every Member has been given the briefing papers from professionals and medics working in Northern Ireland. I will point to a few key points that they raise.

The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists is telling us to consider the issues around the Bill and that removing the ability of clinicians and women to terminate a pregnancy for a severe fetal impairment after 24 weeks will have a substantial impact. Women will be rushed to terminate their pregnancy before 24 weeks. We know that Doctors for Choice in Northern Ireland has said that, in its view, along with that of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, women should be supported in difficult circumstances during pregnancy and that this is best accomplished by permitting decisions to be taken by women in discussion with an expert and a multidisciplinary clinical team. It goes on to give everybody the reasons why the Bill will not do what we hear it is seeking to do. Amnesty International and Informing Choices NI have also sent a briefing paper, and it points to the same thing: the Bill will not do what we hear it is seeking to do.

As I listen to Members from the DUP, the UUP and, of course, the TUV, I hear their outrage at not being able to import trees, plants and cricket-field loam from GB, and they are blaming the protocol for threatening their sense

of Britishness and for them being treated differently from other UK citizens. Well, you have been reminded several times today that the Irish Sea border has always existed for women in Northern Ireland. Today, we continue to force women from Northern Ireland to travel to access safe, free, legal healthcare, regardless of there being a pandemic that is putting them at further risk. Shame on us. The Bill will only exacerbate that, because this is what a clawback of the hard-fought-for, hard-won, small amount of women's rights looks like.

There is nothing about the Bill that will stop abortions happening. Everything about the Bill will simply make it harder and riskier for women to access them, but I suspect that that is exactly the intention of the sponsor. Even if passed, it will not be implemented, if we are to believe the Secretary of State, so perhaps it is a stunt. Who knows? Either way, I look forward to continuing to work with Westminster and the Secretary of State to have free, safe, legal services commissioned here for women in Northern Ireland, whereby they can access treatments and be free to make the choices that affect their own lives.

I call on everybody to reject the Bill. Abstention is not an option, because abstention will simply allow this to continue.

Mrs Foster: Clearly, I am speaking from the Back Benches to support my friend in his proposal of the Bill. We have heard very clearly from many that it is not what many of us would like to see happening in terms of abortions. However, we feel so strongly about the voice of those with Down's syndrome, and I have many in my constituency. I think especially today of Hannah Wilson, such a happy young person whom I speak with often, and how she feels that what is being spoken about today is very distressing. I want to say to Hannah: I will always stand up for you, Hannah, and I will always stand up for those people who do not have as strong a voice as some people in the Chamber. I commend my friend for bringing the legislation. I know the amount of work that he has put into it.

Of course, this is not a technical or statistical piece of legislation. We are talking about real lives. We are talking about real people — our constituents — who feel that we do not value them, and that is incredibly sad.

I share a constituency with the Chair of the Health Committee, and I ask him to reflect on some of the things that he said today. I know that my constituency friend from the Ulster Unionist Party will view those comments as being very disrespectful to many of our constituents who have Down's syndrome and non-life-threatening disabilities. However, that is a matter for him.

I am distressed that Clare Bailey would seek to equate this matter with violence against women. Of course, it is nothing of the sort. All the women in my party and all the women in the Ulster Unionist Party feel as strongly about violence against women as anyone else. Of course we do; we are very concerned about what our daughters have to put up with as they walk in the streets of various cities. I find it astonishing that someone would try to take away my voice on violence against women just because I do not agree with that person on the taking of life through abortion. I feel incredibly strongly about that. I strongly believe that we need a strategy on violence against women. I hope that the Justice Minister will introduce a

strategy in the near future. It is something that many in the Executive want to discuss tomorrow.

It upsets me when I listen to people talk about women's rights, as if those of us who believe in supporting those who have disabilities and Down's syndrome should not have a voice. Let me say this: people in the House will not take away my voice to stand up for women who believe in protecting those young people with Down's syndrome who have value in our society. I feel very strongly about that, and I have been deeply saddened. I did not plan to speak today, but I have tried to keep an eye on what is going on and I have been distressed by some of the things that I have heard from some Members.

I want to put the record straight. Although abortion is a devolved matter, as the Member for North Antrim Mr Allister pointed out, some Members seek to hide behind the skirts of the Secretary of State. They should not do that if they believe in devolution. I heard much over the weekend from members of the SDLP and Sinn Féin about how the British Government having an office in Northern Ireland will damage the devolution settlement, notwithstanding the fact that plans for the office are included in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. People should reread the New Decade, New Approach agreement. However, abortion is a matter for the House, and I feel very strongly about that.

As an Anglican, I feel obliged to comment on the churching of women, which Sinead McLaughlin raised. There is a churching of women service in the Anglican communion, and it is about giving thanks. It is not about judging or stigmatisation. I do not know whether it is different in the Roman Catholic Church; maybe some of my friends opposite could help me with that. I felt that there was a need to clarify that issue because the churching of women is about thanksgiving not stigmatisation. I was struck by the comments that were made on that matter.

As I say, I did not plan to speak today but I felt moved to because of some of the issues that have been raised. The past year has taught us much about the fragility of life. I have tried — we have all tried — to save lives over the past year; that is what we have been trying to do. In a recent Sunday morning television debate, Lord Sumption dismissed the concerns of a clinically vulnerable woman who was suffering from cancer by describing her as having a "less valuable" life than the rest of us. Rightly, many of us were outraged by those comments about a "less valuable" life. No one's life is less valuable, and that standard should apply to life inside and outside the womb. We are entering the realm of eugenics, ladies and gentlemen.

Members can deny that all they like. We are on a very slippery slope, and everybody should be very careful about that. It is Down's syndrome and non-fatal disabilities today. What will we decide is appropriate for abortion in 10 years' time?

6.30 pm

Think about what you are doing today in the House and please send a message to those constituents of ours who have non-fatal disabilities and who add so much to the lives of their families and to society. Do not make them feel as though they are second-class citizens. There is a great deal of evidence out there saying that, if this goes through, people will feel obliged to go through with abortions even

if, in other circumstances, they would not. I am asking you to think about the Bill.

Whilst we can talk about the rights of women — nobody is happier to talk about that than I am — there should be a recognition that those of us on this side of the House have as much right to talk about the rights of women as anybody else in the House.

Mr Beggs: Abortion is an issue of conscience in the Ulster Unionist Party, and I will speak personally on the matter. I indicate my support for the general principles of the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill, which is designed to give protection to unborn children with disabilities. I thank Mr Givan, a Member for Lagan Valley, for sponsoring the Bill and I thank disability campaigners, such as Heidi Crowter, who have highlighted the issue, publicised it and created a greater awareness of the reality and potential outworkings of the Bill on those with disabilities.

Under our current legislation, under the severe fetal impairment heading, the protections for our disabled unborn children are removed right up until birth. Then, suddenly, they have protection. I have to ask why. How is that reasonable? Their lives can be terminated until the very last moment, until they are born. Surely, there is something wrong in that.

Other Members indicated that a wide range of disabilities is covered by the terminology. It can be as basic as a cleft lip or Down's syndrome. Why? Friends of mine — they are in my community — have a cleft lip or Down's syndrome. Why should their life have been at risk of being terminated at some point whilst they were unborn? There is something wrong with our present legislation, and it clearly needs to be changed.

Many have quoted the 2018 report from the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, which was the trigger for the Westminster legislation that brought the current legislation in Northern Ireland into being. However, it is also important to recognise the 2018 UK Supreme Court judgement that did not find the absence of legal abortion in cases of severe fetal impairment to be incompatible with article 3 or article 8 rights. What of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2011 report, which stated:

"disabled people have suggested a bias towards termination of pregnancies if a child is likely to be disabled. Disabled people believe that clear consistency is needed in the approach to resuscitation of disabled people and non-disabled people, when seriously ill."

Surely, we have to value all life, regardless of whether someone is disabled.

We need to think of the very basics, one of which is the basic right to life. In determining what we do, it is important that we value all life. It is for that reason that I will support this very reasonable amendment to the current legislation. It gives protection back to those who are vulnerable and have disabilities: the unborn children in their mothers' womb.

Miss Woods: I intend to keep my comments on Second Stage very short. As a woman and someone who trusts women, I believe in a very important principle: women

should be allowed to make their own decisions when it comes to their health.

I want to be clear with all the women who are watching this debate, and I believe that those who support the Bill should be equally honest. The Bill is saying to women who find themselves in really difficult circumstances with their pregnancy that they are on their own. If passed, the Bill will do nothing more than shut women out and cut them off from reproductive healthcare services when they need them most. It is a deliberately orchestrated attempt to roll back on hard-won rights in women's health. For that reason, the Green Party Northern Ireland will not support it.

At a time when we should be looking to improve healthcare options and commission services for women, the Bill seeks to restrict and limit them. The entire basis for the Bill rests upon a false claim that the current regulations discriminate against disabled people. That is wrong. It is a completely flawed argument to begin with and exposes the falsehood upon which the Bill has been presented to us.

If the current legislation breached the human rights of disabled people, the relevant statutory bodies tasked with advising government on compliance with human rights frameworks would have made such a public determination, but they have not.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Miss Woods: No, I will not.

This is an extremely important point because, as I have said, it is the ground on which the Bill stands, which is very shaky, to say the least. The current law was designed to meet the recommendations of the UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women 2018 report, which stated that it was for the UK Government to ensure that legislation did not perpetuate any disability stereotypes, and that is what has happened. It is a similar model to the model in GB, whose regulations were tested in 2011 by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which found that disabled people have the same right to life as non-disabled people and are not subject to arbitrary deprivation of life.

If the Bill has been introduced to address something that has no basis in fact, what is it really about, and what does it actually do? As I said in my opening remarks, it is no coincidence that the Bill is supported by those who do not support reproductive choices for women. In my view, too many do not pay enough attention to the work of government yet are happy to thrust themselves into decisions that are best made between a woman and her doctor.

Again, I speak to all our women and girls out there. No matter what your background, disability, age, religion or income, when it comes to your health, no politician should decide what is best for you. It is 2021, and we should not have to remind people of that. The only person who should get to make decisions about your health is you.

If the Bill is passed, it will breach the human rights of women and girls in Northern Ireland, and it will force those in the most difficult circumstances to travel to where they will be treated differently. It will be a return to unequal access to reproductive healthcare, and that will be detrimental to our most vulnerable women and girls, particularly those from low-income backgrounds and those without family support. We cannot and must not

go backwards. We should be discussing the real issue at the moment, which is the failure of the Executive to commission services. It is absolutely disgraceful that that has not happened despite the new law coming into force last March.

This Bill breaches human rights and will entrench health inequalities. It will negatively impact on our most vulnerable women, disabled and not disabled. For those reasons, we will not support it.

Mr Carroll: It is an absolute disgrace that abortion services that were legislated for by Westminster are still not in place because the Assembly has failed to commission them. The denial of abortion access by the Minister of Health is not compliant with human rights and should not have been tolerated by the wider Executive for this long.

Women have been told to travel during the pandemic, when planes were grounded, the cost of travelling by boat had soared and hotels were shut, not to mention the risk of contracting a deadly virus. Women who could not afford to travel or who were high risk had to access treatment outside of the health system. What a disgrace. The pandemic forced too many into economic peril and risked their health. This issue in particular has exacerbated those conditions for women who deserve better.

I am relieved that that is beginning to face a serious challenge within the Executive, and, as always, that seems to be down to pressure built outside of these four walls by women who have had to campaign for far too long for basic medical care. I pay tribute to those campaigners, who work tirelessly for little thanks or return from most members of the Executive. Their efforts are noted today, however, and they should go down in history for creating the only progress that we have seen to date.

I will now come on to the specifics of the Bill. I will be clear: I oppose the Bill for a number of reasons. I seriously question the justifications made for the Bill, and I will speak about those now. The Bill, as we have already heard, directly contradicts the recommendations of CEDAW. I believe in a woman's right to choose, because reproductive coercion is abhorrent and dangerous. I support the Canadian model, whereby abortion is treated as a medical issue rather than as a legal or criminal one. This is a gross effort to play off the needs of women to have proper modern medical care against people with disabilities, many of whom have been very clear that they face greater barriers to abortion access. They would like to see abortion care provided locally for women, themselves included.

The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women issued a joint statement in September 2018 that pointed out that restrictions to abortion access often hit disabled women harder than others. That is worth emphasising.

In a letter sent to all MLAs from Mr Givan on the morning that the Bill was introduced in the Assembly, the word "woman" or "women", or even the words "pregnant person", was not written once. That is important to say, because the Bill's sponsor attempts to separate the Bill from the wider issue of restricting reproductive rights. We have seen a wave of abortion restrictions implemented internationally by various right-wing politicians. Those have varied in

specifics, but there is one common factor, and it is present in Mr Givan's Bill: the attempt to control a woman's actions over her body and her pregnancy.

In the same letter, Mr Givan acknowledged:

"The tragic and complex cases where babies have a fatal diagnosis".

We know that late diagnoses of severe fetal impairment are also tragic and complex. They are usually given in cases of wanted and loved pregnancies. The women who receive that diagnosis are impacted on in a way which many of us will never be in a position to understand or question. Many of those diagnoses are possible only after 20 weeks. Medical experts tell us that their patients need time to process the information while also dealing with the shock. The Bill would strip them of that time, by rushing them to make a decision about termination before 24 weeks, potentially leading to more abortions, which the Member, I presume, does not want to see happen.

I am not a medical expert, so I refer Mr Givan to Doctors for Choice and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, which stated:

"Preventing access beyond 24 weeks is not workable because most serious abnormalities are only detected at the 20-week scan or later. Women need time for diagnostic tests and specialist advice in order to decide what is best for them and their families."

Only women will know what they can manage within their individual set of circumstances. Moreover, we know from doctors that making a diagnosis of a fatal abnormality can be incredibly difficult. I wonder how Mr Givan can be so confident about what exactly constitutes a severe fetal impairment and a fatal fetal impairment, when doctors are very vocal about how difficult that can be.

I again refer him and others to Doctors for Choice, which has stated:

"This bill seeks to remove abortion in cases of any severe impairment. Severe impairments are wide-ranging and can include complex abnormalities that are likely to shorten lifespan or lead to significant lifelong disability with complex needs."

From a medical standpoint, it is not always possible to distinguish clearly between a severe fetal impairment and a fatal fetal disability.

The Member, when speaking at the Health Committee last week, did not confirm whether he had spoken with a fetal medical consultant. That suggests that he had not. Since the Health Committee meeting last week, I have spoken with a fetal medical consultant who is very concerned and angry that the Bill was brought forward at all. The consultant expressed to me that it is very rare for terminations to happen after 24 weeks and strongly, strongly, strongly refutes the idea that terminations happen on a whim or that women decide to terminate based solely on a cleft palate or club foot diagnosis. That consultant made it clear that that is simply not true and is an inaccuracy.

When late terminations occur, they do so because there is a severe fetal abnormality or the woman's life is at risk, something that does not seem to be part of the

consideration of the Member who has brought forward the Bill.

6.45 pm

The irony of the proposal is that, if it were to be implemented, it could lead, as I said, to a possible increase in terminations before the 24-week period as women receive the news that it may be a difficult pregnancy. Rather than having time to consider their options or what is best for them, they could be effectively forced and rushed into a termination that they may not have the option of having after 24 weeks if the diagnosis is severe or fatal, especially as they wait for scans to come through.

It is worth repeating that consultants do not decide on a whim what happens in these cases. They have multidisciplinary team meetings and come to a consensus on issues around fatal, very severe and life-threatening issues in regard to later terminations. The reality is that, if the changes being proposed are implemented, women will be forced, as others have said, to travel or to have a pregnancy. The fact that pregnancies are common and can be very happy for many families does not detract from the fact that over 303,000 women die in childbirth every year. That is a frightening figure.

It is the case that we have a higher rate of genetic conditions than other regions of the UK. For some families, it may not be the first time that they are faced with such a diagnosis. They may have already watched a child die after a very short life or have been forced to carry to term a pregnancy that, they knew, would not survive for long beyond the womb. I ask those supporting the Bill to consider the impact on those women and their families of putting them through that traumatic experience again by stripping them of their right — their right — to termination.

Unlike the DUP and the parties supporting the Bill, I trust women and their doctors to decide whether they should continue with a pregnancy. I do not question whether those women inherently devalue people with disabilities because they have had a termination or may want to consider a termination. I do not question their ability to love and care for their other children or future children who may have disabilities simply because they have opted for a termination. In essence, I do not presume that women are simple-minded and callous people. There has been an insinuation today that people who support or choose abortion in cases of severe fetal impairment devalue the lives of people with disabilities. I utterly reject that and implore those on the opposite Benches to speak to women's groups as urgently as possible on that issue.

I also implore them to look in the mirror. Mr Givan asked what value we would like the Assembly to place on people with disabilities. My answer is this: a hell of a lot more than the discriminatory and degrading treatment that far too many people with disabilities have to endure because of the policies of this and previous Executives. Disabled people and their families were effectively abandoned during the public health crisis. People whose support worker or family member needed to shield themselves were left without an alternative. Families caring for disabled children or disabled adults were effectively abandoned, as schools, day centres and respite provision closed without there being safe childcare in place. Those whose support workers could not continue to support them had to find their own PPE. Of course, disabled

people living in care homes, many of whom are younger than the average resident, had to take their chances with the virus. Many families were pushed to breaking point by 24/7 caring, without any break, for months at a time. Those same families and people with disabilities have been hammered by the introduction of the personal independence payment (PIP) via welfare reform, which the Member's party strongly supported. It is no wonder that many are cynical about the sudden interest in disability rights.

The debate is not about disability in the way that, certainly, Mr Givan hopes to portray it. If it were, it would have focused on the lack of services that terrifies new mothers with disabled children. It would have taken Departments to task over the lack of access to services, such as speech and language therapy or respite for families. It would have prevented the attempts, several years ago, to cut the number of special needs schools in Belfast that people had to fight to resist on the streets. If the Bill were about preventing discrimination against people with disabilities, why would it not scrap or propose to scrap welfare reform and detail a new social security system that values and provides for people properly instead of sending them to food banks, a high proportion of which are used by people with disabilities? It would set about ending privatisation in our care sector and invest in better care for people who need and deserve it. The Bill is about abortion, but abortion at any stage does not threaten people with disabilities, and that needs to be emphasised.

We should dispel the assumption that we, especially male MLAs, have any right to tell women what to do with their bodies; that women who terminate certain pregnancies are wrong to do so; and that some women are inherently frivolous or callous when it comes to making decisions about termination and need to be kept in line with the law. In Canada, where abortion is treated like any other healthcare and there are no restrictions or time limits, the proportion of abortions carried out after 20 weeks is considerably lower than it is in Britain. In Britain, 1.9% of abortions are carried out after 20 weeks, whereas, in Canada, the figure is just 0.6%. Why is there such a difference? Mainly because there is no red tape, and doctors and patients can make decisions based on clinical need. I suggest to those who introduced the Bill and those who back it that their interests might be better served with a Canadian approach, which would also treat women with a good deal more respect than we have seen in the Chamber today.

Mr Speaker: I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting for 10 minutes until 7.00 pm. The next Member to speak will be Trevor Lunn.

The sitting was suspended at 6.51 pm and resumed at 7.02 pm.

Mr Speaker: I call Trevor Lunn.

Mr Lunn: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, and thanks for the big build-up over the last 10 minutes.

Mr Speaker: Just wait for the drum roll.

Mr Lunn: I am glad that we are having this debate. It is a discussion that we needed to have. The amount of heat generated by what is, effectively, a one-line Bill, is amazing. It shows the level of feeling around the issue. We have experienced it before, and I have a feeling that

we will experience it again, but it is right that we have the discussion.

Before I go on, I want to say that the contributions in the early part of the debate from Sinead McLaughlin, speaking against the Bill, and Rosemary Barton and Joanne Bunting, who were speaking for the Bill, were thoughtful, thought-provoking and emotional. It is right that we have those sorts of contributions. That is not to dismiss any of the other contributions. It has been an interesting day. We have also had an astonishing amount of advice in the past few days from experts and interested groups, parties and individuals. Again, that indicates the level of interest in the issue.

I am pro-choice. I always have been and always will be. I respect the right of women to conduct their own affairs, look after their own bodies and, to a large extent, decide on what they do with regard to the termination of a pregnancy. Someone mentioned the various discussions that we have had on the issue. I remember the 2016 debate on the first Justice Bill, when the DUP tabled an amendment that would have almost banned abortion in this country and which threatened to put medical professionals in jail for 10 years if they stepped outside the very strict guidelines. I mention that because, during the debate, Jim Wells, who has been in and out of the Chamber today, congratulated me on being the first MLA, along with Steven Agnew, to openly support abortion on demand and a woman's right to choose.

I do not think that he meant to use the word "congratulate", but he did. I treasure that moment, because he quite accurately summed up my feelings about this.

The debate that we had on fatal fetal abnormality has been referenced today. Stewart Dickson and I tabled an amendment on that to the second Justice Bill. We lost, but I mention it because, during the debate, we were heavily criticised because what we were proposing was being made out to be the first step down the road to exactly what the regulations state now. The First Minister mentioned the word "eugenics", and that word was used a lot during that debate, which went on until nearly midnight. We really had to defend ourselves, because what we were about was making room for abortion on the grounds of fatal fetal abnormality and nothing else.

I can say at this point that I am absolutely in support of Paul Givan's Bill. I am broadly in support of the regulations that have provoked this discussion, apart from the few words linked at the end: "Severe fetal impairment", I think that they are. Paul Givan and I come at this from different directions completely. I take my view, and it is in direct contradiction with anything that Paul would believe, but we can still manage to have a friendly discussion about it and try to chart the way forward for this wee country and to do the right thing, principally by our women and also, to some extent, by our men.

Amnesty International has been referenced a few times today, and I have a huge respect for that organisation. It does a terrific job in the area in which it works. I have worked with it several times on issues such as same-sex marriage and this particular issue. It takes the view that we are legally bound by the CEDAW recommendations to provide access to abortions in cases of severe fetal impairment and fatal fetal abnormality. It concludes that, should this Bill pass the Assembly, the UK Government,

as others have said, would have to withhold Royal Assent because of the breach of the human rights of women in Northern Ireland. I normally attach great weight to anything that Amnesty says, but I will say a few things about that particular opinion. The Bill has been confirmed, at least by this Assembly, as being legislatively competent. There is also the Supreme Court judgement, from which other Members have read. I will read out a bit of it too. In a non-binding judgement, it found that there is no human right to have an abortion on the grounds of a non-fatal disability. It is very straightforward. Lord Mance said about children with non-fatal disabilities:

"in principle a disabled child should be treated as having exactly the same worth in human terms as a non-disabled child".

Somebody is therefore wrong. There are two sides to this. I do not know in what way the Westminster Government will handle this situation if it comes to it.

There is also the comment that Mrs Kelly read out from Viscount Younger from 15 June, which was just after the regulations were passed. He said:

"As abortion remains a devolved issue, the Assembly is now able to legislate, or indeed amend the regulations, should it so wish".

I do not know whether that is the case or not, but it was not contradicted.

Another bit that catches my eye is that the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 defines "discrimination" as treating a person less favourably by reason of a disability than one:

"treats or would treat others to whom that reason does not or would not apply".

Finally, section 75 of our Northern Ireland Act 1998 places a statutory duty on public authorities to:

"have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity"

for persons with a disability. When does that duty start? That is my question. It must start before birth. It must do. It must confer that right on the unborn child just as much as it does on somebody who is looking for a job. I know that that is not a fair comparison, but you know what I mean.

There is also disagreement across the medical profession. Doctors for Choice UK and the royal college argue against the Bill, apparently because of the medical challenge of distinguishing between fatal fetal abnormality and serious fetal impairment in, as they refer to it, the short period between the 20-week scan and the 24-week limit. I do not quite know where they are coming from in that respect, but I will leave that hanging. We have all received a letter from Dr Cupples representing 190-odd GPs in Northern Ireland that contradicts that view; it is very much supportive of the Bill and urges us all to support it. Who do you believe?

There is also an ongoing debate in the Republic of Ireland. There is a reluctance down there among the medical profession to make a diagnosis of fatal fetal abnormality in case they get it wrong and are subjected to criminal sanction. Doctors have to make difficult decisions every day of their life. Sometimes, they get it wrong, but, most of the time, they get it right. I do not know a doctor — I doubt

that I ever will — who did not do his very best to make the right decision in the circumstances.

I have a mailbox full of pleas from the public to support the Bill and honour the commitment that I made last June to do so. It has not always been my practice to respect public opinion; I have had my moments when I did not run with public opinion. I prefer to do what is right. I think that we are doing what is right in supporting the Bill. I believe that we, as a society, are better than to allow a measure that permits the abortion of babies with a non-life-threatening impairment up to full term. I cannot believe that the Assembly would accept that. That is the thrust of the Bill. There are other issues that have been brought in around abortion services and funding and support for women through their pregnancy. I completely agree with all that. The Executive are completely at fault; they are dragging their heels in terms of implementing what was agreed up to two years ago. It is not the fault of the Health Minister. Having praised Paul Givan, I have to say that his party is holding up the issue. That should not be happening. We are bound to do this, so we might as well get on with it. Let us get it done.

There is a conspiracy theory that the DUP is on a track to roll back the progress that has been made in that area. Paul Givan and I sat on Lisburn council together. We sit here together. We are neighbours and friends. He and I had a detailed discussion about this before the Bill came to the Assembly. I asked him straight, "Is this one step down the road that people like me would not like to go?". He assured me that it is not. We had a debate on a private Member's motion about this issue in which I accepted the Sinn Féin amendment rather than the DUP one. I asked Paul, when he was making his winding-up speech, whether it was preparation for another assault on the abortion regulations that we now have. He assured me that it was not.

This is a one-line Bill that is designed to remove a few words to rectify a situation with which none of us should be happy. I regard the wording of that clause — "Severe fetal impairment" — as being downright offensive in terms of trying to produce that as grounds to have an abortion. We have heard about situations of aborting a fetus up to 35 or 38 weeks. That is a fully formed child, whose only offence is that it has a non-life-threatening disability, impairment or whatever. We should not be going there. We should not be doing that. I hope that the Assembly will do the right thing and support the Bill as it stands.

7.15 pm

I do not always agree with the DUP, as everybody knows, but there is always a first time. This is an important issue. A lot of people are watching to see what we will do. I sincerely hope that the will of the Assembly and our population — I believe that the population is on our side on this — can be expressed tonight in support of the Bill, and we can send an unequivocal message to Westminster about our decision. Where it goes after that, I do not know. When you see CEDAW and the Supreme Court in opposition, I do not know who will win. I heard the comments of the Secretary of State, and someone — it might have been Dolores Kelly — said that she would not agree with or believe a word he said. You are being very kind to him.

Mrs D Kelly: I was measured.

Mr Lunn: I would go much further than that. Who do you believe and what is going to happen? I do not know. I ask everybody here to support the Bill. I look forward to hearing Paul Givan's closing comments, after Claire Sugden.

Ms Sugden: Mr Givan's Bill seeks to amend only one element of the Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations 2020 — 7(1)(b) — to remove or repeal the regulation that allows termination of pregnancy up to term in cases of severe fetal impairment. Can I, therefore, assume that, as the Bill does not attempt to address any other elements of the abortion legislation, in particular, fatal fetal abnormalities, the proponent of the Bill accepts those types of cases? I say "accept" rather than "agree" because I understand the Member's personal view on the issue more generally.

There seems to be much focus in the debate on the interpretation of regulation 7, in that it mirrors the law in GB, which allows abortion up to term for conditions such as Down's syndrome, cleft palate and club foot, but does it have to? I cannot see anywhere that suggests that Northern Ireland cannot develop its own interpretation, especially as the GB interpretation is outdated. It was interpreted at a point when there was less information and is not reflective of views in the UK today.

To be fair, it suggests that people with those specific conditions cannot lead fulsome lives, which is entirely wrong. My nephew had a quite severe club foot. He is now 11 years old and can run rings around me. He has a fulsome life. Maybe our focus needs to be on interpretation rather than legislation. I have concerns about the Bill because, in some severe cases — I do not mean Down's syndrome or club foot; I mean severe cases of fetal impairment — it may be a reasonable medical choice for parents. I am not an expert; no Member of the Assembly is. However, I am sure that there are examples of severe fetal impairment where most of us would accept, not necessarily agree with, the choice.

I recall, from the discussion about fatal fetal abnormalities in 2016, that some Members did not agree or accept it as a reason then, but, interestingly, they are inadvertently accepting it now. That is not a criticism, because opinions change and more information becomes available, but it is a fundamental difficulty of this debate. Furthermore, definitions of both severe fetal impairment and fatal fetal abnormality are ambiguous and subject to interpretation. It remains a point of debate about fatal fetal abnormalities, and I do not intend to cause distress in asking this: at what point is it fatal? Surely, it is shortly after birth or within 28 days, as defined in the Republic of Ireland. I have a constituent who was diagnosed with a fatal fetal abnormality, and she chose to carry that child to term. She gave birth. The baby was beautiful, as all babies are, but was severely disabled and died at 13 days old. Is that an experience of severe fetal impairment or fatal fetal abnormality?

It seems that the term "fetal impairment" has developed because of the uncertainty around the definition of fatal fetal abnormality. Poor guidance and interpretation have meant that doctors do not want to be responsible for those decisions, and that is the fault of government. Mr Lunn pointed to that when he said that people do not want to make a decision about the matter so they want to keep the definition as loose as "severe fetal impairment" in

order that they will not, potentially, have a lawsuit against them. Maybe that is something that we need to consider in relation to protecting doctors, particularly if we are still content to leave fatal fetal abnormality in the legislation. I do not judge the choices of parents in those circumstances because I have compassion to know that the decision to terminate is probably the most difficult decision that they will take, and I will never undermine anyone for saying that it is less than that.

Another constituent had a diagnosis of fatal fetal abnormality, and she very much wanted her baby so that her son could have a brother or a sister. Upon diagnosis, she treated it almost like a miscarriage and assumed that the health service in Northern Ireland would help her, but she was wrong. She journeyed to England for an abortion, and she told me that while she felt so much guilt, she equally knew the joy of being pregnant and how people responded to her as a pregnant woman, her pregnant belly and her glow. Understandably, she did not want to spend 10 weeks explaining why her feelings did not match theirs. Rather than provide her with healthcare and support at the time, government's failure scarred her.

My biggest concern about this legislation is that we are going to create a similar situation again. It is not about Down's syndrome or cleft palate or club foot; it is about severe impairment. Depending on the doctor's subjective diagnosis, and whether they diagnose as "severe" or "fatal", you might potentially accept their decision. So, what is the issue here? It is one of interpretation. I have concerns about abortion law as it stands. My biggest concern comes from abortions up to term for a range of circumstances. If the Bill has the scope to address that element, then I might consider supporting it. I would be keen to hear what the proposer says in relation to that. Term limits require legislative change but interpretation of legislation does not.

The proposer has leaned heavily on disability discrimination. Members will know that constituents regularly tell us that they have suffered discrimination. In advising them, I refer them to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and section 75, my point being that discrimination is very specific in law. People may feel discriminated against, but our discriminations are not explicit enough to address those concerns. I am curious about that, because I genuinely do not know. Is the discrimination described as a principle of the Bill? Is it discrimination in law or is it Mr Givan's interpretation of discrimination?

Some legislation has been mentioned in relation to the issue at hand, but I do not know whether it applies, given that the person being discriminated in this instance is an unborn child. I would welcome it if any learned Members, for example, would intervene in order to enlighten me. Does our disability discrimination legislation apply to an unborn child? That is something that we are not sure about, so whilst we can point to discrimination, what do we mean by that?

To labour the point around the law, what about women? Is it a form of discrimination — indirect discrimination — to prevent access to public health services that affect only women? I am not a legally trained barrister or solicitor to consider this law on the way, but the Bill throws up so many uncertainties for me. If the Bill makes its full passage through the House, I expect to find it going to the courts,

and then it will not be implemented. So, what was the point of all this?

I want to let the House know that I take this issue very seriously. I spend hours speaking with people on all sides of the issue because it is really important, not least because of my conflict around abortion. I want to say that abortion is not a binary choice between pro-life and pro-choice. It is an incredibly complicated issue in the context of an imperfect world and years of bad governance. Perhaps we should be providing better public services that support women and families, tackle societal attitudes, strengthen communities and address mental health. My goodness, we are a post-conflict society that has suffered years of trauma, yet we do not even scratch the surface of mental health.

People say that we have to support women more. Maybe that is where we need to start. It is not a choice when society gives you no choice. If we are truly pro-life, we fix society if we can take this forward.

Mr Speaker: I call on Paul Givan to make the winding-up speech and conclude the debate.

Mr Givan: As we close, I thank everybody for their contributions, challenging as it is to extend it to everybody. Nevertheless, people are entitled to express their views, and that has been done forcefully by Members. It has been a passionate debate, and that is right. It should be a passionate debate, because we are dealing with the value that we place on life and the serious issue of disability discrimination. In thanking Members for their contributions, I take a moment to thank all those who have written to us, emailed, called my office and shared their stories. That has been the most humbling part of this experience. It has given a platform to many families to speak about how much they love their child who has a disability and what they mean to them. We have heard many stories in that respect. It is because of them that the Bill has been introduced.

As my colleague Mr Lunn indicated, the Bill is a short one. Yet the debate, for some Members, has taken us into loyalist paramilitaries — Dr Archibald spoke about them, I think — LGBT rights, welfare reform, the Irish language and churches. I have never mentioned churches, I have never once lectured Dr Archibald on morality, and I never heard any Member supporting the Bill invoke religious belief as the basis for it. Some Members have taken the debate well beyond the general principles of the Bill. I sought, Mr Speaker, to follow your guidance at the start and kept my speech very much in line with the general principles of the Bill.

Mr Chambers, I think, mentioned how some Members had spent more time attacking the messenger than looking at the message, but my personal sensitivities are neither here nor there. I have sponsored the Bill, but I have done it with the support of other MLAs. The Assembly does not allow multiple signatures on a private Member's Bill. I asked and was told that only one Member could sponsor a Bill; otherwise, I would have had Members to co-sign it with me. The Bill represents many more than me, as an individual, or the DUP, as a political party; it is much broader than that. Beyond the party politics, Don't Screen Us Out, as an organisation, has led on the campaign. It does not take a position on the wider abortion debate; it does not describe itself as pro-life or pro-choice. This

is the organisation that has engaged with Members and has led the campaign. Members need to ask why some Members opposite singled out the DUP and used other issues to cloud what the Bill is about. It is important that we stick to that.

I state the obvious: I speak on this as a male. I almost feel that I need to apologise for that sometimes. I am a father of three daughters and a husband. I represent thousands of females who have voted for me. Does it make my voice less important just because I am a male? Some Members seemed to indicate that no male Member of the House dare ever engage on this type of issue.

We need to raise the level of debate when considering this. Mr Lunn made the point that people outside the Chamber were watching. My phone has not stopped with the hurt and distress that has been caused to people. Heidi Crowter's mum has been messaging me throughout the debate, devastated at some of the comments that Members have made in the course of it. There is an audience outside this place that goes beyond me and beyond the political parties that are represented. We need to take cognisance of that.

If I went through every Member's contribution, we would be here a long time, and I do not intend to do that. I note that 26 Members contributed to the debate and four Ministers — the First Minister and deputy First Minister being two — so there is no doubt that this very short Bill has created a lot of interest across society and in the House.

7.30 pm

I need to deal with a couple of things that were mentioned in some inaccurate commentary. Some of the presentation that I made to the Health Committee has, deliberately or otherwise, been misrepresented. There are things that I apparently said that I did not say, and I need to deal with the way that that has been characterised by some members of that Committee. I will not go through all the instances, but there were certainly more than one.

The Member for South Belfast Ms Bradshaw challenged the Assembly by asking this: do we need another courageous woman to fight for their rights? Absolutely we do, and Heidi Crowter is fighting for her rights and the rights of people like her. I commend her for that.

When we considered a lot of the issues, Members raised general themes, and I want to touch on them to assist folk in reaching their view. I appreciate that some Members are waiting for my response before making their final decision while others have taken a predetermined position.

It is not for me to get involved in how a political party navigates its internal politics, and I would not seek to get involved in what a party is trying to do. Members highlighted Sinn Féin's position: it can speak to that. I note that it will abstain today. I suppose that there is some hope for me, because, when we introduced a private Member's Bill on human trafficking, Sinn Féin was reluctant to support one element of it at the start. Once we got through the process, it came on board.

I do not need to repeat the quotes that were attributed to Ms Sheerin, because they are now on the record. Colm Gildernew, Chair of the Health Committee, was praised by Heidi Crowter when she appeared before the Committee

because of what he had said about her on 2 June 2020. In that debate, he said:

“Sinn Féin does not support CEDAW’s recommendations to provide abortion in the case of severe foetal impairment such as Down’s syndrome. Our amendment welcomes the important intervention by disability campaigner Heidi Crowter, who has been referred to today, and rejects the specific legislative provision in the abortion legislation that goes beyond fatal foetal abnormalities to include non-fatal disabilities such as Down’s syndrome. I support the amendment.” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 128, p331, col 1].

That was the Sinn Féin amendment. They have chosen to abstain today; that is a matter for them. Issues were raised in justification for that, such as what happened with the mother-and-baby homes and the commissioning of services, which my Bill does not touch on. That has been the main plank. Let me acknowledge the injustices that have happened.

I want to touch on Sinead McLaughlin’s contribution. I could tell from listening to her that there was pain there from her mother’s experience. I could feel it when she was speaking about it, but, in the wider context of those injustices, that will not be resolved by perpetuating injustice on our most vulnerable — those who have disabilities. Let us put right the wrongs of the past in how people were treated, but let us not think that keeping that regulation in place will in any way deal with the hurt and pain of what went wrong in the past. It will not.

Some Members spoke of my consultation process. I think that it was Mr Muir who said that he had concerns about the way in which I had consulted. However, he went on to say that he was opposed to the general principle of the Bill, so, if it had been consulted on in the way that he would have wanted, he would still have opposed it because that would be the consistent position to take. Other Members cited that and indicated that I was seeking to rush the Bill through. I am not seeking to rush anything through. The Bill was introduced as per the normal procedures. The convention is four weeks before it comes to Second Stage. We have waited for four weeks. I have briefed the Health Committee. It is now subject to a vote of the Assembly, and it will go through the subsequent processes.

Compare that with Stella Creasy’s amendment at Westminster. There was no consultation at all. That amendment was made to legislation on the re-establishment of this Executive. There was no engagement with disability rights organisations when that amendment was passed — none. When the regulations were produced, they were put through as statutory instruments by Committees of which no Member of Parliament from our jurisdiction was part. There was no consultation when those regulations were drafted and put through the system at Westminster. Yes, there was broad consultation by the Northern Ireland Office, in which 79% of respondents said that they opposed change. Therefore, when Members seek to use their interpretation of consultation and say that they want to go through the normal Assembly processes, I say this to them gently: the standard that was applied in how Westminster dealt with the issue was cheered on by some of those who now criticise my Bill. It does not compare at all with the process followed by Westminster.

Members raised the legislative competence of the Bill. I do not intend to repeat the issues. The Health Committee got legal advice on that from the Assembly’s Legal Services in closed session. It is privity to legal opinion to which I am not. I assume that it interrogated that advice in detail. However, it will have been the same legal opinion that came to the Assembly and Speaker when I first put the Bill forward before Christmas. It was subject to the normal considerations. I assume, because the Speaker allowed it to get to this stage, that it was compliant. However, I have sought legal opinion from a number of Crown counsel on a range of things in respect of the Bill. When looking at the aspect of legal competence, some Members, Ms Sugden being one of them, raised the point that, if the Bill ends up being judicially reviewed, as it might well be — all legislation is subject to judicial review; that is not unique to passing laws — it would be struck down and would not stand. Here is some Crown counsel legal opinion in respect of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Let me read it into the record:

“Northern Ireland is not a member state of a federal union. A consequence of the present devolution settlement set out in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 is that both Parliament and the Assembly may legislate on the same topic and that each legislature may repeal or amend the Acts of the other. The Sewel convention is designed to avoid such overlapping occurring in practice, at least as far as Government legislation in Parliament is concerned, but that such an overlap exists is an obvious element of our constitutional law”.

That advice goes on to say:

“None of the barriers set up by section 6 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 apply to the present Bill. The Bill deals with a transferred matter, ie abortion. Parliament has also dealt with that transferred matter, but that does not make it any less a transferred matter. It has not ceased to be a transferred matter. The Assembly is entirely free to amend the regulations in the manner proposed by the Bill”.

I am almost sure that, if the Bill is to be subject to judicial review, there will be arguments in respect of that. However, there is that Crown counsel advice, and, hopefully, it will reassure the Assembly’s Legal Services that the advice that has, I assume, been given to the Speaker is correct.

Members also raised the issue of international human rights legislation. I think that Minister Deirdre Hargey said that the Bill was not in line with international human rights. It is important that I touch on that for a moment. Crown counsel legal advice on the issue came from Brett Lockhart QC, with whom Members will be familiar:

“The United Kingdom has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2009. The preamble at paragraph g recognises that discrimination against any person on the basis of disability is a violation of the inherent dignity and worth of the human person. Article 10 of the convention reaffirms that every human being has the inherent right to life and shall take all necessary measures to ensure its effective enjoyment by persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others. Article 12 reaffirms that persons with disabilities have the right to recognition everywhere as persons before the law”.

That is from a United Nations convention: not a committee, a convention.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that a child:

“needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth”.

That is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It says “before” birth: not just after birth, but before. That is an international human rights standard. The Bill is entirely in keeping with human rights legislation.

The Member for South Belfast Ms Bradshaw, I think, indicated that, when this goes to the UK Supreme Court, it will be struck down and the court will rule against it. I would love to have such foresight. I would start playing the lottery if I knew exactly what the judgements will be when it comes to these kinds of things. The Member for South Belfast did not say — other Members did: wrongly, in my view — that the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission took a case to the UK Supreme Court and sought a declaration of incompatibility with human rights laws, not just on non-fatal fetal abnormality but on this aspect, severe fetal impairment. That was wrong of the commission, but it did it. It went to the UK Supreme Court and lost, so we know what the UK Supreme Court will do because a case was brought by the Human Rights Commission, and it failed in that.

Some Members have aptly quoted some of the judgements that were read out at the time. Lord Mance said:

“But in principle a disabled child should be treated as having exactly the same worth in human terms as a non-disabled child ... This is also the consistent theme of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, expressing concerns about the stigmatising of persons with disabilities as living a life of less value than that of others, and about the termination of pregnancy at any stage on the basis of foetal abnormality, and recommending States to amend their abortion laws accordingly”.

Lord Kerr said:

“UNCRPD is based on the premise that if abortion is permissible, there should be no discrimination on the basis that the foetus, because of a defect, will result in a child being born with a physical or mental disability.”

That was the UK Supreme Court. This was judged on in our own courts, and Judge Horner, in a preceding judgements, said:

“I do consider that it is a legitimate aim to keep in place a prohibition on abortion where the foetus will be viable but the unborn child faces non-fatal disability. There should be equality of treatment between, on the one hand, the foetus which will develop into a child without physical or mental disability and, on the other hand, the foetus which will develop into a child with a physical and/or mental disability which is non-fatal.”

We have judicial decisions in the area of law that we are speaking about. Those judgements address some of the problems facing those who are trying to get around the

issue — they are clearly wrestling with it — of what is framed as the woman’s right to choose.

I do not agree with the Green Party’s policy, but, to be fair, its policy is clearly on the record: it is the right to choose in any circumstance at any stage. Therefore, when it comes to this Bill, I can understand the approach that it is taking. However, to be consistent on that and to eradicate the discriminatory aspects of this law, which is what the United Nations Committee said by way of a statement on CEDAW and the UNCRPD, you just make abortion available at any stage for any reason. Therefore, you eliminate the discriminatory aspect of the law that singles out somebody with a disability. It would be a consistent position to say that, if you do not want legislation in this area which is against preborn babies with disabilities, abortion is allowed in every circumstance at any stage. You then eliminate discrimination on the basis of disability, but you cannot get round that. That is the problem for those who have quoted paragraph 85 of CEDAW, which is the paragraph that that blunt instrument at Westminster put in. That paragraph recognises the conflict that exists in this area, and I note that the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists omitted that from its submission.

Article VII of the CEDAW recommendation — it is paragraph 85 (b)(iii), which is the area that the Bill relates to — talks about:

“severe foetal impairment, including FFA, without perpetuating stereotypes towards persons with disabilities”.

There is the key phrase of the internal contradiction of paragraph 85 in CEDAW. It advocates for abortion in cases of:

“Severe foetal impairment, including FFA, without perpetuating stereotypes towards persons with disabilities”.

This law does perpetuate, so paragraph 85 of CEDAW is internally contradictory. One could argue that the Bill is entirely in line with paragraph 85 of CEDAW because it removes the contradiction in terms of the perpetuation of stereotypes of people with disabilities.

7.45 pm

Members raised broader points in that area. We spoke about the disability discrimination laws. Some Members rightly highlighted the fact that parties have campaigned for equality of treatment and opportunity. It has been at the core of some political parties and is the essence of what they are. That is why we have the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, and section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 came about through the Belfast Agreement. Section 75 places a statutory duty on public authorities to have:

“due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity ... between persons with a disability”.

That is part of the Belfast Agreement through section 75, which I consistently and regularly hear about from Members.

We also have the Disability Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, which amended the 1995 Act. Again, that requires public authorities:

“to promote positive attitudes towards disabled persons”.

How are we promoting a positive attitude towards disabled persons when, in and of itself and for no other reason, a termination of pregnancy can be granted because of a disability? That does not engage the mother in that pregnancy. Disability is in and of itself a grounds for termination. In our law, up to 12 weeks, termination can take place for any reason. After 12 weeks, there are three reasons for termination: the mother's physical and mental welfare, fatal fetal abnormality and non-fatal disabilities.

Members, I do not know what more I can say about how this law is against people with disabilities, flies in the face of international human rights declarations and goes against legislation passed by the Assembly on disability discrimination. The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is clear:

“The Committee is concerned about perceptions in society that stigmatize persons with disabilities ... and about the termination of pregnancy at any stage on the basis of fetal impairment. The Committee recommends that the State party amend its abortion law accordingly.”

That recommendation was to Great Britain. Great Britain first passed this legislation in 1990. It changed the 1967 Act before the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities made its proclamation on abortion law. However, now it has done that, and some Members seem to advocate that I should look to Great Britain as a model and exemplar. It is not. I have much more affinity with my Irish brothers and sisters in the Republic of Ireland on this issue than I do with any political representation in Great Britain. I will look to Dublin more than I will look to London on the issue. Some Members make the argument that somehow the Bill contradicts unionist credentials. Really and truly, this transcends that type of identity politics of whether you are unionist, nationalist or other. That is a very strange argument to make.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I will give way to Mr O'Dowd.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member has made a detailed and interesting presentation. I am always cautious when listening to selected quotes on legal determinations because often, when you turn the page, there is another legal argument going against your point. I am sure that that will all be sorted out in Committee.

If you want to follow your Irish brothers and sisters on the matter, will you encourage your party to commission services that were enacted in law in the legislation that you are seeking to amend? That would be an important step.

Maybe you will come to Mr Lunn's point. He said that you told him that this is the end of your legislative journey on the matter rather than the start.

Mr Givan: I thank Mr O'Dowd for that. I welcome the engagement, and I will welcome being able to engage further with him when I get to the Health Committee.

On the first of the two issues that he raised — I think that Mr Allister mentioned it — the Bill is exactly as it says. It is the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill. It is a single-clause Bill. It is not for me to rule what will

be within scope, but I do not believe that it can be added to or taken away from unless you vote against it. I do not see where you can do that. For my part, I will not table amendments to the Bill. It is as it has been produced. I will make decisions on whatever other Members seek to do at another time or place. I suppose that nobody should be surprised at my position on the wider issue in respect of the matters, but that is not how it should be viewed if you are looking at it and asking, “What does Paul Givan think?”. The Bill speaks for itself.

On the commissioning of services, again, I appreciate the Member wanting to draw me into that, but the Bill does not deal with the commissioning of abortion services. That is not part of the general principles of the Bill. Where there is a discussion of that at the Executive, I am sure that my Executive colleagues will facilitate that. The wider point goes back to the way in which the legislation was brought in. I have some sympathy for the Minister of Health on that, and I have asked numerous questions for written answer of him about it. He indicated to me that Westminster imposed the legislation, and his position, up to this point, has been that it should pay for it. Let us see how the Executive manage that issue, but that is not what my Bill is about.

Mr O'Dowd brought me neatly to the end of the point about the legal arguments and discussions of international human rights law and how Westminster dealt with it. A number of colleagues spoke about the different medical opinions and quoted the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and Doctors for Choice. I dealt with that during my opening remarks, although I appreciate that not everyone will have been here for that. I put on the record contributions that have been given to me by medical professionals who disagreed with that opinion. We also received the letter that Mr Lunn spoke about, and I understand that it now has over 200 signatories, including not just GPs but consultants.

Those who proclaim to speak on behalf of the entirety of the medical profession — somehow the royal college is representative of them — are not listening to those who said that that is not the case. We have consultants in the Belfast Trust and the Western Trust who have put their position on that on the record. I could go on, but, as I said, it extends to those who work in sexual and reproductive healthcare, palliative medicine, emergency medicine, general surgery and psychiatry. All those medical professionals said, “Support this Bill” and, “We support this Bill”. Those who advocate that we should be against the Bill because of the medical profession are closing their ears to that different opinion. I accept that there are those in the medical profession who have advocated against the Bill. I do not deny that, but neither should Members deny that there are significant numbers of people in our medical profession who have asked for the Bill to be supported.

I suppose that I should read from the letter that was sent to Members. I will not read it all, but it is worth putting the opening paragraph on the record. The open letter, which has now been signed by over 200 doctors, consultants and medical professionals, read:

“We read with real concern the submission to MLAs presented by the political advisor to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

There can sometimes be a tendency for doctors, or doctors' bodies, to give the impression that there is a

unanimous medical view which should be respected, or even the impression that a body's members have been consulted on topics such as these.

We the undersigned are all doctors who fundamentally disagree with the contents of the RCOG submission.

It is of course the right of the Political Advisor to the RCOG to make a submission to MLAs, but it is also our right as doctors caring for patients with disabilities to do the same."

Some Members spoke about where the public are on this issue, and Mr Lunn pointed out that he does not always go in line with public opinion, and neither do I. I suppose that that is something that we have in common. If we hold a conviction on an issue, we will keep to that, and I do, as do others. However, it is worth noting again that there has been a public petition for this private Member's Bill. I think that it is the highest ever responded to. Some 26,814 people have signed it, calling on the leaders of the political parties to support the Bill. We have also had 1,618 people with Down's syndrome and their families calling for MLAs to support the Bill, and we have had 200-plus doctors asking us to support the Bill.

Public opinion polling was also carried out by LucidTalk on the issue, and it is interesting that, sometimes, Members will seek to represent their constituency, even if that does not necessarily correlate with their own opinion; they see their role as being representative of their broader constituency. A specific question was polled for — this is only going back to June last year — and people were asked the question around abortion for those with Down's syndrome and cleft lip. In those two areas, only 20% of people said that they supported the law, and 80% either opposed it or did not have a view, but the overwhelming majority opposed it. On the issue of those with cleft lip, only 15% supported it. The overwhelming majority were against it. So, if Members want to represent wider public opinion, I appreciate that we all need to be influenced by legal issues around courts and international human rights, but I believe that we have the law on our side, we have international human rights on our side and we also have public opinion on our side in respect of supporting this Bill going through to the next stage of the process. I hope that, in that engagement, other people will come on board.

I think that I have covered as many issues as I wish to. Please do not think that not namechecking Members or addressing their specific issues means that, in any way, I am being disrespectful. I would not want any Member to think that. I hope that we can move this on to the next stage of the process. It will go to Committee Stage, when the Committee will be in a position to put out a wider call for evidence, and different people can respond to it at that stage.

I trust that the issues have been covered in as much detail as I can possibly give and that I have given due courtesy and respect to everybody, even when they have disagreed with me. I commend the Second Stage of the Bill to the House.

Question put.

*The Assembly divided:
Ayes 48; Noes 12.*

AYES

Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Ms S Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Ms Hunter, Mr Irwin, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyons, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stafford, Mr Storey, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs Barton and Mrs D Kelly.

NOES

Ms Bailey, Mr Beattie, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Ms McLaughlin, Mr Muir, Mr O'Toole, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Bradshaw and Miss Woods.

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, 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, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill [NIA Bill 15/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Speaker: The Bill stands referred to the Committee for Health.

Adjourned at 8.22 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 16 March 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Health and Social Care Bill: Second Stage

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Health and Social Care Bill [NIA Bill 18/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Speaker: In accordance with convention, the Business Committee has not allocated a time limit to the debate.

Mr Swann: The objective of the Health and Social Care Bill is simple. It is to facilitate the closure of the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and transfer responsibility for its functions, in the main, to my Department. I am pleased to be able to open the debate on the Bill today, not least due to the fact that the closure of the board was first announced some five years ago. It is important that we now take the steps required to bring certainty to staff in the organisation, but also that we respond to the clear evidence that our current system is complex, bureaucratic and no longer meets the needs of today's society. We know from the various reviews and reports that have been commissioned, from Donaldson to Bengoa, that we must transform how we plan and manage our services to meet the needs of our growing and changing population. The closure of the board is an important step on that journey.

Before I move to the Bill itself, it will be helpful to set the scene for what the legislation will mean in practice. The Bill, in closing the Health and Social Care Board, will transfer responsibility for its functions, in the main, to my Department. The staff of the board will transfer to the Business Services Organisation (BSO) under a hosting arrangement. Crucially, those staff will retain their Health and Social Care (HSC) terms and conditions and will continue to undertake their current roles and functions, albeit they will be directed by the Department and led by a senior civil servant at deputy secretary level. That is an important point. As we seek to transform how we plan and manage our services, we must do so in a staged manner that ensures that we manage any risk to our service delivery.

In this first step, we will see the closure of the Health and Social Care Board and its staff supported as they move to a new operating model where they will continue to undertake the same roles and functions as before, but as an integral part of my Department and not as an arm's-length body.

That will ensure the continuity of service delivery and mitigate any risk. From the time that the initial decision was taken, the process has been not about the people who

are involved but the need to streamline our structures and reduce bureaucracy. In designing this operating model, engagement and analysis have taken place across the health and social care system. Work has continued in that vein as multi-organisational project strands have been established to not only take forward the necessary steps in order to ensure a seamless implementation but to identify and take forward improved ways of working.

Building on that first step, I recently approved the commencement of a programme of work that will look at how we plan and manage our services in a way that promotes integration, collaboration and service improvement. Key to that is that it not only seeks to harness the strengths of our health and social care sector but looks beyond to what can be achieved when we work in partnership with the voluntary and community sector, government and our service users. That has been a key learning from our response to COVID and one that, I am sure, we can agree that we must work on now to ensure that we do not lose it as we turn our attention to the future. However, I reiterate my point that the Bill deals with the first step, which is the closure of the board, and the origins of that can be found in the review of commissioning arrangements, which was published in November 2015. The review identified a number of weaknesses in the system, which I referred to, such as the complex and bureaucratic structures and the lack of clarity in accountability and decision-making. On that basis, the decision to close the board was taken — a decision, I assure the Assembly, that has been subject to engagement and consultation.

A public consultation exercise ran from December 2015 to February 2016 and received over 180 responses from a wide range of stakeholders. The consultation report, which was published in March 2016, reaffirmed the need for change. While acknowledging that the closure of the board would not cure all the issues facing Health and Social Care, it recommended that having more effective structures would allow for better focus on resources and support the system to operate more effectively and innovatively.

I put on record my thanks to those groups for their contributions. I also acknowledge the concerns that were raised about how services will be commissioned. However, as I pointed out, the first step is about streamlining structures, providing clarity on decision-making and enabling effectiveness and greater efficiency. This is not about changing process. The approach enables us to move forward in a way that minimises any risk to service delivery. However, I assure those who contributed and

the Assembly that those views will be considered in the work that has commenced to look at how we may plan and manage our services differently.

I will move now to the Bill. The Health and Social Care Bill seeks to provide the legislative framework for the closure of the Health and Social Care Board and the transfer of its functions. It is a relatively short Bill that is technical, with seven clauses and three schedules. I will cover the essential elements of the proposed legislation.

The first clause provides for the dissolution of the Regional Health and Social Care Board, and, as a consequence, local commissioning groups (LCGs) will cease to exist. The board currently has a statutory duty to appoint local commissioning groups, but that statutory duty will end on the dissolution of the board. However, a statutory duty will remain on my Department to secure the commissioning of health and social care services, and, in doing so, to set the priorities and, indeed, the outcomes that the system is expected to deliver. Whilst the dissolution of the board will remove the requirement for local commissioning groups, let me be clear about this: the clause is about the removal of a construct and does not in any way detract from the need for local intelligence and input into the planning decisions. As I said, work has begun on looking at how we plan and manage services based on collaboration and integration and in a way that is built on local need and local input.

Clause 2 refers to the transfer of the regional board's functions. It introduces schedule 1, which is the core of the Bill. It details the amendments that are required to existing legislation in order to achieve the transfer of powers, duties and responsibilities as a consequence of the board's closure. The amendments to health-specific Acts and orders will result in the duties and responsibilities that were held previously by the board being placed, in the main, directly upon the Department. That includes contracts for primary care providers, which will now become the responsibility of the Department. Following on from that, the Bill provides my Department with regulation-making powers to ensure that practitioners have access to an independent appeals process after the closure of the Health and Social Care Board.

In other areas specifically related to social care and children, amendments will result in these functions being directly placed on health and social care trusts. It is important to note that, currently, trusts already exercise these functions as a consequence of their delegation from the board. In this respect, the Bill merely ensures the continuation of the trusts' ability to fulfil their role in this area. The Bill provides for my Department to be directly responsible for the oversight of the trusts' exercise of these functions. That oversight will be facilitated by regular ongoing performance reporting by the trusts to my Department. The Bill provides that the trusts must, at the very least annually, submit for the Department's approval a scheme detailing how they are exercising the social care and children functions of the Department.

Clause 3 provides for the schemes for the transfer of assets and liabilities. To help to effect a dissolution in practical terms, the clause places a duty on the Department to make one or more schemes for the transfer of the board's assets, which include its staff and its liabilities. Whilst a transfer scheme for staff is not new or novel and has been used on many occasions in the

past, this is a novel arrangement and one that has been fully considered. In this case, the staff of the board will transfer to the BSO. However, in the operating model, they will be directed by my Department and will be led by a senior civil servant. Again, this comes back to the need to maintain service delivery. This approach, while streamlining structures and reducing bureaucracy, will also provide flexibility for the work on new planning approaches to evolve, and, importantly, through employment with BSO, the former board staff will retain their HSC terms and conditions, and no staff will be made redundant. Staff engagement has been and continues to be a fundamental part of the process. Consultation with staff and their representatives will be a key part of the development and operation of the transfer scheme for those staff.

Clause 4, the transitional provision, includes schedule 3, which ensures an ordered winding up of the board and the continued proper operation of the health and social care system. A power is included to provide for regulations to be made, if required, to address any non-alignment of existing legislation not already identified as a consequence of the closure of the board and commencement of the new arrangements. Again, this is not novel or contentious and was evident in the Health and Social Care (Reform) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009, which provided for the dissolution of a number of health bodies and the transfer of their legislative functions.

Schedule 3 places a duty on the Department to make arrangements for a statement of final accounts of the board, and, together with a report from the Comptroller and Auditor General, this must be laid with the Assembly. It also sets out provisions to ensure continuity with previous directions issued to and by the board. In addition, the Department may continue anything being done by or to the board, and that includes legal proceedings, following the closure of the board. Clauses 5, 6 and 7 are standard interpretation, commencement and short title clauses respectively.

In conclusion, at this point, it will be clear to Members that the Bill is relatively straightforward and that it is subjective, though technical, in nature. The closure of the board is a step forward as we seek to reduce the bureaucracy and complexity so keenly associated with our system. As part of a wider transformation, it is a step that will enable us to better focus our resource and enable the system to operate more effectively and efficiently, and I think that we can all agree that that need has never been greater. I look forward to hearing what Members have to say about the Bill.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for coming to the House this morning and making his remarks on this change. I welcome the opportunity to make some initial remarks on behalf of the Health Committee, outlining the Committee's consideration of the Bill, before speaking as my party's health spokesperson.

As the Minister outlined, the Bill gives effect to the decision to close the Health and Social Care Board. It transfers the responsibility for the board's functions to the Department of Health and transfers board staff to the Business Services Organisation.

The decision to close the Health and Social Care Board stems from 2015, following Sir Liam Donaldson's report

'The Right Time, The Right Place'. The report highlighted a number of weaknesses in the health system and outlined the need for change that would allow more effective and efficient structures for the delivery of health and social care services. That decision was reaffirmed in 2016 by the then Health Minister, Michelle O'Neill, who confirmed the closure of the board as part of the wider transformation agenda.

10.45 am

The aim of the Bill is to simplify the healthcare administration's structures. In the current challenging climate of the pandemic, with its unknown long-term physical and mental health impacts, and with ever-increasing waiting lists for surgery, any advancement of the transformation agenda is to be welcomed. Indeed, in recent weeks, the Committee has heard evidence from the Department and other stakeholders that there are concerns that the transformation agenda will not be able to be progressed without significant additional resource for the Department of Health. That is disappointing, given that the Programme for Government clearly outlines how the transformation of the health service will contribute to Programme for Government outcome 4, which is:

"We all enjoy long, healthy, active lives."

Moreover, the New Decade, New Approach agreement included an Executive commitment to deliver health and social care reforms. The Committee wishes to see the transformation agenda driven forward by the Minister and the Executive. The Bill indicates a step towards the streamlining of decision-making.

The Committee first considered the Bill at its meeting on 4 March, just before its introduction at First Stage. I thank the Minister and his officials for their early engagement on the Bill and for the briefing on its principles. The briefing was a useful session for the Committee. A number of questions were raised with officials. Members sought clarity on how the Bill will improve accountability and decision-making in the Health Department and on how the Department will manage performance management. The Committee also sought further information on how the Department will ensure that there is a smooth transition when the functions are transferred and the board closes. Members highlighted to officials the importance of enhancing engagement with key stakeholders and asked how the Department will ensure that there is that enhanced engagement with them, including trade union representatives, on the commissioning of health and social care services. Given that the board and its non-executive directors and committees have significant expertise in and knowledge of the prioritisation and commissioning of services, that is especially relevant. The closure of the board may therefore result in an expertise and knowledge gap. There was some discussion about the transfer of staff from the board to the Department and about the roles and responsibilities of officials and their lines of accountability to the Minister. Members again highlighted the need for early engagement with trade unions and staff to ensure as smooth a transition as possible. Provided that it passes Second Stage, the Committee looks forward to engaging with stakeholders and scrutinising the Bill in further detail.

I will now make a few remarks as Sinn Féin health spokesperson. The Health and Social Care Bill is an effort

to reform and address some of the weaknesses across the health and social care sector. It promises to create a more effective and efficient healthcare system, with improved structures that, in turn, will hopefully improve the delivery of health and social care services. The HSC Bill is an integral part of the wider transformation agenda. It proposes to demarcate simply and clearly the structures in the healthcare administration, thus increasing transparency and accountability, which is much needed. Reducing the levels of bureaucracy in any organisation is a positive development. There is little point, however, in simply reorganising the deckchairs. Rather, the transformation of healthcare structures must result in simple and clear lines of responsibility and accountability. There must be a clear chain of command for that accountability. In restructuring the healthcare administration, there must be an effort made to protect the jobs of those within the structures. Redeployment must be assured for all, and the Minister has indicated that that will be the case.

Key issues that the Committee will be concerned about are the very important social care and children's functions. When such issues are talked about, it is crucial that we see continuity and no gaps in those areas. We look forward to discussing how the effective and innovative approach can be enhanced.

I wonder about what the Minister said about the staff being under the direction of a senior civil servant. In the light of the fact that the staff will be dispersed to trusts, the BSO and, in some cases, the Department, how will that be achieved? I look forward to drilling down into those issues in more detail at Committee Stage.

Mrs Cameron: I welcome the opportunity to say a few words on the Health and Social Care Bill at its Second Stage today.

The Bill represents a major bureaucratic change in the manner of governance of our health system through the transfer of responsibilities from the Health and Social Care Board. On 8 April 2014, the then Health Minister, Edwin Poots, announced his intention to commission the former Chief Medical Officer of England, Professor Liam Donaldson, to advise on the improvement of governance arrangements across Northern Ireland's health and social care system. Several months later, the report was published alongside a set of recommendations that are intended to modernise our health system and better equip it to meet the demands and needs of today's society.

On 4 November 2015, the DUP Health Minister, Simon Hamilton, set out the very proposal that we are discussing today as part of a package of administrative reforms. Much of that proposal was based on the Donaldson report, which found our current structures to be overly complex and bureaucratic and identified a lack of clarity in relation to accountability and decision-making as well as a lack of challenge to providers. The review also highlighted how the annual nature of the financial and planning cycle inhibits long-term strategic planning. I mentioned the need for multi-year budgeting in recent Budget debates. Strategic planning cannot be done properly without that foresight.

The public consultation also found that current arrangements are not lean or agile enough to respond quickly to changing demands in health and social care

and that changes should be part of a broader strategy for transformation. If implemented effectively, the closure of the Health and Social Care Board will allow the Department to take firmer strategic control of the health and social care system, allowing cleaner accountability, removing complexity and ensuring that decisions are more efficient and responsive.

The changes proposed in the Bill must be part of a broader strategy for transformation. The restructuring on its own will not resolve all the problems that face our health sector. Significant investment is required in present and new services, and a solution is required to fill many staffing vacancies, ending reliance on agency posts.

The present pandemic has served as a reminder that we cannot keep doing the same things over and over again and expect different results. Health transformation is needed. It needs to happen in a manner that supports staff and patients alike to deliver the best services possible to our country.

Speaking as a DUP representative, we are pleased that the Bill has been introduced. I commend the Minister, Robin Swann, for ensuring that this progress has been made under the current challenging circumstances for his Department. Unfortunately, delays caused by the collapse of the Assembly and by the COVID-19 pandemic have pushed back many of the efforts to properly transform our health service. We must ensure that there is no more delay and strive earnestly to implement what has been recommended to the Executive by many experts for years.

I very much welcome that all staff in the Health and Social Care Board will be redeployed to other roles and that their terms and conditions will be protected through the reform process. It is vital that staff affected by the closure of the Health and Social Care Board are kept fully aware of the changes and are given adequate space to make their views and concerns known.

It is important that these reforms are not taken in isolation but are viewed through the lens of a wider transformation agenda for health and social care. For example, the reform of social care will have a bearing on accountability arrangements and performance management.

Whilst it has been going through a number of very challenging years, not least those of late, we should all be very proud of our National Health Service here in Northern Ireland. I, for one, am proud of all the staff who see their role not just as a job but as a vocation and put their heart into serving and caring for others. We owe it to them to ensure that health transformation is progressed, giving them the resources and support that they need to face the challenges of today.

With the proposed changes, the Department of Health will and must take on more responsibility for the strategic steps necessary to take our health sector forward. It must ensure that true equality of services is available to service users across all regions, allowing more joined-up strategic measures to be made between trusts to improve outcomes and to share resources when needed.

The public perception is often that our health service is far too bureaucratic. The intention of the Bill is to simplify the administrative structures. Having a more streamlined structure in place will help to better focus resources and enable the system to operate more effectively. If, and

once, it is agreed today, I look forward to further scrutiny of the Bill at Committee Stage.

To conclude, I welcome the Second Stage of the Bill. I trust that it will be just one of a number of future legislative steps that will be taken to protect and develop our health service, as was promised most recently to the people of Northern Ireland under the New Decade, New Approach agreement.

Ms Hunter: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the Second Stage of the Health and Social Care Bill. I welcome that the Bill has finally come before the Assembly for debate after the decision to close the Regional Health and Social Care Board was first announced in 2015. My party colleagues and I are largely supportive of the Bill. However, there are a number of points that I will raise today, and I hope that the Minister may be able to address some of our concerns and give us assurances.

The Bill has been a long time in coming, and I hope that it has now provided at least some clarity for the staff of the Health and Social Care Board. Some staff have voiced that they have felt great job uncertainty over the last five years, and I think that that was a very regrettable outcome of the delay and the way in which the original announcement was made. It is, of course, welcome that a hosting arrangement has now been agreed.

An issue that was raised, just moments ago by Pam Cameron and in Committee, is the reliance on agency nurses. An issue that we must urgently address is the lack of nurses in our health service. This is a very important and transformative step in ensuring that our health sector will be able to provide a true equality of services right across the North.

Another concern that I have — I am sure that others across the House will share it, too — is around the closure of the Regional Health and Social Care Board and local commissioning groups. The groups have been an important part of the Health and Social Care Board, and local health professionals are best placed to know what the specific and emerging healthcare needs are within their respective areas. I hope that we will continue to have an aspect of that in our new system. Partnership and co-production in working with communities is how we will deliver better services that meet the needs of local people in each of our constituencies. Can the Minister assure us that local voices and expertise will still be heard and that they will be able to feed into the commissioning process in trust areas as we move forward?

Another concern that I have, in a similar vein, is the issue around the centralisation of power in the Department. While I note the merits and intended consequences of this Bill in giving the Department greater oversight of those functions that will be placed directly in the health and social care trusts, the centralisation of power when it comes to the commissioning of services can have unintended consequences, and I worry about the impact of a regional and rural imbalance. There is often the temptation to place services in Belfast and other cities, and that is an issue. As an MLA for a largely rural constituency, I am all too aware of that, and I often see the impact of services not being evenly distributed across the North, not least on accessibility and the difficulty for many in travelling. I think that social prescribing has been a real positive in these kinds of rural pockets.

As, hopefully, we move into a post-pandemic world, reflecting on the amazing work of our health service, we should also look at how we want our health service to be seen in the future. This is, of course, a huge task that is part of a bigger conversation, which is much more than the Bill that is before us today. However, we can speak to that in the next stage. Local communities and services should be at the heart of our health service. What assurances can the Minister give us today that this legislation will not, in any way, negatively impact on rural communities?

Mr Chambers: The Minister said that the Bill is relatively straightforward in its objective, although it is quite technical in nature. I certainly welcome the Bill at this time, with the certainty that it will bring to staff, given that it has been on the books since 2015. The Minister stated that staff engagement has been, and continues to be, a fundamental part of the process and that consultation with staff and their representatives will be a key part of the development and operation of the transfer scheme for staff. Again, we should welcome that, and we hope that staff will be able to buy in to these changes and understand and support them.

There was quite a robust consultation, back in 2015-16, as the Minister outlined.

It appears to have been quite robust, and the responses received have been given considerable consideration.

11.00 am

The immediate advantages as a result of the Bill will be consistency of decision-making and the delivery of services across the board. The Bill is a small but significant step in the transformation of our health and social care system. My party has had a policy for some time of bringing the work of the various health trusts under one umbrella in the interests of efficiency, better deployment of resources and the enhancement of services to patients. I wonder whether such a move is on the Department's radar at this time.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Minister for introducing the Bill, which has been described as technical in nature. That is an understatement, even though it has only seven clauses. When you read through the schedules, maybe the purpose was that we would put our screens down and give up, but we are not going to. We are discussing the general principles of the Bill, and we all accept that. As other Members have indicated, there is broad support at this stage. I do not think that anyone will argue against lessening the bureaucracy in health and social care. We are all reminded that Bengoa was about systems and not structures and that New Decade, New Approach was about co-production and co-design. I see this as an opportunity, but not to go back and look at it again. The Minister mentioned that the consultation report in 2016 was quite detailed. It was a good consultation with varied responses, but the general thrust was that everybody wants better outcomes for patients.

I appreciate that this is only the Second Stage, but when we get to further scrutiny, as all Members have indicated, perhaps the Minister will take some of these considerations on board. For example, perhaps the Minister will explain the schemes for the transfer of staff, assets and liabilities mentioned in clause 3 and schedule 2.

Like most of us, the Minister probably found out about the revelations concerning the neurology inquiry in yesterday's

'Irish News'. The patients of Dr Watt, and, indeed, of the other consultant now under investigation by the General Medical Council (GMC), want to know what will happen next. What does the Bill mean for those involved in the hyponatraemia inquiry? What does it mean for other ongoing issues? What does it mean for other scandals and other reports? People will be keen to know. They will not look at the detail; they will want to know what it means for them. The public need assurance, and they will not get it from anyone in the Chamber except the Minister.

Some Members mentioned staff, and staff are assets. It is not just about physical assets, it is about the human resources that make up health and social care services. I am very keen to find out what is happening. We also need more detail on the local commissioning end of things. As Alan, Cara and others said, there are concerns, for example, about the impact of the Bill on the urban/rural balance but also on addressing existing health inequalities.

You, Minister, will know about Órlaithí Flynn's work on championing mental health. It is accepted across the board — the Minister did so in his high-level impact assessment — that certain conditions and issues require additional investment and support. That is a decision that he alone must make, but the call for additional investment in health is noted, if not supported. What will those services look like for youngsters in north and west Belfast, particularly those who struggle with their mental health or addiction? What will the transfer of services under clause 3 look like for people like Danielle O'Neill, who is involved in the neurology issue, given her life-changing diagnosis or lack of diagnosis? Whatever comes out of this, those people need to know what the issues are and how they will be impacted.

I know that legislation is legislation, but clause 6, on commencement, states that the Department of Health "may by order appoint" when clauses of the Bill will come into force. I would like a bit more detail on that. Is it all? There are only seven clauses, and, not to be dismissive of any legislation, there are probably two or three that are germane to the dissolution of the Health and Social Care Board. The rest are there because there is a legal responsibility for the transfer of services, along with the schedules and all the language and narrative that goes with them.

Given that we have gone through and are still coming through a historic phase in all our lives, especially those who work in Health and Social Care, I would like a lot more detail on the responsibilities that will be transferred to the Department and to the health and social care trusts. I note the comments of the Minister's colleague about bringing them into one trust, but, irrespective of that, I do not think that you will find anybody who will disagree with having more accountability and transparency. I say this genuinely: Health and Social Care staff need to feel that they can see themselves in whatever legislation comes through the Assembly. We talk about assets, and we all agree that they are assets, but we need to know how and when they are being transferred. We need to know where the lines of accountability are. We need to know what is happening with our local commissioning groups and where those powers and decisions are being transferred to. We need to know what democratic accountability there will be in any new groups, forums or partnerships.

Above all else, we all need to know what is happening with the issues in neurology, which I outlined, hyponatraemia, care homes and services for people with learning and physical disabilities. All those issues that have taken up a lot of time in the Assembly, rightly so, need an explanation. While I appreciate that we are talking about the general principles and will have further opportunities for scrutiny, this is an opportunity to point those matters out so that the Minister and his officials will have time to consider some of the outstanding questions. He may not be able to provide those answers now, but I implore him, particularly given yesterday's revelations in 'The Irish News' to give reassurance to those people as quickly as possible. I know that he was probably as uncomfortable as I and many others were when we read those revelations. That was not the way for those people to find out what is going on.

I support the Second Stage of the Bill.

Ms Bradshaw: I thank the Minister for his statement outlining the Bill. I support the Bill, with some reluctance, as I am unclear about precisely how the implementation of the legislation will provide a genuinely streamlined, more efficient and more transparent system. The fundamental question is this: how will the removal of publicly appointed board members and members of the local commissioning groups, who provide expertise on how the health and social care sector operates and scrutiny of performance, drawing from their own work and background, enhance the delivery of health and social care services? At the Health Committee, I drew a comparison with the removal of the Education Authority, which is the middle layer in the commissioning and operational delivery of education services. In the last few months, we have seen the mass resignation of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) board. That undermined this expertise, and I wonder how the removal of the Health and Social Care Board will improve oversight, scrutiny and local democratic input.

The Bill says little about how exactly the BSO will be improved as part of the process. Currently, far too many positions in the health and social care sector are held on an interim basis. It can take months and months for a post to be advertised and filled. How exactly does any of this constitute streamlining bureaucracy in practice?

The apparent loss of local accountability and input concerns me most. As a councillor, I was on the Belfast LCG before coming to the Assembly. I saw the potential of LCGs and how they worked in practice to inform local population planning, exactly in line with the Bengoa report, and to establish pilot projects such as the integrated care partnership (ICP) falls service, which was rolled out into other areas.

Having consulted the policy background documents again since the Bill was discussed at the Health Committee last week, I remain unclear on why the Public Health Agency (PHA), which has a commissioning role, is untouched by the legislation. In a previous life, in the community and voluntary sector, I found the Public Health Agency one of the few statutory agencies in the public service that was responsive and effective. That was because it had a front-facing culture and there was meaningful and ongoing engagement with the people who were working in the communities and with the groups and sections of society that it aimed to support. As such, it would be helpful to hear, alongside the Bill, how precisely the Department

will be restructured to accommodate that local input and engagement and the additional responsibility that it is taking on, almost in its entirety.

The Bill is predicated on the notion that commissioning is not a cross-cutting issue. That is stated in the accompanying documents, which is interesting because commissioning, as we debated in the Chamber yesterday, is one service that the Minister has argued in the past is cross-cutting. We would like a response from the Minister on that.

The final issue is that the Bill, while apparently all about streamlining, means that additional costs will be incurred. It would be useful to hear what savings will arise from it in years to come.

Although there is little wrong with the Bill in itself, in many ways, it raises more questions than answers. I look forward to further scrutiny of it at Committee Stage. Given that the legislation is mostly about how Northern Ireland is not large enough to do full commissioning on its own, how exactly will the commissioning or contracting of health and social care services be improved for the future? How precisely will new services, such as those for ME, Huntington's disease, long COVID and other conditions that currently lack a fully resourced pathway or service, not get lost in the Department of Health? How will they be commissioned? Where will responsibility lie in identifying planning and engaging with primary and secondary care? How will this make things more efficient?

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister to make a winding-up speech and conclude the debate.

Mr Swann: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Bear with me a moment. I was expecting more contributions, as you can tell, Mr Speaker [*Laughter.*] It is not often that I say that in this place, I assure you.

Mr Speaker: There were few contributions, but all were of quality.

Mr Swann: It is clear from the debate that the construct of the Bill is accepted and agreed but, understandably, there are some concerns about its impact, particularly in relation to accountability, staffing and local involvement in the development and identification of future services. I therefore welcome and thank Members for all the points that they have made, and I thank the Health Committee for its engagement so far and in the future.

I turn to some of the specific issues raised and points made in Members' contributions. In the opening contribution, the Chair of the Committee asked a number of questions and made a number of points.

His first was about how the Department could ensure a standardised approach to tendering for services across the health and social care trusts. The trusts will continue to work within the agreed current procurement guidelines, as the Bill will not impact on their procurement or tendering processes.

11.15 am

A number of Members touched on the issue of accountability, and I was asked to provide granular detail. The Department will be accountable to me for all the functions delivered by former board staff who come under the direction of my Department. The staff will be

led by a civil servant at deputy secretary level, who will be directly accountable to the permanent secretary in the Department for the performance of the former board staff. The permanent secretary is, in turn, accountable to me for the overall performance of the Department.

Queries were raised about the Business Services Organisation's hosting arrangements. Ms Bradshaw raised a number of them. As part of the hosting arrangements, the Business Services Organisation will be accountable to my Department for the delivery of HR services and support to former board staff who will be in its employment but who will be directed by my Department in the operational discharge of their day-to-day responsibilities.

A number of Members asked how the loss of scrutiny by members of the board will change the accountability of those with expertise. I recognise the expertise brought to the table by all board members appointed through public appointments and place on record my thanks to them for the valuable work that they do, which they will continue to do right up until the dissolution of the board. Following the board's closure, the Department will be accountable to me for all the functions delivered by the former board staff under the direction of my Department. The deputy secretary who will be directing former board staff will be a member of our top management group and the departmental management board. The delivery of those functions will be subject to the appropriate level of scrutiny. As Members will be aware, the composition of the departmental management board includes non-executive directors as well.

Pam Cameron, the Deputy Chair of the Committee, and other Members raised the issue of multi-year budgeting and funding for health, never mind for the generalities of the health service, and called for clearer accountability. There is a recognition that this is the first step in bringing about significant change across the health service in Northern Ireland. That has been proposed and promised in the many reviews and documents to which a number of Members referred. I thank all staff in the health and social care system for the work that they do, and continue to do, as we look to streamline structures.

The Deputy Chair also talked about workforce changes and workforce shortages. The Health and Social Care Bill makes provision for the closure of the arm's-length body known as the board. The Bill relates solely to the board and will not have any material impact on any other health and social care body. That also answers Ms Bradshaw's enquiry about the Public Health Agency, which will not be affected by the legislation.

The new operating model will see the former board staff continue to undertake their functions, albeit under the direction of the Department. That approach, although it will streamline structures and reduce bureaucracy, will provide for continuity of service, thus minimising risks to the overall system. The staff will be employed by the Business Services Organisation, but, as I said, they will be led by a senior civil servant at grade 3. I want to make it clear to Members, as well as to staff who may be listening to this, that staff will retain their Health and Social Care terms and conditions throughout their employment with the Business Services Organisation. In addition, no Health and Social Care Board staff will be made redundant as a result of the changes. A programme of work is under way to build capacity and capability in the board structures.

Members asked about consultation and engagement with staff. A staff-side forum has been in place since June 2018 to facilitate trade union engagement and consultation on the change programme. The forum currently meets bimonthly. Additionally, I will say that trade union representation is an integral element of the project work strands set up to co-design new ways of working.

Cara Hunter raised a number of queries, including one about the lack of nurses. Although not connected in any way to the Bill or to the changes, I point out that part of the agreement that led to our return to this place over a year ago was the commissioning of 300 additional training places for nurses over three years.

That has commenced. Those training places are in place and are funded, and we are working through the process of training.

Ms Hunter and Carál Ní Chuilín raised a number of issues on regionalisation versus centralisation. One of the clear approaches that I have taken since coming into office and throughout the pandemic is to look at the regionalisation of services, rather than simply centralising everything towards Belfast. We have seen the need to use all our structures, whereas, in the past, there was always a perception that we would end up closing something or looking at downscaling something. We realise now that the regionalisation approach will benefit us as we come out of the pandemic.

A number of Members — I think that Cara Hunter was the first — raised the local commissioning groups. In effect, the closing of the Health and Social Care Board will remove the statutory requirement for local commissioning groups. However, let me be clear: whilst the Bill will remove the construct that is local commissioning groups, it in no way detracts from the need for local input and intelligence in our planning processes. As I have mentioned, work has begun to develop a new way of planning services that is based on an integrated care approach. A key part of that process will be to take on the learning from the local commissioning groups and bring forward a mechanism to ensure the continuation of local input.

Ms Hunter also talked about the impact on rural communities. I want to make it clear that the statutory obligations of equality screening and impact assessments have been observed in the development of the Bill. Equality screening, a human-rights impact assessment and a regulatory impact assessment were all completed without any impacts being noted.

Mr Chambers mentioned that the Bill was small but extremely significant. He is right: it sets in train a direction that many other Ministers have talked about and brought forward proposals on. The Bill will see the first significant step in making a major structural change to health and social care in Northern Ireland. Many reports and studies have been produced, but this is the legislation that will start to enact some of those recommendations. Mr Chambers referred to our party policy on regionalisation and the need for one trust. That conversation has been had many times and is not part of the Bill. However, as I said earlier, through the regionalisation of services, we have really seen the benefit of all the trusts' specialities coming together and working collaboratively, especially during the past year. That has benefits not just for the delivery of services but especially for the input and output

for our patients, who are at the centre of everything that we do.

Although Carál Ní Chuilín noted that the Bill was technical in nature and felt that, sometimes, she could put down her screen, I noted from her contribution that, at no time, did she do that. She has read the details of the Bill, as I would expect her to do. I identified that when she talked about the transfer of powers and all the functions that are covered, particularly in schedule 2, where it shows the small impacts that the Bill would have and the wider implications of those transfers of power. It is about achieving better outcomes for our citizens and patients. She also asked about the public assurances that I could give. She is right: I was shocked when I saw the headlines in yesterday's papers. It is not something that I expected or that I expect. She will know that, since I have come into office, I have instigated three public inquiries where I see the challenge and where accountability is needed. I will highlight the fact that, in my opening statement, I made assurances about work that has started or been done that the Bill also covers. The Department will continue anything that is being done by or for the board, including legal proceedings, following the board's being closed. All that responsibility will transfer from the Health and Social Care Board to my Department, which is, I believe, the place where it should sit.

Carál raised the legislative provision for local input and setting priorities. While there is no legislative provision for setting priorities or local input, the closure of the Health and Social Care Board results, as we have said, in the end of the requirement for local commissioning groups. That requires my Department to produce a commissioning plan direction and the development of a subsequent commissioning plan. All that then becomes public. That does not, however, detract from the need to ensure local input into the planning process and the need to set strategic priorities and, indeed, the outcomes that the system will be required to deliver. That will continue, but it does not provide the opportunity to improve on the current process. This is now being taken forward as part of the programme of work on how we can plan our services differently, because it is imperative that we allow time for that new way of planning services to be developed and tested before placing anything in statute. The need for legislation will be explored, as work on those developments will continue to form part of the future consultation.

Paula Bradshaw mentioned the vacancies that still exist in BSO. We continually face a challenge to fill those positions. Our recruitment processes have improved, and the number of vacant positions has decreased significantly over the last number of years. That work continues to be progressed through, as I said, the recruitment of new nurses and other staff. There are now regular advertisements for positions available through BSO, other trusts and our Health and Social Care Board. As, I think, I said, the PHA is not included or touched on in any part of the Bill, and I thank Ms Bradshaw for acknowledging the work of the PHA.

Ms Bradshaw raised the issue of whether this work was cross-cutting or controversial: it is not. None of the services mentioned in the Bill that are currently covered by the Health and Social Care Board are controversial or cross-cutting. The debate yesterday that she mentioned

refers to the potential commissioning of a service that is cross-cutting and controversial, and it has been legally advised to me, as Health Minister, that it is. That is why it is a decision for the entire Executive, not just me, to take, no matter what some Members said in the House yesterday.

I appreciate that I have not had the time or the detail to address a number of Members' questions, but I undertake to review Hansard and write to Members on those issues. The debate has been an invaluable opportunity for me to hear at first hand the views of Members on the Bill and on other issues. I wish the Committee well as it begins its crucial scrutiny of the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Health and Social Care Bill [NIA Bill 18/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Second Stage of the Health and Social Care Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Committee.

Members, please take your ease for a moment or two.

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

11.30 am

Private Members' Business

Welfare Support

Mr Easton: I beg to move

That this Assembly highlights the need for a fair and sustainable welfare system in Northern Ireland; notes with concern the deep economic impact of the pandemic and resulting restrictions; stresses the need to meet any related increase in eligibility for, or uptake of, benefits and other forms of financial support for those made redundant or suffering ill-health, as part of the recovery from COVID-19; expresses grave concern that the review of welfare mitigations measures provided for in New Decade, New Approach has not been taken forward as a priority by the Department for Communities; and calls on the Minister for Communities to accelerate that review and to ensure that appropriate and ongoing welfare support is made available to households hardest hit by the effects of the pandemic as the Executive chart a course toward recovery.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

Mr Easton: In the short time that I have, I will cover a range of points, including the number of new benefit claimants that we are witnessing, the continuation of welfare mitigation measures for the next financial year and where we are with the review.

We all know that the financial impact of the pandemic has been severe and that the ongoing restrictions are deeply damaging to our economy. Those points are well known and do not need to be repeated at length. However, there are several points that I wish to make about the depth of the economic crisis that we are now witnessing. I will state at the outset that I understand the constrained financial situation that the Department faces. Nevertheless, I am especially concerned about the number of staff that are involved in processing claims.

The Department failed in its bid for more staff, and current numbers are below what is required under normal circumstances. The longer the restrictions last, the more people who will be out of work and needing to access social security. I have seen estimates of around 60,000 new claimants. That is the result of a Sinn Féin Finance Minister failing to provide the funding for more staff. It is obvious that increased demand and lack of staffing will lead to longer processing times for claimants. Five weeks is already a long time to wait, especially given the current circumstances, so the prospect of individuals having to wait seven or eight weeks for a first payment is unacceptable, particularly for young people, who we know are more likely to face unemployment.

I also want to touch on the number of people who are waiting on personal independence payment (PIP) appeals. That number amounts to the thousands, which is totally unacceptable. There will have to be a concentrated effort to resolve those backlogs, which staff levels are contributing to. The backlogs are also the result of a Sinn Féin Finance Minister failing to provide the funding for staff.

I am thinking in particular about those in the private rented sector, as the delays could push them into debt and further exacerbate the mental health problems brought on by lockdown. There is also an increasing number of families struggling to get by. I am deeply concerned that the Budget not only does not meet the needs of the present economic situation but will mean that there is less support available than we are accustomed to in normal times.

I find the expected cuts to Advice NI particularly troubling. I also note that the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in Westminster recommended the continuation of that advice service. The £1.5 million of planned cuts will see some of the most vulnerable families hit the hardest. The independent support services that Advice NI provides are incredibly valuable in making social security accessible to everyone. Advice NI has been doing great work assisting with the COVID-19 community helpline over the past year. If it is to lose over 40 staff, as has been reported, a vital public service will be lost. The cut is the result of Sinn Féin's Finance Minister failing to provide the funding for the Department. That is why we are minded to support Mr Carroll's amendment, subject to the Minister's response.

Following on from those points, I want to put on record my fear that the Department is not providing funding for the Job Start scheme and other back-to-work programmes. Without those programmes, fewer people will be helped back into the workplace, and the demand for benefits will therefore remain high. On the mainland, over 120,000 young people have benefited from the Kickstart scheme, and it is completely unfair that young people in Northern Ireland will not receive the same opportunities. That, again, is the result of a Sinn Féin Finance Minister failing to provide the funding. We already have a well-known brain drain problem, with many young people from Northern Ireland moving to other parts of the United Kingdom. I worry that this lack of funding will only exacerbate that problem when everything should be done to prevent it.

It was particularly alarming to hear the Department's assessment of the Budget. Even it acknowledged that it will struggle to maintain the same level of services as provided before, and this is at a time when demand is higher than ever before. Not only that, but the Department admitted that it will struggle to assist the economy in its recovery from COVID-19 and to fulfil its obligations under New Decade, New Approach.

The equality impact assessment of the Budget is very negative. We know that youth unemployment is already at over 11% and will only rise without the benefit of the schemes that I mentioned. I also highlight that people with disabilities will be deeply impacted by the inability to provide that economic intervention, and they are likely to find themselves further from work than prior to the pandemic.

I turn to the impact on those who already receive welfare support. Those in receipt of, for example, the bedroom

tax and two-child cap mitigations require certainty. The two-child cap has had a negative impact on almost 4,000 families here. Just under 40,000 households are, through no fault of their own, affected by the bedroom tax. It is due to the lack of available and appropriate social housing, and they should not be punished for that. We are now coming to the end of the financial year, and I appreciate that the Minister has committed to continuing payments beyond the end of March. However, more certainty for people is required, and the sooner that legislation and regulations to do that are brought to this place, the better. I am also aware that regulations are to be brought forward to close loopholes that result in families missing welfare mitigations. I press the Minister to bring those forward as soon as possible.

The review of welfare mitigations that was committed to in New Decade, New Approach will give those who have been impacted more certainty, and it is worrying to see how little that has progressed. That should be an absolute priority for the Minister, and she should engage with the families who have been affected and with relevant groups. I am thinking particularly of the Cliff Edge Coalition, for example. The review needs to take account of those who are most seriously impacted on by the economic changes, including those with disabilities, young people and women. The Minister has also not yet been able to tell the Committee what specific issues will be addressed in the review. That lack of clarity is only adding to the stress that families are facing at this time.

Before I finish, I will touch on a few of my concerns. I have spoken about terminal illness before in the Assembly. I am deeply disappointed that funding has not been found to end the unacceptable six-month criterion for individuals who are seeking access to welfare support.

I am also disappointed that there will be no increase in funding to the Supporting People programme that is run by the Housing Executive. That is the result of a Sinn Féin Finance Minister failing to provide the funding to the Department. That scheme helps almost 20,000 people across this country. It does extremely valuable work in helping them to live independent lives, and it deserves more funding than it will receive. The lack of attention paid to that programme in the Budget will be felt particularly by homelessness services, which have been vital in providing emergency accommodation during the pandemic.

In conclusion, the vaccine roll-out is giving people hope that the end of the pandemic is in sight. However, with that in mind, we must keep in mind the incredibly damaging impact of the ongoing restrictions on many in society. Through no fault of their own, many will be laid off and will need benefits. It is their right that our welfare system is there to support them in a timely manner and assist them to get back to work, which is widely recognised as the most significant factor in alleviating poverty.

The extension of the welfare mitigations has been widely recommended. It has been committed to and must be taken forward. The review is much needed, has been committed to and must be accelerated. It is clear that the Budget will not stretch as far as is required. I therefore call on the Minister to do all that she can to lobby for increased funding to ensure that ongoing support can be provided to the most vulnerable in our society. Not only that, but I press her to take forward the review of welfare mitigations

as fast as possible, as the lack of progress is frankly unacceptable.

Mr Carroll: I beg to move the following amendment:

At end insert:

“, to overturn the recent withdrawal of funding for advice centres and to reallocate the money to allow for the continuation of vital advice services.”

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Carroll will have 10 minutes in which to propose the amendment and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Carroll: I am glad to have the opportunity today to discuss and shine a spotlight on the state of welfare support. We have been inundated with messages of support from people and organisations from all backgrounds and communities right across the North for our amendment to today's motion, which seeks to restore threatened funding for advice service workers.

It is often said that any society should be judged on how it treats its most vulnerable members. The Stormont Government have refused to protect the most vulnerable in society. Instead of championing the needs of the vast majority here from all communities, the present and previous Stormont Governments have put the interests of the Tories, the politically connected and big corporations first. Instead of standing up to the Tories, the Stormont Government have rolled over and sought to justify their pathetic decisions. Is it not the hypocrisy of all hypocrisies that we are discussing a DUP motion criticising a Sinn Féin Minister for Communities with responsibility for the state of our welfare support system?

The motion calls for a “fair and sustainable welfare system” in order to protect:

“households hardest hit by the effects of the pandemic”.

The DUP's concern today for those trapped in our dysfunctional and punitive welfare system appears to be devout and pious, but the reality is that it was the DUP and Sinn Féin, along with the Alliance Party, that voted to implement destructive Tory welfare reforms that have done so much damage to our communities.

In fact, over the past 20 years, all the Stormont Government parties, nationalist and unionist, have played a crucial role in making our welfare support system more punitive and harder to access. The facts are that the introduction of Tory welfare reform has led to a direct increase in poverty across all our communities. It has led directly to increased child poverty. It has led directly to increased family poverty. That is utterly shameful, and that all happened before the pandemic.

The mitigation measures did not protect the vulnerable and the low-paid enough, otherwise poverty and deprivation levels would have decreased. Instead, the opposite has happened. The growing number of people from the Falls, the Shankill and across Belfast and from the Fountain, the Creggan and across Derry, as well as people from Ballymena, Coleraine, Portadown, Craigavon, Newry — the list goes on — depending on food banks is the evidence of that.

The effects of the pandemic recession have meant that many more people need access to welfare support and food banks. The pandemic has worsened all the deprivation and social inequality trends that the DUP and Sinn Féin will probably tell us that they are concerned about today. It is utter nonsense. The Stormont Government are responsible for the fact that we do not have a fair welfare system. We need to reverse completely the welfare reforms that are causing so much damage to people. Today, it is crucial that the Assembly vote to stop plans for the Communities Minister to slash funding for advice service workers and centres. That is what my amendment seeks to do, and I hope that Members will support it.

It makes no sense for the Executive to withdraw funding for advice service workers at a time when tens of thousands more people need help with their benefits, which are hard to navigate. Our advice centres are already completely overwhelmed. Advice workers are exhausted, and news of the threatened cut has left them further demoralised, and they have told me so in the past day. What message does it send out to the people in all our communities who need help that the Executive are going to slash funding for the workers who will help them access benefits so that they can feed their children and keep the heat on?

The work of organisations such as the Belfast Citywide Tribunal Service (BCTS), which my constituency office uses, Advice North West (ANW), the South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP) and many others has been absolutely crucial in protecting and helping people through the pandemic. We need to resource our advice providers fully to make sure that everyone who needs help is able to access it, but we need to go much further. We need to close the bedroom tax loophole, close the benefit cap loophole, end the five-week wait for universal credit (UC) and get rid of the two-child tax credit limit.

We need a full review of the present mitigations, and, if we are serious about protecting people during the pandemic, we need to create a properly funded support scheme that gives people the ability to self-isolate and does not force them to choose whether to do so or not. The present discretionary support scheme simply does not work.

Ultimately, we need to radically change the priorities of the Stormont Government and Executive and begin to put people first, as promised in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. I look forward to today's debate and ask Members to support my amendment.

11.45 am

Ms Mullan: I welcome the motion on welfare support. Since the introduction of the draconian so-called welfare reform measures by the Tory Government as part of their misguided austerity agenda, Sinn Féin has been firmly opposed to cuts aimed at punishing rather than protecting those in receipt of welfare benefits. The Fresh Start Agreement in 2015 established an unprecedented welfare package of £585 million that Sinn Féin argued and fought hard to have established. I am proud of the role that my party, particularly the late Martin McGuinness, played in achieving that. The measures need to be maintained and built on.

There was a time when the party that now proposes this motion was utterly opposed to any form of mitigation that

would set us out as distinct from the cuts agenda being played out in Britain. Nevertheless, we are in a different time, and I very much welcome the cross-party support that now exists for the mitigations. I hope that that support extends to prioritising the funding at the Executive without delay.

In January 2020, we all signed up to 'New Decade, New Approach', and my party ensured that welfare mitigations were included. Unfortunately, we have yet to see the British Government live up to the commitments they made in 'New Decade, New Approach', not only on welfare but on other areas.

Weeks into the re-establishment of the Assembly, we were hit by COVID. The Communities Minister was quick to act to support the most vulnerable, both practically and financially. As an MLA for Foyle, I am grateful for the £1.5 million given to Derry City and Strabane District Council for the COVID community support scheme, alongside the central support of access to food packages and support for fuel and interventions on well-being. I acknowledge the work and support of the community and advice sector in delivering that vital support.

The Communities Minister introduced changes to the social security system to make it easier for those affected by COVID to access financial support during the crisis, in particular enhancing the discretionary support fund to provide a grant payment for short-term living expenses for those affected by COVID and experiencing crisis or financial hardship. She later increased the level of the available award, raised the income threshold and included students.

Mitigations and easing the benefit system, while welcome, cannot eradicate poverty. If we are serious about tackling poverty, we must identify the root causes. I welcome the work of the Minister and her Department, along with the members of the expert panel and the co-design working group who are developing a long-term anti-poverty strategy.

There are clear priorities that must be explored as part of any review, and I commend organisations such as the Human Rights Commission, Cliff Edge Coalition, Advice NI, Marie Curie and so many others who have invested time and effort raising awareness of them and highlighting their impact. Over the last number of weeks, I have met some of those organisations, and they are rightly concerned about further cliff edges, time frames and a lack of budget for extending the welfare mitigation package.

I welcome the Minister's commitment to closing the loopholes in the bedroom tax and the benefit cap mitigations. I am heartened by the support from parties here for the mitigation, and I hope that it will be consistent and evident when it comes before the Executive, when the Budget is being decided.

The Minister has clearly said in the Chamber that she fully supports the independent advice sector and will find the money in the Budget to cover the £1.5 million. For that reason, we will not support Mr Carroll's amendment, which is an attempt to grab a cheap headline. We support the motion and look forward to the proposer of the motion prioritising these issues in the Budget negotiations at the Executive and supporting the Finance Minister.

Mr Durkan: Having a fair and sustainable welfare system here is crucial, now more than ever, as society prepares to address the emerging challenges brought about by the COVID pandemic. Of course, the SDLP made attempts to amend the Welfare Reform Act to remove its most draconian elements, while others in the Chamber voted against those amendments, and we got the Welfare Reform Act in its full, devastating glory.

We welcome the fact that a mitigations package to the tune of £500 million was agreed, and I welcome the fact that it has shielded so many from the worst impacts of welfare reform. However, we cannot pretend that there has been no impact: the disastrous roll-out of universal credit and its intolerable five-week wait, which has led to increased hardship and debt for many families, and the bedroom tax that, we were promised, would never grace our doorsteps yet is squeezing over 225 households. Not only did the DUP, Sinn Féin and Alliance rubber-stamp the Tory Welfare Reform Act, they left people here vulnerable to further attacks against which the mitigations provided no cover, including the benefit cap and the two-child rule, which have had a devastating impact on many low-income families. For those reasons, I welcome and support the motion and implore the Minister to bring forward not only an extension of the mitigation package but an improvement on it that closes the existing loopholes. I know that that is something that the Minister is seeking to address urgently because Ministers have told us consistently for the past 15 months that they are dealing with this hugely important issue urgently.

In the interim, people have been pushed to another cliff edge while others have fallen off the precipice completely. The review of welfare mitigations must be progressed as a priority, but the need for scrutiny by us and, importantly, by experts from the sector must be afforded in line with the principles of co-design. Sadly, more and more people are falling into the benefits system, and those numbers are set to rise dramatically as the economic impact of COVID becomes clear. It is vital that there is a safety net for those people, yet a safety net is only as good or as useful as the people holding it. The DFC workforce has witnessed a 127% increase in universal credit claims: 1,400 new staff are needed to address that growing demand, yet none has been recruited, putting further pressure on overstretched workers and resulting in increased hardship for those waiting to have their claims processed.

It is crucial that individuals and families facing financial hardship can access the vital support to which they are entitled and that they so desperately need. The independent advice sector plays a hugely important role in helping people to do that, as trained professionals and sympathetic people who go above and beyond to help those in need. The kite flown in the draft Budget for an already under-resourced sector to suffer a £1.5 million cut was grossly misjudged. It was a slap in the face to advice workers, causing them massive anxiety at a time when they are under unprecedented pressure. I support the sentiment of the amendment, although I am not entirely sure of its accuracy, given that I never thought that the inclusion of those cuts in the draft Budget was anything more than a cynical political exercise.

The motion refers to financial support for those suffering financially due to COVID. We had submitted an amendment that noted with concern the very limited

financial support provided to those on a low income who have to self-isolate, which is having a detrimental impact on reducing community transmission of COVID-19. My amendment was not accepted, but I reiterate our call for a sufficient self-isolation grant rather than the discretionary support grant hybrid that we have, which does not help people enough and does not help enough people. That is borne out by the shameful fact that, at a time when we have never had more people in need, the Minister handed back an underspend of £2 million that was meant to protect people against poverty and its effects.

We have to make a decision: can we afford a system that protects people from poverty? We cannot afford poverty and the problems that arise as a result of it.

Ms Armstrong: I thank those who tabled today's motion. I will not start to get into party politics over this. The simple fact is that, after today, we have two plenary days before the Easter recess — before the end of March — and people out there are still not clear on what welfare mitigations will look like beyond 1 April.

We have all talked and worked with the Cliff Edge Coalition and academics who have written to us and to the Department and the Minister. We all know exactly what the problem is. COVID has been devastating for so many people who have had to enter the benefit system for the first time. I hope that, as a society, we recognise that being on benefits is not simply sitting at home and scratching yourself; it is about having to fill out forms, having to account for where you are and having to live in poverty. It is extraordinarily difficult.

I recognise the amendment about the advice sector that has been moved. What I say about the advice sector is that those in it are among the heroes who have helped our society throughout COVID. When I came to be a politician, I looked forward to helping people, but I did not realise just how many people would come through my door looking for advice support. I too turn to those partners who have the expertise and work with people daily on the details and complexities of the welfare system and help them to get through that.

Today, as Mr Durkan has mentioned, there is a difficulty with the amendment, but I will support it, because I believe that, when the Minister and the Department come forward with welfare mitigation updates, there will be payment for the advice service. I expect there to be payment for the advice service because of the increasing number of calls and cases that it is working on.

As I said, there are two plenary days left before the Easter recess. I find it difficult and feel guilty that we have not been able to clarify for the general public exactly what is happening with their welfare mitigations. I know that legislation has been taken to the Committee about the social sector size criteria, also known as the "bedroom tax", providing for an extension to that. Cliff Edge Coalition and many others have highlighted the fact that we still do not know about the benefit cap loophole. For those who do not know, the benefit cap affects individuals who were not in receipt of the relevant benefits in 2016, when the welfare reform mitigation package was first introduced. They are unable to access mitigation from the benefit cap. In addition, those whose circumstances have changed have lost access to the benefit cap mitigation.

The number of households capped has risen to over 1,000. A significant reason for the impact is, of course, COVID-19. The end of the nine-month grace period for first-time universal credit claimants at the end of 2020, the ensuing economic crisis and the anticipated end of the furlough scheme are expected to increase that figure. That cap costs families £200 per month. The bedroom tax loophole costs £50 per month. The five-week wait for universal credit, as others have mentioned, causes debt that people did not expect to have at a time when they are in crisis. The universal credit two-child limit just does not make sense for Northern Ireland. It means that, for a third or additional child, a family will lose out on £2,780 per child per year. The local housing allowance cuts in the private rented sector also cause difficulties for low-income households in that sector.

We all know this. The Minister knows this. The Department knows this. We have a society that is living with poverty, not resolving it. It has been five months since this place debated a motion about terminal illness tabled by Mr Easton. We all agreed. There was cross-party agreement in the House that the six-month rule was to be removed and that the Minister was immediately to legislate to remove that rule. That has not happened. I appreciate that DWP has not made a move on that, but this place can.

It is time to be fair to people. It is time to recognise the advice sector heroes. It is time to work together, rather than pull each other apart, to help people to survive COVID and the economic crisis that is coming towards us in the new financial year. As Alliance spokesperson for communities, I joined the Communities Committee from Infrastructure just over a year ago. I have found it to be one of the most challenging Departments. The issues are among the most challenging because they are very personal. It is about people.

I really do not envy the work of the departmental staff or the Minister. It is extremely personal, emotional and difficult, but we need to end that uncertainty for people. I ask the Minister to, please, if she can, let us know what the welfare mitigations will be.

12.00 noon

Mr Newton: I am pleased to support the motion. It has been tabled out of frustration and a strong desire to see the Minister for Communities make progress for all sections of our community, especially the many who are suffering real disadvantage and living in social need. The frustration is also caused by the lack of progress on matters that impact on a daily basis on the lives of families and individuals. The Minister needs to help but is failing those who are unemployed and those who need training and opportunities to get into a job. The Minister needs to help families and individuals who are struggling in our benefits system, as other Members said.

Many millions of pounds have sat with the Minister for 10 years, which is money that should be providing upgraded football stadia plus supporting construction jobs, but when the Minister sends her plan with no budget, targets, objectives or outcomes, it would be irresponsible not to raise those matters in the Chamber. The Minister has many talented, experienced and committed departmental staff. In fact, she has a super team. Therefore, the lack of progress is all the more worrying. Ministers in other Departments have rolled out detailed and measured

plans. The Minister for Communities needs to do the same. The Minister needs to show leadership. It is totally unsatisfactory that no progress has been made on the many important matters that are in the Minister's areas of responsibility.

Let me quote from the 'NDNA' document:

"The Executive will extend existing welfare mitigation measures beyond March 2020, when they are currently due to expire."

It continues:

"A review of welfare mitigation measures will be taken forward as a priority, with any agreed measures in place before March 2020."

Now, let me refer to the Minister's progress or, rather, her lack of progress on the review of welfare mitigations. The Minister recently indicated:

"the specific issues that will be considered as part of the review of welfare mitigation measures have not been finalised".

The Minister said that details of the format and planned engagement:

"will be shared with the Committee for Communities at the earliest opportunity".

There has been no contact from the Minister asking for an item to be placed on the Committee's forward work plan. Given the lack of progress, in the interim, the Minister has settled for the use of four instruments only to extend existing measures. Mr Durkan is right that everything is being addressed urgently but urgency never comes.

It is entirely unacceptable that little or no progress has been made towards the review of welfare support mitigations. With that lack of action, the Minister is failing families at a time of deep uncertainty and great societal upheaval. The Minister is treading water. What we need from the Minister is an ambitious timescale for introducing new mitigations. Having previously collapsed the Assembly, leaving claimants bereft of any hope of greater support, it is totally wrong that Sinn Féin should preside over another cliff edge for vulnerable households as the effect of the pandemic on jobs and incomes bites even more severely. With no progress towards a strengthened set of welfare mitigations, the risk of adding further hardship to those who are in desperate need of support and protection is high.

I will conclude with this: the frequently used Sinn Féin phrases, "It's all about Tory austerity", "The allocation from Westminster isn't enough", "We need more money" and "The Government don't give us enough time to spend money" are shallow and counterfeit. In answer to a question from me, the Minister confirmed that her budget had increased in each of the previous three years.

Mr Allen: Since getting involved in politics back in 2015, I have engaged repeatedly with constituents across the spectrum, not just in East Belfast but across Northern Ireland. Often, they understand what is being attempted to be achieved by the streamlining of our social security system. If we look at our legacy system, what do we see? We see that we had income-based income support, income-based employment support allowance and

industrial injuries. It was unwieldy. There were so many benefits that it was difficult to navigate through them. On the surface, it made perfect sense to streamline that system by introducing universal credit. However, in reality, we do not have a streamlined system. It is not a system that constituents and everyday people find it easy to navigate. Daily, my team and I support constituents who find it very difficult to navigate the universal credit system. They are unable to work with IT, and it seems that no measures are in place to help them. We are having to engage repeatedly with the universal credit team, who, I might add, are terrific. I pay tribute to them. Repeatedly, they step up to the mark. The problem is not them. It is not their policy, but they are implementing a system that they have to work within.

The argument around the welfare reform mitigations has been well made. It is one that we have heard for many years. We know what mitigations may be working and those that are not. Various groups, including the Cliff Edge Coalition, have presented to the Communities Committee on many occasions. They have highlighted and demonstrated the additional mitigations that they feel are required. However, little to no action has been taken on that. I am frustrated, and I understand why Members tabled the motion. I thank them for doing so, because I see the daily impact of welfare reform on my constituents and on Northern Ireland as a whole. It is not fair to blame it solely on Tory welfare cuts and others. What is the Assembly doing to address it? What are we doing to address fuel poverty? What are we doing to address the long-term effects of the impact on people's lives? I welcome the heating payment, for example, that was brought forward in response to COVID. I did not necessarily agree with the wider policy, but I understood that individuals' heating costs had risen. However, these are short-term solutions to a long-term problem. Perhaps the Minister will set out the long-term plan to address the impact on individuals.

Job Start and labour market interventions receive no allocation. The draft Budget presents a bleak situation for the Minister's Department, and I do not envy her. It is easy to sit on the sidelines and critique, but I will give the Minister my full support and assistance from within the Committee in any way that I can to support the people who need it. Does the Minister have jump leads at the ready to kick-start Job Start? Where is it? I have spoken to many people, and I could throw out catchy sound bites and phrases. That is well and fine, but the reality is that I have spoken to many young people who were preparing to avail themselves of that scheme, and their hopes were dashed when the rug was pulled from under them. Where do we go with that?

Like others, I do not fully understand the rationale for the amendment from the Member across the way. The Minister is on the record as stating that she is firmly committed to the independent advice sector, and I believe that that funding will be found. I pay tribute and give credit to the independent advice sector. My office utilises it. I have sought training, as an MLA, to navigate the unwieldy and difficult social security system. It is not easy. I have a basic understanding and knowledge of how to support and signpost constituents through the social security system, but our independent advice sector has additional layers of expertise and professionalism that are often needed. I support the calls for an urgent review of the welfare

reform mitigations, and I call for its recommendations and proposals to be brought to the Committee thereafter.

Minister, I note your legislative timetable. It was indicated to the Communities Committee that you hoped to introduce legislation on the social sector size criteria by February 2021. That is another target missed. From a question for written answer that I tabled, I recall that your Department indicated that legislation has been shared with the Executive and that responses have been received. Perhaps you can provide a definitive timeline for when the Communities Committee and other colleagues in the Chamber will see that legislation and a timeline for when we will see the regulations that will be introduced to amend the loopholes.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I was loath to interrupt the Member, because I could see the passion with which he was speaking on the issue. I remind all Members, however, that comments should be directed through the Chair. Ministers should not be addressed directly as "Minister" in the House.

Mr Sheehan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate today. I spoke recently about the campaign that the Manchester United footballer Marcus Rashford launched to secure free meals for disadvantaged children in England when they were not in school. The English media eulogised and lionised Marcus Rashford as a result of that, and rightly so. He also got a gong in the Queen's honours list, and the Tory Government were embarrassed into a humiliating climbdown on the issue of free school meals. I was wondering why we had never thought of doing something like that, and then I realised that we had. The Finance Minister made funding available for holiday hunger long before Marcus Rashford's campaign. You would not have known it from the media coverage here or from some of the politicians who sit in the Assembly, but the Executive were well ahead of the curve on the issue of holiday hunger.

Another issue that has made a real and meaningful difference to people's lives is that of welfare mitigations. No, we were not able to withstand the full force of the Tory welfare cuts, but we certainly blunted their worst excesses. In fact, the £585 million welfare mitigation package was a remarkable achievement, and one that is the envy of other jurisdictions, particularly Scotland. I am very proud of the role that Sinn Féin played in protecting the most vulnerable in society. I sometimes think that I am living in a parallel universe when I hear some of the comments about and attacks on Sinn Féin in here today, because it was Sinn Féin that stood alone and out in front by refusing to accept the Tory cuts, and it was Sinn Féin that was responsible for the mitigation package of £585 million that was secured.

Standing up for the most vulnerable in society is part of who we are, and Deirdre Hargey emphasised that in the first few weeks of her tenure as Communities Minister, when she said that her role:

"is to stand up for the poorest and most disadvantaged in society, to target resources towards those most in need and to ensure that we do have a rights based approach to the provision of services".

In that context, I welcome the Minister's commitment to carrying out a review of the discretionary support fund, which was set up by the Executive a number of years ago

to support people experiencing financial hardships. The pandemic has shown that that scheme is needed more than ever, but it has also shown that it must be refined and streamlined to make it as accessible and effective as possible for people when they need it most. The review is evidence that the Minister is listening to concerns and is committed to making improvements.

The Minister has also acknowledged the importance of the provision of advice support services and is committed to ensuring that those services continue. I agree wholeheartedly with the comments of Kellie Armstrong in her assessment of the role that the advice sector has played during the pandemic. We owe it a massive debt of gratitude.

On the broader issue of the need for a fair and sustainable welfare system, the pandemic has highlighted many flaws that currently exist, and there are clear priorities that must be explored as part of any review. I commend the Human Rights Commission, the Cliff Edge Coalition, Advice NI, Marie Curie and many others that have been mentioned by many Members today. Those organisations have invested time and effort in raising awareness of the problems that exist.

I welcome the Minister's commitment to review the issues of the bedroom tax and the benefit cap.

12.15 pm

There is much learning to be taken from the many changes that have been brought in as a result of the pandemic, such as telephone assessment and the enhancements to the discretionary support fund, which I have already mentioned. The real priority at the moment should be to extend the reach of the mitigation package in a real and meaningful way. That will require proper resourcing that needs to be agreed by the Executive. I welcome the support here today for the mitigations. I hope that that will be followed up at Executive level. It is just a pity that there was not the same level of consensus when the original mitigation package was being secured.

Mr McNulty: A society will be judged, as others have said, by how it treats its most vulnerable people. The pandemic has pushed people into the benefits system more than ever before. You cannot put a number on the people who have been impacted. The Department for Communities failed in its bid for more staff from the Sinn Féin Finance Minister: why?

The welfare mitigations extension was announced in 'New Decade, New Approach'. Fifteen months on, we are no further on, despite the fact that we are two weeks away from a cliff edge, when the current arrangements are due to end. Legislation to close the bedroom tax loophole has not been passed. That will impact on over 227 households, which will lose, on average, £50 per month. That will lead to significant rent arrears and increase the risk of housing stress and homelessness. The legislation to close the benefit cap loophole has not yet been passed either. All of the impacted families have children, and 77% are lone parents. By October 2020, 1,000 families were impacted. That number is likely to have risen steeply since. All those who began claiming universal credit at the beginning of the pandemic will have come to the end of a nine-month benefit cap grace period in December. We have no figure from the Department in that regard.

The families affected lose an average of £200 per month. In one example, a family with four children has lost £800 per month, which, after housing costs, leaves them with a total income that is 68% below the poverty line. That is all from the party of so-called social justice, the "Blame the Tories" party, the "Blame Tory Austerity" party. The DUP is pointing fingers over the aisle, but you two guys are in it together. You have been the parties leading the Executive for the past 10 years. Universal credit, the children cap and PIP are the legacy of the DUP, Sinn Féin and Alliance handing welfare reform back to the Tories. You cannot blame the Tories when you give them the power. You cannot blame the Brits when you give them the power. Let us not forget who trooped through the Lobbies in the House to hand welfare powers to the Tories in London. No more blaming the Brits: you gave the Brits the power.

It really beggars belief that you could countenance cutting the advice and support sector at the moment. Those people help families and individuals who are on their knees. How do you possibly countenance taking money away from them? I am so thankful to the advice sector and for community advice. It does work on the ground to help and guide people who would never have countenanced the possibility of being in the benefits sector but find themselves there because of the pandemic. Our Communities Minister is countenancing taking money off that sector at this time. How can that be? The party of social justice? Not likely.

I share the concerns about the advice sector in Mr Carroll's amendment, and I share Mr Durkan's cynicism about the proposal to cut support to the sector in the first place. Would any Minister, backed up by their Finance Minister, propose such a cut to those who need the help most in our society? The worst of the health pandemic has passed, but the economic and jobs impacts will go on long into the future. It will get only worse. I will be even more cynical, but can you imagine a Minister in Dublin proposing such a cut? The Minister and her party colleagues would march on the Dáil lawn. If it was a London Minister, the MP for South Down would be standing outside Westminster twiddling his thumbs, shouting about it and saying, "Do not blame us. Blame the Brits. Blame Tory austerity."

I am appalled that we are now weeks away from a cliff edge and there has been no proposal by the Minister. The Finance Minister is struggling to spend money and saying that he may have to hand money back to London. Here is the case for spending it on the most vulnerable and those who need it most. Support them now. Put food on their table and a roof over their head. What are the obstacles to the implementation of the mitigations? Is the money not there? As I said yesterday, the Finance Minister was handing out money hand over fist. Tell us what the obstacles are so that we can all work together to find solutions to help those who need it most.

Ms Anderson: I must admit to having a wry smile on my face when I saw the DUP motion. Traditionally, the DUP has consistently positioned itself against Sinn Féin on many social and economic issues, including welfare mitigation. I hope that the concern expressed by the DUP is a real change of heart. Whatever triggered it — opinion polls, who knows? — it is welcome. The DUP now realises that poverty affects people across the North and that Sinn Féin's efforts to mitigate the worst impact of Tory austerity were the right thing to do.

During the past year, Minister Hargey has put in place a range of measures to mitigate the adverse social impact of the pandemic. She has worked tirelessly to ensure that welfare support is made available to the households that have been hit hardest. The Minister has already confirmed that she not only intends to continue mitigations but wants to strengthen them by legislating to close loopholes in the bedroom tax and benefit cap provisions so that more people will benefit. It was Sinn Féin that put up a fight for vulnerable people and vulnerable families across the North against fierce opposition by the British Government and, indeed, the DUP, and you know that.

Sinn Féin negotiated and secured £585 million for welfare mitigation of Tory austerity. The British Government were adamant that unmitigated welfare cuts would be imposed without top-up payments and with full-blown sanctions: Sinn Féin refused to let that happen. To date, almost 85,000 people in the North have benefited from the mitigation package that Sinn Féin demanded, including the 47,000 homes protected from the bedroom tax. The Comptroller and Auditor General painted a stark picture of what the alternative would have been without the protections secured by Sinn Féin.

Minister Hargey also wants to end the British Government's scandalous two-child policy and wants the £20 uplift in universal credit to be maintained. Minister Hargey is acutely aware that, in places like Derry, the number of people claiming universal credit has increased by 50% since December 2019 — an increase of over 2,100 people. Other tangible supports made by Minister Hargey include the removal of the seven-day wait for new claims for employment and support allowance; changes to the rules for sickness and maternity pay; and the much-needed funeral expenses scheme. Food boxes were delivered to 200,000 homes in need, and 220,000 people recently received an additional £200 fuel support grant.

Poverty has not just materialised from the COVID-19 pandemic; it existed as a result of deep-set regional inequalities and a lack of jobs and opportunities being targeted where they were needed the most, especially in places like Derry. All of that was layered over by a decade of cold, calculated Tory austerity from London that has stifled economic growth and wages. If the DUP is genuinely concerned about poverty mitigation measures, I hope that it will support the Minister's request for further funding. I also hope that, when the anti-poverty strategy comes forward, the DUP will not only support a ring-fenced budget for its delivery but will ensure that its Ministers allocate resources in their Departments towards addressing poverty.

Thankfully, it is a Sinn Féin Minister of the calibre of Deirdre Hargey who is at the helm of the Department for Communities, works every day to protect the most vulnerable in our society and is determined to deliver the welfare mitigation review, as stated in 'New Decade, New Approach'. Sinn Féin Minister Deirdre Hargey will go down in history as a Minister who has played a vital role in tackling poverty and working to create a fair and just society. The Sinn Féin Members in the Assembly and thousands more in society are very proud of Minister Deirdre Hargey.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have time for one more contribution. I am mindful of the fact that, thus far in the debate, nine Members have spoken who represent parties

of government and one has spoken who is not part of the Government. Therefore, I will use my discretion and call Miss Rachel Woods.

Miss Woods: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I fully appreciate that.

COVID-19 has plunged so many into hardship here, and the reality of the pandemic's impact is that it has fallen disproportionately on the most vulnerable individuals along racial, ethnic, occupational, gender and socio-economic lines. Inequalities in people's protections show the urgency of the changes needed to protect people and put them at the forefront of our population's health and well-being in future.

The most recent social policy update from Community Advice Ards and North Down, which gives incredible help to people in my constituency, found that the most significant concerns raised during quarter 3 in 2020 were employers having to contribute more to the coronavirus job retention scheme in late October; ongoing difficulties with the five-week wait; welfare payments being insufficient to live on, often requiring charitable support; and the difficulty in accessing discretionary support.

The £20 uplift in universal credit at the start of the pandemic was a clear recognition that the basic payments were not enough, and to go back to what it was is unthinkable. Research by the Trussell Trust shows that the uplift has provided vital breathing space to hard-pressed budgets, with seven in 10 people on universal credit since early 2020 saying that the increase has made it easier to afford essentials. That anyone would even countenance taking the uplift away from the poorest and most vulnerable in our society is shocking. We know that there is no going back to the way that things were before the pandemic.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Miss Woods: I will not, sorry. I have no time.

We politicians talk about building back better, so I ask the Minister and those who tabled the motion this: should any attempts be made to scrap the UC uplift in Westminster, what will she and they do to ensure that claimants here are protected and keep the rate that they are on?

The question for the Executive as a whole is whether they will dig deep and organise their budgets to effectively safeguard our most vulnerable people from the cruelty of imposed austerity. We urgently need better self-isolation support for those affected by COVID, as current discretionary payments are too difficult to access, are costly to administer and often cover only short-term expenses. That is not just because of the pandemic. In 2019-2020, the Trussell Trust food banks alone gave out over 45,000 three-day emergency food parcels in Northern Ireland. One in five children here were already in absolute poverty, and 42% of people in Northern Ireland were already in fuel poverty. Navigating the complex web of social security was already a challenge, especially for vulnerable persons or those with complex needs. To those of us who listened to the young people who made a presentation to the Executive Office Committee on 17 February, it was no surprise that, of those who were surveyed by the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, 74% did not have faith and confidence in leadership from government. The most shocking statistic in the survey

was that one in 10 young people who were asked about the problems that were facing them at the moment selected food, feeling unsafe at home, housing rights and homelessness.

Legislation must be introduced and passed in order to extend the welfare reform mitigations. The Minister has committed to closing the loopholes in bedroom tax and benefit cap mitigations, but that has yet to be delivered. The five-week wait for universal credit must be amended. The disgusting and shameful two-child cap needs to go, as must the six-month rule for terminal illness.

12.30 pm

We know that there is a link between independent advice and welfare mitigations, especially with universal credit managed migration to come down the line, which will have a huge impact on many people. That will stop people's core benefits and then move them onto universal credit, so there is scope for things to go badly wrong, especially for vulnerable people who are on income-based employment and support allowance. We must protect funding for our independent advice sector. Appeals should not be rushed through as we reopen from the pandemic, as representation is so important for people and for their appeal result.

As the Executive chart a course for recovery and look to longer-term economic planning, will they prioritise health and well-being, or will they continue on an obsessive quest for growth and GDP that will only exacerbate and entrench inequalities? We must rethink what we value as a society and an economy in the light of what the pandemic has laid bare. We need a radical overhaul of how we do business that will reduce inequalities in wealth and income on the basis of a just transition where no one is left behind. We must build an economy where markets are designed and public money is used to conserve and regenerate resources rather than squander them. It is not rocket science; it is strategic investment in public services and green jobs. It is a just transition that will address poverty, redirect wealth into the local economy and improve health and well-being. It is needed now more than ever.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey, to respond to the debate, and she will have 15 minutes. However, I am mindful of the fact that the Business Committee is due to meet at 1.00 pm, so, if we want this item of business dispatched before that, it may be useful if Members did not use up their full time allocation, otherwise the Division may have to wait until 2.45 pm, after Question Time.

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I thank all the contributors to this important debate and welcome the opportunity to speak.

A couple of people made the claim about there being a cliff edge at the end of this month. I assure people listening that the money for the existing mitigations will continue to flow beyond the end of this month. As with last year, there will be no cliff edge and no stopping of those payments. They will continue to be made. It is important that I say that from the outset.

In the response to the COVID pandemic, my Department's work and health group delivers benefits and employment services to around 350,000 people in the North, including the Department's financial support service. The very

nature of those services means that we support the most vulnerable citizens across the North. That is particularly important as we continue to experience some of the worst social and economic downturns in recent years, which have been caused not only by the COVID pandemic but by the financial crash that happened over 10 years ago.

When I came into this role over a year ago, the pandemic had not begun. One of the first visits that I made was to the Human Rights Commission and Eileen Evason, who had taken forward the first set of mitigations. That was about an urgent review of new mitigations that we could bring forward, as committed to in 'New Decade, New Approach'. At that point and in that political agreement, nobody could have foreseen that we would be impacted by the biggest global health pandemic that we have seen in our lifetime. People need to recognise that.

Since March 2020, my Department has responded swiftly and effectively to support individuals, communities and sectors that have been affected. That has involved revising complex legislation and making easements to benefit application processes; redirecting resources on delivery of essential services; and introducing new ways of working, all at a pace that would ensure that benefits were paid and money was delivered to people who needed it. As Members will remember, that was in a context when staff felt uncomfortable, the message was "Stay at home" and there was a lockdown. The number of staff in the Department reduced to under 30% of those who could go into work. We did not have the technology at the outset of the pandemic, because nobody could have foreseen it. A lot of work had to go into place. Everybody in the Chamber recognised the challenges that our staff faced at that time. They really stepped up to the plate to ensure that payments flowed.

I put in place measures to mitigate the social, economic and well-being effects of the pandemic on our communities, helping to protect the most vulnerable and safeguarding the organisations that they depend on. That included setting up a dedicated COVID-19 community helpline. That was working with Advice NI, which is, I recognise, a commendable group, as are the community providers of advice support. The helpline was to ensure access to food and medicines; establish measures to protect the homeless and protect tenants; and establish access to advice for those facing financial hardship. Given the acute financial pressures that many households were experiencing as a result of the pandemic, I focused on measures that could be implemented quickly and introduced packages of additional funding assistance to support people through this difficult time. The changes included removing the seven-day wait for new claims for employment and support allowance; making changes to the rules under statutory sick pay and maternity pay; the funeral expenses schemes; and other measures to ensure that the social security system is more flexible so that it can relieve hardship and ensure that the people most in need get the help and support that they require.

A total of 57,890 people were claiming universal credit in March last year. As of November past, 118,510 households were claiming universal credit. In response to that unprecedented demand, the universal credit standard allowance increased by £20 per week, resulting in an additional £86.67 a month. At a time of increased financial hardship and uncertainty, it was acknowledged that many

will need to rely on universal credit. While I welcome the extension of the standard allowance uplift, people need to know that they can continue to rely on it beyond the next six-month extension. Carál Ní Chuilín, when standing in as Communities Minister, worked with other devolved Administrations. They met Thérèse Coffey, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and pressed her to make that uplift permanent.

In March 2020, I introduced a discretionary support self-isolation grant, rather than a loan, to help with short-term living expenses where a claimant or a member of their immediate family was diagnosed with COVID-19 or advised to self-isolate. There are no restrictions on the number of COVID-related grants that a claimant can receive. Since its introduction in March last year, my Department has processed over 21,000 applications, with over 78% of cases resulting in awards and over £2.3 million being paid out.

As the pandemic continued and in recognition of the additional support that people needed in the winter months, I introduced a COVID heating payment at a cost of £40 million. As was said, that impacted on 200,000 households across the North. I also allocated £3 million in funding to bolster existing programmes and new interventions aimed at supporting people over the winter. To date, 40,000 people have engaged with the Warm, Well and Connected programme, with more than 4,000 helped directly through the warm element and £330,000 made available for direct fuel support.

I continue to push for support for people in our communities. Last week, I met Justin Tomlinson MP, Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, to request that consideration be given to increasing the rate of statutory sick pay and that business and advocacy groups in the North be given the opportunity to input into the reform of statutory sick pay. I also requested that urgent consideration be given to restoring local housing allowance rates to the 30th percentile to ensure that individuals and families continue to be supported during this time.

Members spoke about labour market interventions. I recognise that, as we move to the recovery stage of the pandemic, such interventions will be an essential part of that social return. All our interventions — Job Start, the work experience programme, expansion of the discretionary support advice service and the work-ready employability service — are aimed at helping people who have lost their job to find employment. However, the launch of schemes was paused pending the outcome of the Budget allocation. I have given a commitment that I will continue to fight to protect the interests of those affected by the pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, my Department has continued to deliver the welfare mitigation scheme. The payments provide support for those who lose benefit as a result of changes to the social security system. It is a unique package of financial support, and I am determined not only to have the current mitigations extended but to look at where we can strengthen and provide other mitigations. In the four years of welfare mitigation schemes up to March 2020, my Department has paid out £168.4 million to almost 85,000 households. That includes £68 million that was paid to over 47,000 households that were affected by the bedroom tax. The importance of the mitigation schemes

is recognised across the House. I am pleased that the initial Budget allocation for my Department in the next year includes £42.8 million to allow those schemes to continue, and they will continue.

I want to be clear that my Department will continue to deliver existing mitigations. I recognise, however, that we can do more. That is why I will soon introduce legislation to strengthen the mitigation schemes for people affected by the bedroom tax and the benefit cap. The measures will ensure that the increasing number of people who are denied mitigation payments under the current legislation will be protected and the loopholes closed.

I am aware that there is considerable interest in the review of mitigation measures. I assure the House that I am committed to progressing the matter. I trust, however, that Members will understand that responding to the pandemic has been exceptionally challenging and has impacted on the ability to move on some issues as quickly as I would have liked. I can confirm that proposals for a planned mitigations review are being finalised, and I will make an announcement on that soon. I can also provide an assurance that my Department will adopt a co-production, co-design approach to the welfare mitigation measures; in practice, that means that stakeholders will be central to the completion of that review. I firmly believe, however, that my Department's priority at the moment is to secure approval for the legislation that is required to extend the mitigation schemes and to close the existing loopholes.

I agree with the Members who said that the amendment about advice service funding was unnecessary. It is also inaccurate. There is no funding cut, and there will be no funding cut to the advice services, as I have stated in the Chamber on numerous occasions. I stated it last week. I told Members, including the Member who tabled the amendment, that they can come and speak to me at any time, yet I have never had such a request. Members have never asked to meet me on the issue. I have stated previously that I consider the provision of advice support services as being crucial to helping those who are most impacted on. They are vital. I will ensure that those critical services continue next year as an essential element of my Department's budget.

The Executive's draft Budget was out for consultation until the end of February, as was my Department's equality impact assessment (EQIA). I put out a full EQIA. It was important that I did that, to ensure that, going forward, decisions that I make reflect the groups that could be impacted on by the Budget. I make no apologies for doing that. All responses to that will be taken into account when I finalise my budget.

I will try to respond quickly to some of the issues that have been raised. I covered the issue of staffing numbers. There is a concern there. The number of people who are on universal credit has more than doubled. That was unaccounted for, but I am confident that that funding will be secured in the time ahead, enabling us to start the recruitment of the staff whom we need in the Department to step up service delivery for social security.

The advice sector was mentioned. There will be no cut to advice sector funding. I have said that publicly numerous times in the Chamber and on social media. I have also communicated that point more widely.

The Job Start scheme was not included in the initial calculations for the Budget, but it is a priority for me. I am confident that, in looking at the social and economic recovery from the pandemic, it will be a priority area for the Executive, and there should be an announcement on it soon. We will be ready pretty quickly, because a lot of the work on Job Start has been done. We will be ready, and, as soon as the Budget is agreed, I am hopeful that we can start on the scheme right away.

The Executive support and have given approval for changing the rules on terminal illness. The delay is just as a result of having to bottom out the figures with the Department for Work and Pensions. That work is ongoing. As soon as we get approval, I will move to make the proposal to change the rules on terminal illness. I also addressed the issue with Justin Tomlinson when I met him last week. I said to him that we will push on even if their review is not completed.

Of course, I stressed that they should change the rules around that as well.

12.45 pm

The mitigation impact on women is an important area, and closing the benefit-cap-mitigation loophole and reviewing the feasibility of the two-child policy are two critical areas that will impact on women in the time ahead.

Some Members talked about the Finance Minister and the Budgets. I hope that, when they look at their own Ministers and their own Departments, they will see that they face cuts and impacts as well. Will they be saying that that is down to the Minister? The reality is that we get a block grant from Westminster. That block grant was a flat Budget, which means a cut. The cut was not made by the Finance Minister. All the parties, particularly those in the Executive, will know that because all the parties around that Executive table and all their ministerial portfolios have been impacted by the block grant that we have been given by Westminster. That is the reality. We also do not do multi-year funding, and that is another critical area that we need to change. Again, the need to make those changes rests with Westminster.

Some Members talked about addressing the root causes of poverty and inequality, and I agree with that wholeheartedly. However, for me, you cannot do that without talking about the impact of partition, the impact of how our Budgets are set and the impact of the fact that we do not have our own financial levers and full fiscal powers. We cannot run the way democracies in other countries do, because we have one, and often two, arms tied behind our back. Westminster is making these decisions, and the parties in power in Westminster are not representative of or, indeed, elected by the people here in the North. If you are serious about addressing those issues fundamentally, you have to look at partition and how our Budgets are impacted. Brexit has shown that. All the parties that are based in Westminster, even the parties opposite, will have seen the impact of that and how the Tories have behaved during Brexit, yet, for some reason, you do not want to deal with the underlying issues.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, Minister, but your time is up. That is a good point to stop. You made your point, and it is definitely on the record. I call Mr Gerry Carroll to make a winding-up speech on his amendment.

Mr Carroll: Do I have five minutes, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, yes?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Yes.

Mr Carroll: Thank you.

Thanks, Members. I will try to respond to as many of the comments as possible, but I will miss some, so apologies for that. The Minister described the amendment as "inaccurate". I ask her how? I will quote from the Department's equality impact assessment. Paragraph 6.19, in reference to the Budget allocation, states:

"This equates to a £1.5m reduction in funding to the advice sector which provides help and support to some of the most vulnerable in our society".

The Advice NI response to the equality impact consultation states:

"This consultation response wishes to express in the strongest possible terms opposition to the proposed Department for Communities budget allocation which includes no allocation for the independent advice sector to support welfare change."

It goes on to reference the £1.5 million reduction. Do not take my word for it, Members; take the words of the Department and Advice NI.

The Minister made a point about partition, and I agree with her on that, but we cannot adopt a position that eradicating poverty must wait. One hundred years ago, some people adopted the position that labour must wait, and we cannot, in the centenary of partition, adopt a strategy that is solely about partition. Partition is problematic and should be opposed, but Stormont's role in enabling and increasing poverty has to be addressed and is seemingly the elephant in the room for the Minister and her party.

Karen Mullan said that her party will not support the amendment and that the Minister has already committed to the funding. She did that last Monday, I believe, but I ask the Member to forgive me and many others for not simply believing the Minister — there is nothing personal in that — or any Minister just because they say something. We were told that the North was next to get abortion rights two years ago, then we saw opposition to abortion in the House from that very party. I ask the Member from Foyle to tell advice workers who are contacting me and, I am sure, many others in the Chamber with concerns about their jobs and their futures to leave it to the Minister and that she will sort it. I was told to have a healthy scepticism about whatever a Minister says, and I will maintain that today. At the end of the day, if the Minister is going to bring forward funding, she will have no problem backing the amendment. It will be shocking if Sinn Féin Members do not back me and oppose the amendment, which calls for support for advice centres and workers. Shameful indeed. Many other Members supported the amendment: Mr Durkan, Ms Armstrong — I think, Mr Allen — Miss Woods and, possibly, Mr Easton and his party.

Andy Allen referred to the difficulties that his constituents face in navigating the system, such as computer access and other general problems. Unfortunately, my constituents have faced those problems as well. Members thanked advice workers, and, indeed, they should be thanked. However, it reminds me of the approach that some quarters took to NHS workers: thank them and clap

for them, but when it comes to paying them it is, "Sorry, we do not have that" or "Sorry, that will come at a later stage".

Pat Sheehan mentioned Marcus Rashford and said that his party was able to blunt some of the worst impacts of welfare reform. I dispute that, as the most vulnerable in our constituency of West Belfast and beyond have been directly impacted on by the welfare reform that he and his party supported.

Mr Sheehan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: I will give way.

Mr Sheehan: I agree with the Member. We represent the same constituents, many of whom have been affected by Tory austerity. However, will the Member not agree that the £585 million went some way towards blunting the worst excesses of Tory austerity and cuts to welfare? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am not going to tell someone on benefits not to take extra money. The point is that vulnerable people are already being impacted on by welfare reform, and the mitigation package does not go far enough.

During the debate, we heard discussion from the DUP about supporting low-paid workers. Those are crocodile tears from a party that strongly supported the Tory Government and went into hyperdrive when it came to implementing welfare reform. Sinn Féin asked us to trust it to stop Tory welfare reform and then rolled over and implemented it as well. We simply cannot trust Sinn Féin or take its word on welfare reform issues.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am afraid that the Member's time is up.

Mr Carroll: I ask Members to support the amendment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Ms Bradley to make a make a winding-up speech on the motion.

Ms P Bradley: I will be finished before the 2.00 pm cut-off. I thank everyone who took part in the debate today. Sorry, it is a 1.00 pm cut-off.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: If the Member is going to talk until 2 pm, we are in trouble. *[Laughter.]*

Ms P Bradley: I thank everyone who took part in the debate. Fortunately, Mr Carroll has summarised what a lot of people said, and that saves me having to go into that detail.

Before I make a winding-up speech, I want to clear up some of the comments made in the Chamber today. I have been called "pious". Why I, as an elected representative, should have anything to say on welfare reform has also been called into question. After all, it is, apparently, all my fault that we have welfare reform. I will put on the record that I am an MLA who represents a constituency where there are people who live in great pain and deprivation. I deal with their pain every day. I deal with their queries effectively every day, and I stand by them. I am also one of the only Members in the Chamber who sat on the Ad Hoc Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements, Welfare Reform Bill when the Bill came to the Committee for Social Development in 2012.

I remember welfare reform landing on our desks, and I felt total despair when I saw what the cuts would be.

Some in the Chamber think that we could have ripped welfare reform up, thrown it out and said, "We will do our own thing". I do not know where they think that the money would have come from to do our own thing: we had what we had. Yes, negotiations took place and mitigations did happen. I can say, hand on heart, that I was one of the members of that Committee who banged on at a rate about the Welfare Reform Bill and the mitigations that should be in place. I am one of the members who constantly lobbied my Minister to bring about changes to welfare reform. I am more than able to stand here today and support the many people who are just about living on benefits. Rachel made the point about the £20 uplift. I can tell you, through you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, that I will lobby my party to support that when it ends in Westminster.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. When she is doing that, will she also ask her colleagues in Westminster and the Executive to ask for an extension of that uplift to those who are on legacy benefits and have not yet migrated to universal credit?

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention. Yes, I will. I will certainly make that point.

I want to make one more point about the venom and hatred that Justin McNulty showed when he talked about "the Brits". A vast number of people who live in Northern Ireland see themselves as British. I am sad that he cannot come back to me as he is not in the Chamber, but I would not like to think that the hatred and venom that he showed in the debate when he talked about "the Brits" related to the many British citizens who live in Northern Ireland. I want to put that on the record. I know that Mark is over there shaking his head.

Mr Durkan: *[Inaudible.]*

Ms P Bradley: I will go on. I am not here to hit on the Minister; I am absolutely not. I think that several Members said that. I know the work that has been done by you, through you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and the Department when it comes to the COVID pandemic. I know the amount of money that rolled out that door, whether it was for food, heat or discretionary support; all those things. Well done in getting that out there. I do not underestimate the job that went on. Various Members from the Minister's party listed some of the many things that were done. Absolutely. Pat Sheehan mentioned free school meals and holiday hunger. We, on this side of the House, certainly praised that, because our Minister — the Education Minister, Minister Weir — was part of the joint decision that was made for that to be rolled out.

Mr Sheehan: Will the Member give way?

Ms P Bradley: Absolutely.

Mr Sheehan: I accept your point. I said that the Executive did not get any credit for that particular measure. Thanks.

Ms P Bradley: OK. Thank you for that point. You are right: they did not get that credit. As you said, in other parts of the UK, Marcus Rashford was hailed for the wonderful thing that he did.

It is not about the past year, the work that has been done or calling the Minister to account for what she has not done, but Andy and other Members mentioned the sheer frustration out there when it comes to welfare reform mitigations. As was said, we know from New Decade, New

Approach that a review was due to start in March 2020, but we have yet to see that review. We have yet to see that co-design and the working along with the very many partners who are involved in welfare reform.

I want to mention one of those partners. Very early last year, many Members met members of the UC: Us campaign group, which is made up predominantly of women. They told us about the effects that welfare reform was having on their lives and about the five-week wait and the advanced payment; all those issues. I know that you, through you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, as the Minister, have tried to address those issues, but not enough has been done. That was quite evident from the information that we received about the Budget and the amount from the contingency fund that was handed back because it was not used. Better things need to be done and more work needs to be done to ensure that people get what they need when they need it.

Minister, you mentioned the money for the advice centres. I will speak about that and Mr Carroll's amendment. You said that there has not been a cut in advice sector funding. When we look at the Budget, we know that there has not been a cut, but we also know that the £1.5 million for advice centre funding has not been included in the mitigation measures. I would have been much happier if Mr Carroll had tabled an amendment that was a little stronger. What we heard in the Committee from various stakeholders was that the extra money for the advice sector could not come from the existing Communities budget, because that would take money from other voluntary and community services. That is the last thing that we want. What I want to see is the Minister continuing to lobby her colleague the Finance Minister to get the additional money for the advice sector from the Department of Finance. Mr Carroll could have strengthened his amendment by including something along those lines.

1.00 pm

I know that I am being looked at and that my time is nearly up, but I thank everybody who took part in the debate. It has been a constructive debate, albeit there was a lot of mud-slinging. I think that it was Kellie who said that we should work together, not pull apart, on welfare reform, because every one of our constituents is facing the same thing. Every one of our constituents is coming to our offices with the same issues, and it is up to us, as an Assembly, not to wait on the Westminster Government. It is up to us, as an Assembly, to bring about change. Part of that change needs to start right away with the review of welfare mitigations. Maybe there are things that we need to increase and that we need to add, but we do not know because the review has not taken place yet.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: During your remarks, Ms Bradley, you raised an issue about the conduct of the business in the House. My interpretation of those comments is that they represented a satirisation of another party's position rather than an attempt to offend any group in the Assembly. In defence of Mr McNulty, I do not believe that it was his intent to cause hurt or offence to anyone. Of course, the opportunity will come for him to speak if he so wishes, but that is my interpretation of his remarks. When I am here, I have to speak in defence of all Members and their rights and privileges, and I certainly will.

As there is not likely to be agreement on the Question, and, as the Business Committee is due to meet at 1.00 pm, I propose to suspend the sitting. I will then put the Question after Question Time, and, if necessary, there will be a Division then.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 1.01 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Health

Care Partners Scheme: Uptake

1. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the uptake of the care partners scheme in care homes. (AQO 1761/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I thank the Member for his question. I acknowledge the dedication of all independent care home providers and staff who continue to work tirelessly to provide care to residents under the challenging circumstances that have been presented by the pandemic. Unfortunately, there remain a number of families who have not as yet been able to successfully set up care partner arrangements for their loved ones. The Department and Public Health Agency (PHA) are supporting care homes to implement the full visiting and care partner arrangements. The most recent figures indicate that almost 80% of care homes are facilitating indoor visiting when they can and when it can be done safely. Just over half of all care homes report that they have care partner arrangements in place where it is appropriate for a resident.

Trusts are working with individual care homes to provide the support that they might require to move forward with the facilitation of safely managed and meaningful visiting arrangements and the implementation of the care partner concept. As well as trusts, the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and PHA are working with those homes that are finding implementation more challenging and are identifying and sharing good practice. The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) will assess the approach being used, including when undertaking inspections of care homes, and compliance with the visiting policy and practice will be a material consideration in the inspection and regulation of each care home. Funding has been made available to help homes to implement the approach set out in the regional guidance. For the period up to 4 March, 373 nursing and residential care homes have been paid £6.52 million in funding for staff support in respect of care partners and visiting.

Mr Speaker: I call Patsy McGlone for a supplementary question.

Mr McGlone: Thank you, but the Minister has covered both of the questions that I was going to ask. Well done. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Maith thú, a Aire. Question number 3 has been withdrawn. I call Colm Gildernew.

Mr Gildernew: Minister, I am concerned that you have identified that just over half of the homes have put in place the care partner scheme. Do you understand the comments from the Commissioner for Older People, Eddie Lynch, when he said that he is not convinced that the Department understands the full extent and impact of the lack of visiting access at present?

Mr Swann: I have had conversations with the Commissioner for Older People in regards to that and he did not use that language with me. In fact, he understands the support that we have been giving to care homes and to the families who want to make visits, especially when we are seeing challenges in specific care homes. I have asked the Commissioner for Older People and he has put out a call that he shares any concerns that he has with specific care homes or care home providers as a whole, so that we can engage fully. The Health and Social Care Board can provide support and guidance, the Public Health Agency can supply additional support and guidance, and the RQIA can also be involved, so that we can get as many care partnership arrangements set up and in place as possible. For those who enter into the formal care partnership arrangement, we have early availability of vaccines through the carer section and access to testing.

Mr Chambers: Minister, thank you for bringing forward the care partner scheme. It is an extremely emotive issue. All parties involved want what is best for care home residents, as you do, Minister. Can the Minister tell the House of some possible reasons why some residents have not been able to set up care partner arrangements with their families?

Mr Swann: There is an ongoing challenge with some care homes getting the necessary support. Some do not fully understand their responsibility to ensure that there is safe and effective visiting, which is possible now that we are under the surge level 4 conditions. We fully intend to support those care home providers but also, where needs be, to give them that bit of extra encouragement, shall we say, should they fail to do that. We value and recognise the importance of a visit from a loved one to a resident of a care home and the benefit that it brings.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Given where we are in the pandemic, the huge success of the vaccination roll-out to date and the corresponding data on serious illness among our older population, is it time to look at moving on from care partners? Although the scheme has worked very well for some, it has been very much underutilised. Given the issues that have arisen for care homes in particular, will the Minister also consider what help can be provided to the care sector on the issue of indemnity and the provision of COVID insurance?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her questions. On her point about additional insurance costs, my Department has made additional funding available to care homes so that they can pick up other costs associated with COVID while we still provide, if necessary, a free supply of PPE. Where there are challenges, we have also provided trust staff to support homes.

When we first identified and utilised the care partnership process, it was taken up by other jurisdictions as a way of opening up care homes so that loved ones could visit. It is still a vital tool while we, as a region, remain at level 4. On 1 March, we moved from level 5 to level 4. That is the scale that we, and all other jurisdictions, use to indicate the visiting that we can facilitate in care homes and hospitals. We follow those set criteria. Care partners are still a vital tool in facilitating visiting. However, family members need to be supported so that they understand that there are additional supports for them, as I have said, such as early access to the vaccine and regular testing. That will give

assurance not just to the family members but to the care homes and to the loved ones whom they visit.

Physical and Sensory Disability Day Centre: West Tyrone

2. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has given any consideration to locating a physical and sensory disability day centre in West Tyrone. (AQO 1762/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. As Minister of Health, I understand fully the importance of day centres in the provision of services to meet the wide and varied needs of people with a physical or sensory disability. The strategic location of day centres for adults with physical or sensory disabilities across Northern Ireland is a matter for the health and social care trusts to determine in partnership with the Health and Social Care Board as the commissioner of the services.

There are no plans to augment the existing service provision with an additional centre located in the West Tyrone area, and neither my officials nor their Western Trust colleagues are aware of any specific demand from the local community or individuals for such an additional facility to be provided. There are two day centres for adults with a physical or sensory disability in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area: Glen Oaks in Londonderry and Drumcoo in Enniskillen. In addition, service users can avail themselves of the day care provided by the independent sector across the region.

The trust's adult physical disability service has contracts with a number of independent sector providers in West Tyrone, including Strabane and District Caring Services, Leonard Cheshire and the Cedar Foundation. Although those services are working at capacity, there is no existing waiting list in West Tyrone for access to the day centres. Across the sector, we are increasingly seeing that the demand from younger people with disabilities is for day opportunities through self-directed support. That is based on assessed need and means that individuals can make use of a direct payment in lieu of traditional day care. That model of care allows for bespoke arrangements to be put in place to meet individual needs and enables people to avail themselves of the activities at weekends and in the evenings.

Mr McHugh: Thank you for your answer, Minister. You know that I have requested that you look at the provision in Middletown in Armagh and in Carryduff of sensory care-type facilities for young people and adults who have those types of difficulties and problems. I am amazed to learn that the point has not been made to the trust in my area. I have had parents in tears. They find it so difficult to cope with those who are suffering and would very much like to avail themselves of that type of provision. Minister, I therefore ask you to consider locating such a service in the Strabane area to service that part of West Tyrone, as it would Fermanagh.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. If I recall correctly, he has written to me about autism provision and services. I know that he has raised the issue before. As he acknowledged, I said in my initial answer that we have received no requests either at the Department of Health or through the Western Trust. If the Member wants to make direct contact with the Western Trust and raise his

issues, I am sure that the trust will look into them. We can then progress them, should there be a need to facilitate access to those services. As I said earlier, I encourage the Member to direct those young people to where I mentioned earlier. If necessary, we can provide additional information on how they can look for day opportunities through self-directed support so that they can find a more tailored, personal approach to the support that they need. If the Member wants to engage with the Western Trust, we will follow up on that.

Mrs Barton: Those day centres have proven to be excellent for treating Alzheimer's, dementia and many other of society's afflictions. Will the Minister commit to bringing up the issue of creating physical and sensory disability day centres across Northern Ireland with the Finance Minister, who controls the funds that would allow that to happen?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. She indicates the pressures that we are under. We get many requests to increase facilities or provision of support to individuals, but that is dependent on the financial support that I get from the Finance Minister. As to what we can and should do, as we are well aware, there has been under-provision over the past number of years, especially of mental health services. It is something that we want to do. As the Member will be aware, the primary challenge for provision of day care or day opportunities in the Western Trust area is often transport, especially in rural areas. Furthermore, the Western Trust has a number of individual service users who have complex needs and thus require skilled staff to accompany them in order to meet their nursing needs and administer medication. All those additional ancillary costs and challenges have to be funded as well. I am always looking to improve on the support that we provide to those who need it most.

Mr Durkan: The Minister has spoken of the challenges facing his Department, and we do not doubt those. We cannot, however, underestimate the challenges facing people out there who are living with disability, particularly autism. Does the Minister envisage an expansion of physical and sensory disability services being part of the fully developed autism strategy later this year?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I am glad that he acknowledges the autism strategy that we launched just last week. It is important that that be fed into as much as possible. On the delivery of future services, it is important that the Western Trust engage in order to scope out demand for any additional facilities that it needs in its locality, be they day care or day opportunity facilities. I know that that work has started and is supported. It was commenced through personal and public involvement (PPI) events that were held in Strabane. Service user engagement and informal care engagement events on how we take forward the strategy will commence soon.

2.15 pm

Health Service: Post-pandemic Plans

4. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister of Health to outline his plans to reshape the health service post pandemic. (AQO 1764/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. As he knows, COVID-19 has reinforced the need to rebuild our health and social

care system in new and better ways. Firm foundations for change have already been laid, with such key initiatives as multidisciplinary teams in primary care and new day-case elective care centres put in place; the roll-out of upskilling of the social care workforce; the putting in place of a new rapid response mental health hospital liaison service; and a commitment to put in place 900 additional nursing and midwifery training places by 2022. As we emerge from the latest COVID-19 surge, I am determined to rebuild as quickly as possible. That will include the stepping up of elective care services and the reshaping of existing services. That will be informed by the work that we have progressed to date and the learning that we have gained as a result of the pandemic.

A key priority for rebuild is the need to return critical care to its usual position to facilitate an increase in elective care. I have agreed that the de-escalation of the ICU and the rebuild of elective care will follow a number of key principles. They will underpin the trusts' rebuild plans for April to June 2021. The principles include the de-escalation of the Nightingale facility at Belfast City Hospital.

Another critical step in rebuilding the system is the introduction of the Health and Social Care Bill, which passed its Second Stage this morning. That Bill will facilitate the closure of the Health and Social Care Board and transfer responsibility for strategic decision-making back to my Department. It will streamline our structures, reduce bureaucracy and enable our resources to be better coordinated. As ever, our ability to rebuild will be heavily predicated on the resources being available to do all that we need to do. A multi-year Budget is critical to the planning to achieve sustainable, long-term change within our health service.

Mr M Bradley: The Minister has, in part, answered my supplementary question. As we come out of the current restrictions, does he envisage the decentralisation of acute services, particularly in elective surgery, to other hospitals across Northern Ireland, especially as we are facing a massive backlog in such services as cancer treatment and other deferred acute and surgical procedures?

Mr Swann: The Member will be aware of the approach that I have taken recently with regard to looking at our service as a regionalised, rather than a centralised, process so that we can best utilise the facilities that we have around Northern Ireland and ensure that we can get best use of our staff, our operating theatres and our footprint. It is about looking at where we can establish green pathways for care in the locations where we are seeing a small number of COVID patients being supported so that we can critically upscale the rest of those service provisions. The Member will be aware of the elective care unit that we have established in Lagan Valley Hospital and the sites across Northern Ireland that we are trying to utilise on a regional basis rather than within the trust setting.

Mr Allister: Whatever the ultimate reshape of the health service, there is going to be a critical need for adequate surgical departments. I draw the Minister's attention to the unsatisfactory situation at Antrim Area Hospital, where, because of underinvestment, the surgical department was unable to provide a safe green pathway for cancer patients during the recent pandemic. What is his response to the Northern Trust's request for a new theatre, a new critical care block and a new ward block? It is clear that Antrim

hospital cannot continue to serve patients' needs without those.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. It is an issue that he has raised in relation to a patient or constituent who had approached him, and who, because of our regional approach, was able to get an operation elsewhere, but not in Antrim. A surgeon who is based in Antrim raised concerns with the Member. He is right: long-term underfunding of that hospital did not allow it to be in the shape that it needed to be in. We saw that in the Northern Trust region, particularly when a large number of COVID patients came forward and we had to move our intensive care ward out on to one of the main wards so that we could support the high number of COVID patients who required ICU support.

It will take time for us to come back down from that provision, but it is also that important time when we look to the revenue budget that I have for updating what is a relatively new hospital. If we had been looking at the continuing funding and support of the Northern Trust on a regional and revenue basis along the entire pathway over the past 10 years, we would not have been in the situation that we are in now, whereas we know that we have already looked at the Northern Trust and at the Antrim Area Hospital specifically with regard to how it was able to reshape and re-image its emergency department. Even with a relatively new hospital and a new design, that was necessary in the past number of years. So, when the Northern Trust puts forward those business cases and business proposals, we will consider them within the round of the funding that we have available.

Ms Ni Chuilín: Does the Minister accept that safe, compassionate and accessible abortion services, in line with legislation, must be brought forward by his Department immediately?

Mr Swann: The Member follows on from a debate that was had in this place yesterday, and I will be clear to the Member. I have said from the beginning that the establishment of a commissioned abortion service in Northern Ireland is cross-cutting and controversial. That is the legal advice that I have received and the legal advice that I will follow, and the Member knows that, having received it, I would be in breach of my ministerial duty if I did not bring it to the Executive. Should I not do that and should I even want to take that as a direction under my ministerial role, it would be called in and challenged. I think that the Member knows that well. I was disappointed that my position was misrepresented in the House yesterday by a number of Members who were in full knowledge that this matter is cross-cutting, controversial and one that must be decided by the full Executive. It is not for me alone to move.

Ms Bradshaw: I welcome the announcement during the week of additional funding for community and voluntary sector groups that deliver on healthcare. What is the Minister's Department going to do to make the community and voluntary sector more sustainable? I am talking specifically about the charitable sector, such as our hospices, which provide vital, not just add-on, services. They should not have to rely on cake sales and other fundraising events to provide vital services.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I acknowledge the work that our hospices have done, not just over the past 12

months but over the past number of years. Their funding is also mentioned in New Decade, New Approach. There has been an ongoing issue with regard to how they are funded centrally and what funding they receive from central resource. That conversation will continue with the Health and Social Care Board and with representatives of my Department until we get to a satisfactory resolution from both sides.

Hospices in Northern Ireland have received additional funding from my Department and also directly from the Department of Finance during the pandemic because we have acknowledged that, particularly with regard to the services that they supply, they do rely on a considerable amount of voluntary contributions and people supporting them in that way. So, it was right that the Executive centrally supplied that additional funding during this time.

Mother-and-baby Homes: Records

5. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister of Health what steps he is taking to ensure the protection of records from mother-and-baby homes. (AQO 1765/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for bringing this topic to the Floor of the House. On the matter of records held by mother-and-baby homes and Magdalene laundries or by other organisations on their behalf, in December 2020, I wrote to the holders of those records and to the Health and Social Care Board requesting that they ensure that all reasonable steps are taken to preserve the records in their possession and that they are maintained in keeping with best archival practice.

I also requested that they immediately suspend any routine procedure for deleting or destroying any such records and ensure that the suspension remains in place for the duration of any further investigation. My correspondence also made it clear that all staff and former staff, where appropriate, should be notified of the ongoing need to preserve the records and that reasonable steps should be taken to ensure that any agents or third parties do not delete or destroy potentially relevant records.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, I appreciate that you have written to the organisations, but we are at a point now where we need to move a step further. You are relying on them to do the right thing. If there is a need for legislation or further moves in that regard, what are the Minister's plans? I wrote to you at the beginning of February, which is over six weeks ago now. I appreciate that your Department is under severe pressure, but I would have expected a response of some description — even an acknowledgement — at this stage. We have people who find themselves in a postcode lottery in tracing services, never mind the difficulties they have in accessing their own records and information. Will the Minister give some assurances on what moves he plans to make? Will legislation be required in order to ensure delivery for victims?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for acknowledging the large number of correspondence cases and Assembly questions that we are dealing with. The remit of the independent investigation into mother-and-baby institutions and Magdalene laundries will be shaped by victims and survivors, as she referred to, with the support of the truth recovery design panel, which, as I am sure that the Member is aware, has been appointed. I am confident that

the issues in the access to and the protection of records relating to mother-and-baby homes and Magdalene laundries will be fully considered by the co-design process and the independent investigation into those institutions so that the individuals whom she directly referred to — I have been in touch with her — have input and can feed into that process. It is about co-production and co-design. The Executive have been very clear about that in how we take forward that independent investigation.

Mr Buckley: The report from the interdepartmental working group highlighted what was evidently a shameful and dark period in our recent history. What conversations has the Minister had with his Republic of Ireland counterpart about the nature of the powers that the independent investigation will have to call witnesses from other jurisdictions?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I had an initial discussion with my counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, the Minister for Children — I cannot remember his name; apologies — a number of months ago. The investigation is being taken forward as an interdepartmental piece of work, so the First Minister and deputy First Minister had meetings with him, along with Judith Gillespie, who has been in regular contact as well, about the direction that the independent inquiry will take and the need for both jurisdictions to share information because of the nature of what will be necessary as we get to the bottom of that piece of work.

Medical Procedures: Cancellations

6. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Health how many medical procedures, not related to COVID-19, have been cancelled across all health and social care trusts since March 2020. (AQO 1766/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. He will be aware that I deeply regret that anyone has had their surgery or medical procedure postponed or delayed. Those critical decisions are very distressing, and they are never taken lightly. The downturn in elective care has been a consequence of the unprecedented pressures that the COVID-19 pandemic has placed on our hospitals over the past year.

From 17 March 2020 to 5 March 2021, a total of 16,938 procedures, operations and diagnostic tests were postponed. However, it is important to note that that includes cancellations for all reasons, not just those that are COVID-related. Procedures are often cancelled for myriad other reasons, such as clinical circumstances, patient cancellations and staff pressures. Nevertheless, I am assured that every attempt is made to protect the most urgent appointments where achievable and that postponed tests, procedures and operations are all rescheduled as quickly as possible. To that end, my Department has commissioned trust rebuilding plans for the three-month period from April to June, and I will publish detailed activity projections alongside those.

While the number of COVID patients in hospital and in ICU has reduced in recent weeks, the emergence from the latest wave is slow and the situation remains extremely challenging. Trusts are keeping the position under daily review so that they can reinstate and resume surgery fully as soon as capacity is safely available.

Mr Stalford: At the commencement of the crisis, the Minister used the phrase “biblical proportions” to describe the scale of the challenge that we face. Given the answer that he has just provided, what assessment has the Department made of the impact that the biblical proportions of cancelled surgeries will have?

2.30 pm

Mr Swann: The Member is well placed in the position that he has taken. That was and still is one of the biggest challenges that face my health service and all those who work in it. It is a health service that, for the past 10 years, has been underfunded, under-resourced and undervalued. Unfortunately, when we saw the complete escalation of pressure that the global pandemic had placed on our health service, drastic decisions had to be taken. Those decisions about what services had to be scaled back so that we could support patients coming forward with COVID-19 were not taken lightly by my Department, trusts or clinicians. I am reassured when I see the rebuilding plans and engage with the trade unions and the royal colleges about their desire to get back up and running as fully and as quickly as they can, as safely as they can.

We continue with that ongoing rebuilding framework, and, as I said, we will publish the next three-month rebuilding schedule for April to June towards the end of this month. We have made it clear that we will take it in three-month blocks so that we can escalate proportionately and with as much speed and dedication as we can.

As I said in an earlier response, we have to look at a regional approach so that patients are willing to travel outside their trusts and the areas where they would usually have been seen. We now see that our health professionals, such as surgeons, are willing to travel from Belfast to utilise operating theatres in the South West Acute Hospital (SWAH) and other areas so that we can get full capacity from our health footprint and get as many patients as possible seen as quickly as possible.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We move on to topical questions.

Republic of Ireland: Health MOU

T1. **Ms Bailey** asked the Minister of Health what areas of the memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Republic of Ireland will be reviewed and how that will proceed, given that, in response to a question from Mr Allister yesterday, he stated that, on finding out about the Republic of Ireland’s issues with the AstraZeneca vaccine, he asked the Chief Medical Officer to review the terms of the memorandum of understanding. (AQT 1121/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. Our current memorandum of understanding with the Republic of Ireland is about sharing information and data quickly and efficiently so that each jurisdiction knows what is happening and what decisions the other will take. I was disappointed, therefore, to receive the notification and find out through the media about the decision that the Irish Republic was taking with regard to AstraZeneca. I have asked the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) to engage with his counterpart, who is the co-signatory, to make sure that we realise the full operational value of that memorandum of understanding to prevent reoccurrences of that. It does not help either of us

when we are blindsided by a decision that is taken in either jurisdiction.

Ms Bailey: I see that there is a report out today from an EU committee saying that there is no evidence of the AstraZeneca vaccine having negative impacts. Have you sought any assurances or, more importantly, have you been given any assurances from your counterpart in the South that they can go ahead and use the vaccine again?

Mr Swann: The question for urgent oral answer that was asked yesterday allowed us to give an update. We take our guidance from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). That guidance regarding the safety and efficacy of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine has been repeated by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA), so I struggle to see why the authorities in the Republic took the decision that they did. It is their right to do that, but I am concerned that it has an overall impact on their vaccination process and discourages people in the Republic of Ireland with regard to the efficacy of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine. That is something that we have thankfully not seen in Northern Ireland; in fact, in the answer that I gave yesterday, I stated that, when we opened up our vaccine portal to over-50s, within three hours, 30,000 people were willing to come forward for the vaccine. I know that the Member was one of those who got a booking, and I thank her for her support and endorsement not just of the vaccine but of those involved in the vaccination process. It is an amazing achievement for our National Health Service — those who work in it and the volunteers who are supporting them — to see it in full operation.

Lockdown Data: Complexity

T2. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Health whether he believes that the data that has informed the Government’s lockdown decisions is too complex to be shared with the public. (AQT 1122/17-22)

Mr Swann: No, I do not, and I was thankful that the ‘News Letter’ printed an apology in which it said that its headline, which included quotation marks, was not a direct reflection of anything that I had said.

Mr Stalford: That being the case, I presume that the Minister will publish the data that guides the decision-making processes.

Mr Swann: That being the case, that information is already available on my departmental website, the COVID-19 dashboard and the Public Health Agency’s dashboard, and that is where we can see the trajectory of the virus and where it is taking us. Also, the R paper that we produce supplies more than just the R number that we use to inform the Executive’s discussions, and it is published weekly on my Department’s website. I have heard many calls to make data available. The data is there for those who wish to see it.

Health Professionals: Cross-border Registration

T3. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Health, having previously acknowledged the benefits of cross-border health services, to outline what services will be impacted on by his Department’s decision to require health professionals to be registered, North and South. (AQT 1123/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for that question. I do not envisage it having a big or particularly negative impact. Only a small number of health staff will have to register on the other side of the border. Unfortunately, it is an outworking of part of the protocol. We are supporting the officials and employees who have to register. That concern was raised by the Northern Ireland central alert system (NICAS) in particular, the team that transfers critical patients between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It has a particular concern about the accreditation and certification required to do that.

Mr Sheehan: Will the Minister outline why there is such urgency in getting professionals who deliver cross-border services registered before the end of this month?

Mr Swann: The urgency is to make sure that we have all bases covered so that there is no opportunity for someone to miss the registration process that allows them to deliver their professional skills and support on either side of the border, should that be affected. We encourage all staff members who have to register in either jurisdiction to do it as quickly as possible to make sure that they are not personally or professionally caught out.

AstraZeneca: Withdrawal from Use

T4. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister of Health whether, in light of the withdrawal of AstraZeneca in many European countries, he has received any pressure whatsoever to withdraw it from use here, albeit when we look back over the period of COVID-19, there will be many points of difference between us as to the response, but one thing that we will all be able to take pride in will be the vaccination programme, with the NHS deserving thanks for the diligent way in which it has carried out that service. (AQT 1124/17-22)

Mr Swann: No. I am thankful for the cross-party support that I received in the House yesterday for the stance that we have taken. That stance is science-led, and it has been led by the updated guidance that the Department received from the MHRA on Sunday. The MHRA provided the additional information and assurance that we sought after the Irish Republic made its decision on Sunday morning.

Mr Buckley: Thank you. Minister, sadly, the delay in administering the AstraZeneca vaccine in the Republic of Ireland and other European countries will result in the slowing of the vaccination of their populations, which should be the priority of every nation. Minister, have you had any conversations about the means by which we could share any excess vaccines with our friends and neighbours in the Republic of Ireland, if and when we get to a point where an adequate proportion of our population is vaccinated and our society is back to normal?

Mr Swann: I had a conversation with the Secretary of State about that and also raised the matter with the Prime Minister when he was here last Friday. We are concerned about the different rates of vaccination in the two jurisdictions. We would like the whole island to be at the same level, but I will not slow down the vaccination process and procedure in Northern Ireland. It would have been unfortunate that, had we shared the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine with the Republic of Ireland prior to its announcement on Sunday, those doses may have sat unused. Although I am open to the sharing of vaccines to ensure that we get the entirety of this island to a level

of vaccination, my focus, as Health Minister of Northern Ireland, is on the people of Northern Ireland in the first instance.

Domiciliary Care

T5. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Health what measures have been taken at departmental level with the trusts to ensure that domiciliary care packages are established in areas where there are and have been voids for quite a considerable time, leaving elderly people and disabled people isolated. (AQT 1125/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I know that it is something that he is very passionate about, because he has raised the issue with me, specifically as it concerns Mid Ulster. The Northern Trust has received additional moneys to encourage and support the provision of additional domiciliary care workers for the area. I do not have a recent update on the level of success that the trust has had, but those additional supports have been referred to the trust and talked about.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for his answer. Yes, additional resources appear to be there, but resources in this instance are not matched by the number of people on the ground to fulfil the care packages and make sure that disabled, isolated and often elderly people in poor health are getting the support that they require. Is there any mechanism by which the Minister can ascertain information about delivery on the ground of extra personnel to support people living in isolation?

Mr Swann: It is about meeting the demand for the care packages that are there. As a constituency representative, the Member knows as well as I do that it is OK to fund care packages but that it is a different matter when it comes to getting people to deliver them. It is not solely now a challenge for rural constituencies. One thing that I have been very clear about during the pandemic is the valuable service that our domiciliary care workers provide. I have referred to them as the Cinderella service. Until we saw the real value that they bring, domiciliary care workers were often forgotten about and never mentioned. As I said, that support mechanism has been provided to the Northern Trust, and I am sure that it is engaged in making sure that as many care packages as possible are fulfilled financially and that the personnel are in place to fulfil them. If I recall correctly, the Northern Trust has recently advertised to recruit domiciliary care workers in the area. I can follow up on that with the Member.

Health Professionals: Cross-border Registration

T6. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Health to guarantee that the anomaly that means that cross-border healthcare workers will have to register with professional bodies, North and South, will not impact on cross-border healthcare, including the transportation of sick children to hospital in Dublin, given that, in an earlier answer, he mentioned that that was an outworking of the protocol when, with respect, that is not true — it is not in the protocol — but is an area where, because previous EU legislation no longer applies and it is not covered by the protocol, these people are having to register. (AQT 1126/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for pointing that out and making the correction. As I said in response to the question that Mr Sheehan asked, we want to push as many people as possible to get dual registration so that opportunities are not missed. We do not want to see people on the other side of the border, where their certification and registration do not cover them from a liability point of view.

Mr O'Toole: Further to that, will the Minister raise the matter with his counterpart in the Republic so that there is absolutely no doubt that healthcare on either side of the border will not be disrupted? I appreciate that he is confident that people can be registered quickly, but it is important to have absolute clarity on that.

Mr Swann: My departmental officials are in regular contact with their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland, and I know that the issue has been talked about.

2.45 pm

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two. Before we return to today's business, I wish to inform Members that I have received a request from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister that they wish to make a statement setting out the decisions that were taken today by the Executive as part of the pathway out of the COVID-19 restrictions. The statement will be taken after the motion on supporting students and prior to the Adjournment debate.

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

Private Members' Business

Welfare Support

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly highlights the need for a fair and sustainable welfare system in Northern Ireland; notes with concern the deep economic impact of the pandemic and resulting restrictions; stresses the need to meet any related increase in eligibility for, or uptake of, benefits and other forms of financial support for those made redundant or suffering ill-health, as part of the recovery from COVID-19; expresses grave concern that the review of welfare mitigations measures provided for in New Decade, New Approach has not been taken forward as a priority by the Department for Communities; and calls on the Minister for Communities to accelerate that review and to ensure that appropriate and ongoing welfare support is made available to households hardest hit by the effects of the pandemic as the Executive chart a course toward recovery. — [Mr Easton.]

Which amendment was:

At end insert:

“, to overturn the recent withdrawal of funding for advice centres and to reallocate the money to allow for the continuation of vital advice services.” — [Mr Carroll.]

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly highlights the need for a fair and sustainable welfare system in Northern Ireland; notes with concern the deep economic impact of the pandemic and resulting restrictions; stresses the need to meet any related increase in eligibility for, or uptake of, benefits and other forms of financial support for those made redundant or suffering ill-health, as part of the recovery from COVID-19; expresses grave concern that the review of welfare mitigations measures provided for in New Decade, New Approach has not been taken forward as a priority by the Department for Communities; and calls on the Minister for Communities to accelerate that review and to ensure that appropriate and ongoing welfare support is made available to households hardest hit by the effects of the pandemic as the Executive chart a course toward recovery, to overturn the recent withdrawal of funding for advice centres and to reallocate the money to allow for the continuation of vital advice services.

Supporting Students

Dr Archibald: I beg to move

That this Assembly welcomes the recent announcement of a £500 COVID disruption payment for students studying full-time higher education courses; believes that the exclusion of full-time students studying further education courses and students studying higher education courses in the Republic of Ireland or in Britain is unfair; acknowledges that the difficulty for part-time students facing financial hardship also needs to be addressed; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to address these inequalities and ensure that all students who are currently excluded from the COVID disruption payment receive the £500 payment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

Dr Archibald: This has been a really tough year for very many people. The pandemic has had a devastating impact on the lives of so many. Thousands of people have lost loved ones, others have been seriously ill, and some have lost jobs. To save lives and to reduce the pressure on our health service, we have had to stay at home, our workplaces have closed, and our movements have been restricted. Businesses have received hundreds of millions of pounds of support to help them to survive and to try to protect jobs and livelihoods for the future. Workers should have been receiving support where they are unable to work through the furlough scheme, and self-employed people, for the most part, have been supported. Albeit there are exceptions.

Students, on the other hand, have signed up for courses. Some were told that they would get some classroom time; others that it would be remote learning for at least the first semester. However, last summer, no one could tell them, "Do not sign on for rental leases, because there is a good chance that you will not be living in those houses".

Since last March, there have been very few opportunities for students to get the part-time jobs that are, unfortunately, necessary for most students to supplement their student loans and help them to scrape by.

Students have been left in a situation where, despite the best efforts of lecturers, teaching assistants and other staff, the university or college experience is not what many had expected or signed up for. They have had to keep paying bills despite not living in houses, and they have had to support themselves with no work opportunities.

It is, of course, important to point out that students are not a homogeneous group. The majority of students, particularly undergraduates, might be young people, but they might also be young parents, young people with caring responsibilities, and young people with disabilities. They might also be mature students with families and other responsibilities and part-time students paying for their courses while working to pay bills. Students come from all walks of life and have a variety of financial and other responsibilities.

It is important to recognise the nature of our higher education system, which is increasingly marketised and where students are seen as customers. With fees here second to only England and Wales as the highest in Europe, students struggle financially while studying and after they begin work. Understandably in the current circumstances, our students feel exploited and short-changed.

Coming out of the pandemic, as we look at rebuilding our economy and society, we also need to look at how we support and fund education and training.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Chair of the Committee for giving way. As the Member knows, I represent South Belfast, and we have a significant student population. We also have a significant number of houses in multiple occupation (HMOs), and private landlordism in many parts of my constituency has destroyed the character of local communities. Does the Member agree that, while it may be legally right to hold people to contracts for properties, it is actually morally outrageous to do so?

Dr Archibald: I agree with the Member, and that is something that I am going to address in my contribution. A lot of landlords need to look at their role during the pandemic, how they have or have not supported students and whether they really have all been in it together with their student tenants.

Since last year, John O'Dowd and I have been raising with the Economy Minister the need for students to be supported. Sinn Féin Ministers have supported our calls for support. Last June, I think it was, additional money was allocated to the student hardship funds in recognition of the fact that many more students were facing financial difficulty, and that money was much welcomed.

However, the feedback from students in the months following was that the application processes and barriers to those funds meant that students were not getting the support when they needed it. Bureaucracy that was designed for non-COVID times was making it difficult, and, frankly, that also needs looking at in the longer term, but that is for another day.

Student representatives highlighted the issues impacting students, such as the financial difficulties, the difference in the education experience from what they expected, the loneliness and isolation and the mental health impact. I have engaged a lot with student representatives over the last number of months and with individual students, and I have found that not only the impact of the financial pressure on mental health but the isolation and worrying impact of COVID generally have been raised consistently. My party colleagues will speak to that further. We must not underestimate the need for further support for students who are struggling with poor mental health.

Student organisations and representatives should be proud of their role in ensuring that student issues have become a priority for MLAs and Ministers. The COVID disruption payment that is being put in place is testimony to the impact that campaigning loudly and consistently has. We all very much welcome that payment, recognising that it does not pay all bills, but it is recognition that this year has been a difficult one and students have not got what they signed up for. Unfortunately, however, the payment went to only some students, and not all who study here are from here.

In setting out her reasoning, the Economy Minister said that the payment was in recognition of the impact of COVID and the restrictions put in place by the Executive on students here. If that is the case, why are part-time and international students excluded? The Minister said that there are legal barriers to making payments to students in other jurisdictions. What are those barriers and what alternatives have been explored? Has a legal mechanism been explored that would allow the payments to be made?

The Minister also set out that further education students do not pay fees and that that is why they have not had support. Further education students have been impacted in the same way, and many are in the same situation as higher education students in having to continue to pay rent and bills with few income opportunities.

Every time that we discuss education and skills in the Chamber or Committees, we talk about the need for parity and about the importance that is placed on academic and vocational education.

What does it say to students in further education that they are not getting the same payment as those who are in higher education? Does it say that they are viewed as "less than" by the Department?

3.00 pm

I want to reflect some of the issues that students have raised with me over the past few days. I could have reflected on many more issues when it comes to students who contacted me about landlords and accommodation providers, such as those that Mr Stalford mentioned. I have addressed that issue already. Over the past couple of days, I have received dozens of emails from students, as, I am sure, have other MLAs. Students have told me about their personal experiences. Part-time and further education students do not understand why they are not getting the payment. Postgraduate students who study in the South do not even get a loan to help them with their fees. Those in England have pointed out that they already get less student loan support than English friends studying the same courses, despite their having to travel to study. They are away from their families, and they feel left behind in not receiving that support.

One student in England said:

"In a time where student isolation and unemployment is rife, I would like the Minister to acknowledge the fact that Irish students, whether in Britain or in the South of Ireland, are facing the same financial struggles as those back home in the North".

What message does the exclusion from those payments send to students from here who are studying in England, Scotland or the South? How does feeling disregarded by the Economy Department make them want to come home and contribute to the economy? I recognise that funding has been made available to universities and colleges to help to support students, and for additional hardship fund support and digital support. Extending the COVID disruption payment is about recognising that every student who studies in the North has, in some way, been adversely impacted on by the pandemic. It is also about recognising that students from the North who study in the South or Britain have been impacted on in the same way, have not had similar support where they study and have had the

additional burden of travel costs and being away from their families at this difficult time.

I know that the Minister will have been inundated with calls from students and MLAs to extend the payment. My party colleague John O'Dowd recently presented a petition signed by over 3,000 students asking the Minister to extend the payment, but, as yet, the Minister does not seem to have listened. However, there is still time for the Minister to say to students, "I hear you. I want to recognise, in a small way, that this has been a really difficult and disappointing year, and it is not the experience that you hoped for when you signed up for university or college". The Minister has the opportunity —.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: Sorry, I do not have much time left. As the Minister who has responsibility for students, she has the opportunity to stand up for them. I hope that she will heed the calls in the motion and finally do that.

In closing, I want to thank the student organisations, representatives and all students who have been in touch. I ask Members to support the motion and reject the amendment, which waters down what the motion calls for.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Gary Middleton to move the amendment.

Mr Middleton: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after the first "courses" and insert:

"notes with regret the absence of legal powers in the Department for the Economy to extend this support to all full-time students studying further education courses and students studying higher education courses in the Republic of Ireland or in Great Britain; acknowledges that the difficulty of part-time students facing financial hardship also needs to be addressed; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to raise with her counterparts in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland the desire to ensure that all students who are currently excluded from the COVID disruption payment receive comparable and much-deserved support."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes. Please open the debate on the amendment.

Mr Middleton: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The opportunity to speak on student support is very welcome. I take pleasure in speaking on students' issues when I come to the Chamber. Many student representative bodies have been in touch with MLAs throughout the course of the pandemic. I pay tribute to those organisations for the way in which they have campaigned so proactively and respectfully. It is important that I put that on record on behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party.

Right across the Province, students of all ages have faced challenging circumstances throughout the COVID pandemic, along with, of course, many other citizens in our communities. Particularly for students, there has been an impact on their studies; financial hardship; mental health impacts, which I will talk about in a bit more detail shortly; and the challenges around accommodation, which, of course, were mentioned with regard to contracts with landlords and the difficulties that students have found themselves in. Members on all Benches have heard

first-hand from students who have found themselves in really difficult circumstances and facing the wide range of challenges that I outlined.

Of course, students come in all shapes, sizes and ages and from different backgrounds. As I say, students have raised their issues proactively over the past while, and it is important that we hear their concerns.

Like the signatories to the motion, I very much welcome the announcement by the Economy Minister, Diane Dodds, of the £500 COVID disruption payment for our students. That was part of a wider £37 million package to address a number of areas across the further and higher education sector. That package was announced in February and was very much welcomed across the sector. It included a one-off £500 payment for students from the UK and the EU who are in Northern Ireland in full-time higher education in a university setting. A total of £8.5 million was provided to address student financial hardship and digital poverty and to support student unions with mental health provision. There was £4.1 million for the provision of a safe working, learning and research environment. Finally, there was a £3.1 million package to compensate universities for lost income arising from rental pauses and releasing students from accommodation contracts. The level of support provided by the Department for the Economy for students in Northern Ireland during COVID-19 is unrivalled among Administrations across the UK and the Irish Republic.

Ms Mullan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Middleton: Yes, I will indeed.

Ms Mullan: The Member is on the all-party group on further and higher education with me. Will the Member agree that the Health Minister should immediately clarify the situation and make sure that all students, including those in clinical placements, receive the COVID disruption student support and be included in that scheme?

Mr Middleton: I thank my colleague from Foyle for her intervention. I agree with that. The all-party group on further and higher education is an example of one of the proactive all-party working groups. It raises various issues, and that is one of them. It is important that the Health Minister take that point on board. The all-party group met last week and raised quite a few issues that need to be considered, none more so than the student mental health action plan. We need to be mindful of the fact that student mental health is very much at the forefront of student issues and needs to be funded. We talk about the £500 payment. As important as it is, it will not solve all the problems. Many more wider issues will need to be addressed in the student setting, but I thank the Member for her intervention.

Students from Northern Ireland who are studying in England, Scotland and Wales have access to support from the institutions in which they are enrolled. My understanding is that in the region of £175 million has been provided to institutions and students in GB and ROI, and key to that will be ensuring that such investment translates into practical and timely support for those most in need.

I welcome the fact that Minister Diane Dodds has previously indicated, in response to numerous questions, that she will continue to raise the issue of support for students with her counterparts in the other jurisdictions. That is very important, and, if anything comes out of

today's debate, it should be that we continue to go in that direction. The amendment deals more with sending out a message from the Chamber that the Minister has the mandate to speak with the other jurisdictions and ensure that they step up and deliver for their students. I very much welcome that. The COVID disruption payment is one such area in which our counterparts can assist students from Northern Ireland.

I dispute the suggestion that the amendment waters down the motion. Rather, it reflects the reality of the parameters that the Minister is dealing with. The Minister will be the first to say that, and she will no doubt speak later about how passionately she feels about students in Northern Ireland.

Mr Stalford: I am really grateful to the Member for giving way. He has just made the key point. It is important that we are honest and straight-talking with people, and I think that our amendment reflects the reality of the situation, both legally and politically. It is important that people make statements and take positions that are grounded in reality.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for his intervention. He makes a key point that I want to get across today in the short time I have. The motion is not about sending out the message that no one wants to do anything more for students. It is quite the opposite. We need to do what we can, and that is why a £37 million package has been brought forward. That is unrivalled in the other jurisdictions. I know that many students are very appreciative of the package. Certainly, the students that I have been in touch with appreciate the measure. There are challenges and difficulties and people who feel that the package does not go far enough, but, again, the message is that the Department is trying to reach all those in need across our society in a timely fashion.

The COVID disruption payments in Northern Ireland are being made via the higher education institutions, not directly through the Department. The Minister has made clear in a response to previous questions that the Department does not have the legal power — and that is the key point — to make allocations to universities outside of Northern Ireland, whether that might be a university in England or the Irish Republic, or to the Student Loan Company. It is simply not possible for the Minister to deliver funding through universities and further education settings, either south of the border or across the rest of the United Kingdom.

Dr Archibald: I appreciate the Member taking the intervention. Will the Member agree that this problem is not going to go away? Students are going to continue to face financial difficulties, and the Department should look at how it can, potentially, put support in place and make payments.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for her intervention. Again, as I said, the Minister has made it very clear to me, personally, and also to Members across the Chamber, that she will continue to raise student issues. Of course, there is a huge remit in the Department, but we are here today, thankfully, talking about students. We need to try to do whatever we can to support students within the legal possibilities that we have. No doubt, the Department has explored all avenues open to it, but we will hear about that from the Minister very shortly.

The priority must be, as always, to ensure that we get support to our students in a timely and effective manner. The most appropriate way to deliver those payments is through the existing mechanisms in the institutions. However, that said, we do fully appreciate the hardship experienced by Northern Ireland's students based in other parts of the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic. I urge our MPs to continue to lobby at Westminster to ensure that institutions in other jurisdictions provide support for our students.

Finally, my party will continue to raise issues on behalf of students, whether through the all-party groups or in the Chamber. It is important to address students' issues. The University of Ulster Students' Union has launched the 'Student Mental Health Action Plan', and as it says:

"We all want to see a greater and happier society, and we believe that investing in our young people now will create a better Northern Ireland in future."

Ms McLaughlin: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. The pandemic is a crisis not just for physical health but for mental health, and this is particularly true for our students who expected to have the best days of their lives but, unfortunately, are dealing with the worst. Instead of making new friends, many are studying in their parents' homes, and others are isolated in halls of residence, away from other students and their families. The students are paying extortionate tuition fees for Zoom calls, and many are living in areas with poor broadband access. This terrible situation is badly hitting students. Some have abandoned their university or college course this year in the hope that they will feel psychologically strong enough to start again in September. At its worst — and this is just terrible — students have taken their own lives. Hit by depression and not able to see a longer-term future, they have given up.

The SDLP's student survey, which had more than 500 responses, clearly illustrated the impact. Three quarters of the students reported a decline in their mental well-being because of the lockdowns. How can students perform at their best when they are starved of human contact and are short of access to people to ask advice from? Zoom is definitely no substitute for human contact.

3.15 pm

Money shortages make it worse. Students have had to pay a fortune for accommodation that many of them have not been able to use, and very few have been able to earn money doing the part-time work that they would have expected to depend on. The financial crisis is very closely associated with a mental health crisis.

I will say a word about the hardship funds that Members spoke about. Time and again, the Minister stated, in response to correspondence, that students should apply for support through hardship funds. However, the criteria for those funds are a real problem. One student who contacted me was rejected for hardship funding because he once — I stress once — made a £5 bet. That one £5 bet months ago disqualified him from support. Another student contacted me because hardship fund criteria insisted that he must first apply for an overdraft facility. However, he believed that he would not get an overdraft and said that it could damage his credit rating by being rejected for an overdraft before he could even apply for hardship funding.

When we hear that students in difficulties should apply for hardship support, I ask Members to remember two things. First, the amount of hardship funding available is too little to meet the demands and difficulties that students are experiencing. Secondly, the criteria create a barrier that is impossible to overcome, even for students in the greatest financial difficulty. At best, the criteria are ridiculous. At worst, they are deliberately exclusionary and can cause financial difficulties for our young people.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Ms McLaughlin: OK. I think.

Mr Stalford: You will get an extra minute. Do not worry. *[Laughter.]* The Member mentioned the problems with mental health. A recent response to a question for written answer that I submitted to the Minister of Health demonstrated the scale of the problem. Northern Ireland has set a new record for the number of antidepressant prescriptions issued during the last 12 months. Surely, we can all see the devastating impact that lockdown is having on people's mental health.

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

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, Mr Stalford. I totally agree. There is a mental health crisis in Northern Ireland. I think that every Member would agree with you.

Financial problems for students are also impacting families, with parents and guardians trying to support their children despite maybe being on furlough or being unemployed themselves. The SDLP tabled an amendment that sought to draw attention to the weakness of the hardship fund structure and the crisis in mental health, but it was not selected.

Before I finish, I will say a word on the DUP amendment. We are glad that the Economy Minister heeded our call and brought forward the COVID-19 disruption payment of £500 that we suggested. That provided huge comfort to eligible students. However, as the motion states, the scheme excludes students who are studying in GB and the South from accessing support. That is fundamentally wrong. Those students are living away from home and are under more financial pressure than those studying locally due to the high fees in GB. Those are students from the North, Minister. We do not want to ignore them, and it is not right that we should.

In response to a question for written answer, Minister Dodds stated that the Department's regulations prevented her from making £500 payments to our students in GB. Has she considered making a ministerial direction? Has she consulted her Executive colleagues to agree a joint approach to change the Department's regulations? Is there a party in the Assembly that is against making payments to students studying in GB and ROI? Has the Minister tried hard enough to provide support to those students who so desperately need —

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

Ms McLaughlin: — assistance at this time? We do not believe that she has. The pandemic has shown us that we can find solutions to red tape. If there is a will, Minister, there will be a way.

I will support the motion but will vote against the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call John Stewart.

Mr Nesbitt: Hear, hear.

A Member: And that is before he has started.

Mr Stewart: I know. Before I said a word. *[Laughter.]* On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I support the motion.

At the outset, I acknowledge the £500 COVID disruption payment announced by the Minister on 4 February. That payment was extended to every student from the UK or EU enrolled in a full-time higher education course in Northern Ireland. The one-off discretionary payment rightly acknowledges the disruption that students have suffered as a result of the pandemic. Sadly, the limited scope of the eligibility criteria means that almost 75% of students in Northern Ireland are not able to avail themselves of that vital support. Despite the matter being raised with the Minister on a number of occasions, requests have so far fallen on deaf ears.

Since that announcement, like many in the House, I have been contacted by dozens of students in further education colleges, students in GB, students studying in the Republic of Ireland, students enrolled in theological colleges and students studying part time in higher education institutions in Northern Ireland. The disruption, uncertainty and financial difficulty suffered by those students as the result of the pandemic is no different from that of those who met the original criteria; in fact, it is often worse. How is it fair or equal not to give similar access on a similar level?

We have heard from Members about the deep pressure, stress and anxiety that students here face as a result of the pandemic, and I pay tribute to the SDLP, which has done great work surveying and working with students to get a real feel for the pressures that they are under, and to all Members who have engaged with students. The numbers are startling, especially when we look at the mental health aspects.

I do not want to cover old ground, but I will cover a few points. Full-time students, higher education students in Northern Ireland, GB and ROI face mounting problems and difficulties as a result of the pandemic. They pay full fees for courses that are primarily taking place in their bedrooms. They pay extortionate rent to private landlords for accommodation that they cannot use. Our colleague from South Belfast highlighted that, while enforcement is legal, it is morally repugnant. Landlords are charging full rent, and some people have not even set foot in those buildings. It is disgraceful. Hopefully, collectively, we can work to push that issue.

Students are not able to avail themselves of the part-time jobs that all of us who were students used as a financial safety net to get through university. Many struggle to access broadband in rural areas. There is a lack of access to the right study equipment, to libraries and other facilities, and, let us face it, much of what being a student is about is the social environment and everything that goes with it, but they are not getting anywhere near that experience.

I remember being a student, and it was difficult to get by in normal circumstances. I have been contacted in recent days and weeks by so many constituents studying

here and in GB, whether they are full or part time, who are finding the stresses and strains almost unbearable. To many in the House, a £500 payment may not seem very much, but for people who have just paid rent to a landlord for a property that they cannot use, leaving them with less than £1 left in their bank account, it means everything. It is a lifeline. Extending the payment would recognise the students who were originally excluded and would acknowledge their hardships, even though they are ineligible at this stage.

There simply has to be a way to provide equality and fairness for all students, no matter what their situation. The Minister replied directly to my questions for written answer on the topic and outlined why the Department could not go further, but, where there is a will, there needs to be a way. The pandemic has told us that we need to find creative solutions no matter what the problems are. If that means engaging with student finance organisations or creating a direct application process, so be it. We have overcome bigger adversities than this so far in the pandemic, and there can be a way of solving it.

Your days as a student are meant to be the best days of your life, but, for students in Northern Ireland studying here, in GB or in the Republic of Ireland, that could not be further from the truth. They are isolated, financially strained and getting nowhere near the student experience that they expected. We have an obligation to do all that we can for them, and extending the £500 grant support would be one way of doing that.

Mr Dickson: If we hear essentially the same speech repeated in the Chamber, perhaps the Minister will start to get the message. This has been an incredibly challenging year for students. It is regrettable that many students have felt let down by a lack of support coming not only from the Minister but from their institutions.

As many have said, students are now mostly learning online. While that has been necessary to tackle COVID-19 infections, it is clearly not a replacement for in-person teaching and the interaction that student life gives and is expected to give. Library services are challenging to access, meaning that students may see greater costs associated with printing and may even have to buy textbooks that they might normally get on loan.

In addition, online learning means that, as was referred to, they are stuck with accommodation that they either do not need or have never really been able to use. I appreciate that it is a contractual issue, and others have spoken about it, but I appeal today to another Minister, the Communities Minister, to do what she can to provide help and advice to those in that position.

It is therefore extremely welcome that the Minister has introduced the £500 COVID disruption payment. We have been seeking to resolve this issue for quite some time. However, it is regrettable that Northern Ireland students, as others have said, studying elsewhere have been excluded, as indeed have most further education students, non-UK and non-EU students. Other excluded groups include those attending institutions that are not publicly funded, such as Belfast Bible College, part-time students and those studying with the Open University. The Minister says that she does not have the legal vires to make payments to some of these groups. However, just because she cannot does not mean that she should not be making

the effort to try to do it. We need a clear explanation of the steps that can be taken to deliver funds to all those students. I, and everybody in the House, believe that they should receive the money.

Due to the pandemic, students have been negatively impacted on by the loss of the part-time work that supplements their income. I do not see why support should not be provided. The excuse coming forward seems to be that the Department does not have the power. I accept that the Department does not have the power, as it says, to pay students studying in GB and the Republic of Ireland. However, this is a legislative Assembly. We need to find ways round these issues and problems. Problems are there to be resolved; not to be resisted or used as excuses.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. I have listened to him and his colleagues in the House. Currently, one of his colleagues, the Justice Minister, refuses to fund additional police officers because she does not have the money. Where does the Member think that his colleague will find £40 million to be able to do that on top of the money that will be needed to address this issue? Can he tell me where the money tree is?

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

Mr Sheehan: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mr Dickson: Yes.

Mr Sheehan: If the Minister were to make a bid to the Finance Minister for more COVID funding, Mr Storey would find an answer to his question. The Finance Minister has encouraged the Economy Minister to do so. Thus far, she has refused.

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

Mr Dickson: I assure the House that I am more than capable of answering my own questions. *[Laughter.]* Indeed, the Member who kindly helped me out rightly indicated that that is exactly the statement that the Finance Minister made in the House yesterday. He had to make that statement because other Ministers failed to bid for money that could have been forthcoming to solve this problem. The £500 payment is not the only intervention that we should make to support students. I know that the Minister refers to the university hardship fund that should play a big part in providing support, but I am concerned that it is not adequate enough or wide enough to provide the help where and how it is needed.

We have often heard that university hardship funds are difficult to access and not adequately advertised. We have heard that there are barriers to providing hardship funds. We need to look at the general issue of how student finances should be progressed, because hardship is not only a feature of this year; students face hardship in all circumstances.

In addition to that, although financial support is vital, universities can do other things to reassure and support their students. I have written to the vice chancellors of our two universities to ask that they support a student safety net to ensure that students do not have their educational outcomes impacted on by COVID-19. The safety net should include uncapped and free resits. I hope that

the Minister can support this and encourage both vice chancellors to implement it.

Let us be clear: students have felt let down. For most of this year, they have forgotten what it is to have an enjoyable student life in which they can be challenged by academia, meet their friends, and socialise.

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

3.30 pm

Mr Dickson: In conclusion, I encourage the Minister to listen to what has been said in the debate and to work to provide creative solutions that deliver £500 to more than the students to whom she has already provided the funds.

Ms Kimmins: I am exasperated that, one year on from the start of the pandemic, we are still fighting to ensure that those on whom COVID-19 has had a severe impact receive much-needed support to help them survive the unforeseen challenges with which the pandemic has presented us. Over the past number of months, I, like many other Members, have been engaging with hundreds of students from across my constituency, and across the North, who feel excluded and undervalued by the failure of the Economy Minister to support them during this challenging time. Week after week, via Zoom meetings, emails, social media and through our offices, we have listened to the hardships that students are facing and the impact that they are having on them, causing them unnecessary stress and anxiety, which is subsequently affecting their mental health.

As many other Members have said, students have been expected to continue to pay full tuition fees for courses that have been moved online and high rents for accommodation that they cannot live in as a result of the current restrictions across these islands. As well as that, they are having to deal with increased living costs arising from the need to have the additional resources that enable them to complete their studies outside their university campuses. Although we all fully appreciate the unprecedented challenges that this year has presented us with, it is the responsibility of the Economy Minister to ensure that all sectors in her Department receive the adequate support to help them through these challenging times. That responsibility has not been met. Other Executive Ministers have stepped up to the plate and shown initiative and flexibility to get support out to those who need it, and she must do the same. I have written to the Minister on countless occasions, as she will know, to highlight the significant issues that students are facing and to all but beg for the support payment to be extended to those students from the North who are excluded. Unfortunately, that has been to no avail. I have also asked her to engage with her counterparts in other jurisdictions and, in the absence of her doing that, have written to Ministers across the water to see what support they can put in place.

The message from excluded students is that they feel discriminated against and undervalued, even more so if they are part-time students, are studying a further education course or are studying in the South of Ireland, in Britain or abroad.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she agree that the Minister should also consider supporting

those students who graduated last year either in June or in the period up to Christmas? They would have been taking exams and completing coursework but were still paying rent for accommodation that they were not able to stay in because of the restrictions.

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

Ms Kimmins: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I thank the Member for her intervention. She makes a very important point. One thing that we have all learnt is that there are so many unique situations. I appreciate that it is not always easy to reach everyone, but, when we have the information and the knowledge, we must endeavour to do so. I therefore agree with the Member's point.

Over the past year, I have heard many different experiences from our students, and I will share some of those with Members today to emphasise exactly what they face, particularly when we continually claim that we want to ensure that they return home to live and work in the North when they qualify in their relevant career paths.

Aoibhin is a third-year nursing student from Newry who is studying at Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) in the South and has been on placement throughout the pandemic. Aoibhin described to me the impact of the COVID pandemic on the hospital environment and the increase that there has been in the responsibilities and workload for all staff and students. She described to me how one of her most challenging experiences during her time on placement was caring for a newborn baby who, sadly, would not survive. She described how the context of COVID made that situation even more difficult and made her role of caring for him and supporting his family during this very sad time even more important. Aoibhin hopes to return to work in the North when she completes her studies. She expressed deep disappointment, however, when she learned that the Minister had excluded her and many others from the COVID disruption payment despite her studying only a few miles up the road from Newry.

Chris is another student from Newry. He is studying in London, as his chosen course is not available here. Chris's course has been moved online, and he is paying in the region of £3,000 a month in rent for a flat in London that, owing to the current restrictions, he has not been able to live in. Chris was not eligible for support from student finance in normal circumstances and was heavily reliant on his part-time job to help him cover his living costs while studying at university. Chris, like many others, has lost his job because of COVID and now faces significant rent arrears that neither he nor his family has the ability to pay.

Those students feel badly let down and have described how they just need a helping hand to survive these turbulent times. I feel that this is an opportunity for the Minister to show all our students that she and her Department value them and are intent on treating them all equally. The reasons given by the Minister to date demonstrate an unwillingness to explore all options to provide this essential support, especially, as others have mentioned, in light of the fact that the Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, is willing to provide the money and has encouraged her and others to make further bids to support excluded students, but those have not been forthcoming.

This has been a year that none of us will ever forget, least of all those who have been forgotten and excluded from the support that has been provided to date. These students are our future and have an important part to play in the economic recovery from COVID. If we are truly committed to showing them that we value their contribution and potential, we must treat all our students fairly and equally. I ask Members to support our motion and reject the DUP amendment so that we can get support to our students urgently.

Ms Flynn: I apologise, but do not apologise, that some of my remarks will repeat what other Members have touched on, as it cannot be overstated. I support the motion wholeheartedly and encourage all Members to do so. I want to send a clear message to all our students that their hardships and struggles are real and recognised by the Assembly. I will focus my comments on the wider challenges facing students, particularly those who find themselves excluded from the £500 disruption payment. First —.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. I have heard the word "excluded" used a couple of times. Will she confirm for me that the criteria for the existing scheme were agreed and approved by the Executive and, therefore, the Finance Minister, the Justice Minister, the Communities Minister and the Health Minister?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Minister has an extra minute.

Ms Flynn: The Minister? Thank you.

I thank the Member for his intervention. I am not taking away from the fact that the £500 disruption payment that is already in place is absolutely welcome and represents a big move on the part of the Minister and the Executive. However, the Minister still has responsibility for all the students in further and higher education.

First, I would like to personalise the debate. I remind Members that we are talking about our young people — people in their late teens and early 20s. It is our young people, who are on their own special journey to becoming adults. They are at the most crucial part of their lives, when they are just starting to set out who they are and who they want to be. It is an important time in anyone's life. We cannot lose sight of that. It would send a powerful message to our young people if we could all welcome the motion to extend the £500 payment to all students studying full time and those in higher education courses.

Since the early stages of the pandemic, my office, like those of other Members, has been contacted by many university students who faced paying rent on halls that they were anxious about going to in the first place and who had lost part-time jobs and crucial hours that they would usually have worked just to get by. I was also contacted by those in further education and by students who study in the South and in Britain. They face many of the same challenges and pressures —.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. She is right to say that students, particularly those in part-time work, have been absolutely hammered during the lockdown. That is why, at the most recent meeting of the Economy Committee, we agreed to write to the Department to ask for a full list of all the easements to the economy that the Minister sought. I do not think that any of

those have been granted by the Executive. If the Minister is seeking to help people back to work, could the Member prevail upon her Executive colleagues to support the Minister in that cause?

Ms Flynn: I thank the Member for his intervention. Again, it is a good and positive thing that the Minister for the Economy wants to see people return to work as soon as possible, because that will help their mental health. However, that does not take away from the debate that we are having about the extension of the £500 payment.

The point that I was making is that students, no matter where they come from, face the same challenges and pressures. Some Members mentioned the bids that the Minister for the Economy has made for schemes. Minister Conor Murphy allocated £22 million for the current disruption payment. Did the Minister for the Economy request any further bids that might have included those students who have been left behind in the current scheme?

Many Members listed the challenges facing students with job losses, restrictions on seeing friends and family, remote learning and — the big one, for me — their mental health and well-being. That is important, and it is good that Members have been given the chance to recognise and articulate those challenges, because students will be listening, and, more importantly, because a person's mental health and well-being are closely related to their environment and to any additional pressures that are placed on them. Students and young people are no different, and those who have been excluded, in particular, may be feeling additional pressures at the moment. We know that financial concerns contribute massively to poor mental health, stress and anxiety, as do concerns about housing and where they are going to live, and loss of hope and purpose about their future or the quality of their education. Some of those students will be feeling all of that.

I finish by quoting a recent prevalence report into the mental health of our children and young people that was published in October 2020. It noted that 16- to 19-year-olds — the make-up of our student population, essentially — are five times more likely to have a mood or anxiety disorder than younger children.

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

Ms Flynn: My time is up, so I will leave it there.

Ms Hunter: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion, which the SDLP will be supporting. The past year has been an awful one. No age group or section of society has been unaffected by the pandemic and its restrictions and lockdowns. However, our students and young people have been particularly affected. At a time when many of them should be starting out on a new adventure, away from home and enjoying what should be a relatively carefree few years, they are being badly impacted. The first few weeks of entering university are, undoubtedly, some of the finest and funniest days of your life. You make new friends and form your own identity and independence. You are out of home for the first time and away from your family. Unfortunately, students have been robbed of that. I feel for them because the student years are crucial to socialising and character-building.

As well as the restrictions, the financial pressures on students have been immense. I reiterate Órlaithí's point about some of the issues being mentioned in the Chamber already, but they need to be reiterated. Students have been continuing to pay landlords for accommodation that they are no longer living in; paying significant fees for courses that have largely, if not all, moved online; and face the loss of part-time jobs or are on furlough as a result of business closures. Students cannot win. They also feel undervalued and overlooked.

Of course, the £500 COVID disruption payment is to be welcomed, and I am sure that it is a relief and support to many, but it must be expanded. I pay tribute to the students and student bodies who campaigned for the payment. They lobbied MLAs and the Executive, very effectively, and shared their experiences and stories — often personal and difficult — of the financial problems and circumstances in which they had found themselves in the past year. I also take the opportunity to mention my party colleague Sinead McLaughlin who has led an effective campaign on the matter. She has campaigned, unapologetically, to ensure that students are financially supported and that their voices are heard.

I concur with the motion that the exclusion of full-time students studying elsewhere from the payment is wholeheartedly unfair. Their financial burdens and pressures are no less. We must support students who are studying away from here, in the South and further afield. They should be supported in the same way. Likewise, part-time students, many of whom have additional financial pressures and worries, should be supported. Students feel that they cannot win. Many have spoken online about their experiences and have been told to stop whining and complaining and that they are young, but we have to note the detrimental impact that the pandemic has had and not brush them off.

3.45 pm

We often forget that students are not all teenagers. Some are parents, and they are of all ages. It is important for us to remain mindful of that today as we discuss students. Financial support for students post pandemic is also a wider issue that we need to be mindful of.

Childcare is a massive issue that has been noted. The pandemic has highlighted that huge issue. I am particularly concerned that more needs to be done across the Executive to ensure that parents are supported in their studies during the next few months and post pandemic. Trying to juggle childcare and further their studies is difficult at any time, but I imagine —

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Ms Hunter: Not at this time, because I am going to try to fit this in. Sorry.

I imagine that it has been particularly difficult during the pandemic.

The impact on mental health has been a universal experience over the past 12 months. The restrictions on travel, the "Stay at home" message, not being able to visit family and friends and social distancing have left us feeling isolated and cut off from our loved ones. Our students and young people have had that feeling exactly or, perhaps in some cases, have felt it more. In recent conversations,

student union representatives in Coleraine gave voice to one of the main issues, which is that counselling during the pandemic takes place online via Zoom and Skype. People who are at home with their parents feel that they cannot open up and be vulnerable due to thin walls and the lack of discretion in the home. We need to explore student well-being and what more the Executive can do to support our students.

I hope that the payment has gone some way towards supporting our students financially at this extremely difficult time. As the motion acknowledges, there is more work to be done. I urge the Minister and her Department to continue working on it and to expand it to our students in the South and further afield. A much bigger debate is needed on aspects of student support beyond the pandemic and the lessons that, hopefully, we have learnt from it. I am keen to play my part in that. We wholeheartedly support the motion.

Mr Nesbitt: I will speak in support of the motion but not the amendment. Perhaps I should begin by explaining why I feel unable to support the amendment that Mr Middleton moved. He quoted legal and contractual barriers and constraints, which, I understand, his party feels to be fair comment. However, it seems to me that, when processes trump the people whom we are here to serve, we have a problem. It is our duty as politicians to overcome that problem. Processes should enable, not constrain.

Mr Sheehan: I thank the Member for taking the intervention. I was on the Health Committee for nearly a year. On an almost weekly basis, regulations to change legislation came through to deal with the emergency that we face at the minute. Surely it is not outside the bounds of possibility for the Economy Minister to construct some sort of process like that.

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

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I welcome the intervention from the Member. It is the very point that I am trying to make.

I congratulate the National Union of Students - Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI) on a vigorous campaign on social media in support of today's debate. I will return to an ask of that student union body in a moment.

Several Members have made the point that the debate has an inbuilt capacity for repetition. I will try to avoid that by introducing some novel thoughts, not novel in the pure sense but novel in this debate. Having said that, I will repeat a quotation from a Northern Ireland Member of Parliament speaking in the House of Commons in September of last year. Some Members will immediately recognise the Member of Parliament who is speaking; others may guess. The quote begins as follows:

"The climate of fear deliberately created by Ministers and their advisers has done untold damage to individuals and to the economy as a whole, and has now hit students and universities, with lock-ups of students and students being denied face-to-face education and unable to engage in the activities we normally associate with student life. Yet they are expected to pay the full price for this substandard opportunity in higher education. Does the Secretary of State think it is fair that universities still hold on to the

money paid by students when they are not offering the student experience that they promised?"

If anybody needs a clue, the name of that MP is in the minutes of the recently leaked DUP South Antrim constituency association meeting. I think that Mr Storey has guessed that it is the Member for East Antrim, Mr Sammy Wilson, apparently, promoting a policy that is not supported by his colleague the Minister for the Economy in the Northern Ireland Executive. However, it is to be welcomed that Mr Wilson recognises that there is an issue and that Mrs Dodds recognises the issue to the extent to which she has given grants to some but not all.

My objection is this: distinguishing between higher education and further education is a very bad look. There is an inequality there. It says something about a lack of understanding about intelligences. I am very much a fan of the late Professor Ken Robinson. For those who have not googled him, I really recommend that they look at some of his online videos, which explain in clear terms what we need to develop our children. He believed that there was an element inside them; I used to call it "a spark". It is a spark of intelligence. It might be academic, so a child might find it in the classroom, but they are equally likely to find it in a science lab, on a sports pitch, in the school choir or in the drama theatre. If we say to higher education university students, "We respect and value your intelligence with a financial reward" but say to students at further education colleges, "Not you", we have a problem that we really need to acknowledge.

I said that I would come back to the NUS-USI. It also asked for grants to be extended to international students, including non-EU students. There is a good reason why, and it is called the draft framework Programme for Government, which is currently out for consultation. One of the nine high-end outcomes is that:

"People want to live, work and visit here".

The outcome:

"is about promoting Northern Ireland as a place where people want to live, work and visit ... We want to build on international relations and enhance our reputation".

If we deny international students a grant that we give to our own, we are hardly building good international relations or enhancing our reputation. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call on the Minister for the Economy to respond. She has up to 15 minutes.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I thank all Members for their contributions today. I am acutely aware that all our students have experienced terrible disruption since the onset of the pandemic and that that continues to have a major impact on their studies, their student experience and their mental health and well-being. My officials and I meet regularly with and listen to the concerns raised by students, their representative bodies, family members, educators and institutions. It is clear that, while remote learning is useful, it has had a detrimental impact not only on the overall student experience but on the mental health of students, as many in the House have outlined. That is why it is my firm view that we should resume face-to-face learning for as many students as possible as quickly as possible. Students have already returned to face-to-face learning in practical subjects

in other parts of the United Kingdom. In England, for example, all students will be back to face-to-face learning at the beginning of the third term. I look forward to having support from my Executive colleagues as I introduce that conversation to the Executive.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Will she confirm that, at present, her Department runs 48 economic intervention schemes, which is more than are being run by every other Minister combined?

Mrs Dodds: It is perfectly true that, over the past year, my Department has run over 48 different schemes and interventions in higher and further education and in different parts of the economy. We have administered over half a billion pounds in funding support to the economy, individuals and businesses in Northern Ireland. The House should acknowledge the extent of the work that has been done by my officials, who have operated in a time of great stress to deliver this vital funding and support at a difficult and dark time for people here in Northern Ireland. It is because of this disruption that I have delivered a wide-ranging and comprehensive package of targeted support to our student population. This includes the recently announced £37.7 million in support of our higher education sector, which included a one-off discretionary payment of £500 to all students from the United Kingdom and the EU who are in full-time higher education in Northern Ireland. I will come back to that later.

The focus of the motion and of Members' contributions has been on the COVID disruption payment. However, I want to outline the wide range of support that I have provided and introduced to support our students as a direct response to the concerns of and issues affecting our whole further and higher education student population. The Department delivers financial support to eligible Northern Ireland higher education students through Student Finance NI and has provided £126 million in maintenance loans and a further £56 million in maintenance grants as a contribution towards students' living costs during this financial year. For further education, in addition to the COVID disruption scheme, I recently announced £8.5 million to address student financial hardship, including digital poverty, and a payment to student unions to help to support students with mental health provision; £4.1 million for the provision of a safe working, learning and research environment in our higher education institutes; and £3.1 million to universities for income lost as a result of releasing students from accommodation contracts and through rental pauses. This is in addition to the £1.4 million that I secured from the Executive at the start of the pandemic. Adding a further £1.4 million from my Department's budget made up the original £5.6 million that was available for students in hardship.

In response to Ms McLaughlin, I confirm that, time and again, I have asked the universities, as the administrators of these funds, to make sure that the criteria are wide enough and that they are reaching all students who are in financial need. It is also worth noting that it is not just financial support that our students need in this difficult time. That is why, as a result of concerns about provision, and reflecting some of the issues raised by Mr Stewart, Ms Kimmins and my colleague Sammy Wilson, I wrote to Northern Ireland's universities and university colleges on behalf of students, asking them to be clear with new and returning students about how teaching and assessment

will be delivered and the circumstances in which changes might be necessary. The higher education institutions have been asked to confirm that they have been and will continue to be sufficiently clear with new and returning students about how teaching and assessment are delivered, the circumstances in which changes might be made and what those changes might entail. They have been asked to confirm that the assessment that students received during the autumn term and the teaching assessment that they were promised and might reasonably have expected is based on the information that has been provided for them. They have also been asked to confirm whether their current plans for the spring and summer term will ensure that students receive the teaching and assessment that they were promised and might reasonably expect.

A Member: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Dodds: No, I have a lot to get through. Sorry.

If new or returning students were not provided with sufficiently clear information about that teaching and assessment, and it was not delivered as promised, I expect the institutions to consider their obligations under consumer law for tuition fee refunds or other forms of redress.

4.00 pm

Many Members have highlighted the difficult time that our further education students have had this year, and I entirely agree. Students on further education courses at local colleges are being supported through a range of mechanisms. I have secured an additional £7.7 million, of which £4.8 million is being used to provide additional IT equipment to allow continued access from home for college staff and students and to help address digital poverty, which includes providing 1,200 SIM cards. The remaining £2.9 million is for an additional 500 devices and to make a one-off payment of £60 to eligible full- and part-time further education students to help with data costs. The Department has provided a range of interventions to support further education students throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, including adaptations to existing financial support programmes to encourage their continued participation in further education programmes. That has included further education grants, the further education hardship fund, the Care to Learn childcare scheme, home-to-college transport, free school meals, a clothing allowance and an additional support fund for those with a disability. The combined value of those support arrangements totals £13 million per annum.

Furthermore, the Department has worked with the colleges to increase the flexibility of those student support policies in order to make them more accessible. That has included paying childcare retainer fees during the initial lockdown, while further education grants and hardship funds have been updated to facilitate claimants who participate in distance learning, with an extension having been made to the closing date for grant applications.

Free school meals and holiday payments for all eligible school-age further education students have been made directly to households. Specifically within the hardship funds, increases have been made to the dependent student rate, which provides eligible further education students with an additional £15 a week. Part-time and

repeat students are also eligible to apply for all elements of the hardship funds.

Members have also highlighted issues for part-time students. Part-time students are more likely to be in employment than full-time students, and the cohort includes many on master's, higher-level apprenticeships and other schemes that are supported through my Department. Part-time students are less likely to have different term-time addresses and the associated living costs. Any uniform payment would be unable to be targeted at those who are genuinely in need and unable to consider the nuances of the range of part-time provision available. I recognise, however, that many have been deeply affected by the pandemic and the disruption that it has caused. Those students will continue to be eligible for other support packages that have been put in place. I implore any students who are facing difficulties to contact their institution to discuss what support is available.

Members have highlighted the fact that the COVID disruption scheme does not include students who study in Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland. My officials and I had discussions with the Student Loans Company (SLC) to explore the possibility of making a payment through it to all Northern Ireland-domiciled students. Such requests must be agreed by the four UK Administrations before they can be taken forward by the SLC. Accordingly, a request was formally submitted to shareholders for agreement. Subsequent legal advice received by my Department, however, indicates that the Financial Assistance Act 2009, which is the vehicle that was used to make that and other COVID financial assistance payments, would not give the Department the powers to make payments to public bodies outside of Northern Ireland.

All areas of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland have substantially increased the funding that is available for student support. It is important to remember that, although students who study outside of Northern Ireland will not have access to the COVID disruption payment, they will have full access to the payments and supports that are available through their institution.

Ms Kimmins: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Dodds: No. I have a lot to get through.

In England, £50 million has recently been announced, and that is in addition to the £20 million announced in December 2020. Scotland has announced £20 million of government funding for student hardship, with a further £10 million being allocated to universities and colleges for income lost in providing rent rebates. Wales has a £40 million package of support for students facing financial hardship. The Republic of Ireland announced, in November, a €50 million one-off COVID-19 payment scheme, whereby all eligible students and EU full-time undergraduate and postgraduate students attending publicly funded higher education institutions would receive €250.

I have made representations that students should, like those in Northern Ireland, be supported by those Administrations that have imposed restrictions on student activities, and I am more than happy to commit to further representations. Again, I ask students who are facing genuine difficulties to contact the institutions to seek and access the support that is available.

Members, the package that I have put together for students is generous, and I am delighted to provide this payment to almost 40,000 students. I hope that it goes a small way to alleviating the tremendous stress and pressure that they have faced. These payments will be made shortly to undergraduate and postgraduate full-time students who were enrolled at any point during February 2021 at publicly funded Northern Ireland higher education institutions and full-time higher education students at further education colleges.

Once again, I welcome the opportunity to appear before the House to provide clarification on the support available to students. Many Members have written to me about this, but it is vital that information on this wide range of support is not just readily available but is communicated. I am sure that I have the support of all Members when I say that I will continue to do all that I can to support our young people through this difficult time and help them to regain the learning experience that they deserve. That, of course, must start with the return to college and university. I hope that we will be able to do that in the not-too-distant future in a safe and sustainable way.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Christopher Stalford to make his winding-up speech on the amendment. The Member has up to five minutes.

Mr Stalford: This has been a very good-natured — by and large — debate and discussion around the issues facing our students and young people. There is no doubt that the last 12 months have been something of an *annus horribilis* for all of us but particularly for our students and young people. The impact that continued lockdowns have had is evident for all to see. I mentioned, during the debate, that in a recent answer to me, the Health Minister confirmed that Northern Ireland has now broken its own record for issuing antidepressant prescriptions. That is reflective of the mental health impact that these continued lockdowns are having.

The economy needs to be opened up because, whilst we all recognise the need for interventions like this, ultimately, we need economic activity to generate the resource that government will use to pay for the delivery of first-class education. It is important that we establish that as a first principle. I assume that it is the first principle held by everyone here — I hope that it is — that the economy needs to be opened up as quickly as possible to allow economic activity to resume.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: I only have five minutes.

It needs to be opened up to allow educational activity to resume and to allow students to enjoy the benefit of the student experience. I declare an interest as the uncle of a first-year law student at Queen's University. The entire year has gone and that entire experience has been lost because of lockdown.

The motion and the amendment reflect the fact that we both want similar outcomes. The disagreement is about how to achieve them. No one should be in any doubt that both sides of the argument want similar outcomes. They want the maximum funding that can go to students to be delivered to them.

The scheme has been criticised. However, the Executive, on which several Members who have spoken are

represented, agreed to the criteria that we are discussing. Moreover — I know this to be the case because I have asked about it repeatedly — the Minister for the Economy has received less than 40% of the funding from the centre that she bid for in relation to economic interventions. It is well and good for Members to say that the Minister must do this and must do that, but she needs to be given support in the Executive in order to deliver the schemes that Members want.

Despite the fact that she has been consistently short-changed by the Department of Finance, the Minister for the Economy has been able to deliver half a billion pounds' worth of economic interventions through her Department. I am glad that she was able to confirm to me that over 48 initiatives have gone through the Department for the Economy — more than any other Department. The Minister has presided over those interventions — more than any other Minister has made.

The point needs to be repeated that, in Northern Ireland, we have introduced £37.7 million of financial support for students and the higher education sector. That has taken different forms, but all those interventions are designed to achieve one goal: to help students and young people through this time. To those who say that we need to help young people, I say that one of the best ways to do that is to set them free from continuous lockdowns. I hope that when the time comes, and we can do it in as safe a way as possible —

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

Mr Stalford: — all Members will not be slow to support the easing of restrictions.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Anois iarraim ar Pat Sheehan ceann a chur ar an díospóireacht ar an rún. I call Pat Sheehan to conclude and to make his winding-up speech on the motion.

Mr Sheehan: I think that everybody will support the easing of lockdowns when it is safe to do so. That is the straight answer to that question.

Students are among those who have been most negatively affected by the pandemic and the lockdown. What are, supposedly, the best days of their lives have turned into nightmares for many. A large number of students face mental health issues; many more face financial hardship. I am standing in for my colleague John O'Dowd, who cannot be here today. However, I commend him for his tireless and diligent work on behalf of third-level students in further and higher education. He has lobbied the Health Minister and the Economy Minister on the provision of better healthcare for students. However, despite warm words from both, no real action has been taken by either Department. On 22 February, John O'Dowd presented the extend the COVID disruption payment petition with 3,000 signatures to the Economy Minister. What has the Minister done in response? Absolutely nothing.

In what ways have students been affected? First, many have lost the part-time jobs that they depended on in the hospitality and retail sectors. Their student status means that they cannot access the same financial supports as wider society. Others have lost family support because their parents' household incomes have been negatively impacted by the pandemic. The sad fact is that three

quarters of students from here are not eligible for the £500 payment.

Ms Armstrong: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sheehan: I will give way quickly, yes.

Ms Armstrong: I will be very quick. I had hoped to bring this matter up before. Does the Member agree that those students have now lost trust in us and they are not coming back, because, at a time of crisis, we were not able to help them?

4.15 pm

Mr Sheehan: I absolutely agree with that. I was going to mention it later.

Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker, how long do I have?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Deich mbomaite. Ten minutes

Mr Sheehan: Many students are locked into tenancy contracts even though they may not be able to live in their rented accommodation. Legally, that may be enforceable, but it is morally wrong that students are forced to continue to pay rent for accommodation that they cannot use. The learning experience of students has been well below what would normally be expected, due to the remote nature of the teaching, but students have still to pay their tuition fees.

I want to speak briefly about the further education inequality. It was an issue that Mike Nesbitt raised. There is no legal barrier to giving financial support to further education students. Not giving the payment reinforces the view that students at further education and vocational colleges are viewed by the Department as less important than students at universities. Offers of £60 to further education students through the digital hardship fund are an insult, given that full-time higher education students will receive an automatic £500 payment. Some 41,000 further education students in the North are studying courses that are level 3 or above. Each of those students has experienced disruption to their education, and some face costs for rent and so on. Further education students generally come from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, and refusal to give the £500 payment further entrenches inequalities in our society. It would cost only £20.8 million to give the payment to further education students.

We have students studying in Britain. There are 17,500 students from here studying across the water. Two thirds of them never return. Refusal to give the £500 payment to them reinforces the mindset of exclusion. The Minister says that she cannot give money to a university in Britain. Fair enough, but she must find innovative ways of getting money into the hands of hard-pressed students. Surely, that is not beyond her capacity. Some £8.7 million would cover the cost of making the payment to students in Britain.

There are 1,200 students from here studying in the South. That is a fairly low number. Those students are paying higher rents, particularly around Dublin, where rents are extortionate, for properties that they do not need due to remote learning. The Minister should engage with her counterpart in the South and seek to extend the £500

payment to those students as well. That would cost under £1 million.

I made the point that the Finance Minister had been encouraging the Economy Minister to make further bids for COVID funds that could be used to support our student population. Unfortunately, thus far, the Economy Minister has been playing hard to get. She has every excuse in the book for not making bids. She claims, for example, not to have the authority to give payments to students who are studying in the South or across the water. However, as Stewart Dickson pointed out, this is a legislative Assembly. What about legislating? I sat on the Health Committee for nearly a year. I made the point that regulation after regulation came through that Committee week after week. Why can the Economy Minister not be innovative?

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sheehan: Why can she not find a way to provide funding to those who need it? The Economy Committee will propose amendments to the regulations that the Minister has introduced to make payments. That will happen next week. I will give way to Mr Storey.

Mr Storey: I know that the Members opposite have no difficulty in taking money from any source that they can get their hands on. However, given that the Minister has outlined that she cannot pay outside the jurisdiction of Northern Ireland, for which we have responsibility, will the Member give us some innovative way that that can be overcome, given the words of wisdom that we have had to listen to from him?

Mr Sheehan: I do not draft legislation, so I cannot tell you that, but I can tell you that all sorts of emergency legislation have come through the House over the past year. We have been able to do it. Where there is a will, there is a way.

Ms Kimmins: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sheehan: Go ahead.

Ms Kimmins: In relation to Mr Storey's point, other Ministers have shown clearly that there are ways of addressing these things. One possible way is an application process whereby a student shows proof of their home address and attendance at university. Does the Member agree?

Mr Sheehan: That may be a wee bit too simple for the Members on the Bench opposite to understand *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Please, will the Member refrain from speaking from a seated position? Mr Sheehan has the Floor.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The fact is that the Finance Minister has made it clear that funding is available. He has encouraged the Economy Minister to make bids to access that funding and to develop a process to deliver it.

Mr Nesbitt: I am grateful to Mr Sheehan for giving way. If I understood Mr Stalford correctly, he was making much of the fact that Mrs Dodds had brought forward more economic initiatives than any other Minister. Would it not be odd if another Minister were bringing forward more economic packages than the Minister for the Economy?

Mr Sheehan: The Member has brought me on to my last point. The Minister and Mr Stalford were almost boasting about the 48 schemes that they have delivered. That is the Minister's job, and she is pretty well paid for doing it. If she is not going to do it, who will? The fact is that three quarters of our student population from here in the North cannot access the payments that have been made to some university students. Boasting about 48 schemes that you are delivering will not butter the parsnips for the students who find themselves in financial hardship. I ask Members to support the motion.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly welcomes the recent announcement of a £500 COVID disruption payment for students studying full-time higher education courses; believes that the exclusion of full-time students studying further education courses and students studying higher education courses in the Republic of Ireland or in Britain is unfair; acknowledges that the difficulty for part-time students facing financial hardship also needs to be addressed; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to address these inequalities and ensure that all students who are currently excluded from the COVID disruption payment receive the £500 payment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes this item of business. The First Minister and deputy First Minister have been given leave to make a statement on the Executive pathway out of the COVID-19 restrictions at 5.50 pm. By leave of the Assembly, we will therefore suspend until then. The sitting is suspended until 5.50 pm. Thank you very much.

Sorry, it is 4.50 pm *[Laughter.]* Sorry, it is written here as 5.50 pm. OK, thank you for that.

The sitting was suspended at 4.23 pm.

The sitting resumed at 4.51 pm.

(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 the deputy First Minister that they wish to make a statement setting out the Executive's pathway out of the COVID-19 restrictions. Before I call the First Minister, I remind Members in the Chamber that, in the light of the 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 present in the Chamber must do so by rising in their place, as well as by notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members please to be concise when asking their questions. This is not a debate per se.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to update the Assembly on our decisions on education last week and at this morning's Executive meeting.

Before I outline the detail, it is important to set our decisions in context. COVID-19 is still with us in our community. Today, we have 176 COVID inpatients in our hospitals; 18 people are in ICU with COVID; there are 13 active care home outbreaks being managed; 164 people have tested positive with COVID-19; and, unfortunately, we have a further death. Those are, of course, better numbers than we have seen in recent times since the latest restrictions took effect on 26 December, but the numbers tell us that caution is still important. We have seen how the numbers can rise rapidly, and we do not want to go back there. That is why we published our pathway out of restrictions on 2 March, and we outlined our rationale in our statement to the Assembly that day. Our rationale can be summarised in one phrase: cautious but optimistic. Small steps along the pathway, with time built in to help us take stock of the impact on the ground. Time to reflect, analyse the data and structure the next steps in the pathway in that context.

Our colleagues in the Department of Health have coined the phrase "social contact capital". It is a helpful way of understanding the situation that we are in. We have an amount of decision-making capital that we can afford to spend. We need to spend it wisely each time, in the interests of as many people as possible. If we spend the capital on one easing of restrictions, it cannot be spent on other things at the same time. That is why it is important that we work our way through the restrictions in a careful and managed way at each four-week review point. We are not setting dates so that we can take our decisions against the prevailing health, economic and societal circumstances.

The Executive are clear on the need to think especially hard about our children and young people. Last week, we decided that preschool, nursery and primary-school pupils in P1 to P3 would remain in school until the start of the Easter break. Meanwhile, students in years 12 to 14

would still return to face-to-face teaching, effective from next Monday. Today, we have considered further the steps that we should take, rightly, to provide more certainty for our children and young people, parents, teachers and the whole education family. Today, having taken into account the prevailing COVID situation and with care and caution, we have decided that primary 4 to primary 7 should return from 22 March, and all pupils, including years 8 to 11, will fully resume on 12 April. Those decisions are aimed primarily at getting children back to school in the safest way possible, with mitigations and preparation time. That has benefits for us all.

We have been very concerned throughout about the impacts on young people's education. We know that the education sector will pull together to help address that.

We have been equally concerned about the well-being impacts. We all know how important it is for children to build and grow their friendship networks, to be able to socialise and grow their own interests and future potential. That has been our clear focus today. We think that every sector in our society will understand that education has to be our priority at this time, but we understand that those sectors and individuals also want a bit of certainty and hope.

Having taken the education decisions, the Executive went on to look at the available social contact capital to see if we could do more. Our commitment has always been that we will not leave restrictions in place for a day longer than is needed. We appreciate that we are moving quickly towards the first anniversary of the first lockdown in March last year. The weather is improving, and we have been in the current lockdown for around 80 days. That is a long time and a big ask, and we have been so grateful to everyone who has made a personal contribution to the improvement in the COVID situation.

Our responsibility to you is to look carefully at how we can improve the situation for you in a careful and sustainable way. We want to give you hope, and we have discussed today a number of small steps that we hope will be welcome.

We have decided that, from 1 April, 10 people from two households can undertake outdoor sporting activities, as defined in the regulations; up to six people from two households may meet outdoors at a private dwelling; and garden centres and plant nurseries will be included in the contactless click-and-collect scheme.

We have also decided that, provided the situation still supports this, the following changes will be introduced on 12 April: increasing the numbers who can meet outdoors in a garden from six to 10, including children, from two households; the removal of the "Stay at home" provision in the legislation, moving to a "Stay local" and "work from home" message; allowing contactless click and collect for all non-essential retail, subject to the overall health position at that time and Department for the Economy evaluation of the limited 8 March reopening of non-essential click and collect; and allowing outdoor sports training to resume by sports clubs affiliated with recognised sports governing bodies in small groups of up to 15 people but with all indoor spaces closed except essential toilet facilities. The relaxations planned for April 12 will be subject to Executive ratification in the week after the Easter weekend.

The Executive have also agreed to increase the provision for elite sports from 25 March to allow a number of new competitions to begin. This minor adjustment to the current restrictions will allow two World Cup qualification matches scheduled for 25 and 31 March to take place, as well as a friendly match between Northern Ireland and the United States of America on 28 March. No spectators will be permitted at any sporting event.

It is important that we explain our rationale, as we know that some people will be disappointed that their sectors are not on this list. Our focus in our decisions has been to take a risk-based approach, as we promised in our pathway. The common ground is that the steps are aimed at individuals and their families to support well-being and socialising in a limited and careful way. We have focused on outdoor settings, where the risk is relatively lower than indoor settings.

There are things that we need you to continue to do, please. First and foremost, follow the public health advice, including when you are outdoors. Wash your hands and maintain social distancing. If you are meeting up with other people, plan your journey and plan what you will do when you meet up. Avoid car sharing if you can, wear a face covering and, if you cannot, ensure good ventilation.

We want to say to our colleagues in the retail sector that we realise that today's developments are modest and that we have a long way to go. We thank you for your forbearance, and we recognise that large sectors of retail have been on the front line all year. We say thank you, as an Executive, to everyone who has supplied goods, stocked shelves, served customers and looked after us all over a protracted period of time.

We will now proceed to deliver these decisions into regulations and guidance changes. The next formal review period is 15 April, and we will be working towards that from today. There is no halt in the work that will go into that. That work starts now, and we will monitor the data closely over the coming weeks.

We also want to say something about key events in coming weeks. Tomorrow, St Patrick's Day, would normally be enjoyed by many. We need it to be different tomorrow. Please continue to stay at home. Do not socialise outside your family or your bubble. We particularly want to say to young people that they need to follow the rules and advice.

Ahead of us, we have Easter and Passover, important events in our faith calendar and for our citizens. The deputy First Minister and I met the leaders of the four main Churches yesterday to discuss the hope and solace that we need to give our people at Easter. This year has been hard for people of all faiths, and people of none. We have welcomed the opportunity to work with all faith leaders over the past 12 months, and that will continue. We need to continue to acknowledge how much people need hope and solace, and we noted in our discussion yesterday the desire of the Churches to work towards a return to in-person services in time for Easter.

5.00 pm

We acknowledge the risk involved and the mitigations required by the Churches. Some places of worship will find it easier to continue with their online services, and we know that in-person services will be taken forward carefully. We have been grateful to leaders across all

faiths who have voluntarily worked closely with us. We have discussed with Church leaders the benefit and comfort that prayer and reflection can bring, whether from a faith perspective or from personal reflection on the year gone by. Making time for prayer and reflection on Easter Sunday will be timely. It is, of course, a personal matter for everyone, but we are facing a difficult first anniversary, and we all feel a sense of loss, whether that is the loss of loved ones or the loss of the things that we enjoy in life. Taking a moment for prayer or reflection will be a powerful act of support for one another and a way to look forward with hope.

We have a long way to go, but the steps that we have agreed as an Executive are designed to start that process in line with our pathway commitments and to give the bit of hope that everyone seeks.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I thank the First Minister for her statement. The relaxations to the lockdown that have been announced are well overdue in people's minds and lives. It has been a long winter, and the lockdown was tough on people's mental health, given the long, dark, depressing winter period, especially January.

The relaxations announced today include schools. Primary classes P4 to P7 will be joining P1 to P3 from next Monday. Many parents will welcome that announcement. However, many teachers and principals may be more reticent, since although the Education Minister promised to give two weeks' notice, he is, in practice, giving the majority of schools just two days. In fact, some schools have been given two hours' notice, as they are closed today and do not open until next Monday.

Today's announcement could also be accused of being a little bit light touch. I appreciate that people are complying, but the moves are modest, and, in many areas, do not budge for another two weeks; others are further into April. Again, there is not much information on how we get from here to the next stage, and many businesses and sporting fraternities have been left wondering when progression will be made.

Can the First Minister explain the differences between the stages that are progressing today? In some of the pathways, we have moved to level 2, while in others we have not; in some pathways, we are moving to all parts of the level but only to some parts in others. After the last announcement, I predicted that, without robust and proper messaging, these announcements would become massive confusion events. What will happen now to detail this information to people?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Chairman of the Committee. Nobody is denying that we have been in lockdown for a long time. It has been well signalled that the Education Minister wanted all primary-school children back as quickly as possible. I welcome the fact that colleagues have agreed with that position, and children in P4 to P7 will go back to school next Monday. As I say, we have been talking about that for some considerable time.

I also accept from the Chairman that it is a modest lifting of restrictions. No one said that it was going to be otherwise. We said that we would be relying on advice from our medical adviser, and we have taken that advice. A modest lifting of restrictions is what he is comfortable with, given where we are with the pandemic

The Department for Communities is working with all the sporting codes, and the Minister is having discussions with the various sporting bodies. We believe that giving the go-ahead for training outdoors from 15 April will be welcomed. The fact that people can come together in public spaces for outdoor activity from 1 April will be welcomed as well, albeit that it will be people from two households before 1 April.

On the communication, it is incumbent on all of us as public representatives to get the messages out on what has been agreed today about the relaxations. I hope that everybody will play their part in that, but, no doubt, there will be some who would rather seek to criticise the Executive. So be it. We are big girls and boys and can deal with that.

What we have brought forward today are cautious steps, but they very much point in an optimistic direction. As we move through the different steps, the fact that the task force is meeting every week to look at where we are with the transmission of the virus is a very helpful way forward. We have always said that we will be as flexible as we can be and that we will keep the restrictions only for as long as they are necessary and proportionate. That is what we have tried to do today. I hope that people will take advantage of the nice weather, but cautiously and recognising that COVID is still very much with us.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for her statement. Minister, you referred to primary 4 to 7 pupils returning on 22 March, followed by years 8 to 11. What clarity can be provided to parents about the return of schools?

Mrs Foster: I hope that we have provided that clarity. P1 to P3 and preschool pupils are already back in school. Years 12 to 14 will be back next Monday. We are now saying that years 4 to 7 should also return next Monday.

I was a bit surprised when Mr McGrath said that some schools are closing tomorrow and would not be coming back until next Monday. My goodness. I would like to go to that school to have such holidays for St Patrick's Day, especially when the schools have been off for such a considerable time. I have never heard of that before.

Of course, years 8 to 11 will return in full after the Easter holidays on 12 April. The Easter holidays will allow us to assess the impact of the children having gone back. It is useful for us to have that break and space to find out how that has impacted the transmission of the virus.

Mr Gildernew: First Minister, thank you for your statement. The relaxation of rules on meeting will undoubtedly be welcomed by those who have felt the strain of separation over the past period and, indeed, by many who have felt the impact of loss. I send our condolences to all those people.

This afternoon, I met the senior team in the Public Health Agency (PHA) that is responsible for contact tracing. We wish them all the best now that that service comes back into the spotlight, as you said, to try to prevent us from ever having to go back. I am sure that we all wish them well and hope that the system is fit for purpose. How crucial has the vaccination programme been in enabling this particular change?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Chairman of the Health Committee for his question and comments. People will welcome the relaxation of restrictions in being able to come together.

They will not have been able to do that unless they were bubbling or in caring positions. There have been great strains, and people have sacrificed a lot. It is important that we acknowledge that so that we can get COVID-19 under control and in a manageable situation. That is important.

On the vaccination processes, as the Member will know, we are now in the position where we can take bookings for the over-50s. Yesterday was a phenomenal day of online booking. The Health Minister tells us that, at one point, 350 people were taking up vaccine slots per minute. That is a good indicator that people very much want to avail themselves of the vaccine.

Some work is ongoing to look at how the vaccine is impacting hospital admissions, particularly among our older residents.

We look forward to receiving that data because it will be very important. That has been done in Scotland. I do not know whether it has been peer-reviewed as yet, but it suggests that the vaccine is having a real and tangible impact on the numbers of people who are going into hospital, so that is very much welcomed.

The vaccine programme continues. I pay tribute to Patricia Donnelly and her team for the way in which they have rolled out the vaccine programme right across Northern Ireland, and I look forward to receiving the vaccine as soon as possible.

Mrs Barton: First Minister, you spoke about pupils returning to schools, but what consideration has been given to students in further education colleges? Will you give me an update on that, please?

Mrs Foster: I do not have the details of that. I will get the Minister for the Economy to come back to you on it, because I know that she has been looking at the return for some students. If there is a need for a student to be back at Queen's, for example, if they study medicine or engineering or something like that, it may well be the case that further education colleges are in the same place. However, as I said, I will get the Minister for the Economy to detail that for you.

Mr Dickson: Not all the messaging has necessarily been very clear on how we move through the pandemic and on the regulations that you placed in front of us, but now you are suggesting in the statement today that we are moving from staying at home to staying local. How will you get a very clear message out to people on how that should be handled, particularly over the Easter holidays and the days afterwards?

Mrs Foster: I am glad that the Member asked that question, because the "Stay at home" message will be in place until 12 April. It is important to say that. We are all concerned about the Easter holidays and about people coming together in the ways that we have seen, unfortunately, sometimes in holiday destinations and country parks. Of course, we want people to get outside and enjoy the outdoors, but I ask people to do that in a way that does not cause crowds to accumulate. That is very important.

After 12 April, the message will change from "Stay at home" to "Stay local". We hope that that is self-explanatory so that people do not move very far away from home and still work at home where possible. We understand that a

lot of people cannot work from home and have to go into work, but the message up to 12 April is still “Stay at home”.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the First Minister for the statement today. This is an incredibly difficult time, with such a prolonged period of lockdown. Many are feeling negative physical and mental impacts of the restrictions, and many will be quite disappointed today. Will the First Minister confirm that further changes or easements to the restrictions will not necessarily have to wait until the next formal review, which is due on 15 April?

Mrs Foster: When we came to the House with the pathway, Mr Speaker, you will recall that the only dates in the document were the actual formal review dates on which the Minister of Health has to review the regulations. There is flexibility in the pathway to allow us to take decisions outside those formal review dates. We will want to assess what social contact we have in terms of the capital that we have to spend, so we will have to see what way things are moving. You will recall that, last year, we moved at a faster speed coming out of some of the regulations because of the fact that we were moving in a very good way. Hopefully, that will be the case again, but we need people to work with us so that we can achieve that.

I acknowledge what the Member said about it being such a difficult time for so many people. It has been physically and mentally difficult. We hope that the easements that have been granted to allow people to get outside and meet another household will allow people to get out and about and to enjoy what I hope will be good weather over the coming period. I know that it is only a modest relaxation, but I hope that it will help some of those people.

5.15 pm

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad-Aire as ucht a ráitis anseo inniu. I thank the First Minister for her statement. The main argument being advanced for bringing children back to school is that their mental health and well-being have been adversely affected by the pandemic and the lockdown; indeed, some weeks ago, Professor Siobhán O’Neill, the mental health champion, agreed at the Committee that there was a tsunami of mental health and well-being issues amongst children. However, the Education Minister’s approach seems to be that getting children back into school will resolve those issues. That is not good enough. Can the First Minister tell us whether additional resources will be made available to our schools to deal with the mental health and well-being issues?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. Yes, we absolutely need to get our young people back to school for their mental well-being and their socialisation but also for their education and their life chances. That is really important, given that they have missed out on so much face-to-face teaching. I have said many times that the kitchen table is no replacement for the classroom. Those of us who have been homeschooling are in no way substitutes for the professional teachers in our schools.

I understand that the Education Minister has indicated that he is putting more resources into schools. Since last year, he has already done that for mental health support. I know that he would want to do more on that. However, again, that will be resource-led, and he will need to have

the resources made available to him to do that. As I understand it, he has plans to put more money into schools and into the front line so that people can deal with the mental health issues that, unfortunately, we will have to deal with.

Mr Clarke: First Minister, I, like others, welcome the statement. Members have expressed their appreciation of the Public Health Agency and the roll-out of the vaccination programme.

The business sector will probably be disappointed by what it is hearing today. I want to put on record, because I am sure that many in the Chamber would not want to put it on record, the generosity shown by Her Majesty’s Government in terms of the sum of the financial packages that have been drawn up to support those businesses. However, many of those packages do not cut it. Many businesses are waiting to get the opportunity to open and continue to trade as normal. Following today’s announcement, what is your message to businesses that continue to wait for the announcement that they can open and get back to some form of normality?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. I absolutely acknowledge the fact that Her Majesty’s Government have put in place a large amount of resource to assist people who, through no fault of their own, have found themselves in the position that they are in, particularly on our high streets. However, we also recognise — if the Economy Minister were here, she would say this very clearly — that grants are no substitute for being able to open, to do business and to trade. We want to be able to allow our businesses to reopen as quickly as possible.

I welcome the fact that colleagues have now agreed to a suggestion that garden centres and plant nurseries be included in the click-and-collect scheme from 1 April. That is before Easter, so it will allow people to avail themselves of those facilities. It is important, because we know that spring will move into summer, and many gardens need to be planted out. Many people take solace from their garden, so it is important that we allow that to happen. On 12 April, click and collect will be allowed for all non-essential retail.

It is only a modest proposal, and I accept that. We need to continue to work with the retail sector as we need to work with other sectors, whether that be hospitality, the Churches or all of the sectors with which we have been engaging, so that we can move forward together and there are no surprises in how we do our business. I acknowledge that this is a hugely difficult time for our business community, but we will keep engaging with it as we move along.

Ms Mullan: I thank the First Minister for her statement. Minister, following on from the question on businesses, can you confirm whether the COVID restrictions business support scheme (CRBSS) grant will be extended?

I have been contacted today about a number of things. However, an outstanding one is whether you can give clarity on whether golf is included in the outdoor sports. You would make a lot of people happy if you said, “Yes”. Is there any update on whether driving tests are to resume?

Mrs Foster: As I understand it, the CRBSS will continue for as long as it is needed for those businesses. As I said to Mr Clarke, it is not ideal that those businesses are

closed, but we are trying to support them as much as we can. The good news is that golf can now occur, as long as it involves only two households. We very much believe that walking along a golf course is the same as going out for a walk, but those who play golf will probably disagree with that. In any event, golf and tennis are allowed, as are those outdoor sports that engage only two households. That is important. What was your final question?

Ms Mullan: Driving tests.

Mrs Foster: Driving tests are deemed to be a close-contact service, so there will be no resumption of them at this time, but we will come back to the House on that. We understand that there are a lot of young people affected, and I know some young people who are desperately waiting to do their driving test. Again, we hope that driving tests will be able to happen in due course.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the First Minister for her statement. As someone who hails from Downpatrick and then spent many years away from here, I have always treasured and enjoyed St Patrick's Day, but I echo what the First Minister said about people enjoying it differently this year. In my constituency of South Belfast in particular, we want to send out the message that people should please stay away from the Holylands tomorrow and not delay our progress in easing restrictions.

First Minister, may I specifically ask about the exact data that is being used to make these decisions? Although I agree very much with the cautious approach, you mentioned in the statement both social contact capital and a risk-based approach, which indicates that there is a degree of quantitative analysis going on. What are the specific data points that you are looking at? For example, are you looking at a decrease in hospitalisations or a certain proportion of people being vaccinated? It would really be helpful to understand precisely what data points you are looking at.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. From the health data, we are looking at the rates of transmission. At the moment, Northern Ireland's infection rate is 66 per 100,000, while in Scotland it is around 64. In Wales, it is much lower, in the mid-40s, I think. In the Republic of Ireland, it is about 75. We are looking at that data. We are looking at the number of people in hospital, the number of people in ICU and the number of positive cases, and we are also looking at the fact that this is a new variant that is more transmissible than the original variant. That is the health data that we are looking at. As I indicated, we are waiting on the efficacy data from hospitals on vaccinations so that we know how they have impacted on the number of people going into hospital.

From the economic data, we are looking at how, unfortunately, the economy has shrunk since the beginning of last year and at the number of people who are unemployed. Again unfortunately, we learned yesterday that Thorntons has decided to leave the high street. We are looking at how the high street is coping with the pandemic. From the societal data, we are looking at how people are dealing with the lockdown and how they are dealing with their well-being and not being able to socialise and play sports in particular. That is one of the reasons that we have front-loaded allowing people to get out and about, enjoy the outdoors and meet outside.

Those are the sorts of conversations that are going on at the task force, where we are trying to balance all the different metrics. It is not an exact science. We have tried to prioritise young people and children, and we absolutely recognise the need to get our economy into a state in which it can start to recover as well.

Mr Butler: I thank the First Minister for her address. I also thank her for linking hope with Easter. It is important that we send out a message of hope. I am sure that there are many parents, carers and teachers who are looking forward, as we all are, to their pupils, students and children returning to school very soon.

The Minister will be well aware that there was an inflexibility this year with the transfer test and that some children were left to suffer. There have been many professional calls for the need for children to emotionally regulate before we educate. We now seem to be seeing a lack of agility with GCSE and A-level exams, with returning students facing the immediate threat of having to sit stressful exams. We know that children have been hard hit during the pandemic. Will the First Minister give a commitment that the Executive Office, along with the Education Minister, will look at making our children a priority on their return to school? I take the opportunity to wish everybody a happy St Patrick's Day.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. The Executive have tried to prioritise children's well-being and educational life chances. We are parents as well as Ministers, so we know the impact that schools not being open has had. We pay tribute to teachers on the way that they have engaged in remote learning with our young people. However, it is so important that young people get back into the face-to-face environment, not just with their teachers but with their peers so that they can socialise.

As the Member will know, the Education Minister leads on all issues of exams and testing. He is very alert to the fact that, while they will not sit GCSEs this year, we have to find some form of academic achievement for those young people who have spent so long building up to years 12 and 14. It is very important that we recognise the challenges for teachers and pupils but, at the same time, allow them to do those testing processes so that young people have something to move forward with. That is very important for their life chances.

In respect of linking hope to what we are trying to do, we had a very good meeting with leaders of the four main Churches yesterday. We talked about hope. We talked about the fact that we have been in a very dark place over the past year and that many people have lost loved ones. We hope that most people will recognise this time of reflection — and if you are Christian, this time of prayer — on Easter Sunday as a coming together, though, obviously, apart in our homes. It will be about taking some time to reflect and, from my point of view, to thank God for his mercies over the past year. That is very important.

Mr Stalford: The announcement has been made that pupils from preschool through to P7 will be returning to school. I want to raise the issue of Sure Start. I am given to understand that, for 10 days or thereabouts, the Department of Health has been assessing whether Sure Start can open. The First Minister, my Rt Hon friend, will know the wonderful work that Sure Start does, particularly with vulnerable children. May I encourage her and her

Executive colleagues to expedite a decision on this issue in order that Sure Start can recommence its wonderful and important work?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. I agree with him wholeheartedly that Sure Start provides a great resource for vulnerable children and their families right across Northern Ireland. I hope that we will be able to have that matter dealt with through the task force that is set up to look at all these matters. As I have said, there is flexibility, so we should be looking at Sure Start and other schemes that are there for our young people. We recognise that, for some young people, home is not the safest place. School is probably a much safer place for some young people, and some very much need the support of their youth leaders. I hope that we can come to this place and make an announcement in relation to Sure Start and other youth programmes in the very near future.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Ministers for their statement. I am delighted that a tentative return to sport has been announced. Personally, I am excited to get home to get the football boots and gumshield hoked out and get back to kicking a football. Does the Minister agree that facilitating a return to sport is crucial for our recovery and our mental and physical well-being? Does the Minister agree that continuing that engagement with sporting bodies and clubs will be critical as we make our way out of lockdown so that we keep our kids and young people on the pitch where they belong?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. Yes; as I understand it, there has been ongoing discussion between the Department for Communities and the sporting bodies. They are very keen. You will have heard a lot of stellar people telling us that we need to allow our young people, in particular, to get back to sport for their well-being. We spoke quite a lot at the Executive about the need to be out in the fresh air and enjoying sport. That is why 10 people from two households can undertake outdoor sporting activities from 1 April; that is before Easter. After Easter, it will be sports training, which is governed by the sporting bodies, of up to 15 people; again, that is not indoors but outside. The sporting codes will welcome that, as will a lot of young people, and not so young people, who want to get out.

5.30 pm

Ms Armstrong: I thank the First Minister. I want to follow up on the comment that has just been made about mental health in the community. Next Tuesday, I hope to take part in a day of reflection that has been called for by Marie Curie and others. When I think about the community and voluntary sector, I think of a sector that will be looking forward to the phased reopening, as we all are, but they are exhausted. It is a community and voluntary sector that has supported us throughout the whole of the pandemic. Many of them have not yet received letters of offer of funding to keep them going. Can we help those who have supported us the most during the pandemic and make sure that they are aware of when they can get back, because they will be providing the community with the mental health support that we have missed?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. I, too, hope to take part in the Marie Curie day of reflection. We are thinking about the fact that we have been dealing with this issue for a year. I remember standing here and saying

that I hoped that we would be in a much better place by Christmas. That was at the start of all of this. Here we are in March, still dealing with these terrible issues.

Our voluntary and community sector organisations and individuals have been absolute heroes in many communities across Northern Ireland and have gone the extra mile in delivering and in dealing with isolation. As the Member will know, the Red Cross brought us a report recently about the real problems of isolation that are being experienced. We hope that the task force can look at the issues with isolation. The Member also asked about funding. Given that we are coming towards the end of March, I would be concerned if bodies have not received their letter of offer but which have been successful in gaining funding. If the Member wants to come to us about any body in particular, she should do so and we will look at that.

Mr McNulty: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Beannachtaí na Féile Pádraig oraibh. Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for her statement and her answers. About a month ago, 15 sporting bodies were represented in a correspondence to you and your fellow First Minister relating to the reopening of youth sports. Those sporting bodies have not received a response from you. In advance of the review, there was anticipation, discussion and huge excitement about the potential restart of youth sports, yet I see no detail in relation to that in the statement. Can the First Minister provide clarity on when a return to youth sports will take place?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. We decided that we should make sport available for people of all ages, so 10 people from two households can undertake outdoor sporting activities after 1 April. If the Member is talking about organised sport, then, after 12 April, outdoor sports training will be resumed, in small groups of up to 15 people, by sports clubs that are affiliated with recognised sports governing bodies. However, indoor spaces will be closed. We are listening not just to youth sports but to all sports. That is important for people of all ages.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Ministers for their statement. In my East Derry constituency, businesses in Portrush, Portstewart and Portballintrae thrive and, oftentimes, depend heavily on tourism. Will the Executive give them appropriate prior notice to reopening so that they can get in the stock and supplies that are necessary for reopening? Does the First Minister recognise the huge impact that the lockdowns have had on towns that depend on tourism?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. I acknowledge that there are towns and villages in East Londonderry and across Northern Ireland, including in my constituency, that are very dependent on tourism. We recognise that the tourism industry has taken a huge hit. Before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, we had built the tourism sector up to larger than it had ever been, so we hope that a lot of people will decide to stay at home during the summertime for their holidays this year.

Hopefully, people will be able to visit all the beautiful parts of Northern Ireland, but it is important that we continue to speak with the tourism sector. As I understand it, officials from our Department had a discussion with Colin Neill from Hospitality Ulster yesterday, and we will continue those conversations, because the Member is absolutely right to

say that the sector needs to have advance notice. It does, because the businesses need to bring in their stock and their staff and train them up and get them into a position where they are ready to welcome guests. That is why there needs to be a space between an announcement and the time that they will open. We will continue that engagement with the sector. We know that it needs that advance notice, and we hope that we will be able to give that to it.

Miss Woods: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for coming here and for their statement. I am looking forward to getting my football boots back on. With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I have two detailed constituency queries that I received this afternoon to ask about. First, Mr Stalford mentioned Sure Start, so when will the Sure Start development programme for two- to three-year-olds begin? Secondly, does the outdoor sports training from 12 April include outdoor yoga that adheres to social distancing? If not, could it?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her queries. Yoga can absolutely take place outside after 12 April. I cannot see a reason why you would not be able to engage in yoga outside in groups of no more than 15.

As I indicated to my friend Mr Stalford, the request on the Sure Start development programme from the Department of Education has gone to the task force, so I hope that we will have a response from it. It is very important that those young people have that support, and I hope that that will be dealt with sooner rather than later.

Mr Allister: I welcome the overdue return of our children to school, but this timid Tuesday will be a disappointment to many, most particularly our retailers and critical businesses. The last statement was built around a buzz phrase about being data-driven. This statement is built around a new buzz phrase, "social contact capital", although it seems to be blighted by a lot of Executive austerity when it comes to spending that capital. If we are still data-driven, what targets were attained today to enable the first triggering of relaxation? What will be the next targets for each of the data transmissions, hospital admissions etc that will enable the next phase to be triggered? I think that the public should be trusted by knowing that rather than having to wait hopefully. They should know what the standards are, surely.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. I have a lot of sympathy for his point. As I think I indicated in my speech, "social contact capital" is a phrase from the Department of Health. My goodness, has this year not been a year of new phrases and new acronyms that we have become familiar with? I think that it is about the headroom that we have to make these decisions.

I wish that we had been able to have all children back at school before Easter. I think that I have been very clear on that. We are in a position now where we at least have certainty for those young people. All primary-school children and years 12 to 14 will go back before Easter, and the rest of the children go back directly after Easter.

We have, I think, set out that these are cautious steps. I know that there are some in the Chamber who feel that they are too cautious, but we are led by the advice that is given to us by our medical advisers, and they are saying that this is what is available to us at this point.

I will certainly pass the Member's remarks on more clarity about data to the Department of Health. As I said, I do not disagree with him. I think that it is important that we are as open as possible with the community so that it can understand why these decisions are being taken.

Dr Archibald: I thank the First Ministers for their statement. First Minister, the business support schemes, for which there is a whole raft of acronyms, have been really important in helping businesses during the restrictions. However, families and businesses will also need practical support to rebuild once we are able to reopen our economy and society, which, obviously, will be guided by the pathway. One of the support schemes that have been proposed is the high street voucher scheme. Will you give an update on that?

Mrs Foster: The high street voucher scheme is still very much something that we plan to do. The money is still available to us from the Department of Finance. The Department for the Economy will decide when the best time is to reinvest. Obviously, our non-essential retail is not yet open, and we want to lead on the scheme when retail opens up again.

On practical support, a very clear commitment was given at the Executive last week to fund the recovery of Northern Ireland. The Economy Minister has put forward detailed schemes that she needs to do that, not least around skills, and I am sure that the Member will acknowledge that. We will need to do a lot more in the recovery phase. We are only stepping out of the restrictions now. Much support will be needed in the recovery stage.

Mr Carroll: The fact that schools have been given short notice again shows the continued disrespect of the Education Minister for staff in schools. Given that the regulation changes mean that there is a move from children staying at home and that more people will be working in schools, what consideration has the First Minister given to increasing social isolation support payments? Currently, they are not adequate.

Mrs Foster: As I indicated, the "Stay at home" message is in place until 12 April. Of course, there are people who cannot stay at home; they have to be in their place of work. They will, of course, be expected to do that, rather than staying at home, and that has always been the case.

There has certainly not been any disrespect for school staff from the Education Minister. A great deal of disrespect is shown by the Education Committee for the Education Minister. I noted that many of the members were hugely disrespectful to the Education Minister as he attended an Executive meeting. The Education Committee thinks that it should take priority over an Executive meeting. That is not how it works; the Executive take priority. Many members of the Education Committee should apologise to the Education Minister.

Mr Speaker: Members, that concludes questions on the statement. Thank you for all the contributions. Take your ease, please.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Speaker.]

Adjournment

Post-primary Education Provision in South Belfast

Mr Speaker: The proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you to the Education Minister, to South Belfast MLAs and to others who are in the Chamber. I will outline some of the very pertinent issues that are impacting on educational provision in South Belfast.

Parental choice is essential, but it is severely limited in South Belfast. There is a lack of adequate options for those who do not sit the transfer test or attain a sufficient score, and integrated schools and many of the selective grammar schools are hugely oversubscribed. In practice, the inadequate area planning restricts choice. I put on record that I toyed with the wording of “sufficient score” because I think that it is appalling that we still have the transfer test and that we would deem a child insufficient at such a young age.

One of the most pressing issues is post-primary transfer. There are particular circumstances in South Belfast because of its demographic and because so many schools that are right on its boundary are so sought after for miles beyond it, across the city.

Naturally, the problem has been further highlighted this year due to the pressure on many popular schools in South Belfast to allocate places without the use of academic selection. As I speak, that sees many pupils, parents, carers and even grandparents being left on tenterhooks. We also have to recognise that many schools have to manage a very complex transfer situation and are seeking to do so as fairly and reasonably as possible. I will return to that point.

Popular schools should, of course, benefit the residents of South Belfast. You would think that geographic proximity would be a key part of the transfer criteria, but that is not necessarily the case. In particular, the use of existing, or even former, family links has proven highly controversial among the many constituents who have contacted me over the last few months. Concerns have become a reality as Rathmore, Methodist College, Lagan College, Our Lady and St Patrick’s College Knock, Wellington College, Aquinas, Victoria College, Hunterhouse and the Royal Belfast Academical Institution (Inst) all place having a sibling at the school above being the eldest child in their criteria.

Area planning has not served South Belfast well. The popularity of local schools, which is one reason why many people choose to live in South Belfast, brings its own disadvantages. Area planning is not just about numbers on a page, although it should be noted that, in the cases of South Belfast and East Belfast, many of those numbers are outdated and lead to many of our schools annually requesting temporary variations on pupil numbers.

Area planning is fundamentally about provision: provision of buildings and other educational spaces, provision for

pupils with special educational needs, provision of pastoral support and so on.

At the moment, that area planning is just too narrow and too reactive to serve its supposed purpose for our constituents in South Belfast, where there is a disproportionately high population turnover.

There are also understandable concerns about the type of provision. Planning rarely focuses on secondary provision. For example, Breda Academy already has an intake of which a third have recognised special educational needs, and there may be others without a statement of need. That requires the appropriate education infrastructure to be developed proactively. Four- to five-year lead-in times to cover issues that are emerging now are no good and do not serve the pupils’ needs. Essentially, the system is unbelievably complex, with parents even considering nursery schools depending on the route to post-primary education that they wish to take for their children. There is huge complexity in everything from decreasing state secondary-school provision to an oversubscribed selective or integrated school within the constituency boundary.

It is evident that many parents wish to choose integrated education, but they are seriously limited in their choice. The excellent Lagan College, which is right on the constituency boundary, serves many parents in South Belfast who opt for that type of education for their children, but the catchment area is vast. For other parents, there is a recognition that, although integrated education may be their preference, the difficulty in getting to Lagan College from further away in the constituency and the likelihood of getting a place anyway are off-putting. To be clear, the Alliance Party fully supports the admissions criteria for attendance at an integrated primary school.

I recognise the efforts of the Education Minister, his Department and the school leadership to advance plans for the expanded Forge Integrated Primary School on the —.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Member’s giving way. I am very grateful to her. Does she accept that one of the reasons that people want to send their children to Lagan College is not necessarily because it is an integrated school but because it is a good school? Just as the Member does not like the preference for having a sibling at a school being used as part of the criteria to get you into a selective school, should that criterion continue to be used for integrated primary schools? Surely that is not particularly fair, especially if you look at where Lagan College is located and the number of non-integrated primary schools that are in the area.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you for the question. I will get on to the second question in a minute, but I think that the reason that Lagan College does so well academically is because it is so diverse. People want to send their children there because of its all-encompassing ethos. It is therefore almost a self-fulfilling prophecy. I do agree with you, however, that the whole issue of criteria and admissions cuts to the heart of the issues that we face in South Belfast.

As I said, I applaud the Department for trying to advance the new Forge Integrated Primary School on the site. Trying to make progress on that has no doubt not been easy during the pandemic.

An integrated education survey that was carried out a couple of years ago showed that six primary schools in South Belfast are consistently at or above capacity, as parents choose the route to post-primary provision for their children early on. Their choice is not, as you said, always just about the ethos, although that is relevant, because sometimes it is about proximity. The outcome of that is that there is a growing population, particularly in the Castlereagh South part of the constituency. That leads to a fast oversubscription for integrated education places. That situation will most likely be exacerbated in the next 10 years, as we know that there is ongoing work on, and work in the planning stages for, a further 1,100 houses, many of which are family-sized. One obvious question is this: is there room for another integrated school for our 11- to 18-year-olds? By that, I mean one that is well outside the constituency that could share the burden of oversubscription with Lagan College. It would be a significant boost to integrated provision for parents in and around South Belfast and further afield.

Given the delay in having this Adjournment debate, I will seek to address the lack of planning around COVID. Initially, schools were extremely concerned about the need for online learning options and the significant differences in pupil experience, depending on which school was attended. They were concerned about access to technology, family circumstances and so on. Schools have also been worried about social-distancing provisions, contact tracing, ventilation and other matters that relate to public health.

An immediate problem is how to manage the transfer for this year. However, it is a symptom of a wider problem that requires improved cross-sectoral communication and collaboration, more joined-up planning, a better approach to balancing parental rights and places for all ages, broader provision, not least in the integrated sector, and shared education by locality.

COVID, in some ways, has shone a light on the way that we often divert responsibility to schools. This was never more apparent than in the issue of managing transfers when it was increasingly evident that the transfer tests would not take place. I emphasise that the Department is responsible for planning, management and delivery of a fit-for-purpose school estate and an adequate transfer and public examination system. Let us be clear that transfer is a statutory function of the Department, and it is not adequate for the Department to say, "Well, let the schools decide". The Department's functions include, but are not limited to, ensuring that section 75, for example, is adhered to. We are already seeing disadvantage in schools exacerbated by time taken off due to self-isolation, and it is unacceptable for this to be ignored and handed over solely to schools to make the best of the situation. It is also unfair to the many pupils across South Belfast who beavered away on practice papers in anticipation of the transfer test. They have their hearts set on a particular school and are having to face the reality that they probably will not secure a place this September because they do not have siblings already at the school.

In conclusion, whatever our political differences, I want to put on record my thanks to the Minister for being so responsive to issues raised by me from my constituents around education during the pandemic. I appreciate his prompt responses. However, these immediate problems

give us a full view of the longer-term issue. We need to reconsider transfer in general and also be proactive in considering the particular circumstances of the growing and changing school-age population in South Belfast. We also need to ensure an integrated option is available for all ages to match increasing demand for it in our increasingly mixed communities. Our proactive planning and expanded provision in South Belfast can ensure that parental choice is a reality and high-quality provision is assured for all.

Mr Speaker: I remind all Members that they have five minutes.

Mr Stalford: South Belfast has some of the finest schools in Northern Ireland, offering some of the best educational experiences that young people can have. We always end up going down this road, but I have to defend the principle of academic selection. I believe in academic selection. I am standing here, speaking as someone who was born in Annadale Flats and comes from a working-class background. Had we been a family living in England, for example, the access that I had to the education that was given to me at Wellington College would never have been an option. In England, Wales and other places, in place of academic selection is selection on the ability of your parents to pay. My parents would never have been able to pay. Therefore, I will always defend the principle of academic selection because of my lived experience and that of others in my family, who also enjoyed access to Wellington College. That was the school that members of our family always seemed to go to. I will always defend that principle.

I agree with Ms Bradshaw about area planning, and the disservice that it has done to the constituency through the years. We have now arrived at a situation where, in the entire constituency of South Belfast, we have one controlled secondary school remaining. The present situation is that kids from Sandy Row and the Donegall Road are heading up the road to the Boys' Model in North Belfast because they cannot find a school place.

It is important that Breda Academy be maintained, but it is also important that the controlled secondary school element of educational provision be maintained.

6.00 pm

Almost all the schools in my constituency could be described as "integrated". It may not say "integrated" on the sign over the door, but I think of schools such as Rosetta Primary School, Knockbreda Primary School and Fane Street Primary School, where maybe 70 or 80 languages are spoken. All those schools in my constituency could be described as "integrated" because they reflect the diversity of our constituency. It is not for nothing that five different political parties represent South Belfast in this place: it is a diverse constituency.

I want to raise the issue of special educational needs (SEN) provision. I do not think that the Minister was in post at the time, but, frankly, the Education Authority (EA) made an absolute hames of the consultation with parents over the provision of special education at the Harberton site. I hope that lessons will have been learned from that so that children with special educational needs are catered for in a way that is befitting. Were we starting blank on that site, if we are being honest, it would not look like that, nor would the educational provision. It has evolved in that way. There

needs to be, in my view, a parent-led approach to securing the best SEN provision there.

I agree about the limited options, and that needs to be addressed. We cannot have a situation where, as at present, two pupils apply for every place that Lagan has. That school is deeply oversubscribed. In the spirit of someone who wants every school to be an integrated school in that sense, I think that it is important that that provision is there. We also need to see capital investment in an awful lot of our schools, primary and post-primary. It would be remiss of me if I did not, yet again, take the opportunity to bend the Minister's ear about the need for investment in Nettlefield Primary School, not just because I went there.

This has been a positive discussion. I thank my colleague, Paula Bradshaw, for bringing it to the Floor of the Assembly, and, hopefully, actions will arise from it.

Ms Hargey: I thank Paula for tabling this important topic. I am glad that we have finally got to discuss it. I am proud to say that I attended post-primary education in South Belfast in St Monica's Secondary School, which then became St Joseph's College, on the Ravenhill Road, along with my six siblings. I take the opportunity to commend and acknowledge the leadership and commitment of all our school leaders and teaching and non-teaching staff across South Belfast and beyond and thank them for their tireless work, particularly over the past year.

These are, without doubt, the most difficult of times for our schools, our young people and the education system, with disruption to education that most of us have never seen in our lifetime. At the start of last year, no one could have anticipated the sheer disruption that our young people would have to endure and continue to endure as a result of the pandemic. Sinn Féin offices, like many constituency offices, have been inundated with letters and emails from concerned parents in relation to the disruption and the consequences that it will have not only for their children's education but for their mental health and well-being.

Children have faced unprecedented disruption, which was added to by the handling of the exams issue. The Education Department must ensure that that does not happen again. Young people, parents and schools need advance planning, engagement and notice about the approach to tests, including the transfer test, and on wider issues. There must be no delay when addressing the issue of post-primary transfer, because children in P6 and their parents need to know what is happening in relation to the unregulated tests now. We know that private companies are opening for registration in May and June, so the issue needs to be looked at quickly. How can the Minister stand over putting children through those tests in the autumn when they have missed so much school, not just this year but last year?

As we plan a social recovery from the pandemic, the Education Department must address and plan for the mental health and well-being of young people and for schools more widely. It should put in place plans to address that and should not just have an academic focus. The interim mental health champion spoke of that recently when, at the Education Committee, she talked about an oncoming tsunami of mental health issues as a result of the pandemic and the restrictions.

We now know that the demand for places and provision in South Belfast has been growing, as has been said. That demand is not being met. Schools urgently need more places and increased resources. The area planning process is slow, and we need the Minister to address that and to ensure that they are prepared. We know how many children come through the system each year, and we need plans in place to respond to that. We must respond especially to the growing demand for special educational needs, which has been touched on. There are also demands for integrated and Irish-medium education. In Irish medium, the demand is huge. Coláiste Feirste is the only Irish-medium secondary school in the city and further afield. It is bursting at the seams. We need to look at that in the longer term. I ask the Minister to give assurances on detailed planning. Is that planning in place to ensure that there will be sufficient places in September?

Securing, protecting and enhancing the extended school provision is also vital. Such schools are extensions of the community, and they can act as a community hub beyond the school day. They can work to alleviate poverty and offer parental support. In a constituency that is, as I said, as diverse in population, society and economy as South Belfast, the provision of extended schools becomes crucial. The extended school programme has key outcomes such as closing the attainment gap, alleviating poverty and addressing the key themes of being healthy and living in safety and with stability. Much of the provision has focused on being healthy, which is important, but we must also have a clear focus on alleviating poverty. That was further demonstrated through holiday hunger, with parents raising concerns about access to resources for clothing, food and childcare. Many parents would say that economic well-being is a key theme that they would like to see addressed through those programmes and support in the time ahead. The extended school programme should see transformational change in alleviating poverty and closing the education gap, but we need to look at the financial pressure that parents face.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Ms Hargey: Another area is travelling to school safely. I encourage the Minister to work with Infrastructure to look at traffic calming and reduced speed limits.

I thank the Minister, and I look forward to engaging with him on those issues.

Mr O'Toole: I thank Paula Bradshaw for securing the debate. The Manic Street Preachers brought out a best-of album called 'Forever Delayed'. That could describe this post-Brexit Adjournment debate, but I am glad that it is finally happening. It has been really useful.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I will happily give way.

Mr Weir: A great musical experience is one of the Manic Street Preachers' most celebrated tracks, 'If You Tolerate This, Your Children Will Be Next'. So it is, perhaps, appropriate that the Member makes reference to the Manic Street Preachers best-of in the debate.

Mr Speaker: You have earned another minute for that one.

Mr O'Toole: It is a good way to earn another minute. I have to say that I did not predict that the Education Minister would be a Manics' fan, but every day is a school day, as they say.

Mr Stalford: I am starting to feel manic.

Mr O'Toole: Indeed.

To boil down thoughts on the post-primary provision in South Belfast, two issues emerge for me from the debate. One is the complexity of the system. That has been mentioned. There is complexity in the system in Northern Ireland generally, but that is exemplified in South Belfast in a really striking way. The second issue is the lack of provision. Frankly, our provision in South Belfast is really straining at the seams because we have a growing population.

Issues in post-primary provision are clearly not unique to South Belfast, but, as I say, they are particularly acute in our constituency. We have a growing population and a growing need for provision, but there is not enough of it. There is, specifically, not enough of it in the right places. Some of that is a result of our growing population. The population of South Belfast grew by 6% between 2009 and 2019. People want to live in South Belfast and are moving there.

It is important to say that we are in the process of completing our census forms, and that census information will be important in planning for provision in South Belfast. Paula Bradshaw was correct to mention issues around area planning, and I share those concerns. Hopefully, we will get rich census data. The diversity of the constituency and how quickly its population changes relative to other constituencies mean that it is important that people in the constituency complete the census.

People want to move to South Belfast, and that is, in part, due to the quality of schools. I agree with Christopher Stalford when he mentions our good schools. We do not agree on selection, I am afraid, but I do not disagree with him on the quality of the schools.

A significant amount of the challenge being faced in South Belfast is a result of the same structural forces that are present in Northern Ireland education. We have not been serious enough about confronting those forces. Our overly complicated education system not only multiplies provision in some areas but means that we do not have enough provision in others. In South Belfast, many of those issues are stark. Many of our high-performing grammar schools, especially but not exclusively in the voluntary sector, are oversubscribed, and post-primary provision in South Belfast is disproportionately selective. That means that many parents are obliged to make that choice for their kids, even if they see the benefit of all-ability schools.

We also have some of the most successful controlled and voluntary grammar schools in Northern Ireland. As mentioned, Methody, Wellington, Victoria, Aquinas and Rathmore are high-performing schools. I will concede Christopher Stalford's point that many have become organically integrated because of the nature of South Belfast and its relatively integrated population. I treasure that, and I think that it is really important. However, in my view, as someone who strongly supports integrated education, that does not mean that we can simply rest on that happening organically.

Although Lagan College, Northern Ireland's first integrated school, serves South Belfast, it is technically in the Member for Strangford's constituency. Clare Bailey is here, and I think that she was a pupil at Lagan, so she will be able to talk about it with more authority than I can. However, a large volume of its intake comes from South Belfast. Clearly, as has been said multiple times, there are issues around Lagan College because it is such a good school, and so many parents in South Belfast want their kids to go there. It is an amazing achievement but there are simply not enough places. There is a clear demand, as was said, for more non-selective education.

The need for capital investment was mentioned. Frankly, Deirdre Hargey's alma mater, which is now St Joseph's, is a school that needs capital investment. It could really do with a new building to deliver really good, all-ability education to pupils in that part of South Belfast.

It is important to talk about the BT8 postcode of Castlereagh south, which Paula Bradshaw mentioned. The population there will grow, and it is a population that will, hopefully, continue to be diverse in terms of what we slightly clumsily call the traditional communities in Northern Ireland. Hopefully, because South Belfast is diverse, it will have a more diverse population generally. The population of the whole corridor between Newtownbreda and Carryduff will grow, so we will need more post-primary provision in that part of the world. The current capacity of Lagan College and the other schools there, whether controlled, voluntary, selective or non-selective, and whether it is Breda, Lagan, Aquinas on the Ravenhill Road or St Joseph's, means that they will not be able to cope with the growth in population, so we will need investment and area planning, and, as I said, the census data will be critical to that.

I want to reinforce some of what was said about special education. We have an issue in some of our schools, particularly around special education.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr O'Toole: I am pleased that this debate has happened. I have two points to make about the fiendish complexity of our system: we need simplification and a fundamental review of how we do that; and, put bluntly and simply, South Belfast is growing, our schools are oversubscribed, and we need more capacity.

Ms Bailey: I am delighted that the Minister has begun the appointment process for members of the panel of the independent review of education. I look forward to their work, which is long overdue.

Across the school estate, we have in the region of 50,000 empty seats. We spend £95 million a year on the duplication of services. Recently, the Integrated Education Fund estimated that £1 million had been spent over 10 years on cross-community projects that bring children together. However, every year, without fail, I am inundated with pleas for help from the parents of children without a post-primary place after assurances of an offer. The letters come out at the start of June, and some may have just missed out on a place at their preferred school, and others have little prospect of getting a place at all.

Every year, we are promised that the Department has a plan, that we will not be in the same position and that there

will be enough places, but, every year, there is the same scramble for places and the same temporary variations.

6.15 pm

As some may know, and as Matthew O'Toole mentioned, I was part of the first intake of pupils at Lagan College. It is now the most oversubscribed school in Northern Ireland. If an identical school were to be built next door, it would be filled straight away, yet, last year, when the school applied for extra places, it was turned down by the Minister, apparently because there was no need in the area. That is a complete contradiction of my experience as an MLA in South Belfast and as a past pupil of Lagan College. Last year, for the first time in its history, it had to turn away children from the local integrated primary school until a temporary variation was later granted for the many children across South Belfast who had been turned down for a place.

My first day at Lagan College, back in 1981, was marked by protests. We had an RUC armed guard to help us get into school. Thankfully, that situation has shifted, and we now have, I think, 65 integrated schools across Northern Ireland. Opposition to integration remains, however. Since 1989, the Minister's Department has had a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate integrated education, but I have seen little policy or practice coming from it to promote integrated education. It is left to schools and parents to do the heavy lifting. I am delighted to be able to say that Lagan College will mark its fortieth anniversary this year. It stands as an example, just like Scoil an Droichid in South Belfast, of a proud and successful parent-led project that has led to a great school at the other end. We still reinforce divisions and segregation in children, however, and that has to end.

I do not want to go over other issues that have already been raised, suffice it to say that only 15.4% of students in the Belfast City Council area attend their nearest school. That is followed closely by the Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council area at 18%. Those are, by far, the lowest rates in the whole of Northern Ireland. I do not think that it is any coincidence that South Belfast straddles both council areas. I see how many pupils are left without places each year and the limited options that are available to them, yet the most oversubscribed integrated school in the region is told that it has no need for more places.

As we have heard, a number of schools are waiting desperately for new builds. I have visited St Joseph's College and seen the cramped conditions that its staff and pupils manage in. I have also visited Forge Integrated Primary School around the corner from it. It is deeply regrettable that the Minister could not find it within his powers to include those schools — St Joseph's College in particular — in the capital expenditure scheme that was announced by his Department in June. I hope that he will look favourably on their development proposals as a matter of urgency.

Last summer, I, along with a team of my party's volunteers, spent time at Glenveagh School helping teachers and staff simply to improve their outside space to make it safe — just safe — and more usable for their students. Glenveagh School is a lifeline for many children and young people with severe learning difficulties and their parents. I encourage the Minister please to visit the school at least,

meet its committed staff, pupils and community there, see the work that they do and see what they really need.

We have a long way to go in South Belfast to ensure that every school is a good school. We still do not really understand what integrated education is about. Lagan College is a good school because of its ethos. It is all-ability and non-selective, and it takes children from right across the spectrum, which means that children from one family can all attend the one school, thereby encouraging —

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Speaker: Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Ms Bailey: — a sense of community. I do not think that the Speaker will let me.

Mr Stalford: If you give way —

Ms Bailey: I will. Go ahead.

Mr Stalford: — he will give you an extra minute. I certainly would.

Mr Speaker: You just blew an extra minute. I call Kellie Armstrong.

Ms Armstrong: I am not a South Belfast MLA, but I have waited until the end. Some might say you are saving the best until last, but, no, I will not say that. As we know, Lagan College's catchment area falls just into the Strangford constituency. I am here with my colleague Paula Bradshaw to say that, in the morning, one could watch literally hundreds of my constituents' children get on buses that go into the South Belfast constituency. I think that two full buses of pupils travel to Our Lady and St Patrick's College, Knock.

Lagan College has a range of pupils because, in Strangford and North Down, Priory Integrated College and Strangford Integrated College are oversubscribed, so, if pupils can get into Lagan, they will go there. I know that South Belfast is a heavily and densely populated area, but, instead of pupils travelling to their nearest local good school, they choose to go to South Belfast, and that puts pressure on the population in that area.

I agree with Mr Stalford: I would love it if every school was an integrated school. However, I would like to point out that we cannot claim that all schools in South Belfast are integrated. Justice Treacy stated that integration and integrated schools are a stand-alone concept. In fact, when he made his decision, he criticised — it was not under the current Minister's remit — the Department's planning policy, which had been used to determine which schools would remain open, expand, close or amalgamate to meet future demand. That had prevented integrated education from being developed because, often, there were places available in other types of school, and the integrated schools became more and more oversubscribed. That has happened in South Belfast. Parents cannot get their children into schools there. The Good Relations Indicator report was, unfortunately, because of COVID, not reported on by the Executive Office in the last 12 months, but the previous report, 12 months earlier, stated clearly that 20% of children were being turned away from integrated schools because there were not enough places. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be a measurement to see where they ended up going.

A lot of work needs to be done for South Belfast, and I would really welcome the Minister taking a look at the area planning. It needs to be done in a cross-constituency way because so many children travel into South Belfast. It is more than just the population of the area, and that is one of the concerns that I have always had about area planning and the way it works. As Paula said, it does not measure where everybody is coming from or take into account how many families will bring their children into an area because there are good schools there.

Pupils travel extraordinary distances. I know that Minister Hargey talked about safety at schools. I have to declare an interest as I have a niece at OLSPCK — Our Lady and St Patrick's College, Knock — and my heart is in my mouth when I think about her. The school transport is not there when she finishes after-school activities, so she has to walk down the road, get out to the Newtownards Road and, hopefully, get a bus to head towards Strangford. It is concerning, and that happens because it is a successful school. There are concerns about that school because kids are coming out and there is no school bus available, and, when you live a further distance away from the school, it limits your opportunity to do extra activities or after-school activities. I know about that, because I travelled a fair distance to go to school outside Strangford and into south Down.

I say to the Minister that South Belfast is an amazing place for schools, but it is an amazing place for pupils coming into the area from other constituencies, and that leads to further pressure. As others have said, the constituency is due to expand. More pupils will come as the years go on, and many more houses are being built in the area. It has got to the stage now that, in South Belfast, a number of people's children have their own children and want them to go to the school that they went to, so we will see more and more pressure.

That is all I have to say. To finish, I will say that I am envious that South Belfast has such amazing schools. Strangford has them too. I just wish that we could change the system so that parents can choose to send their children to their nearest local good school, as opposed to driving or bussing them out of their areas and far away.

Mr Weir: Mr Speaker, how long have I got?

Mr Speaker: You have 10 minutes.

Mr Weir: OK. Thank you.

It is great to have the debate. It is a testament to the perseverance of the Member. I think that this is third time lucky. We have had a few snags. I thank all those who contributed to the debate. I suspect that the one area where there was probably a little bit of divergence across the Chamber was on the issue of post-primary transfer and selection, but everything has been said in a very good-natured manner today.

There is one slight restriction that I will have when responding to some of the points, but I will try to deal with it generally. Members will be aware, even in terms of a range of the sectors, that a number of the issues will touch on development proposals as we move ahead. Legally, the restriction is that they have to come from the managing authorities of those schools, but the Department and, I suppose, myself ultimately have to give a legal verdict on

any development proposals. That may restrict some of the remarks that I will be able to make on that.

Members are right to highlight the diversity in the constituency and its cosmopolitan feel. While I cannot claim to have gone to school or been raised in South Belfast, as some Members can, my parents are both from South Belfast, so I am well aware of the area. On the growth of the area, there is a higher than average percentage of newcomer children in South Belfast. There is a tendency for people to see new housing as always leading to a growth in population, whereas it can sometimes lead to a lower housing density. The projected growth in the number of young people in Northern Ireland as a whole is about 2.7% , but it is nearly double that in South Belfast, at 4.8%. South Belfast, probably more than anywhere else, has a flow of school places in and out of the constituency. It is to the credit of the schools in South Belfast, as that movement creates challenges and difficulties.

I appreciate the point made by Kellie Armstrong that while, strictly speaking, Lagan College is just inside the boundaries of Strangford, it mainly draws its students from South Belfast. If we count Lagan College as part of the overall South Belfast picture, there are 11,060 post-primary places in total, 10,938 of which are filled. It is noticeable that, of the 11 post-primary schools referred to, five are oversubscribed at first preference. All 11 mainstream schools have sixth-form provision, which puts South Belfast in a unique position compared with most other constituencies. Additionally — this can be overlooked — the five special schools in South Belfast have been mentioned. Given the fact that there are 39 special schools in Northern Ireland, there is a disproportionately high number of special schools in South Belfast.

The debate touched on a number of aspects, and Deirdre Hargey mentioned mental health. There is a major concern about the tsunami of mental health issues that will happen post COVID. None of us can make a full judgement call on where that will be. The Member will be aware that, as part of the process of COVID recovery, I have put in bids for additional mental health funding for next year. Significantly, it is not just the response to the COVID situation but a response to a long-standing issue. Recently, the Health Minister, the mental health champion and I launched the Executive's mental health and well-being framework with a mainstream budget of at least £6.5 million.

Mr Sheehan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I will give way briefly.

Mr Sheehan: The mental health and well-being framework was designed and formulated pre-COVID. We now face a totally different situation. As you said, the mental health champion talked about a tsunami of mental health issues, which will require an altogether different approach to the problems with mental health and well-being.

Mr Weir: That is why there are two elements to it. There is the direct mental health and well-being framework. What we are trying to do with that — we had a number of young ambassadors at the launch — is that, as much as possible, the co-design, as we move ahead, will be with young people, so that we reach a situation in which that input is there. As we trial things, that mainstream, baseline budget will be there, but, in addition, specific funding is being sought — I hope we will be successful in seeking it — for

direct COVID recovery. There are two parts to that, and the Member is correct in relation to that.

Holiday hunger has been mentioned, and I appreciate that it goes beyond the boundaries of South Belfast.

We know that work is going on between Education and Communities. I think that we in Northern Ireland can be rightly proud of the fact that, while in other parts of the UK there was a backwards and forwards with Marcus Rashford and others, Northern Ireland was the first part of the UK to accept that there would be payments for free school meals all year round and not simply when children are in school. In many ways, we were the brand leader on that, and I think that that stands to the credit of the Executive as a whole.

6.30 pm

On a few of the issues that Members raised, there are, I suppose, a number of voluntary grammars, controlled schools and integrated schools for which potential development proposals are either being considered or are en route. Perhaps, in keeping with trying to provide solutions that are much more geographically based, I appreciate the point that the Member for Strangford made that area planning should not be particularly confined to specific geographic boundaries, and I think that some of those solutions look across the greater Belfast area.

A Member: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: Unfortunately, I am a little bit tight for time.

Specifically, there have been a number of ongoing community conversations on integrated post-primary provision. Obviously, it will be up to the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) to bring forward proposals directly, whether they are for the transformation of a school or to look in a wider context at a new location for a school that may or may not be within the boundaries of South Belfast. Again, that will come forward directly from NICIE. I know that work is ongoing on Breda Academy as well.

Mention has been made of capital builds, and I visited St Joseph's Primary School and a number of the other schools that are involved in those builds. It is undoubtedly the case that there is wide-ranging desire and need for new capital builds. One of the frustrations that we all have is that a certain budget is available for capital builds and that, if that budget were to suddenly double overnight, it could be spent. The aim is to have a new direct call for capital builds later this year to which all schools can apply. I think that the fabric of the schools will be a key determinant when evaluating that.

With regard to special educational needs, there is a need to ensure that we have something that is fit for purpose, particularly for this September. We are also trialling additional provision in mainstream schools, and, indeed, I think that a consultation to take that forward is due to be completed in April.

A number of Members also expressed concerns about the slowness of the area planning process. I share those concerns. That has not necessarily been helped by the situation with COVID, but, hopefully, we are back on track a little bit. There are two solutions to that process in addition to the longer-term solutions. Mention has been made of temporary variations. The numbers in the

cohort that is transferring to post-primary this September throughout Northern Ireland will be higher than they have been previously, so temporary variations can proactively deal with some of those things. However, I am also keen to formulate a system that operates, if you like, between the two pillars of temporary variations and area planning. Through area planning, I will bring forward a process of what is, I suppose, termed rightsizing or normalisation, which will allow levels of either uplift or reduction. That would be considered on application by schools that meet certain criteria and can reflect what is in the schools in practice. Those will be brought forward fairly soon and can give, if you like, permanent solutions without having to go through the rigours of a full development proposal, which can take an amount of time. The other advantage is that that will hopefully unclog the system a little bit and allow major systemic actions to be taken where they are needed.

I appreciate that my time is up. I thank all those who contributed to the debate.

Mr Speaker: OK, Members. I thank everybody for their contributions this afternoon. Beannachtaí na Féile Pádraig oraibh. Happy St Patrick's Day.

Adjourned at 6.34 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 22 March 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matter of the Day

Murders in Newtownabbey

Mr Speaker: Ms Paula Bradley has been given leave to make a statement on the murders in Newtownabbey, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should do so by rising in their places and continuing to do so. All Members who are called will have up to three minutes to speak on 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.

Ms P Bradley: It is with great sadness that I bring this Matter of the Day to the Chamber. Before I begin, I offer my sincere condolences to the families of those who lost their lives in Rathcoole and Glenville Road on Friday night.

This time last week, we had a Matter of the Day on the murder of Sarah Everard. Little did I expect that I would be standing here today to talk about two women who were murdered on Friday night in my constituency.

The news that two women have been robbed of life has sent shock waves through the wider community and beyond. While such extreme incidents are, fortunately, rare in Northern Ireland, it is a stark reminder that we are not immune to such violence. Domestic violence and the threats of violence against women and girls are a very topical subject at the moment, and this brings home the reality that we need to do something to tackle it.

These abhorrent murders will leave an indelible mark on the victims' families, as well as the wider community, which will feel the loss deeply. Violence in all forms, but particularly towards women and girls, is completely unacceptable and can affect anyone or any home in our society.

In May 2011, my colleague Pam Cameron and I tabled a motion on domestic violence for our maiden speeches. Whilst some progress has been made, we still have a long way to go as an Assembly and as a society as a whole. We cannot allow Stacey Knell and Karen McClean to become yet another statistic; we cannot wait for another mum, daughter, wife or girlfriend to die.

There are families grieving this morning, and my heartfelt thoughts are with them as they try to rebuild their lives in the days, weeks and months ahead.

Ms Dillon: I support the comments of my colleague in my condolences to the families of Karen and Stacey and particularly to their two young daughters, who have been left without their mummy.

As outlined, we are here again talking about violence against women and girls. I am acutely aware that a motion on that is being brought to the Assembly tomorrow, and I welcome that. It was raised with the Justice Minister when the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill was going through that we need a strategy dealing with violence against women and girls. Whilst that Bill was not gender-specific, that was because it was a much wider Bill, covering all familial relationships. However, we need a strategy on violence against women and girls, and it has to be cross-cutting across all Departments.

Whilst the Justice Minister will need to take the lead, we do not want to fill our prisons with perpetrators. We want to stop women and girls becoming victims in the first place. We do not want to see incidents like this where women are killed and their families are left and their daughters are left without their mummy. That has highlighted yet again that we will have a trans-generational impact on those two young women, who will have no female to look up to, no mummy there to rear them, to be there for them and to teach them how to deal with life.

As an Assembly and as leaders in our own communities, we have to take responsibility to show those young women that we will not tolerate this and that we will not allow their mummies and family members to be just another statistic with all the others. Whilst it has been said that this type of incident is rare, one is one too many, and two in one weekend, on one night, is far too many. Families and communities are destroyed, and we need to take it seriously.

I hope that tomorrow's motion will get support. I sincerely hope that the Justice Minister and the Executive as a whole will take the issue and grapple with it. It does not take away from all other violent acts. These things are not competitive, but we have to acknowledge that violence against women and girls is all too common and is destroying our communities. Violence within the home is not a problem just within the home; it is a problem for entire communities and one that we all need to deal with. We are talking not only about domestic abuse but about violence against women and girls in every facet of life. Whether it is in their home, on the streets, in their workplace, in their place of education or wherever it may be, we have to deal with the issue, and we have to deal with it now.

Ms Mallon: My thoughts and those of the SDLP are with the friends and family of the two women who were brutally murdered. I cannot imagine the pain and hurt of losing a loved one in such horrendous circumstances. It appears that, yet again, two women have lost their lives in a violent

attack. That cannot continue to happen. We must work together to address gender-based violence.

The truth is that our society has a deeply rooted problem of misogyny and violence against women. The brutal murders of Stacey Knell and Karen McClean on Friday brought into sharp focus the clear inadequacies of the systems that are designed to protect women.

As Members said, you will be aware that the SDLP tabled a motion calling for an immediate introduction of a robust strategy to address violence against women and girls. We must see legislation that makes misogyny a hate crime. We must, as a society, do all that we can to erode sexism and protect women. We must do it for Stacey and Karen, for their families and for the many other victims who should have been protected but were not. We must do it for the many women and girls who are continuing to suffer.

Mr Beggs: I pass on condolences, on this occasion on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, to the family and friends of the individuals who so tragically lost their lives over the weekend in what appears to be murder and suicide. Two women have lost their lives as the result of stabbing. The police stated that they have launched a murder inquiry but are not seeking anyone else in connection with it.

Drug addiction has been highlighted as a related factor. We as a society must work to reduce the prevalence of both drug addiction and violence against women and girls in relationships and, indeed, against all who are involved in relationships when they break down. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families. We as an Assembly and an Executive must try to work to reduce the prevalence of such incidents and prevent them happening again. We must work to improve the education of our children and young people so that mature relationships will exist in the future and these tragic events will be less likely to occur.

Mr Blair: In addressing a reflective Matter of the Day, I first express, on behalf of the Alliance Party, my deepest condolences to the families of Karen McClean and Stacey Knell. It is an absolute tragedy that, for a second week in a row, the Assembly is condemning and reacting to domestic abuse or violence by men against women in which women have lost their lives. These killings have brought grief to the families affected, shocking many people and, of course, bringing sadness to the wider community.

Karen McClean, who, along with her family, was known to me, and Stacey Knell have become the sixth and seventh women to die in suspected violent circumstances in Northern Ireland since the start of the coronavirus lockdown. Their killings must be a catalyst for change to end male violence against women. Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK without a specific strategy to tackle male violence against women. Interdepartmental efforts are urgently needed on a cross-cutting strategy that is properly resourced and that takes on the views of the third sector. We need to put in place stronger early interventions and tougher sentences to avoid tragedies like Friday's double murder.

I welcome the comment made over the weekend by the Justice Minister that this week she hopes to put before the Executive a paper on a strategy to protect women and girls from violence. I welcome the opportunity to have further debate on the need for such a strategy and to highlight what more there is that men can do to be better allies in

addressing and challenging problematic behaviour from fellow men.

We must expect interdepartmental and inter-agency responses on these issues. Such issues impact every community and walk of life. They are also issues on which every person in every place can take action to tackle societal problems and to challenge attitudes. I look forward to working with colleagues to further address these issues.

Miss Woods: My thoughts are with the family and friends of the two women, Karen and Stacey, who lost their lives this weekend. I offer my sincere condolences to everybody who has been affected.

It is most shocking that we are here again this week, the second week in a row, to discuss yet more violence against women. Last Monday, through another Matter of the Day, we discussed the murder of Sarah Everard and the lack of a violence against women strategy. We know that this is not a rare event. Violence against women is endemic in our society and across our globe. We must recognise that.

Without a gendered resource strategy to tackle violence against women and girls, the issues are not addressed properly. A strategy that is not gendered does not state the facts or name the structural inequalities that exist, let alone deal with them. The Executive must act. Societal problems like domestic abuse and sexual violence are gendered issues. If we fail to recognise that in government, we fail to effectively tackle such issues.

Again, I offer my thoughts to the family and friends of everybody who has been affected. If you do need support, please reach out to the many support agencies that are out there.

Mr Allister: I join in the expression of condolences to the two families who have been ripped apart by these gruesome murders. I suspect that we all struggle to understand how anyone can kill their own mother and their own loved one. It is such a horrendous act that it is quite chilling even to think about it, and yet these horrific offences take place in our society. Through the relatively short passage of time, the victims become mere statistics, which is a tragedy in itself. When violence is resorted to so readily, a great change of attitude is needed. This past weekend is yet another tragic example of that.

12.15 pm

Of course, we come from a society in which young mothers were killed for political reasons. We have just passed through the census weekend. Forty years ago, a young mother from Londonderry, Joanne Mathers, was deliberately and consciously murdered in the pursuit of some perverse and wicked political end. Her death continues to cause shock throughout this community. Sadly, the shock did not end further such deaths. My prayer and hope is that the shock of this occasion will contribute to there being no further deaths of this nature, but, in this flawed society, that is probably too much to hope for.

Ms Ni Chuilín: Thank you, Paula, for raising this Matter of the Day. Before I watched your interview and the interview with Noreen, I heard the chilling news on the radio of a double murder-suicide. I understand that it was the early days of the investigation and that perhaps the facts were

not known, but I wished and hoped that those words had been used for the last time.

Karen and Stacey lost their lives as a result of murder in their own homes. We can only imagine the terror and the thoughts that went through their heads. As many others have said, two generations of a family are now bereaved. In the middle of this is a bereaved nine-year-old child who will be trying to understand.

I appeal to everyone to keep their attention on what happened at the weekend in Newtownabbey and Whiteabbey. Anyone watching the debate will want to know that we will do our best to make sure that Karen and Stacey are the last women about whom we speak in the Assembly who died as the result of violence at the hands of a man. For me, any other suggestion or quip demeans what happened to these families and, indeed, to the whole community. I offer my condolences not only as an elected rep for the area but as a woman. As a mother and a grandmother, I can only imagine what the families are going through.

I am also concerned at the plea raised by the father about his nine-year-old daughter. That is really concerning and needs to be thoroughly investigated. When anybody approaches me with concerns of that nature, as an elected rep, I encourage them to go to the PSNI and social services. We need to find out what happened.

I join with others in saying that it is regrettable and heartbreaking that, just a week on, we are again talking about the death of a woman. However, we will all have an opportunity tomorrow to join in support of the motion on ending violence against women and girls and, indeed, violence against men. The difficulty with that is that, at its root, the majority of this violence is perpetrated by men; the statistic that I heard is 96%. We have a big job of work to do. No one wants to hear about where the responsibility lies. The issue needs to be funded and the Executive need to own it, lift it and resource it. Let us focus on reflecting on what happened at the weekend, and let us offer our support to the community and the families.

Dr Aiken: I, too, state our condolences to the families on the loss of Karen and Stacey. I note the remarks of our Mayor of Antrim and Newtownabbey, who has talked about the sadness and shock that this has caused across the whole community. The fact that here we are talking in the Assembly about violence against women in its worst form underlines what a significant issue we have in Northern Ireland, particularly with domestic violence and violence against women. The fact that we are having to debate this when we are still waiting for a strategy to deal with crimes against women says something about all of us: we have failed.

This kind of thing should not happen. When concerns are raised with authorities, they should be dealt with and dealt with swiftly so that such tragedies do not occur. We have a variety of issues that we need to deal with. We need to deal specifically with hate crime legislation. We need to make sure that misogyny is not used as an excuse for violence. There is too much violence in our society. There is far too much violence against women. What do we — particularly the men in Northern Ireland — say to our young daughters, our wives, our mothers and our sisters? We have to acknowledge that we have a significant problem and have to deal with it. There is no point in putting it off further and further. We must all

work collectively to make sure that such tragedies do not happen again. We must make sure that the authorities, no matter where they are, really listen and deal with the issue when people come to them and say that there is a significant issue that needs to be dealt with.

I do not want to stand here again expressing our condolences after cases of domestic violence and violence against women. It is time that it stops. It must stop. Let us make sure that the Justice Minister fast-tracks legislation so that we get to that point.

Mr Speaker: That ends the discussion on the Matter of the Day.

Speaker's Business

Public Petition: Ban Conversion Therapy

Mr Speaker: Ms Paula Bradshaw 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 Bradshaw: I am proud to present the petition, which has received over 24,300 signatures to date, calling for a ban on so-called conversion therapy in Northern Ireland. I put on record my huge appreciation to all those who signed the petition and, in doing so, showed their compassionate support for the ban. The petition was started by the chair of the Alliance Party LGBT group, Micky Murray, who is a passionate campaigner for improved rights on behalf of all LGBT+ people in Northern Ireland. I am especially privileged to have him as a member of staff. I also put on record my appreciation to the Rainbow Project and TransgenderNI for their work on the issue.

The UK LGBT rights charity Stonewall defines conversion therapy as:

“any form of treatment or psychotherapy which aims to change a person's sexual orientation or to suppress a person's gender identity.”

The practice is based on the repugnant belief that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people have a mental illness that can be cured. Let us be clear that a person's sexual orientation or gender identity is not something to be ashamed of, something to be denied or something to be hidden. It is certainly not something to be cured.

Conversion therapy is a cruel, homophobic practice that exists only to erase the LGBT+ community and its culture from existence. It has no place in Northern Ireland or any other tolerant society. The practice's detrimental effects are evidenced in the 2018 faith and sexuality survey conducted by the Ozanne Foundation, which found that more than half of those who had tried to change their sexual orientation reported mental health issues as a result. Furthermore, the UN independent expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity recognises that the practice may constitute a form of torture, depending on the severity of the therapy and the impact on the individual. He has called for a global ban on conversion therapy.

The petition calls for the introduction of legislation to ban conversion therapy, but it must be robust and fit for purpose. It would be heartening if the Communities Minister, on behalf of the Executive, were to proceed with haste on the issue and send a message that attitudes in Northern Ireland have moved on.

No one should be encouraged to deny their sexual orientation or gender identity. Our citizens should have the freedom to be themselves without undue influence.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to make arrangements to submit the petition to my office electronically. I thank the Member for bringing the petition to the attention of the Assembly. Once received, I will forward it to the Minister for Communities and send a copy to the Committee.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to ask how the Assembly Commission, which you chair, hopes to carry the confidence of the unionist community —.

Mr Speaker: I will stop you there, Mr Allister. Resume your seat, please. That is not a point of order, as the Member is well aware.

Mr Allister: It is an embarrassment for you, sir,

Mr Speaker: It is not a point of order, Mr Allister. I am moving on.

Mr Allister: It is an absolute shame that the centenary of Northern Ireland, by virtue of the Commission that you chair, is denied to be celebrated within the premises of Stormont.

Mr Speaker: Do not accuse this Speaker of being unfair or of abusing his position. Please do not do that. I advise you not to do that.

Mr Allister: The Commission is unfair.

Mr Speaker: I advise you not to do that.

Mr Allister: It is a scandal.

Mr Speaker: The Commission is made up of five parties. Its members work very hard to reach agreement on a wide range of issues. I commend my office's officials for assisting the parties in reaching an agreement recently on the centenary, for example, and other matters. I defend the right of Commission members to agree or disagree, but I affirm to the House that they work hard, despite their political differences, to reach agreement on a wide range of matters. I will not have them insulted in the Chamber. I am not raising any more discussion on the issue. I have made my point.

Mr Allister: Sinn Féin tramples in the gutter the rights of unionists.

Mr Speaker: That is OK.

Committee Business

Committee Membership

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

Resolved:

That Mr Gary Middleton replace Ms Paula Bradley as a member of the Committee on Procedures; and that Mr Gary Middleton replace Mr Paul Givan as a member of the Committee for the Economy. — [Mr K Buchanan.]

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

Mr Speaker: The next item in the Order Paper is the motion to extend the time frame for the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response. It will be treated as a business motion, and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That this Assembly agrees that, unless it previously resolves, the time frame for the existence of the Ad Hoc Committee, appointed by the Assembly on 31 March 2020 for the purpose of receiving oral statements from Ministers on matters relating to the COVID-19 response and questioning Ministers on such statements, be extended by six months until 30 September 2021. — [Mr K Buchanan.]

Mr Speaker: Members, take your ease for a moment or two, please.

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

12.30 pm

Executive Committee Business

The Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

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

That the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be affirmed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on this debate.

Ms Hargey: These regulations will increase the value of lump sum payments that are made under the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) Order 1979, known as the 1979 scheme. The uprating of the scheme stands apart from the main social security benefits uprating procedure, and there is no statutory requirement to increase the rates. However, as in previous years, it has been agreed to increase the amounts payable from 1 April in line with inflation. The payments will be increased by 0.5% in line with September 2020's consumer price index. This is consistent with the uprating of the industrial injuries disablement benefit, to which the 1979 scheme is linked.

These regulations will ensure that lump sum payments here are at the same increased level as those in the corresponding schemes operating in Britain. The purpose of the 1979 scheme is to pay compensation to people who suffer from certain dust-related diseases or their dependants. The five respiratory diseases that it covers are mainly related directly to asbestos exposure and include mesothelioma, diffuse pleural thickening, primary carcinoma of the lung, byssinosis and pneumoconiosis, which includes asbestosis.

The lump sum payment scheme is intended to compensate people who are or during the course of their work have been exposed to asbestos or other listed agents but who have been unable to seek compensation from their employer even though the disease was contracted as a result of working for that employer. Due to the long latency period of these conditions, symptoms tend not to appear until many years after exposure. By that stage, the employer may have ceased to be in business. To be eligible for payment under the scheme, there has to have been no current or previous claim for damages in respect of the disease for which the person is claiming. There must be no relevant employer who can be pursued through the courts. The person must have been awarded industrial injuries disablement benefit.

The lump sum compensation is paid in addition to the weekly disablement benefit and is for the same disease. Dependants of the sufferer can make a claim if the person has passed away before they were able to make the claim themselves. Payments of the lump sum are based on the age of the person with the disease and their level of disablement at the time of the diagnosis. Higher amounts

are paid to people on higher levels of disability whose condition is diagnosed at an earlier stage. Lower amounts are payable to dependants who can make a claim after the sufferer has died.

The maximum amount that can be claimed under the 1979 scheme is increased this year to £94,296 for a person aged 37 or under at diagnosis. This helps to ensure that the compensation provided under the order maintains its value. I am sure that Members will agree that no amount of money can ever compensate a person who has been affected by this terrible disease. However, I am also sure that Members will want people who are making a claim on or after April 2021 to receive the higher amounts and that Members will therefore support these regulations.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): The Committee considered this statutory rule on 11 March 2021. The statutory rule is made under the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1979. Pneumoconiosis is a group of lung diseases that can happen when a person breathes in dust particles such as asbestos, coal dust or silica, usually from a workplace. Symptoms include difficulty breathing and a cough. It is not curable but is medically managed. The order provides for lump sum compensation payments to sufferers and also makes provision for payments to dependants, as defined by the order, where the sufferer did not receive compensation payment under the order before their death.

As Members will be aware, the rates of most social security benefits, pensions and lump sum payments are reviewed each year. These regulations are one of a series of statutory rules relating to that annual review and uprating. They amend the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1988 to increase the amounts payable under the order from 1 April 2021. Although there is no statutory obligation to increase the level of payments under the order, the amounts are usually increased each year in line with the rate of inflation as measured by the consumer price index the previous September, which was 0.5%. As payments made under the order are in respect of people who have been disabled by that disease through work, they are uprated in line with other disability benefits.

The Committee agreed to recommend that SR 2021/55 be affirmed by the Assembly.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No other Member has indicated that they wish to speak, so, to wind on that expansive debate, I call the Minister for Communities.

Ms Hargey: I thank everybody across the Chamber. I also thank the Chair and the Committee for Communities for their prompt consideration. The safeguards and the amounts of compensation payable are to make sure that they are not devalued by inflation. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be affirmed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members should take their ease for a few minutes — we are running a bit ahead of time — to allow the Finance Minister to come to the Chamber.

The draft Energy Performance of Buildings (Certificates and Inspections) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That the draft Energy Performance of Buildings (Certificates and Inspections) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there shall be no time limit on this debate.

Mr Murphy: The draft regulations before the House today are to be made under the powers conferred by the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. The Act gives my Department the power to modify secondary legislation regarding fees or other charges that were created pre-Brexit using powers in the European Communities Act 1972. The draft regulations were laid before the Assembly on 4 March 2020 under paragraph 12(3) of schedule 7 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. That Act requires that regulations follow the draft affirmative procedure.

Prior to the end of the implementation period, the regulations would have been made by negative resolution under section 2(2) powers of the European Communities Act 1972 and it is unlikely that we would be debating the issue today. Equivalent legislation is passing through the Westminster Parliament for data that is registered against properties in England and Wales. Scotland operates its own energy performance buildings register and is not covered by the regulations.

The purpose of the draft regulations is to reduce the statutory fees that are charged when data is registered for energy performance certificates (EPC), display energy certificates and air conditioning inspection reports for properties. There are two classes of data registration to which fees are applied: domestic properties and non-domestic properties. The draft regulations propose to reduce fees by 12% from £1.86 to £1.64 when data is lodged for domestic properties and to reduce the fees that are charged for non-domestic properties by 81% from £9.84 to £1.89. The Energy Performance of Buildings Regulations implemented the certification and inspection requirements of the energy performance of buildings directive, which include the production of EPCs, that is, energy performance certificates, display energy certificates, air conditioning inspection reports and recommendation reports. An EPC is required whenever a building is constructed or for an existing building before it is marketed for sale or rent. It gives the prospective purchasers or renters the ability to determine how efficient a property might be and to make comparisons between properties. A property owner can consider the recommendations that are in an EPC to help inform decisions in order to improve the property's energy efficiency. Display energy certificates, which we see in buildings, are also required by regulations, and they provide public services and air conditioning inspection reports in order to further support energy performance assessment and encourage improvement. The Energy Performance of Buildings Regulations also provide for the establishment and maintenance of a register of the data that is used to produce the certificates and reports and for charging fees for entering data on that register.

The Climate Change Committee reported that, in 2016, buildings accounted for 16% of our total emissions.

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Assessing the energy performance of our individual buildings and ensuring that our buildings are as efficient as possible will help to reduce those emissions. The fees that are charged to register data on the local energy performance certificates registers were last adjusted three years ago. Officials in my Department, alongside their counterparts in England and Wales, calculate the appropriate level of fees each year in order to ensure a cost-neutral service. A reduction in fees is now possible because the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, in partnership with my Department, has invested in new cloud-based digital platforms and has moved away from the fixed hardware model that had been in place since 2008. The changes should provide a more user-centred and future-proofed service as well as better value, which is demonstrated in the fee reduction.

The new fee rates that are set out in the draft regulations will allow operating costs to continue to be met without generating a profit or subsidising a loss. The costs of the service have been calculated in line with government policy, the principles that are set out in 'Managing Public Money' and with stakeholders in the property and energy professions. The Finance Committee considered the draft regulations on 3 March, and it agreed that they could progress to the next legislative stage. The Examiner of Statutory Rules has considered the draft regulations and has not raised any issue in her report.

In conclusion, the draft regulations serve a specific purpose, which, as I said, would previously have been dealt with as a routine matter by negative resolution in order to reduce the statutory fees that are charged when data is registered for domestic and non-domestic energy performance certificates, display energy certificates and air conditioning inspection reports. I commend the draft regulations to the House.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I thank the Minister for his opening remarks. The Committee considered the draft rule at its meetings on 3 March and 10 March 2021. As indicated, the rule will reduce the statutory fees that are charged when data is registered for domestic and non-domestic energy performance certificates, display energy certificates and air conditioning inspection reports.

Members indicated some concerns about the other costs to prospective households that are associated with energy performance surveys, which can exceed £50. It is also understood that the Department for Communities may be considering a minimum energy performance certification level for rental properties in order to improve the energy efficiency of private rented stock. That, although interesting, is, of course, not in the regulations.

Officials also advised the Committee that, because the European Union's energy performance of buildings directive is not covered under the Northern Ireland protocol, the legislation being considered today sits outside those considerations. Therefore, after consideration, the Committee agreed that it was content to recommend that the Assembly affirm this rule.

12.45 pm

Mr Catney: I have no issue with the statutory rule. It follows changes that have already occurred in England and Wales. There is a question of why the fee for non-

domestic certificates needed to be as high as £9.84 in the first place. If we have been able to reduce it by 81%, was this being used as a source of income generation for the Department?

In broader terms, the Department needs to urgently carry out a wider review of how building regulations can further improve the energy performance of buildings. At the start of the year, we had discussions about what the Department would bring forward to reduce the energy needs of buildings to nearly zero. While the rest of Europe has moved on, Northern Ireland and the Republic have set highly ambitious targets. A €9 billion refitting programme is to provide half a million buildings with insulation, and installing 400,000 heat pumps will have a huge impact on the efficiency of buildings. This is a key cornerstone of the green economy that we should be working towards. It has implications not just for the climate emergency. We, of course, must do all that we can to make our environment greener and reduce our impact on it. It also has huge implications for how we tackle fuel poverty. An estimated 42% of households in Northern Ireland are affected by fuel poverty. That is the highest in the UK. A huge number of people spend a significant proportion of their income on heating their home. We have winter fuel payments, and we have set ambitious regulations for the building of zero-energy homes. We could lift thousands of people out of fuel poverty and give them more money in their pockets.

Mr Frew: It would be remiss of me not to mention and welcome back my colleague and Chairperson of the Finance Committee. I hope that he is making a speedy recovery, and it is good to have him back.

The debate on the value of certificates took up a bit of Committee time. There is value in the collection and registration of data on energy efficiency. There is no doubt about that, especially when you consider that our heavy industrial users — the non-domestic side and our biggest employers and manufacturers — pay so much for their energy bills. The Assembly should be grappling with that. Most years, Northern Ireland competes with Italy for which country is the most expensive for large industries. There is no doubt that those industries employ people specifically for the collection of data on energy efficiency. They have to do that because of the cost of their energy bills. Many will go off-grid, which increases the costs for the businesses who stay on-grid.

Energy efficiency is paramount, and it must be an important focus of the House. I welcome the fact that we can reduce some costs. When we look at the figure of 81%, we think that is a massive drop, but, in a business sense, we are talking only about pennies. It is small fry in the cost of the certificate. The gathering of data will be a full-time job for at least one person, and that will be a cost in itself. However, the bills that energy users have to pay are massive. They are massive by European standards.

In the domestic setting, our housing stock is getting older. As my colleague Pat Catney has already said, fuel poverty is an issue for many people who are just about managing. They are increasingly finding that they are not heating their home efficiently because heat is being let out elsewhere and thus wasted. We should be grappling with that issue more. Bringing our housing stock up to an acceptable level is going to be a massive problem for the Assembly. We need to assist people who are living in properties that are not their own or who are having to rent. That in itself is a

massive issue for Northern Ireland. I therefore welcome this movement, albeit it is small fry. It should, however, trigger bigger debates about how we effectively manage energy costs in this country.

Mr Murphy: I thank the Members who contributed to the debate. I join the Deputy Chair of the Committee for Finance in welcoming back the Committee Chair. It is good to see him back in the Chamber.

The proposed statutory rule will reduce the statutory fees that are charged when data is lodged to the energy performance of buildings register. The reduction is possible because my Department has worked jointly with the Minister for Housing, Communities and Local Government to modernise the register by using new information technology and the latest software development techniques. The register service is now hosted on a cloud-based digital platform that is managed in-house with lower running costs, the benefit of which can be passed on to fee payers. That perhaps addresses Mr Catney's point about previous costs. The registering of data is to be cost-neutral, so it was not a moneymaking exercise, but we are now in a position to be able to reduce the cost, albeit, in monetary terms, the fees are small. It is important, however, that they match what is required. There are no alternative or non-legislative options to reduce the fees, other than by a statutory rule that is approved by the Assembly. If the statutory rule is not approved in its present form, the current higher fee rates will remain in force until a remade statutory rule is approved and signed into law.

Much of the debate focused on broader points about energy efficiency and the implications for fuel poverty. Mr Frew correctly pointed out that the gathering of data is very important. How will we benchmark improvements in future? How will we know that we are becoming more energy-efficient, particularly as buildings contribute to 16% of emissions? How will we measure our movement towards zero carbon in 2050? We need data in order to measure it. Data collection and management are very important for assisting us in adhering to the rules on the longer-term reduction of emissions, in making buildings more energy-efficient and in eradicating fuel poverty by improving our housing stock.

The changes will ensure that the energy performance certificate register can continue to operate on a cost-neutral basis. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Energy Performance of Buildings (Certificates and Inspections) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

Private Members' Business

Climate Change Bill: First Stage

Ms Bailey: I beg to introduce the Climate Change Bill [NIA19/17-22], which is a Bill to enable the mitigation of the impact of climate change in Northern Ireland; establish a legally binding net-zero carbon target for Northern Ireland; provide for the establishment and powers of the Northern Ireland Climate Commissioner and Northern Ireland Climate Office; guarantee existing environmental and climate protections; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease while a change is made to the top Table.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

1.00 pm

Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition

Ms Bradshaw: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises there has been a failure of leadership to deal with issues that arise around flags, identity, culture and tradition in Northern Ireland; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to publish the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition report, and to bring the report recommendations to the Executive for review, to provide funding and to take forward in order to ensure leadership on these issues and to move Northern Ireland forward together as a united community.

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 in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

Ms Bradshaw: I rise to propose the motion and am happy to accept the amendment.

The Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition was formed in June 2016. It held a series of useful events around Northern Ireland and brought together key interests not only to discuss what may be perceived as the obvious issues of the display of flags and emblems — perhaps predominantly in urban areas — and memorials — perhaps more so in rural areas — but to look at the range of issues arising from culture, identity and tradition that have, it must be said, been at the heart of much of our division and conflict.

What was striking was how well mannered and, indeed, positive much of the commission's engagement was, but we have not yet had sight of its report. It seems to have disappeared into the Executive Office with no hint of when, how or even if it will emerge.

The commission's work, given its timing, has also become embroiled with the very existence of these institutions. The debate on an Irish language Act was central, rightly or wrongly, to their non-existence for three years. I myself engaged with the parties during 2017 and found that the engagement was mostly positive. The outcome, albeit with extra bureaucracy thrown in, was the agreement in New Decade, New Approach. That, too, however, has disappeared into the Executive Office.

With time now short until the end of the mandate, we have still not seen any draft legislation emerging. Of course, we now have DUP sources briefing journalists, proposing an outright breach of New Decade, New Approach. That could be achieved only with yet another use of the sectarian veto, the exact opposite of legislation that is supposed to deliver for all. How ironic.

The report and the legislation are strands of the same comprehensive agreement on how to take our culture, tradition and identity forward, including how those are reflected in flags and emblems flown from public property, and in language. As ever, that can still be abused for crude political purposes.

It is simply not good enough, five years from establishing the commission, to receive in response to a question for oral answer about the publication of the outcome of its work that a working group is being set up. Note, not even "has been set up", merely "is being set up", and fully five months after a response to another question for oral answer stated that they were considering next steps, and more than a year after the Executive came into office.

That is all an excuse for the usual endless inaction, not a route to delivery. What, exactly, is so time-consuming that the report, which took £800,000 of public money to produce, must be concealed from the public?

The culture of taking things into the Executive Office for them to reappear only on the basis that "One for you, one for us" is agreed is no way to provide good government. It merely shows that a system that is based on sectarian veto has nothing to offer us at all. It is hardly "together: building a united community".

The very point of the motion is that it is hard to have a debate on issues when we know that, after a painstaking and thorough process, a report on them has been produced but we literally cannot see it. Let us at least ask Members whether they agree on the basics. First, with regard to flags and emblems, there is no current lawful authority — "lawful authority" is the key term — for the display of flags and emblems on public property or the constructing of memorials on it. Does anyone dispute that? Secondly, the erection of flags promoting what we call paramilitarism is illegal under the Terrorism Act 2000. Surely, no one in the Chamber would have a problem with enacting and enforcing that Act. Thirdly, the display of flags, emblems and memorials should take account of the effect that it has on businesses, tourism and, ultimately, neighbourhoods. Does anyone challenge that?

The absence of lawful authority does not make it illegal per se, and cultural expression through the display of flags, emblems and memorials is a democratic right. However, no one supports flags becoming rags, and a legitimate democratic right that also requires a democratic responsibility to tolerate displays that we would rather not have to tolerate must be balanced with the need for such displays to be reasonable, focused and time-bound. What that shows is that the lack of a regulatory framework through which flags and emblems can be placed on public property for celebration and commemoration is not viable. The Executive Office should be working on the provision of such a framework.

What should never be tolerated is the erection of flags or emblems or, indeed, memorials as a means of intimidation, deliberate exclusion or mockery of victims. That is where the line must be drawn. Yet we are about to enter, again, the time of year when we meekly tolerate those. Under the Terrorism Act, it is illegal to display emblems of any kind that support proscribed organisations; a law that is taken seriously in Scotland, but is largely ignored here. Why does that continue? Ultimately, as with any rights, there are also responsibilities. Any displays need to take account of local people and their livelihoods. That point really should not need to be made.

It should be emphasised that, in many instances, flags, emblems and memorials represent underlying issues and, occasionally, tensions around culture and tradition, and, indeed, society and the economy, which, themselves,

need to be tackled. That is why it is important to recognise that what came to be known as the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) is about more than just flags. The leadership that really seems to be lacking is the one that recognises that Northern Ireland is a crossroads where English, Irish, Scottish and, increasingly, other people have come together to create their homes. As long as we fail to respect the impact of all those who have made their home here and as long as we fail to respect our own and others' responsibilities to respect and, indeed, promote all aspects of culture, tradition and identity that come from that patchwork of diversity, we will get nowhere.

We also need to get away from the notion that language, culture, heritage and tradition are necessarily a single package. In particular, we frequently hear the phrase "Ulster-Scots language, culture and heritage", yet many people who enjoy Ulster-Scots heritage do not speak the language. Others may well speak or understand the Ulster-Scots language while not otherwise considering themselves to be Ulster Scots when they reflect on their own cultural heritage and traditions. More than a few people who speak some Ulster Scots and regard their own heritage to be Ulster Scots take great pride in Irish dancing, celebrating St Patrick's Day and other cultural traditions. In other words, we have to get away from seeing identity, culture and tradition as a set menu, selected solely along sectarian fault lines. Instead, we need to see it as an à la carte menu that has the potential to enrich us all.

What I hope we will hear at the end of the debate is a new determination from the Executive Office to prove that it can get things done, alongside immediate publication of the FICT report, imminent publication of the culture and language legislation as set out in 'New Decade, New Approach', complete with clear allocations of funding and responsibility to ensure actual delivery.

There should be a commitment to develop a framework through which the display of flags and emblems can take place as a matter of commemoration or celebration in a focused and time-bound manner. That is what is meant by the notion of leadership. To enable that, I urge unanimous support for the motion and the amendment, which, rightly, proposes the swift establishment of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression.

Mr McGrath: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "review," and insert:

"to honour their commitments within New Decade, New Approach and establish the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression without delay, and to provide the necessary funding for these outcomes to recommit ourselves to reconciliation, peace and stability."

Mr Speaker: You will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. Please open the debate on the amendment.

Mr McGrath: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I welcome the opportunity to move the SDLP amendment to today's motion. Our amendment will, I believe, complement the motion. We are supportive of the motion but feel that it does not go far enough and does not place sufficient impetus on our First Minister and deputy First Minister to respond to the contentious issue of flags, identity, culture and tradition; rather, there is a need to remind the First

Ministers of the responsibilities that they willingly signed up to in 'New Decade, New Approach'.

When it comes to rights, language and identity, what have the respective Departments in the Executive delivered in the past year? What about the new framework for rights, language and identity, an Irish language Act and the Ulster-Scots language Act? What about appointing a commissioner for the Irish language or Ulster Scots or a central translation hub? Not one thing in that strand of New Decade, New Approach has been delivered.

Issues such as flags, identity, culture and tradition are essential for the lived experience of people in the North. They provide a sense of community, of belonging, of being valued and connected to their communities' histories and having a place in the story of their future. History teaches us that each generation of our society inherits a new challenge, a new concern and a new fight for their future, and, often, the youth of that generation are the ones who identify that concern. In present times, our young people want to see outward-looking policies and progressive politicians. Such politicians and policies may be shaped by our past but are not restricted or defined by it. The concerns of our young people have been identified and focus on the issues of rights, identity, politics, better housing and a commitment to fight back against the deadly effects of climate change. In many ways, we have come full circle since the civil rights struggle of yesteryear.

Today's debate focuses on identity and provides a suitable vehicle for us all to remind ourselves of the various traditions that exist in the context of the North and to reaffirm that it is healthy to have a sense of national identity of whichever strand. It is healthy to take a position on the constitutional question, given that it is a question that all of us will have to answer some day, sooner than many of us may think. A sense of national identity should provide us with a grounding in where we have come from and where, as a collective society, we want to go.

In the SDLP, we have always been committed to that vision and ideal. From the earliest days of our party's inception, there was a recognition that a number of traditions and identities existed across the North and there was a need to find consensus and common ground. Political giants from all quarters of the House, some of whom are still with us, offer much that we can learn from and helped to broker the peace deal that handed us a new Northern Ireland, one in which our children could live and grow as equals, no matter what their flag is, no matter what their sense of national identity is, no matter what their expression of culture is and no matter what their community's tradition is. That generation — indeed, your generation, Mr Speaker — taught us why discussion and debate are essential to the furthering of our society.

Only a few generations back, countless men, women and children from different backgrounds and traditions marched together in defiance and dissent against the status quo. They marched for the civic rights of the individual and for adequate housing, and their dissent won that day. A generation ago, another band of brothers and sisters marched against the status quo of violence that paramilitary organisations continued in our society. Those organisations laid down their arms, and, again, that dissent won the day. In the previous generation's time, understanding had to be sought, peaceful resolutions made and compromise agreed on. Against all the odds,

they achieved what many had written off as impossible. Our time, however, expects and demands action from us. Regardless of the differences in our society and the depth of our dissent from each other, we must show society as a whole, particularly our young people, that change is possible and, when it is for the betterment of our society, inevitable.

1.15 pm

Ahead of the talks process preceding 'New Decade, New Approach', the SDLP had a number of key asks. We wanted equal marriage to be delivered and, if it were done through the Assembly, the democratic will of the people to be respected. I am delighted that equal marriage was delivered, although I regret that I was not able to cast my vote to support it. We want to see the beginning of a process to decide on the content of a bill of rights, and I am delighted that that work is ongoing. We are committed to the establishment of a single equality Bill and an all-island charter of rights.

For the time being, however, we are here to deal with the issue of the day: the establishment of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression. The establishment of such an office is founded in the Good Friday Agreement, our pathway to peace:

"It is the firm will of the Irish nation, in harmony and friendship, to unite all the people who share the territory of the island of Ireland, in all the diversity of their identities and traditions, recognising that a united Ireland shall be brought about only by peaceful means with the consent of a majority of the people, democratically expressed, in both jurisdictions in the island."

The establishment of such an office is detailed in 'New Decade, New Approach'. The office will have a responsibility to:

"promote cultural pluralism and respect for diversity, build social cohesion and reconciliation and to celebrate and support all aspects of Northern Ireland's rich cultural and linguistic heritage."

It is an essential part of the framework that was meant to be delivered by the joint First Ministers, and, while I welcome the presence of our junior Ministers today, it would send a clearer message to the public if the First Minister and deputy First Minister were here today. Maybe that harks back to something more sinister that needs to be clearly called out. We have heard talk today of the Brexit protocol being linked to the delivery of an Irish language Act or, more broadly, the proposed cultural Acts. That is just political grubbery. The only politics that Sinn Féin and the DUP can deliver here are these: if you do not scratch my back, I will not scratch yours. I have mentioned our young people and their future more than once. That is a future in which we all welcome and respect each other and each other's traditions and move forward to challenge issues such as climate change, economic stability and opportunity. Just remember: there are two parties here that want to draw you into a binary debate that revolves around them and not you. That is not what I am about.

It has been more than a year since New Decade, New Approach, and the promised cultural issues have not been delivered; they have not even inched forward. Our goal is

to deliver on the work of previous generations of politicians and community workers and find consensus in all quarters of the House, regardless of flags, identity, culture or tradition, that such agreement, such compromise and such recognition of identity is not only possible but inevitable. Let us prove the commentators wrong for once. Let us deliver that. I commend our amendment to the House.

Mr Lunn: I rise to speak on behalf of the Committee for the Executive Office. I thank the Members who tabled the motion and the amendment.

Flags, identity, culture and tradition have been dominant themes of political life here. Needless to say, there is significant disagreement on those issues across the Assembly. It will not surprise anyone to learn that there are differences of opinion on those matters on the Committee as well: we are merely a reflection of the Assembly. We come from different cultural traditions and have different political perspectives, but the Committee has agreed that we must talk about such things. Whatever our differences or viewpoints, we need to engage with each other in informed and respectful dialogue.

We know that there is a report by the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition. That is all that we know about it. We do not know anything about it, and the Committee has not seen it. We hear that a working group has been established to map out a way forward on the issues highlighted in the report. The Committee was not informed of that working group being set up and has written to the Department for details: when it is to meet, whether it has met and its membership.

Renowned peacebuilding practitioner John Paul Lederach talks of three working assumptions in reconciliation work. The first is relationships. Let us face it: they can be good or bad. The second is encounter, which is the opportunity and space to express how we feel about the issues that concern us. That can be challenging and difficult, but it is important that we find ways to talk about such things. The third and, perhaps, most important is acknowledgement. That is hearing the views of others and holding those views to be valid. It does not mean that we have to agree with everything that is said, just that the views expressed are accepted and treated with respect.

The Committee may not be united on the issues associated with flags, identity, culture and tradition, but it is agreed that it needs to be part of the conversation, and that conversation has to be informed, honest, positive and respectful. The Committee looks forward to receiving the details that it requested from the Executive Office, either by return letter — that is taking some time — or in today's debate, perhaps from the junior Ministers.

I want to make one or two comments off my own bat as an individual MLA. The first is to welcome the motion from my former colleague and the amendment from the SDLP. I am happy to support both. They complement each other well.

This is not the first time that a report has been delayed. It is almost traditional in this place. It is still not acceptable. Why has it been delayed in this case? The commission was formed in 2016 — five years ago. I know that there was a break in its deliberations due to the collapse of the Assembly, but that does not really explain why, since July last year, when the report was presented to the Executive Office, there has been nothing about it except the establishment of another working group.

There are various potential reasons for such a delay. If I expressed some of them, I might sound a bit cynical. The first is that the working group is working diligently to refine the recommendations in the report and will shortly complete its work satisfactorily. I hope that that is the case. Secondly, it could be that there was so little consensus in the commission that a useful report could not be produced. I do not think that that is the case. What we hear unofficially, perhaps from within the commission — let us put it that way — is that there is some useful stuff in the report. The other day, my colleague Doug Beattie pointed out that the report had cost £809,000 so far. If it does not see the light of day, it will be a complete waste of public money. I hope that, if it does see the light of day, it will not still be a waste of public money. We have to go somewhere with it.

On 30 November, the deputy First Minister said in answer to a question from Kellie Armstrong that discussions were ongoing. That was five months ago, and we have still heard nothing. It is nine months since the report was produced. I encourage the junior Ministers to tell us what they can today about what is happening and, perhaps, give us some insight into their thinking about the report.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Lunn: I know that my time is up, Mr Speaker, but thank you very much. I will support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Stalford: The first principle in a discussion on culture, identity and tradition should be that the huge majority of people who live in Northern Ireland are tolerant. We are tolerant people. That is because, over many years, there have been three major cultural and identity influences here: the English influence, the Irish influence and the Scottish influence.

Stalford is not a Scottish name, but I am married to a Getty. Her mother is a Campbell, and my relatives have various Scots names. We are a blended people, with very different and diverse backgrounds. We have a vibrant community identity in Northern Ireland.

I want to be clear on the flags issue: I will always defend the dignified display of the flag of my country, and I will never make excuses for the display of anything that could be associated with a paramilitary organisation. I want to talk about a local compromise, which I worked on and which stretched people, that was reached in my constituency. We now have an agreement in place that governs the display of flags in the Ballynafeigh area. There is a set time for when they go up and for when they come down, and there are set places where they can go up. I think that that is working well. I, along with Clare Bailey, was involved in putting that agreement together. When we announced its provisions, some of those who have participated in the debate thus far could not wait to kick us hard enough for what we had proposed. What we have instituted, however, is working and will continue to work in that area.

As for the community that I come from, I am member of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Orange Order, the Apprentice Boys and the Royal Black Institution. My father was a member of the Orange, as was his father, as was his father, as was his father. That tradition goes way, way back in my family, and it is one from which I am very proud to come. It is a startling statistic that attacks on Orange

halls have risen since 1994. Instances of attacks on the property of the Orange Institution have gone up since we have supposedly become a more peaceful society. That demonstrates an intolerance, but, as I said at the start, I genuinely believe that the huge majority of our people are tolerant and want to live peaceably alongside their neighbours.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: Certainly.

Mr Allister: Does the Member recognise that, on this day in the House, this place is probably the last place that can talk about tolerance and understanding, given that we are coming off the back of a disgraceful decision last week from the Assembly Commission, which runs the House, indicating that the centenary, which is so precious to many, cannot and will not be marked on a permanent basis within the curtilage of the House? Does he not think that trampling in the gutter the wishes of unionists shows anything but respect from the House?

Mr Stalford: I thank the Member for raising that point with me.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Stalford: Thank you, sir.

It is poor form to stand to your feet to demand that your culture, your identity and your tradition be respected whilst, at the same time, denying that respect and integrity to the traditions of the people whom you work and live alongside. I very much regret the decision that was taken by the Assembly Commission. It was the wrong decision, and it sends out an appalling message about the decade of centenaries that we are going through. You cannot, later on in the year, make demands while, at this stage in the year, denying people their space and their place. It is important that people reflect on that. I do not think that the decision taken was respectful or appropriate. Aside from anything else, the Assembly Commission was not being asked to spend taxpayer money on the memorial.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Member that he is well beyond the scope of the motion in hand.

1.30 pm

Mr Stalford: OK. I fear that it is reflective of intolerance, and that is where, sometimes, I think that political parties are out of step with the community as a whole.

I hope that the content of the report will be published soon and that Members will be able to study it for themselves. In the meantime, I, once again, repeat my call for us to live peaceably alongside each other, because we all have to make this place work.

Mr Sheehan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. I thank my colleagues from the Alliance Party and the SDLP for tabling the motion and the amendment, both of which Sinn Féin will support.

Of course, this debate does not take place in a vacuum; the context is 100 years of partition. There are two narratives associated with that. The first is that there is a sense of pride about this place but also a sense of insecurity, having fashioned a state based on inequality. The second narrative is of a people who suffered

discrimination, sectarianism and the denial of rights and cultural expression.

As I drove to work this morning through my constituency, down the Falls Road, I passed the Royal Victoria Hospital. I then went on down to the Sinn Féin office at the corner of Sevastapol Street which leads on to Odessa Street, both named after sites of battles in the Crimean War. You could walk two minutes on up the street to the Kashmir Road, Lucknow Street and Benares Street, other places of British imperialist rampaging. That is right in the heart of republican west Belfast. I came on up to work and drove up Prince of Wales Avenue, or, as some of us with a certain background describe it, POW Avenue. Then I got to the statue of Carson and the building with Britannia on it. I came in and waved to Lord Craigavon at the top of the stairs. As Conor Murphy says, we should be thinking of doing more to celebrate unionist tradition and cultural expressions here. That is the context. There is an imbalance in society, and that is why we have debates like this.

The framework for dealing with those problems is the Good Friday Agreement, and it is welcome to see Members on the opposite Benches belatedly giving support to the Good Friday Agreement. That is a good thing. The Good Friday Agreement reminds us of the need to uphold the protection and vindication of the human rights of all and partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships. Unfortunately, respect, equality and parity of esteem have been in short supply since the foundation of this state 100 years ago. That is because there has been a failure of leadership to confront not just sectarianism but also sexism, racism, homophobia and so on.

The old labels of minority and majority are gone. There are new communities here now, and there are people who do not consider themselves as being part of a minority or a majority. Real political leadership means working together, and the challenge is to demonstrate that we give equal expression to the identity, aspirations and traditions of all our people. Our focus must be on building an open and diverse society, based on anti-sectarianism and reconciliation. That is what we need to do.

As another Member mentioned, we heard more of the anti-Irish aspect of the DUP's rhetoric this morning with the supposed decision to oppose the enactment of an Irish language Act until the protocol is done away with. I would love to hear what the protocol has to do with an Irish language Act. I say to them again: you may be able to stall progress, but you will not be able to stop it. We, as Irish republicans, take no satisfaction from your humiliation at the hands of the English Tories, because they will never consider you, or us, their equal. However, Irish republicans will. Unionists are the equal of republicans. So, join with the rest of us in building a new dispensation and a new country that all of us can be proud of because no one can be proud of what has existed here for the last 100 years.

Mr Beattie: First, I register an interest. For my sins, I was a commissioner for three-odd years and know the workings of the commission. Secondly, I pay tribute to the commissioners. There were seven political representatives representing the five political parties. They know what they did, and they know the information that came back from it. There was also civic representation, and there were academics who had an awful job to do in a political

minefield. I pay tribute to Dominic Bryans, the joint chair with Neville Armstrong; Katie Radford, who was the only female on the commission, and that was an imbalanced commission because we needed more female voices; Mukesh Sharma; Tom Hennessey; David Robinson; and not forgetting the dedicated secretariat from the Executive Office.

It is worth remembering that the commission was not just about flags; there was an awful lot more. It was a massive remit. It covered education; the media; sport; language, culture and heritage; the public space, including arts in the public space; symbols and emblems; flags in public spaces; flags on public buildings; bonfires; murals; memorials; remembrance; and commemorations. It was a huge remit to try to get through.

If anybody thinks that it was easy to reach agreement or, indeed, that we reached agreement on all those things, they are sadly mistaken. However, there were some great discussions, some great ideas, some innovative thinking and some fantastic arguments. The commissioners worked incredibly hard. However, I am not sure that the commission's report will have solved all the problems that we face. They may set up another conversation that we will have to have, and a working group may not necessarily be a bad thing. We certainly need to see the report. I have no issue with that; I think that it should be put into the public domain. However, it will not give us the answers to many of the issues that were raised.

Let me give you an example. I made a simple suggestion on the commission that we should reduce the number of memorials in Northern Ireland, bearing in mind that there are more memorials in Northern Ireland to murderers, rapists and child abusers than there are to their victims. That was a very simple recommendation. The argument was that we all have to be able to remember our dead. That is a fair one; I have no issue with that. However, we have to take into consideration the person whose family member was murdered by the UVF who has to walk past a UVF memorial every day and the hurt that it causes them, or the family that had a loved one blown to pieces by an IRA bomb, only to see it memorialised year after year.

However, my recommendation — I thought that it was a good one — to reduce memorials failed. It was not taken forward and was not agreed. Most military memorials have been withdrawn and are now in the memorial garden in Palace Barracks, and most front-facing RUC memorials have been taken away and are now at the back of police stations, yet we could not even say that we would reduce harmful memorials to save our people who have to look at them every day.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He makes a very powerful point, and I thank him for making it. Will the Member agree with me that people in our community have to walk past such murals and monuments while so-called elected Members of this House representing democratic parties glorify terrorists and terrorism by attending such events? That is equally wrong. In fact, it is reprehensible in a democracy.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Beattie: Thank you, Mr Speaker. That is why, as a society, we are not addressing the harmful nature of issues such as memorialisation, and we need to. For me, it was a key point, and it was not just a key point for one side or the

other; I was talking about everybody. We should be looking after the victims not the perpetrators. Not only was the issue of memorialisation not agreed, neither was the issue of languages.

Partly, it was not agreed because, in 2018, Sinn Féin said, "We are not going to talk about the Irish language in the FICT commission any more because it is being discussed elsewhere".

Symbols and emblems: not agreed. Flags on street furniture: not agreed. Flags on public buildings: not agreed. Implementation and oversight: not agreed. There are elements in the FICT report that will give us food for thought and something to take forward in order to move some of the issues on. However, the FICT report will not be a panacea that will fix our problems; it will create another discussion. We need to be ready for that discussion and honest in it. When the FICT report is released — I will support the motion to have it released — some people in the House will look at it and say, "I don't agree with that element, but I agree with this element. I don't agree with what you are saying about bonfires, but I certainly agree with it about memorials". We will have to be ready for that when it comes out and to stand over it. Political parties sitting here today that say that they do not know what is in the report are not being truthful: they do. I do. *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Clarke: To follow on from the last speaker, I will put it on record that I do not know what is in the report. I have had a good insight from you today on what may be in it. However, what I also get from that is the filibustering from the other side about what they want in terms of their rights. However, from what you said, it seems that what will not be in the report is what many may wish to be in it. It alarms me to hear that about memorials for —

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to my friend for giving way. Does the Member agree that anyone who refers to Prince of Wales Avenue as POW Avenue is the very last person who should be talking about protecting rights?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for that point, and I will come back to it.

It concerns me that we have victim makers' memorials and that those who are involved in the commission obviously did not want to have them, but they came here today to give us lectures on other aspects of rights.

I will go back to my colleague's comments on the work that was done in Ballynafeigh and on the leadership there. That is where the real leadership happens: in our communities. In my area, I worked with a loyalist paramilitary organisation to remove its flags and to put up more respectful Union Jacks for the marching season. That is probably similar to some of the suggestions, given some of the comments that Mr Beattie made on it. That worked because it was led by the community. It was welcomed by those who lived in the community and did not want to see signs of paramilitarism but were content for the flag of our country to fly for the marching season. It is examples like that that show leadership.

It reminds me of the debate when they took the Union flag down from Belfast City Hall. The Alliance Party has tabled the motion nearly as if to stoke the argument when

tensions are already high in our communities. However, it is ill for the proposer of the motion to come here today and not stay in her place until the second or third speaker after her had finished their contribution. That was more about them coming in to make some big point as if they are the champions of democracy and trying to lead things.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Clarke: No, I will not give way. I will hear enough when you are on your feet later.

It was poor that the Member could not stay to hear the contributions if they were so concerned.

Mr Lyttle: She had to let me take this seat. I am contributing.

Mr Speaker: The Member did not want you to intervene.

Mr Clarke: I could say to the Member, who is in a sedentary position, that, if he had taken the seat after the Member left, he maybe could have heard this point and I might have given way. However, like the other Member, he was not here for the debate.

The only way for the argument to go forward on all the points is with respect. However, listening to the Member from West Belfast talk about his parade from his home to here, he omitted to mention all the memorials and murals for terrorists. He forgot about those. He belonged to a terrorist organisation; indeed, he was a POW, if he wants to call himself that, rather than the Prince of Wales. Like many Members opposite, he went out of his way to be offended. They go out of their way to be offended by our tradition — my tradition. I do not know why he had to go up Prince of Wales Avenue. What was wrong with Massey Avenue?

I have to say that the argument put forward by the Member opposite and the temper and arrogance of the Member opposite worry and concern me. He can smile all he likes. We want to bring peace and stability to Northern Ireland, but he can get offended by street names. He did not mention once the terrorists who murdered people in his constituency and the glorification of those people on walls, which people like me find offensive, if I have to drive through west Belfast. Not one mention.

1.45 pm

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I am sure that the Member will agree that the Member for West Belfast failed to acknowledge that, if you go down the Falls Road, you will see mention of D company of the IRA, which terrorised the people who lived in the lower Falls, destroyed our city centre and, of course, was responsible for the murder of many people from the Catholic community including Jean McConville, whose family have been unable to mark her passing and murder by the IRA.

Mr Clarke: That is like many other examples that could be mooted. It is a sad reflection.

We are back here because of the NDNA agreement. However, there are many aspects of that that have not been resolved or settled. It seems that the Members opposite want to cherry-pick those. There are many aspects of the NDNA that are beneficial to everyone.

Hopefully the party that tabled the motion recognises the harm that it did at Belfast City Hall. Maybe the Member

who moved the motion could have a word with the Minister of Justice to see what she is going to do about the 7,500 police officers. If we are going to do this without consent and bringing people with us, we will see more problems on our streets unfortunately. In the Minister of Justice's police settlement, she is reducing the number of police officers. We are going down to 6,800, which is 800 officers fewer than we require. Let us not cherry-pick parts of NDNA; let us implement it in full. When we get it in full, we can talk about some of the pet projects of the Members opposite.

Mr Muir: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In his contribution, Mr Clarke alluded to Ms Bradshaw leaving the Chamber as a matter of disrespect and not wishing to contribute to the debate. Can we clarify that the reason that Ms Bradshaw left the Chamber is the social-distancing rules that are in place, which permit only two Members from the Alliance Party to be here?

Mr Speaker: Thank you. You have made your point on the record.

Ms Sheerin: I support the motion and the amendment. I acknowledge that, to some, this might seem like quite a superficial conversation to have, given the year that we have had and the pandemic that we are all still living through. That said, we have had events in recent weeks that demonstrate just how important identity and respect for differences still are in the North of Ireland.

In the outworking of an anti-democratic Brexit, we have seen gangs of loyalist thugs march through our streets uninterrupted; paint-can soldiers threatening our hard-won peace through graffiti on walls; and pandering to paramilitaries from both broadcast media and political unionism. The anniversary of the shameful partition of our country gave way to a debate about the appropriateness of a floating six counties made of stone, and, just this morning, we were told that Acht na Gaeilge will be blocked as long as an internationally agreed solution to Brexit on the island of Ireland remains in place.

We no longer live under majority rule. It is important that our public places welcome everyone. The days of marking territory and no-go areas need to be confined to history. This is a time of transition, something that was legislated for in the Good Friday Agreement. It is the Good Friday Agreement that provides us with the framework for equality going forward. It gives us a template to work within when delivering language rights, access to healthcare and public services, all contained within a bill of rights as recommitted to in 'NDNA'.

The Good Friday Agreement prioritised the protection and vindication of human rights for all and partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships. FICT deals with symbolism, but, far from dismissing that as just semantics, we should acknowledge that symbols are the visual manifestation of the regard in which citizens are held. This statelet is contested territory. Sometime after Ireland was first colonised, when the land had all been acquired and the people all belittled, the process of anglicisation began in earnest. Across the country, we still see the legacy of that in the loss of our native language, the imposition of place names and a state that is still owned by aristocrats.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. She will be aware that, since the establishment of the Irish Republic, or the partition that she so loathes, it has been

official government policy to sustain the Irish language. Will the Member tell me how much of a success that has been?

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Member for his intervention, but I do not know how relevant it is.

Mr Stalford: It is perfectly relevant.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Sheerin: The language was removed by "antiquators" from Britain, and, over hundreds of years, stripped from the country, North and South. It is being regenerated. We have a Gaeltacht in the area in which I live.

It was in the context of violence and threat that the country was divided and partial independence was granted to the Twenty-six Counties. Following partition, the North saw the establishment of the sectarian state with a deliberate and consistent resistance to equality and respect. Instead, discrimination was enforced in legislation. The remnants of that are everywhere: our street names; our public buildings; our statues and monuments; the language that we speak; and the names of our public services. They are representative of the dominance of one tradition and the exclusion of another. There has been a failure of leadership from many across the House in their attempt to maintain a status quo that has long gone and a refusal to challenge and confront sectarianism, racism and xenophobia. The antidote to all those isms is to affirm positively and commit to the delivery of the rights and entitlements of all our people. The debate on constitutional change will be the context for progressing work on identity, tradition, overcoming sectarianism and addressing sectarian segregation. The days of majority rule are over. This is not about only unionists and nationalists. There are many new communities that must be seen, heard and represented in our society.

The motion calls for action on an agreement from New Decade, New Approach, which, of course, created the conditions for our restored five-party power-sharing Executive. It is vital that we deal with the issues around flags, identity, culture and tradition, as we should with all commitments from NDNA, and that requires common enterprise. Political leadership means that we look to the future together. The challenge before each party in the House is how we demonstrate equal expression to the identity, legitimate aspirations and traditions of all our people. We need to be inclusive and commit to a shared focus on anti-sectarianism and reconciliation. In that context, I look forward to a meaningful conversation on the FICT report and its recommendations. I hope that this will be the first step on a journey that ends in equality and respect for us all.

Ms Anderson: Tá mé ag tacú leis an rún agus leis an leasú. I support the motion and the amendment. The issue of flags, identity, culture and tradition is multifaceted. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate as it is timely or, some might say, well overdue. There is no doubt that there has been a lack of leadership from the state since the partition of Ireland. This statelet, once referred to as an orange state, had no intention or desire to be inclusive. It instilled in the republican and nationalist tradition a deep understanding that we were born into a little sectarian state that neither wanted nor welcomed us. The violent imposition of partition led to the creation of an exclusionary orange state that was built on institutionalised

sectarianism. Therefore, the centenary stone proposal, in the shape of the partitioned Six Counties, was insensitive, to say the least, to the identity, culture and tradition of people who viewed it as symbolic of the past failures of political unionism and of a statelet that discriminated, excluded, oppressed and gerrymandered.

No effort at reconciliation has been made by the state to address the violence and suffering caused during that era, and, to this day, DUP politicians continue to treat with disdain the flag, identity, culture and language of the Irish tradition. Anti-Irish diatribe has been characteristic of some unionist politicians who proudly light bonfires that are bedecked with Irish flags, boastfully insult Irish republicans and nationalists with such remarks as “Coronavirus is a Taig plague”, “Curry my yogurt” and “Feeding the crocodiles”, stop bursaries for aspiring Irish language speakers and even change the Irish name on a boat. That was not any of us going out of our way to be offended; that was offensive.

We need equal expression of all identities on this island in council chambers, in this Building and on this estate. That is the test for political leaders, and all political parties need to confront sectarianism in all its ugly facets. Sinn Féin has adopted and published detailed policies and concrete proposals for tackling sectarianism, and that is what we bring to the discussion on flags, identity, culture and tradition. That is Sinn Féin’s contribution to overcoming sectarianism and engaging in conversations about the continued transformation of society towards reconciliation and Irish unity. Now is the time for other parties to bring forward their proposals to end sectarianism, promote reconciliation and to engage others in that debate, which is a debate that we are committed to having.

There is no doubt that the legacy of our past political conflict continues to cast a very long shadow over political and communal life. We view our past differently, and we have different narratives that conflict with one another, but we can respect each other’s differences, and we can agree to disagree. Reconciliation in a new Ireland is rooted in timeless republican core principles. Sinn Féin is working to build an outward, positive and inclusive rights-based society. However, political parties that seek electoral support from sectarian politics cannot achieve a cohesive, united community if they continue to whip up their base into a toxic, sectarian frenzy in, perhaps, an effort to stop their votes haemorrhaging. I am an Irish republican, driven by an absolute commitment to anti-sectarianism now and in the future.

Mr Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Ms Anderson: Going forward, that is what our society needs.

Mr Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until then. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Patsy McGlone.

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Housing: NDNA Commitment

1. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the commitment for a specific housing outcome in New Decade New Approach (NDNA), why such an outcome is not included in the draft Programme for Government. (AQO 1776/17-22)

Mrs O’Neill (The deputy First Minister): Housing was identified as a key priority in the Programme for Government draft outcomes framework published for consultation. The provision of suitable housing for everyone features prominently in three of the nine well-being outcomes, and that reflects the importance that the Executive attach to the matter. The public consultation, which commenced on 25 January, is an important first step in the new programme’s development process. The consultation closes later today, and the process of analysing the comments and views expressed by stakeholders and respondents will commence very shortly. The aim is to have an agreed outcomes framework that is informed by the consultation ready around the end of April, with a more complete programme, incorporating an agreed budget linked to policies and programmes, being brought forward for Assembly consideration by the summer recess.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the joint First Minister for her response and for her acknowledgement that housing is related to good well-being and good health. There is an ongoing issue with landbanking. Following the consultations, are there any plans to take action against those who continue to bank land, particularly in and around public housing, and to ensure that there is a sufficient budget allocation that will go some way to meeting need?

Mrs O’Neill: I thank the Member for her question. I absolutely agree. She highlighted the fact, which I welcome, that housing is such an important area for us to be focused on, whether it be social housing, affordable rents or repairs to Housing Executive properties. The Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey, has brought forward the biggest shake-up of public housing in 50 years. I know that the Member will also welcome that. We look forward to that work being undertaken.

You are right about landbanking. There is a lot more to be done there, but it is beyond the remit of just the Department for Communities. A number of Departments will need to be involved. What is most important is that we provide housing for the public in the right locations so that people who live in rural areas have the same access to housing as those elsewhere. I am therefore more than happy to raise the particular issue of landbanking at the Executive to ensure that that is factored into the considerations that are already under way.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, deputy First Minister. As you said, housing appears in three of the nine well-being outcomes. There was a specific agreement in New Decade, New Approach to have a housing outcome

on its own, because that would lead to many other options being opened up, such as the environment. Why was the decision taken to keep dividing housing up rather than having a specific outcome for it?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her commentary. I share some of the concerns that you have raised. The Communities Minister — the housing Minister — also raised that very point. You are right. The Programme for Government is in draft format, so everybody has the chance to have input and change it. There has already been considerable engagement on the draft programme to date, which we welcome. The purpose of the consultation is to try to get to a point at which we are able to change things, if we can. The programme in its current form does not seek to denigrate or downgrade the housing outcome, because it is writ large across three of the different areas, and in more detail than you would get in a high-level aspiration. It is hopefully a practical outworking of what we can do on housing. We have listened very carefully throughout the consultation. I have no doubt that strong lobbying will have been received by many people with regard to this, and I am very open to the conversation continuing.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the joint First Minister for her responses so far, and I thank Dolores for tabling a very important question. Will the joint First Minister detail the work that is being carried out to address decades of underinvestment in our housing programme?

Mrs O'Neill: As I touched on previously, the Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey, has already highlighted to all her Executive colleagues that the outcomes framework needs to be revised. That is her view, as the housing Minister, and it is what you would expect her to talk about. However, I am also very pleased with the work that Minister Hargey has brought forward. She has been very clear about working through an ambitious proposal to transform the housing system, which I have described as the biggest shake-up of public housing in 50 years and which will include securing the future of the Housing Executive, ensuring that it can build homes where they are needed.

The Finance and Communities Ministers have also successfully worked together to end the Housing Executive's requirement to pay corporation tax, and they will explore future investment opportunities. That will result in the Housing Executive's ability to maintain and repair its current stock, as well as build more homes. On behalf of the Executive, Minister Hargey continues to make significant progress in this area, particularly around bringing forward measures to tackle homelessness, and she will provide a programme that will see new social and affordable homes being built where they are needed. Overall, we have seen through her recent statement that she will make sure that our housing system will work better for all those who need a home.

Brexit Transition Discussions

2. **Ms Kimmins** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on any discussions they have had to address issues arising from the end of the Brexit transition period. (AQO 1777/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: Addressing issues that have arisen from the end of the transition period has been a priority for

us. Discussions have taken place on a number of levels with multiple partners and stakeholders. As an Executive, we consider issues arising from the end of the transition period at our regular meetings on EU exit matters. In the run-up to, and following the end of, the transition period, we have engaged with the European Commission through our participation on the Joint Committee. That has met on seven occasions, the most recent of which was on 24 February. We met with the co-chairs of the Joint Committee, who are Michael Gove and vice president Maroš Šefčovič, on 3 February. We and the junior Ministers have also continued to engage with them and their colleagues, primarily through the EU Exit Operations Cabinet Committee. We have taken the opportunity to highlight issues as they arise, including at a dedicated discussion on the protocol, which was held on 7 January.

In addition, our officials hold weekly meetings with the Trader Support Service and their counterparts in the Irish Government to proactively ensure that any emerging issues are addressed as quickly as possible. We are also continuing to engage closely with stakeholders in our business community to ensure that their concerns are also understood. Throughout all our engagement, we have taken every opportunity to highlight the need to resolve issues and to ensure that additional burdens and costs for our people and businesses are minimised.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the joint First Minister for her answer. The recent breaches by the British Government of their legal obligations to implement the protocol will come as no surprise to the majority in the Chamber, who were and remain opposed to Brexit and who were acutely aware of the damage that it would do to our people and economy. Does the joint First Minister share my concern that the British Government's most recent solo run on the implementation of the protocol was reckless and unnecessary and that it creates even more instability and uncertainty?

Mrs O'Neill: I attended a meeting of the Joint Committee on 24 February with Michael Gove and Maroš Šefčovič at which both reaffirmed their support for the protocol and the need to work together to deal with the issues that have arisen. However, despite those commitments, the British Government, less than a week later, went on to do the solo run, and they took unilateral action that has totally undermined the work of the Joint Committee and that risks a collision course with the European Commission where we become the collateral damage.

In my personal opinion, rather than TEO's opinion, that was a calculated act of political bad faith. I do not think that it will come as any surprise to the Member that the current instability and uncertainty is a direct consequence of Brexit — a Brexit that was rejected by a majority across our community and this House. Those who championed Brexit need to own the economic consequences and uncertainty that have flowed from it. Any threats to the implementation of the protocol, which is our protection against the worst excesses of a hard Brexit, risk future stability, growth and prosperity. It is still a time for clarity, stability, certainty and to find solutions to issues as and when they arise.

Mr Stalford: Throughout the Brexit process, the deputy First Minister and other colleagues on that side of the House have been faithful cheerleaders for the European Commission. Given its disgraceful behaviour over the past 24 hours, with the European Commission now actively

threatening vaccine supplies, not only for my constituents but for the deputy First Minister's, will she and the Remain parties in the Chamber care to revise their fealty to the European Commission?

Mrs O'Neill: My personal view is, "Thank goodness that we had people looking out for the interests of the Good Friday Agreement, and thank God the EU stayed firm on that". We are where we are. Let me be clear that vaccines should not be a commodity and should not be traded; they should be given to those who need them most. We should be working together to make sure that that is the case. I make that point very clearly.

Mr O'Toole: Deputy First Minister, speaking of revising earlier positions, Members on the other side of the House might want to examine data put out today by the Food and Drink Federation showing that UK exports of salmon to the EU were down by 98%, beef was down by 91%, cheese by 85% and pork by 87%. Agri-food is such an important part of our economy, and, sadly, British food producers are now at an appalling disadvantage, thanks to the Brexit championed by those opposite. What are we doing to maximise the advantage presented by the protocol, which gives our farmers and food producers unfettered access to the EU market that is so important to them?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mrs O'Neill: The Member is right. We are where we are, albeit it was not the democratically expressed wishes of the people who live here. We have to maximise the potential that we have to access the EU market. We need to look towards economic recovery in a post-COVID world, and what that will look like with the new trading realities that exist as a direct result of Brexit. We have to work with local industry, particularly the agri-food industry that the Member referred to, and look at other market opportunities. For example, what the opportunities are, the challenges, and what we can do to assist the industry. We need to do all that we can because we are now faced with a post-Brexit era with many new trading realities as a direct result of Brexit.

Mr Allister: Bearing in mind that New Decade, New Approach brought the deputy First Minister back to rule over us, its commitment to Northern Ireland's continuing to be an integral part of the United Kingdom internal market and its guarantee of unfettered access in EU trade, do the deputy First Minister and the office that she represents support the rigorous implementation of those pledges?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will know that, over many decades, every time that we have signed up to any political commitments, we have always honoured them. That remains our position. What we are dealing with on Brexit are the unfortunate trading realities in a post-Brexit world. Those who championed Brexit, the Member included, need to shoulder some of the responsibility for the situation that many people find themselves in today. My rule of thumb has always been to ensure that we had continued North/South and east-west trade, minimised the disruption to businesses, the costs and burdens that fall upon consumers, and support local business and industry. That remains the position today.

COVID-19 Recovery Strategy

3. **Ms Flynn** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Executive's COVID-19 recovery strategy. (AQO 1778/17-22)

14. **Mr Catney** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how they will ensure that 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out Of Restrictions' supports parks and outdoor activity facilities. (AQO 1789/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I will answer questions 3 and 14 together.

The Executive are focused on building a careful and ambitious plan for moving forward in 2021 and beyond. We reviewed the restrictions on 16 March and agreed that, in addition to a phased approach culminating in all school year groups being back to face-to-face learning on 12 April, there will be modest relaxations in place from 1 April for non-essential retail, click and collect, and numbers permitted at outdoor gatherings and in private gardens.

2.15 pm

From 12 April, further relaxations will be implemented for the numbers that are permitted in private gardens, click and collect, outdoor sports training as well as the "Stay at home" message. All that is, obviously, subject to Executive ratification after Easter.

Many parks and outdoor spaces have remained open, enabling people to take daily local exercise. By the end of the cautious first steps phase in the sports and leisure activities pathway, we hope to open all outdoor visitor attractions as well as outdoor sports facilities for training and organised group activities. It is important that we ensure that our society can reopen in a sustainable manner that reduces the risk of reintroducing restrictions.

Looking beyond the relaxation of restrictions, the Executive have started developing a cohesive, cross-departmental strategy that focuses on societal, economic and health recovery. It will outline key interventions that will take account of current COVID-19 restrictions and the medium- to long-term outcomes that are envisaged in the draft Programme for Government.

Ms Flynn: I thank the joint First Minister for her response. As we know, the pandemic has had a huge impact on many people, particularly the vulnerable, the lonely and those in poverty and housing need. Women, in particular, have also been impacted quite badly; we have seen increased levels of unemployment and domestic violence. With all that in mind, does the joint First Minister agree that addressing social inequalities and concerns should be at the core of the Executive's recovery strategy?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her question. The pandemic has certainly highlighted the high levels of poverty, inequality and disadvantage across our community. I am also particularly aware that the social and economic impact of the pandemic has fallen hard on women, many of whom are in low-paid, precarious employment, and many others have lost their jobs. The rise in domestic violence and abuse has also been particularly alarming. As we step out of the restrictions we, too, must develop more sustainable and strategic responses that, at their core, break the cycles of poverty, exclusion and inequality.

In that context, the Minister for Communities will bring forward a plan for inclusive social recovery that will include tackling unemployment and delivering inclusive economic growth; protecting the vulnerable, including through delivering a cross-government anti-poverty strategy; improving the supply of decent and affordable housing; working with councils to support town and city centre recovery; the recovery of our communities through support for organisations that encourage community development; the recovery of our culture, arts and heritage sectors; and support for a safe return to sport and physical activity.

Addressing social inequality is about looking after the most vulnerable, the lonely, those in housing need and those in poverty. Families and workers on low incomes must be core to our recovery strategy. The Member will agree when I say that we owe it to all the people in our society to make that happen.

Mr Catney: Will the Minister provide an update on vaccine supply? Will we reach the targets that were set out in the vaccination timetable?

Mrs O'Neill: That is, of course, the remit of the Health Minister. You will have seen commentary from the Health Department over the past number of days about the concerns that it has. The roll-out plan as originally envisaged may be delayed by a couple of weeks, but I am hopeful that the vaccination programme will continue to go as well as it has been. We can only hope that we get to the point where the maximum number of people have been vaccinated. That will, obviously, allow us to marry the programme with our pathway out of restrictions.

Ms Bradshaw: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answers so far. What consideration has been given to people who have been on furlough, whether they are in retail or restaurants etc? It is one thing to earn a salary, but work is not just about getting paid; it is also about interactions and a sense of worth. How will the recovery strategy accommodate those people when they are getting back to the workplace?

Mrs O'Neill: You are right. Those same considerations apply to all the children and young people who are returning to school today. They have gone so long without those interactions and the chance to engage with people and be their normal selves. The Executive have started a conversation and a piece of work on the things that we need to focus on as part of the recovery. The needs of many people who have been impacted by the pandemic have to be taken into account. You referred to those who have been furloughed in, for example, the retail and hospitality sectors, for the best part of a year.

We also have to look at the situation that faces nurses right now and those who work in the health service. It is quite alarming to listen to the lived experience of those who are working on the front line in dealing with the pandemic. I am fearful for their mental health and well-being. In the last number of weeks, the First Minister, the Health Minister and I met the Royal College of Nursing. Representatives expressed their depth of feeling, in the strongest possible terms, on the anxiety, exhaustion and general feeling of a lack of well-being among the nursing staff. I am really concerned about that. We have a big job of work to do in trying to support people in the post-COVID recovery era.

Mr Clarke: The Member who asked the initial question talked about the effects that COVID-19 is having on

families, including unemployment. The Member who spoke previously asked about furlough. The thing that is directly involved in both of those is businesses. If we can get businesses open again, unemployment will reduce and furlough will end. Are there any plans to speed up the strategy, to prevent both unemployment and furlough, and to let those businesses get back to operating as normal, which we will see right across the rest of the UK?

Mrs O'Neill: The pandemic has caused untold damage, from a personal point of view to lives and livelihoods and people's mental health and well-being and to the economy, small businesses and businesses that have been closed for the best part of a year. The pandemic has been cruel and unforgiving in its impact. There is a huge amount of work to be done. I assure every business that we want to have them opening their doors as quickly as possible, but we must do so safely and sustainably. In other parts of Europe, over the weekend, people went back into restrictions. We want to avoid that. We do not want to be in that position, and the best way that we can attempt to avoid it is by going forward, "Steady as you go". There will be gradual easements. We will keep making progress by adding to them, and we will find our way out of this sooner, rather than later. However, it will be only with continued public adherence and the public working with us. We understand how difficult it is, and we will not keep restrictions in place for any longer than is necessary.

Miss Woods: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answers so far. Today, we have the return of many children and young people to face-to-face education. Last week, during the ministerial statement, the First Minister informed me that a decision on the return to the Sure Start developmental programme for two- to three-year-olds has been referred to the COVID-19 task force. Has a decision been taken on that? If not, when is it expected?

Mrs O'Neill: The answer is that no decision has been taken as yet, but I hope that it will come to the Executive — probably Thursday's Executive meeting will be the next opportunity. We have set out specific dates at different intervals, but the cross-departmental task force group meets every week. It looks at current issues, and I know that that is one of the issues that is on its desk. We want to be able to support families that need that additional support. There are other areas around children and young people needing support in the community. That is another area that we should look at.

Mr Stewart: The deputy First Minister rightly said that the pandemic has been cruel. That cannot be any more the case than for our tourism and hospitality sectors, which have been massively hit. Some predict that many businesses will not be able to open on the back of it. Aside from the additional financial support that they need, they need assurances about when they will be able to reopen and the lead-in time to that. Can the deputy First Minister tell me what conversations she has had with the hospitality and tourism sectors about plans to reopen and the measures that they need to put in place ahead of that?

Mrs O'Neill: The principal engagement with the tourism and hospitality sectors falls to the Department for the Economy, and there is ongoing engagement there. However, at the level of our task force, there is continual engagement across the sectors, and we know that tourism and hospitality are two sectors that have been absolutely decimated as a result of the pandemic. We

need to continue to engage with them. We want to have conversations about preparedness and getting ready to open, so that people know that they have something to work towards. We continue to do that. I cannot remember the last time that I met representatives of the sector, but I engage, for example, with Hospitality Ulster, on an ongoing basis, as do junior Ministers and officials from the Executive Office.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answers so far. Can the deputy First Minister tell us in which phase outdoor airsoft is included? Is it in phase 2, as a sport and leisure activity? Given that sport can take place outside at a social distance and that preparation and set-up can also happen outdoors, will that be treated as phase 2 and will it go ahead? Are there any indicative dates, or how much advance notice will be given to those types of groupings and organisations so that they can resume business?

Mrs O'Neill: The plan is designed in such a way that we are able to say, "This is what we think is coming next", and we can start to work with the sectors. I do not know specifically. I would guess that it is the phase 2 cautious first steps because it is outdoors, but I would like to clarify that with officials. I am happy to write to the Member. It makes sense: outdoors is safer than indoors, so those are the first areas that we will be able to focus on and make some relaxations. I will write to the Member and make sure that she is informed.

Ebrington Square

4. **Ms Anderson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on how their Department is progressing projects on the Ebrington site. (AQO 1779/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: We are absolutely committed to the regeneration of the north-west. We want to be able to move the region forward and improve the lives of all the people in the area.

Through a sustained programme of investment and development, good progress is being made. The £250 million investment through the Derry/Strabane city deal will be really transformative. The graduate entry medical school at Magee, which is on track to receive its first cohort of 70 students in September, will deliver far-reaching benefits for the regional economy and for wider society.

The Executive Office is taking forward a number of important projects, including the major redevelopment of Meenan Square through our Urban Villages programme; a new arts and culture centre at New Gate in the Fountain; and the redevelopment of the Ebrington site, which is a crucial part of our vision for the north-west. We have made significant progress since the Executive Office took direct responsibility for the regeneration of the site in April 2016. All buildings on-site now have a lease agreement for lease or preferred developer identified.

Construction of the grade A office accommodation building is well under way and is due to be completed in March 2022. Construction works on a proposed hotel are scheduled to commence in the summer, and a business case to develop a maritime museum on Ebrington is being progressed by Derry City and Strabane District Council.

Subject to approvals and budget, it is hoped that the council museum will open in 2024.

A new site entrance road and service road opened last year, and the provision of essential utility services is nearing completion. Those works have helped to attract private-sector investment to the site, with three businesses opened in 2020 and more scheduled to open when the tenant fit-out works are completed.

We will continue to advance all our main development works and progress the phased transfer of the site to the council in due course. We very much look forward to seeing the benefits of the regeneration to come for many years.

Ms Anderson: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for that answer. How advanced are the plans for the second grade A office accommodation in Ebrington Square?

Mrs O'Neill: As part of the planning approval for the current grade A office accommodation, permission has been granted for a second office building on the same enabling platform above the underground car park. There is, therefore, scope for a further development of that nature, should the market support it.

Given the high level of interest for investment on-site following previous marketing exercises, we are making plans to dispose of the car park and remaining land as a development opportunity. That is expected to be via a marketing exercise in line with the well-established process used for the disposals of other land and buildings on-site. We are keen to bring that to the market as soon as possible, and work is already well under way in preparation. We anticipate that the development opportunity will be publicised and, hopefully, formal expressions of interest sought by early April.

Uighur and Kazakh Muslims

5. **Mr McGlone** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline any representations that have been made to the Chinese Government through the Northern Ireland bureau office in Beijing about the treatment of Uighur and Kazakh Muslims. (AQO 1780/17-22)

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

Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Foreign policy is not a devolved matter. The function of the bureau in China is to strengthen our relationship with central and provincial governments and the people of China to increase trade, tourism and educational opportunities. It is not a political office, so no direct representations have been made by the bureau to the Chinese Government.

However, as an Executive, we have a responsibility when it comes to how we engage on the world stage and with our international partners in promoting the values and rights that are important to our democratic systems.

In common with other Governments, we are deeply concerned about reports of the treatment of the Uighur and Kazakh populations. We believe that we are in a position to share our unique experience of how building an accountable political and democratic system is good for business and society.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. Tá mé buartha. I am sorry. We will now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Gender-based Violence

T2. **Mr McGuigan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they agree that the Executive must take immediate and resolute action to tackle gender-based violence against women and girls in light of the fact that, in early February, Urantsetseg Tserendorj, who was 48 and from Mongolia, was stabbed and killed in Dublin; earlier this month, Sarah Everard was kidnapped and murdered; and, at the weekend, the very tragic deaths of Karen McClean and Stacey Knell occurred in Rathcoole; with us all, no doubt, extending our deepest sympathies to their families, friends and loved ones. (AQT 1132/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. First, I extend my sympathies and, I am sure, those of everyone in the Chamber to all those who have been bereaved in the most harrowing circumstances. We must always remember that, at the very heart of all those stories that we see breaking on the news, there are people, families and loved ones. Those women have tragically and avoidably lost their lives, and all those families have been robbed of that person. Although we appreciate that each circumstance is individual, such incidents are by no means isolated. Gender-based violence is the appalling truth for countless women and girls right across society. Domestic abuse of every form is the daily lived experience of many women. This comes at a time when the levels of domestic violence across the North are at a record high. We cannot stand still while women and girls continue to come to harm. To do so would be a dereliction of duty by all of us in public office. Yes, I absolutely agree that the Executive must take unified and determined action to tackle the critical issue of gender-based violence, which needs to be progressed in the right way as a matter of urgency. I assure the Member that it will have my full commitment.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for her response. Given her response and commitment, does she agree that, as a society, we must deal with the underlying misogyny that gives rise to violence against women and girls, and that that would best be achieved through the development of an Executive strategy?

Mrs O'Neill: I absolutely agree. It is vital that the Executive develop a gender-specific strategy to address the many complex issues that give rise to violence against women and girls. The Member is absolutely right to say that dealing with misogyny must be at the heart of all that, because the ingrained misogyny that prevails across society is not only damaging to women but very dangerous. We must all say very clearly that none of us should ever stand for it. An Irish saying — *Ní neart go cur le chéile* — means that there is no strength without unity. We must stand together on this issue.

Dismissing the discrimination and denigration of women simply as outdated thinking, which is, often, how it is described, is really not good enough. It has to be flushed out. It needs to be eradicated through a coordinated and sustained approach across all parts of society, from educating children and young people to adopting a zero-

tolerance approach to those who seek to abuse women and girls in that way.

Safety for Women and Girls

T3. **Mr Catney** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, after expressing his sincere sympathy to the families of Stacey Knell and Karen McClean, who were so brutally murdered and taken from their loved ones at the weekend, to state what action they are taking to make our communities a safer place for women and girls. (AQT 1133/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in my previous answer, it is incumbent upon us all to work together to make society a safer place and challenge outdated claims. Misogyny is treated almost as though it were an acceptable everyday occurrence. That is not the case. It needs to be stamped out and called out collectively. The Member asked about action. There is no one solution for how we deal with that. It needs to be across all Departments. There needs to be a societal approach that starts with individual, personal responsibility: for example, even for me, as a parent, educating my children. We all have a job to do to try to make this a better, safe place for women. I am committed to playing my part in working with others to ensure that we come at this issue. The starting point has to be the gender-based strategy on tackling violence against women and girls.

Mr Catney: Thank you. I hear what you say, deputy First Minister, but this is the only place on these islands without a specific strategy to tackle violence against women and girls. What is the timeline for the completion and implementation of a strategy?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will hopefully know that, under the remit of the Department of Justice, Minister Long will have responsibility for bringing forward such a strategy. I will work with the Minister to make sure that we get a fit-for-purpose strategy. It is not good enough that this part of the world is the only place that does not have a strategy to tackle violence against women and girls, so let us ensure that all political parties work together to bring forward a strategy in the most timely manner possible.

Climate and Energy Governance

T4. **Miss Woods** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that they will be aware of the recent report from academics at the University of Exeter, which was funded and commissioned by the Executive to look at the energy governance that will be required for Northern Ireland's energy transition, for their assessment of a key recommendation in the report that a duty be placed on all Northern Ireland Departments to consider climate and energy transition as part of policy development. (AQT 1134/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her question. The outworking of such a report has to have more Executive discussion, but we all have a responsibility to play our part in tackling climate change. Every Department will have a responsibility. I welcome the fact that the Climate Change Bill will receive large support in the Assembly Chamber when it is debated. We are living through a climate emergency, from which there will be disastrous effects across the board, so we all need to tackle it. I am open-minded when looking at these things, but I do not

have the details of the report with me. I am happy to write to the Member about where the report goes next and at what stage it sits.

Miss Woods: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. I would certainly welcome a commitment from the Executive Office to introduce a duty to conduct a climate impact assessment when it comes to policymaking, for example. Regarding another recommendation from the research, will the deputy First Minister support proposals to establish a new Department of climate and energy transition? What discussions is she having with her Executive colleagues to make that happen?

Mrs O'Neill: There are no conversations of that nature at the moment, but, again, let me get the details of the report and write to the Member about its status: where it sits and where it will go next. There have been no discussions for some time about new Departments or even about establishing an independent climate change Department. Let me look at the report, and I will then write to the Member.

COVID-19: Vaccine Access

T5. **Mrs Cameron** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what assurances they can give that the local vaccination programme will not be adversely affected by the EU's threat to ban AstraZeneca supplies to the UK. (AQT 1135/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: I made my position clear to your party colleague earlier when I said that access to the vaccine should be based on need. Anybody who needs the vaccine should have it. It should not be a commodity. It should not be there to be traded. It should not be used as a bargaining chip. I therefore encourage everybody to work together to make sure that we vaccinate all people globally, because what happens in this part of the world during a pandemic has an implication for what happens elsewhere, and vice versa.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the deputy First Minister. Will the Executive Office support a 24/7 roll-out of the vaccination programme if the supplies allow that in Northern Ireland in the near future?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. We have always said that we will support that position. I do not think that that position has been advanced by the Department of Health yet, but getting the vaccine out as quickly as possible is top of all our agendas, as is making sure that we are protecting people. I am therefore open to supporting such a proposal.

British Government Office in Belfast

T6. **Mr Buckley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the deputy First Minister agrees with Minister Mallon who, last week, said that the opening of a UK Government office in Northern Ireland was a "power grab" and a clear attempt at "undermining devolution". (AQT 1136/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: This is not an agreed Executive position of course, but, yes, my personal view is that we need to make the power-sharing institutions work, as we do all strands of the Good Friday Agreement. I wholeheartedly believe in the Good Friday Agreement, and I believe that the British Government should not undermine power-sharing

by establishing offices in Belfast that interfere with the devolved responsibilities of Ministers here.

Mr Buckley: The deputy First Minister will know full well that that is a commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach', as is the marking of the centenary in a "spirit of mutual respect".

What respect was at the heart of the Sinn Féin decision to veto the marking of the centenary with a commemorative stone? How can the deputy First Minister expect unionism to honour the commitments made in 'New Decade, New Approach' when, evidently, you and your party are cherry-picking what you like and dislike in the agreement?

Mrs O'Neill: The debate over the stone — the monument proposed by unionists to mark the centenary of the establishment of the northern state — has once again highlighted the need for continued transformation of this society. We need to create a shared and inclusive society. For me, it underlines the importance of inclusive discussion and dialogue and the need for political discourse and ongoing engagement. I am sure that the Member or anybody with an objective view of this place to which I am elected will know that it is not an inclusive or welcoming place for people from a nationalist or republican background. It is more important that we work together towards the future. Yes, we reflect on the past, but someone from your generation and age category should be more concerned about working to build a better future. I encourage you to work with me. Let us make this place a more inclusive society, do all we can to make sure this place is welcoming and make sure that today's young people do not fight the battles of the past. I encourage people to continue to look forward and see how to share this place and demonstrate through mutual respect, generosity of spirit, good grace — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. Order, please.

Mrs O'Neill: People should realise that there is nothing to fear from the future. There is something for us all to work for — something better — where previous generations have been failed. My final words to the Member are, "Work with me". Let us make this a more inclusive place where we all live comfortably together side by side.

Caravan Parks and Holiday Homes: Reopening Date

T7. **Mr Harvey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, with St Patrick's Day having passed and Easter coming fast, to enlighten the House on when they plan to reopen static caravan parks and holiday homes. (AQT 1137/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: The Member is a poet, and he did not know it.

The issue of caravans has been raised quite a lot recently because the weather is turning and people want to get back to their caravan sites. I know that the issue has been raised with Minister Dodds, who has the responsibility for caravan parks. It is too early to say when caravan parks will open, but, as we have always said, we will not keep restrictions in place for any longer than is necessary.

There are already some categories where people can go to their static caravan. I cannot give you the date today for the removal of restrictions. However, I can say that we will

continue to work through the issues, and, as soon as we think it is safe, we will make an announcement.

Mr Harvey: Thank you for your answer, deputy First Minister. Have you considered touring caravans and a risk assessment of the shared facilities on sites?

Mrs O'Neill: It is all in the mix; it will all be part of the caravan conversation. As part of our ongoing deliberations, I will ensure that your points are factored into the conversation.

Victims' Payment Scheme: Funding

T8. **Ms Ennis** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions have been had with the British Secretary of State on funding for the victims' payment scheme. (AQT 1138/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her question. It is really important that we continue to work through the funding issue. It is really important that the victims and survivors hear that the Executive are committed to the scheme and are determined to get the money paid. However, the advances that have been made from the Secretary of State in the last week are not sufficient to allow us to move forward on the financial commitment that is needed to develop the scheme. We have asked for another cross-departmental meeting, as TEO, Finance and Justice are working together. We are still asking for that meeting, and we need to have it as soon as possible to progress the issue.

Mr Speaker: Time is up, and I invite Members to take their ease while we change the top Table for the next item.

Mr Buckley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Not during Question Time, unfortunately. We will have to take it later. Thank you.

2.45 pm

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

Infrastructure

Union Connectivity Review

1. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the assessment she had made of the Union connectivity review proposals before engaging in public comment. (AQO 1790/17-22)

2. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the proposed bridge or tunnel linking Northern Ireland to the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQO 1791/17-22)

10. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her meetings with the British Government on the Union connectivity review. (AQO 1799/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 1, 2 and 10 together.

As the Assembly will be aware, the Union connectivity review was launched by the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, last year. The review chair published his interim report

on Wednesday 10 March, which touched on a number of issues that will be examined in depth in the final report due to be completed in the summer.

I made my views on the publication of the review's interim report known earlier this month. At that point, I had read an advance copy of the interim report and met the review chair, Sir Peter Hendy, and the Secretary of State for Transport, Grant Shapps, to discuss why the promised engagement had not materialised. I have also met the Secretary of State for Transport and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on several occasions to discuss the Union connectivity review.

I will always welcome any proposals to provide much-needed investment in transport infrastructure in Northern Ireland. To that end, I have provided a list of my Department's agreed priorities to the review. They reflect the priority transport infrastructure schemes outlined in the New Decade, New Approach agreement for which funding has not yet been delivered. However, the approach to the review from the British Government is unacceptable. Decisions on devolved matters should be made by local representatives accountable to the people of Northern Ireland and not decided unilaterally in Whitehall.

I believe that a fixed link between Scotland and Northern Ireland, whether a bridge or a tunnel, is a vanity project. The enormous costs of construction could be much better spent improving infrastructure across the North. We already suffer a substantial infrastructure deficit, especially in the north-west. The Executive and the British Government have given many promises to deliver schemes to address that deficit, not least in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. I do not think that a single Member would agree that it would be in the interests of any citizens here to prioritise what appears to be a multibillion-pound bridge or tunnel when we can see that our transport and water infrastructure networks are crumbling before our eyes and that previous funding commitments made by the Prime Minister have still not been honoured.

Mr Allister: I suggest to the Minister that she let herself and the people of Northern Ireland down by her pejorative, contemptuous, ill-considered response before the ink was dry on the interim report. Why would any Infrastructure Minister with the commercial interests of Northern Ireland at heart not want to see radical improvements to the A75, by way of example? I suggest to the Minister that it is time that she took off her nationalist blinkers and was something more than a Little Irelander.

Ms Mallon: Let us look at the facts instead of engaging in emotive language. The facts are that I got an advance copy of the report, and I read it. I entered into the process of the UK connectivity review in good faith. My job as the Infrastructure Minister in Northern Ireland is to deliver schemes that will improve the lives of the people of Northern Ireland. It is not a nationalist or unionist issue, and it is lazy to characterise it as that. I am a devolutionist, and I believe in power-sharing. I will work across these islands to ensure that we improve our citizens' lives.

'New Decade, New Approach' has a list of infrastructure projects. The Prime Minister has committed to turbocharging infrastructure in Northern Ireland, and that is a case that I will continue to make. As for the A75, that is a Scotland transport issue, and I will continue to engage with

the Scottish Minister, who has responsibility and authority on that matter.

Mr Easton: Minister, why would any Infrastructure Minister oppose the creation of thousands of jobs and billions of pounds of investment that would improve connectivity between us and our biggest trading partners? Is it not simply the case that you are opposed to anything that physically connects and strengthens the Union?

Ms Mallon: As I have demonstrated since taking up my post, I am committed to working in partnership across these islands. That is why I have met, on numerous occasions, Grant Shapps, my Scottish counterpart and my Welsh counterpart and will continue to do so. The difficulty that we have here is that our infrastructure is crumbling before our eyes. Let us look at the Prime Minister's form: he squandered £40 million of taxpayers' money exploring the feasibility of the garden bridge in London. I could do so much with that £40 million for your constituents and the constituents of every Member across the House, and I make no apologies for continuing to do that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before I call the next Member, I would appreciate it if Members, when seated, kept their remarks to themselves. There is a process for dealing with questions to the Minister, and I call on Members to respect that, please.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, you are right to point out the blinkered vision of some in the House who believe Boris Johnson's promises on the delivery of infrastructure, particularly bridges. I am sure, Minister, you agree that, if people were rational and objective and looked at what is really going on, they would see how Northern Ireland is being used and abused by the British Government in their appeal to Scottish Conservatives and Labour people in the context of the Scottish Parliament elections in May.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. It is typical Tory distraction and deflection from their failings in government. They have failed in government to honour the financial commitments that they made to the people of Northern Ireland through 'New Decade, New Approach'. I agree with the Member in her analysis: this is as much about using Northern Ireland in an electoral game with the SNP, which Boris Johnson is obsessed with, as it is about anything else. One thing that we know across the House, regardless of our political position, is that we cannot trust Boris Johnson. Boris Johnson does not care about the people of Northern Ireland. He will not put our interests first.

Mr Boylan: Minister, one of the essential projects is the A5, and there is a lot of disappointment with the announcement last week about the delay. Why were the issues such as flood risk and the alternatives not raised during the first inquiry? The project has been on the go for 15 years, so we cannot understand why those issues were not raised earlier.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. Given that his party colleagues held for five years the ministerial post responsible for the A5, he will know that it has been beset by legal challenges and difficulties. The public inquiry inspector produced an interim report that made it highly likely that we would have to return to a public hearing.

I reiterate my commitment to the project. I gave careful consideration to the interim report, and I sought expert and

legal advice. I want to see the project delivered as quickly as possible.

Mr Beggs: I understand the Minister's concern that funding for a Boris bridge of some sort could be better spent on lots of other infrastructure projects, but I fail to understand her approach to the A75 between Gretna, Dumfries and Stranraer.

That is one of the four projects highlighted as having real potential, given the failure of the Scottish Government to invest significantly in that route. The Minister was content for the European Union to fund Trans-European Network links, which included that same road. I am trying to understand why she is now critical of the Scottish Government potentially gaining additional money so that improved transport links can be put in place for the west of Scotland and Northern Ireland. Indeed, that would be to the benefit of hauliers from the Republic of Ireland.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. Although we have been told that additional money will be provided, I reiterate that this Government have not honoured the financial commitments that they have already made to the people of Northern Ireland. I am committed to working in partnership, and I will continue to do so, but I respect the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity and the devolved settlement in Scotland in the same way as I respect and uphold the devolved settlement here. I will work with anyone. However, given what is happening with this Government, be it the Internal Market Act, the Levelling Up Fund or the connectivity review, I have been expressing concerns for some time about their encroachment into the devolved space. I do not apologise for standing up for devolution and power-sharing in Northern Ireland.

Mr Muir: The Boris bridge or tunnel is a dead cat strategy and needs to be seen as such. Will the Minister provide an update on the exact amount of funding that the UK Government have supplied under their New Decade, New Approach commitments for the next financial year?

Ms Mallon: Much money has been promised, but very little has materialised, unfortunately. However, I will continue to make the case to the Secretary of State and to all Ministers with whom I can get in contact to ensure that all of the commitments made under New Decade, New Approach are honoured. If we are serious about building back better from COVID together and about growing our economy and tackling the climate crisis, we must invest in our infrastructure. So, I will continue to make the case for that and look to colleagues from across the House to support me in doing so.

Mr Buckley: The Minister said that she wants to act in keeping with commitments in New Decade, New Approach by, for example, turbocharging infrastructure. Last week, Minister Mallon said that the opening of a UK Government office in Northern Ireland was a UK "power grab" and:

"a clear attempt to undermine devolution".

That just happens to be another segment of New Decade, New Approach. Will the Minister outline which parts of the agreement she agrees with and which parts she does not?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He refers to paragraph 7 in 'New Decade, New Approach', which mentions an office being set up here in Belfast to widen

accessibility to London Departments. What has transpired is that the Government wish to set the infrastructure priorities for the people of Northern Ireland. It is not about giving us greater accessibility to London Departments, it is about those Departments being parachuted in with absolutely no accountability to tell the people of Newry, the people of upper Bann and the people of Lisburn what they need.

Vehicle and Driver Testing

3. **Mr Stewart** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the restart of vehicle and driver testing at Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) centres. (AQO 1792/17-22)

15. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on measures she is taking to address the backlog in driving tests. (AQO 1804/17-22)

Ms Mallon: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 15 together.

From 20 July 2020, MOT testing resumed for priority vehicle groups, including vehicles whose owners are not able to avail themselves of temporary exemption certificates (TECs). The DVA has steadily increased its vehicle testing capacity by adopting a range of measures, including the recruitment of additional vehicle examiners, the use of overtime to provide cover for leave and sick absence and a reduction in the vehicle test appointment time. Testing is being carried out at all 15 DVA test centres.

In light of the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, I recently announced that existing TECs for qualifying vehicles will be extended by a further four months. That applies to private cars, light goods vehicles and motorcycles aged from four to nine years that have TECs that will expire between 21 March 2021 and 25 March 2022. Four-year-old cars and motorcycles and three-year-old light goods vehicles whose first test is due between those dates will also have a four-month TEC applied. New TECs or extensions to existing TECs will be applied automatically to allow vehicles to be taxed. Customers do not need to do anything until they receive a reminder notification from the DVA to present their vehicle for testing.

The delivery of practical driving tests was suspended following the Executive's decision to increase COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in December 2020.

Resumption of testing will be dependent on the timescales set out by the Executive on the easing of the restrictions, which are due for review on 15 April. Motorcycle training and testing is unaffected.

3.00 pm

The DVA has released additional testing slots for May and June. Those will provide sufficient booking capacity to allow customers with previously cancelled tests the opportunity to rebook an appointment prior to the booking system opening for other customers. Additional booking slots will also be made available where possible as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for her response. That will be of great interest to those learning to drive, driving instructors and everyone who owns a car that needs an MOT. You will be aware that drivers currently are not receiving their MOT test notice until five weeks before.

They are experiencing massive difficulty with booking a test. It is hugely frustrating for many of my constituents and, I am sure, for constituents across the country that they are not able to get a test slot, even though they need the car for work, for family commitments and for everything else. There are simply not enough slots available. When will you be able to increase capacity so that MOTs can take place within an acceptable time frame?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. We have provided additional capacity for the north-west in Derry by opening up a second building. The DVA recently extended the notification period from which MOT reminder letters are issued to customers to six weeks prior to the test due date. Plans are in place to increase that to seven weeks' notice from 14 June, when the first reminders for vehicles in receipt of the further four-month TEC will be issued to bring those vehicles in for a test. We continue to review the entire process in line with public health advice and will do what we can to resume services to their full capacity as quickly as we can, when it is safe to do so.

Dr Archibald: Has any consideration been given to ways of enabling essential workers who need a vehicle to carry out their duties to be able to access a driving test safely? I have been contacted by a number of constituents who find themselves in that situation.

Ms Mallon: The DVA is actively liaising with the Department of Health to consider the facilitation of priority requests identified by employers 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. It will be for the relevant employers to contact the agency directly to identify staff who fall within that priority group. The DVA will then endeavour to facilitate priority appointments for both theory and practical driving tests, where possible.

Miss McIlveen: The Minister will be aware of the challenges that COVID has created for the haulage industry, which has had little to no support. The cessation of testing for drivers has had a further impact. As HGV drivers retire, there is no new pool of drivers to replace them. Will the Minister look at prioritising that important sector?

Ms Mallon: My Department is in regular contact with representatives of the haulage industry. I will ask my officials in DVA to make contact with those representatives to identify what difficulties there are and what we, working together, might be able to do to try to resolve them.

Mr Dickson: I appreciate all the difficulties with MOTs caused by COVID, but you have another difficulty in MOT centres, and that is with ramps. What progress has been made there? Are they all now operational?

Ms Mallon: When I took up post and that situation soon developed, I thought that that was extremely stressful, but then COVID hit. I am pleased to say, however, that we have carried out a significant amount of work, and all the lifts that required replacing have been replaced and are operational right across the 15 test centres.

Mr Catney: What information have you received from the Executive Office on the recommencement of driving instruction?

Ms Mallon: The Member will be aware that the Executive stopped driving instruction in line with medical and health

advice, and my Department responded accordingly. Recently, in the road map to recovery, the Executive Office deemed driving tests to be placed in phase 2. To ensure that my Department is prepared, my officials are engaging across Departments, including with the Department of Health, to ensure that the correct assessment is completed ahead of further reconsideration of any easements. I assure the Member that, as soon as it is safe to resume driving tests, my Department will be ready to do so.

Roads Network: Funding Bids

4. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline any bids for additional funding for the roads network made in the various monitoring rounds in the past year. (AQO 1793/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There has been historical underinvestment in our road network for a significant number of years. Recognising this, during the current year, I submitted bids for additional funding for investment in the road network of £11 million and £6.5 million in the June and October monitoring rounds. I was very disappointed to receive no funding against my £11 million bid in June and that only £2 million was allocated against my bid for £6.5 million in October. From the £2 million that I was able to secure, I allocated £1.1 million 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 £4.5 million 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.

Mr Givan: I am deeply disappointed that you did not get your full allocation, given the underspend from the Minister of Finance and the way that it was then put out the door at the last minute, before the end of the financial year. It was not good enough on the part of Sinn Féin and I support the Minister in her bids.

Having said that, when it comes to the allocation of public funding, my constituency in Lagan Valley has often funded key infrastructure projects such as the north Lisburn feeder road and developments around the Prince William Road and Ballymacash Road through private-sector funding. When will my constituency get equality of treatment so that key infrastructure is funded by the public sector, rather than pushing up the housing market costs and pricing young people out of the market in what is a difficult area to get housing? Funding the Knockmore to Sprucefield link road would be a good test of the Minister to announce 100% funding for it today.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware of the years of underinvestment in our infrastructure, which has led to huge difficulties with the surfaces of roads, and it limits our ability to do much more on new projects. The Member may wish to know that I have included a requirement of £120 million for capital structural maintenance for the next Budget period. I hope that the Finance Minister shares our concerns and that he recommends that this bid for our roads is met. I will continue to make the case, around the Executive table, for greater funding in our infrastructure so that we can improve the quality of life of your, and all of our, constituents.

Ms Anderson: I note that the monitoring rounds have been agreed by all Executive Ministers. That is something that should be taken back there.

I note, Minister, that you received £280 million, the largest ever capital funding for your Department. Has the Minister ever bid, during any of the monitoring rounds, to kick-start the upgrade of the A2 Buncrana Road?

Ms Mallon: The Member will be aware, from previous Question Times, of my commitment to the Buncrana Road project. However, we have to ensure that due process takes place. Increasingly, I hear calls of, "Just get it done" implying that I should be cutting corners in some way by not following through proper design process and consultation with local communities, right through every stage of the process, to ensure that we can get these projects delivered in the right way. I will continue to take that approach.

On the funding allocations, Mr Deputy Speaker, you will be aware that there is a requirement of around £140 million per annum, independently verified by the Barton report, to maintain our road network as is. I will continue to make the case, around the Executive table, for funding. As I said in response to a previous question, I look to all colleagues across the House to support me in that effort.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for her answers to the question so far. I will make a very blunt point: the Department's budget for roads in 2011 was £57 million; it is now £27 million. People can read into that as they wish.

Minister, thank you for putting the hypocrites in Sinn Féin in their box. The reality of the delays to the A5 project is that we had five years with two Sinn Féin Ministers and a three-year delay when the institution was down. Thank you for putting them in their box and for making it very clear that the delays are firmly in their corner.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Does the Member have a question?

Mr McCrossan: I ask the Minister to reaffirm her commitment to this project.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I completely understand the frustration that is felt locally at the delay to that project. It has been around since 2007, and the people of west Tyrone and the wider region want to see the project delivered. I reiterate my commitment to deliver it. I carefully considered the interim report from the inspector. I took expert advice. I took Crown counsel advice. Having taken those steps, I believe we can progress the project at the earliest possible opportunity. I remain committed, and I fully understand the frustrations of local members of the public and elected representatives.

Sewerage and Water Infrastructure: Dundonald

5. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what investment is planned by her Department to develop the sewerage and water infrastructure in the rural areas around Dundonald village. (AQO 1794/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The sewerage requirements for the vast majority of rural properties around Dundonald village are served by private septic tanks, and such properties are offered an annual septic tank emptying service, funded by my Department. With regard to further plans for the

Dundonald area, I recently consulted on 'Living with Water in Belfast', the strategic drainage infrastructure plan for the greater Belfast area, including Dundonald. The public consultation closed on 29 January 2021, and officials are reviewing the responses.

'Living with Water in Belfast' identifies the existing strategic drainage and waste water issues and pressures across the greater Belfast area in respect of flooding, pollution and development constraints. An integrated and collaborative £1.4 billion plan is proposed to address those over the next 12 years. The plan includes opportunities to deliver projects in the Dundonald area, including upper catchment management to store and catch surface water run-off in the Craigtantlet and Castlereagh hills; river floodplain restoration works along the Enler River and various tributaries; and sewerage improvements to provide increased capacity, combined sewer overflow screening and sewerage storage tanks to reduce the risk of out-of-sewer flooding and spills from the network.

On provision of drinking water supplies, Northern Ireland Water prioritises treated drinking water infrastructure to ensure that every household, business, hospital and school has a reliable supply of safe and clean water. Northern Ireland Water reports no specific issues with the supply of drinking water to the Dundonald area.

Progression of any water and sewerage improvement opportunities is subject to necessary approvals being secured and the funding being made available. However, as the Living with Water programme has been identified as an Executive priority in 'New Decade, New Approach', I will continue to make a strong case for that investment to be made available. I recently wrote again to Executive colleagues to advise of the serious pressures facing our water and sewerage network and the need for critical investment.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for her very detailed answer. Is the Minister taking into account the fact that Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council is about to invest somewhere in the region of £36 million in the Dundonald International Ice Bowl? That investment is likely to leverage another £100 million of investment in the area surrounding the Ice Bowl. To be successful, that requires new roads infrastructure heading towards it. There are proposals for additional housing in the immediate area of Dundonald, and there is demand for additional public-sector housing in that area.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The reality is that, because we have had historical underinvestment in our water and waste water infrastructure, we are now sitting with some 116 locations across Northern Ireland that are at or beyond their developmental capacity. That has consequences for the building of the many homes that we need, as the Member rightly identified. It has consequences for the building of recreational facilities, hotels, hospitals and schools. The Utility Regulator has identified some £2 billion of capital investment that is required in the next price control period alone. I make it very clear to my Executive colleagues that that is a huge issue. It is a very challenging issue. If that critical investment is not realised, we will not be able to deliver our Programme for Government outcomes and we will not be able to see that development and economic growth in the Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council area or any of the council areas for that matter.

Ms Anderson: The Minister knows that there is a lack of capacity in Derry. Some 3,000 homes in Skeoge need sewerage capacity and are being delayed as a consequence of that. What plans are in place to accelerate that work? "No drains, no cranes; no cranes, no drains", as some say, whatever that is all about. In the Infrastructure Committee, we know what it is all about. We are very aware of the need for waste water sewerage capacity in Derry.

3.15 pm

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. Northern Ireland Water has advised that it completed an analysis of its waste water investment plans for the Foyle constituency at the end of last year. That investment will require the Executive to provide capital funding of approximately £29 million. The planned improvements will target capacity issues in the Culmore waste water treatment works network, including a £12 million investment in the upgrade at Strathfoyle and nearly £5 million investment in the Culmore waste water treatment works itself.

To service new growth, approximately £9 million is associated with new sewerage infrastructure investment for the Skeoge lands along the A2 Buncrana Road, which Northern Ireland Water is seeking to align with the DFI Roads A2 upgrade scheme.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): There is time for a very quick question from Mike Nesbitt.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister reports that the Utility Regulator has identified the need for £2 billion of investment. What is the Minister asking for from the Executive?

Ms Mallon: My ask of the Executive is simple, but I know that it is a tall order. We absolutely have to provide the funding that is required to ensure that we have access to clean drinking water, are able to meet our environmental requirements, can build the many homes that we need and can grow the economy. I will continue to make the case to ensure that we can get the required investment across the line.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That ends the period for listed questions. We move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Active Travel: Update

T1. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on active travel plans and how grants to improve cycling and walking routes are being rolled out and utilised. (AQT 1141/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I know that he has a keen interest in this area.

The Member will be aware of the investment that my Department has provided for the development of greenways and park-and-ride facilities across Northern Ireland as part of the £20 million blue-green fund. We have also been writing out to councils to ask them, along with their local communities, to identify ways to enhance active travel infrastructure and opportunities in their areas.

I remain committed to that agenda, and, while it is not possible to determine at this stage what the final funding may be for next year because we have not yet had the final Budget allocation, I gave a commitment to the Member

that I will continue to do what I can to maximise active travel opportunities for constituents right across Northern Ireland.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for that answer. How will the routes be identified, and will there be a proportionate concentration of routes outside metropolitan and urban areas compared with inside those areas so that we can reduce commuter traffic and, therefore, pollution?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I am very keen to ensure that we do not leave our rural communities behind when it comes to the active travel agenda. I have also been very clear that I do not believe in delivering government from the top down, imposing what I believe to be the right approach for local active travel routes on communities. That is why we have been working very closely with councils through my walking and cycling champion and why we had the community safety grant for local communities.

I very much want to continue to work in partnership with councils and local communities to identify the right opportunities for active travel so that, when we bring about change, we do so in a lasting and sustainable way.

Pedestrianisation and Active Travel: Derry

T2. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the plans for pedestrianisation and active travel in Derry city centre. (AQT 1142/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. A pop-up cycleway was delivered in June 2020 between the Harbour Square roundabout and the council offices through the riverfront car parks. My Department continues to work with the council and other stakeholders to identify measures for social distancing in Derry city centre. Officials are developing draft proposals for the Ferryquay Street, Diamond and Bishop Street areas. Those measures may include the repurposing of road space to improve social distancing where footways are narrow, the introduction of one-way streets and the removal of on-street parking to enhance provision for walking and cycling or the introduction of parklets.

My Department is also progressing several walking and cycling measures in collaboration with the council. The more significant of those include the north-west greenway proposals for Derry and Strabane. Other walking and cycling measures are proposed at Strathfoyle in the Maydown area and along the Limavady Road from Ebrington. I am also providing funding for the construction of the Strathfoyle greenway and the Strabane north greenway.

Ms McLaughlin: Minister, in line with the COVID recovery plan and, in particular, the high street recovery plan, it is important that businesses can use outside spaces but also that they share those spaces with our citizens. Will you commit to doing everything that you can to have the tourism sector COVID-ready for the summer tourism season? We are hoping that the tourism sector can use outside spaces, but we need your support.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. That agenda was important even before COVID. We need to be better at reimagining our space. A people-centred approach to place shaping is the right one. We all must work together to ensure that we reimagine our space so

that people can, when it is safe to do so, come together to shop in our local businesses. We will be very much reliant on indigenous tourism. I give a commitment that I will continue to work with stakeholders across the North to ensure that we reimagine our spaces together and do what we can to support our businesses, in particular, at this difficult time.

Casement Park: Update

T3. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Casement Park development. (AQT 1143/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I announced my decision to recommend planning approval for the new stadium at Casement Park on 13 October. The final decision will issue when a section 76 planning agreement with the applicant and with relevant parties has been satisfactorily concluded. Work on that is ongoing at pace. The application remains a priority for my Department. The drafting of a planning agreement is a complex legal matter. I am sure that the Member, as a supporter of the project, will agree with me on the need for it to be done right. The Departmental Solicitor's Office and the GAA's legal team remain in regular contact on the details of the planning agreement. Both parties are keen to reach agreement as soon as possible. I look forward to the final planning decision issuing, as the project will give a real boost to sport across our island and to the economy of west Belfast and, finally, give the GAA its home in Ulster.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. It is five months since the Minister made her announcement to approve plans for Casement Park. However, there appears to have been no progress whatsoever in the meantime. Antrim and Ulster Gaels are getting very frustrated at not having a state-of-the-art, modern stadium. Casement Park, like the A5, is one of the Executive's flagship projects. Can the Minister give an assurance that there will not be a similar failure to deliver it as there has been in the case of the A5?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. To state that there has been no progress is factually incorrect. A number of draft agreements have been shared between my Department and the GAA's solicitor. The drafting of a planning agreement is a complex matter. I am not suggesting for one moment that anyone wants me to cut corners and put the project in jeopardy. I will continue to do what I can, and my officials will continue to work at pace, on this very important project. However, I share the view that, if we had had an Assembly and Executive for the three years that they were down, we would have made much more progress on this important project.

Road Safety: Derry

T4. **Ms Mullan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, having written to her about road safety at the junction of Northland Road and Rock Road at the Magee campus of Ulster University, where there have been several serious collisions and, unfortunately, last year, a young man lost his life, whether she will undertake a review of the location with a view to introducing additional protections for road users and pedestrians. (AQT 1144/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for raising this very important issue. I will commit to discussing the matter with

my officials, asking them to provide you with an update on what actions we can take and making sure that that gets to you at the earliest opportunity.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for her answer. Following on from what my Foyle colleague said, a good outcome of COVID has been more people being active, getting out and about and enjoying our outdoors. Will you give an update on any investment that your Department will make to light our walkways and green spaces and make them more user-friendly? I am thinking of the Foyle Road and Bay Road areas in my city.

Ms Mallon: The Member raises a very important point. That is particularly important when we reflect on the tragic deaths of the two women at the weekend and on women feeling safe. As Minister for Infrastructure, I want to ensure that we make women feel safe, and an important part of that is street lighting. The Member will be aware that I allocated a budget to ensure that we could have a full 12-month repair of our street lighting, but I am keen to work with councils and others to see what more we can do to ensure that, yes, we are lighting our spaces to make them attractive but also, importantly, so that women and young girls and everyone who wants to go out walking can do so and feel safe.

Strathfoyle and Maydown, Derry

T5. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the work taking place in the long-neglected Strathfoyle and Maydown area of Derry, where, for the past few weeks, contractors have been busy. (AQT 1145/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The Strathfoyle to Maydown shared-use path will be a continuation and extension of the council's Strathfoyle greenway and Waterside greenway projects, which provide a shared footway/cycleway from the Peace Bridge to Stradowen Drive in Strathfoyle. Phase 1 of the Strathfoyle shared-use path will provide new 3-metre-wide off-road facilities for walking and cycling on the Temple Road at Clonmeen Drive and Haw Road. Phase 1 started in the autumn of 2020 and is substantially complete.

Phase 2 of the project involves upgrading and widening the existing substandard footway on the Maydown Road from the Haw Road junction to the police station to the desirable standards of a shared-use path. The proposed alignment and location of the shared-use path ensures that no carriageway-crossing movements are required for walking and cycling, creating a safer road environment for all road users. Phase 2 is under way, and I am pleased to say that it is expected that it will be complete by the summer. It is expected that a resurfacing scheme will be undertaken alongside that project.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her answer and for her investment in the Strathfoyle and Maydown area. With the progress on the Strathfoyle greenway along with that of the shared-use path between Strathfoyle and Maydown, do the Minister and her officials see merit in the ultimate continuation of the greenway as far as the village of Eglinton?

Ms Mallon: The Member will be aware that I am committed to greenways. They deliver huge benefits to people. They contribute to better mental well-being and physical health, promote active travel and are good for the environment

and reconnecting people with nature, which has been one of the chinks of light throughout the COVID crisis. I will continue to do what I can to maximise our opportunities for citizens across Northern Ireland to avail themselves of greenways and to do as much as we can to ensure that we have continuous routes for greenways not just here in Northern Ireland but across our island, because I believe that there is huge potential, which remains untapped, to do so much more in that very important area.

Resource Budget Priorities

T6. **Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that she will be aware of her rather disappointing draft resource budget settlement for the next financial year, albeit it is for her to decide how to cut that cake, whether she will give a commitment to rebalance her investment towards active travel, given that, in a recent answer, she stated that although 1,400 staff are employed by DFI Roads, only 33.5 are employed in transport policy division. (AQT 1146/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He will know that I created the new blue-green infrastructure fund of £20 million. I remain committed to that agenda. We have also been recruiting in order to ensure that we have more people in the Department working in Roads who are aware of the opportunities for active travel so that we can have that design phase at the beginning of the processes. I will continue to do what I can.

You are right: the draft budget allocation as it stands is deeply concerning, and it will have ramifications. I know that Members are very concerned about the surface of roads, street lighting and active travel, but, unless I am given the budget to be able to do those things, difficult decisions lie ahead with consequences for all our constituents.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Mr Muir for a very brief supplementary question.

Mr Muir: The Minister referred to a lot of capital spending, and I welcome that, but very little resource is being put towards active travel. There are schemes in my constituency that we would like to see delivered, such as an active travel hub with the One Path initiative. Will the Minister commit to putting funding into resource initiatives for active travel?

3.30 pm

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware of the huge pressures on the resource side of my budget. Those pressures go back to the smash-and-grab when Danny Kennedy was the Minister. I give a commitment that I will do what I can, but I cannot give a commitment on numbers because the final budget allocation has yet to be determined.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you, Members. Time is up.

Mr Durkan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for a Member to address a Minister or another Member for that matter as a "Little Irelander"? The remark made by Mr Allister about Minister Mallon is not just inappropriate but insulting and inflammatory. The Member should apologise, withdraw it and wise up.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That is a matter for the Speaker to rule on. I would determine it to be rather juvenile and inappropriate behaviour. I will relay that to the Speaker so that he can make a determination on it.

Mr Buckley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Can you clarify whether it is appropriate for Members to speak in Irish and not provide translation?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The appropriate practice in the Assembly is that anyone who speaks in Irish provides the appropriate words in English for those who do not understand Irish.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Health

Abortion Services

Mr Speaker: Ms Paula Bradshaw has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Health. If Members 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.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what actions he intends to take to commission abortion services in Northern Ireland in line with CEDAW recommendations, as must be provided in law under section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation Etc.) Act 2019.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): In April 2020, my Department invited the Executive to give their agreement to exploring options to see whether it was possible to put in place some limited measure to access a commissioned early medical abortion service in Northern Ireland during the COVID-19 emergency. This proposal aimed to mitigate the travel restrictions preventing women from Northern Ireland accessing the abortion service that is available in England. The Executive did not agree to my Department's proposal. My Department resubmitted this proposal to the Executive in May 2020, and I wrote to the Executive Office on 26 November 2020 to request an update. As the Executive have not agreed to this proposal, no further work has been taken forward by my Department.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, the Health and Social Care Bill papers provided by your Department clearly state that commissioning is not a cross-cutting matter. You have used this excuse on numerous occasions for why you brought it to the Executive. Will you please outline how it is a cross-cutting matter? Also, there is an accusation that you were bringing these proposals to the Executive because you knew that they would be blocked by the DUP.

We saw from the response to the FOI request that came out at the weekend that, during the travel ban that you spoke about, people preferred to put women at risk by having them travel during a pandemic rather than provide them with healthcare services here. Will you respond to those accusations, which members of the general public are levelling at you?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. Those accusations are unfounded. It is not just the general public who are making those accusations. At times, the Member is trying to make the issue very personal and about how I view it.

My Department does not dispute that women in Northern Ireland are legally entitled to abortion services. The legal advice that was received by my Department states that 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. To get to the position in which my Department could issue a commissioning direction, as the Member is aware, and in furtherance of legal advice, I brought a paper to the Executive on 3 April 2020 that provided options for the establishment of an early medical abortion service in Northern Ireland. My Department resubmitted that proposal to the Executive in May, and I wrote to the Executive in November. As yet, no decision has been taken by the Executive, so there is no commissioned service for abortion in Northern Ireland. 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 to discuss and agree. I stand by my view that the commissioning of abortion services could be considered as significant or controversial and outside the scope of the Programme for Government. The commissioning of that service also seems to cut across the human rights responsibilities of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. In view of that, I am obliged, under the ministerial code, to bring the matter to the Executive to discuss and agree before it can proceed.

Mrs Cameron: The DUP is a pro-life party that is focused on saving lives, not on taking them. The commissioning of abortion services is a cross-cutting matter. Indeed, there is nothing more controversial than this particular topic. It is quite ironic that Sinn Féin, whose MPs cannot even be bothered to take their seats at Westminster, seems happy to rely on UK Ministers to implement its oppressive abortion agenda.

Does the Minister agree that those who advocate the commissioning of radical abortion services without any robust scrutiny or due process are showing deep contempt for devolution and the need for consensus?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her comments and those of her party. As I said, I am of the view that the matter is cross-cutting and controversial and therefore must be taken forward by the Executive in the first instance before any proposal to commission a service can be taken any further.

Ms Sheerin: Minister, you have repeatedly said that you are not going to commission those services. What do you say to the women who are being forced to travel to England in the middle of a global health pandemic to access health services that they are entitled to under the law at home?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I want to correct her. She said that I have said that I will not commission those services. She is wrong in saying that.

Ms Sheerin: Yes, you did.

Mr Swann: What I am —. I am not a liar, no matter what the Member says.

Ms Sheerin: I did not say that you are a liar.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Swann: I have never said that I will not commission those services. What I have said is that I have a duty, as Minister of Health, to bring any proposal to the Executive that concerns the commissioning of services, because I consider that matter to be cross-cutting and controversial.

Under the ministerial code, I must do that to meet my legal obligations.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, it would be helpful to understand precisely what your position is. If I understand you correctly, you said that the last time that you brought the paper to the Executive was in November. Will you address that first? Secondly, since you have clarified that abortion services are now legal in Northern Ireland, will you advise what a woman who needs to access those healthcare services should do? As of today, from your perspective, what should she do to access those services?

Mr Swann: Those services are not illegal. They are being performed across all the trusts in Northern Ireland.

Should a woman want to access abortion services, she can contact her GP in the first instance or she can contact Informing Choices NI.

Abortion services in Northern Ireland are not illegal. They are being carried out by health professionals. It is just the commissioning of a full and comprehensive abortion service in Northern Ireland that still has to be referred to and agreed by the Executive.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for making himself available today. We know that women trying to access services are being forced to travel during the pandemic and that those who can access the very limited services here run a gauntlet of protests — in some cases by people who are travelling for their right to protest during the pandemic. In some of those cases, we have seen protesters entering health clinics and premises, blocking access, standing on the steps of hospitals. Minister, this is a deliberate attempt to prevent women accessing those services, so do you have anything to say to those who are protesting? Can you do anything to ensure safe access to the very limited services that exist for women?

Mr Swann: I agree with the Member that there should be no obstruction for anyone who wants to access a health service, whether it is commissioned or not. Those who have used their legal right to protest, as the Member has indicated, should not obstruct entry or interfere with any individual who wants to enter a healthcare facility to seek any healthcare provision that they may want.

Mr Buckley: Does the Minister agree that the intervention by the UK Government is an unacceptable breach of the devolution settlement and that this matter is for the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive to deal with? Has he made that point robustly known to the Secretary of State?

Mr Swann: I have spoken to the Secretary of State and to the Minister of State, Robin Walker, on this specific issue and on what, I believe, is a devolved matter. I have said that publicly and in the House. It is also a matter that must be brought before the Executive and agreed, because it is cross-cutting and controversial, as some of the commentary that has already been delivered today in the House shows. If I were to proceed, should I want to proceed, with the matter, I would find myself in breach of the ministerial code and would be open to legal challenge, as would any adoption of the service.

Ms Kimmins: Minister, as you will know, I raised the issue last week of the protests outside John Mitchel Place in Newry. I have engaged with a number of agencies over the last week or so on this. Minister, can you advise of

what engagement you have had with clinicians and the chief executives of the trusts across the North, all of whom are trying to deliver services under the law without any framework for what they should provide or any support from the Department? The Southern Trust's clinic in Newry is dealing with quite a difficult issue with the protesters. The clinic provides a range of services, for all sorts of reasons, and many vulnerable women and children face a really challenging situation, as do the staff, many of whom have been in touch with me about the impact that it is having on their daily lives.

Mr Swann: With regard to an earlier answer, nobody should judge anyone who is entering a health facility or why they are entering it. That is wrong. The protesters who are outside do a disservice to the staff working in the clinic and to individuals who are seeking medical support and advice. I ask them to desist from doing that until the issue is resolved through proper democratic scrutiny and accountability.

Mr Allister: The Minister will be aware that the present absurd system of devolution was sold to many in the pro-life lobby on the basis that it guaranteed control over issues such as abortion. Now that that is lamentably not so, what value is there in devolution for such people?

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point and has raised a question that is in many heads and hearts across Northern Ireland at this minute in time. However, what I say to them is that, if this place were not here, Westminster would have a free hand to do whatever it wanted to do. We will wait to see what the Secretary of State brings forward in his proposals. As yet, I have seen nothing.

3.45 pm

Mr Carroll: Minister, the reality is that you are failing women and their healthcare by refusing to act. The legislation implemented at Westminster does not require you to bring it to the Executive. That is a political choice that you have made, and many are opposed to it. Given that you have the power to act but refuse to do so while women's mental health is at risk, with many reporting to be suicidal because they cannot get access to terminations, do you regret not implementing the legislation and making the services available to women here?

Mr Swann: The Member again is trying to make a political point by making it personal: I regret that. As I said in my initial answer, the issue is cross-cutting and controversial. Therefore, as part of the ministerial code, I must bring it to the Executive to discuss and agree. Any commissioning of services that seem to be outside that remit and outside the Programme for Government will be open to challenge, as would I for breaking the ministerial code. I ask the Member to take the issue on its political and medical merits rather than trying to personalise it with regard to my position on it.

Mr Speaker: That concludes this item of business.

Ms Sheerin: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Minister accused me of calling him a liar: I want to put it on record that I did not call him a liar. I said that he had repeatedly said that he would not commission the services. He then went back to say that it was not his responsibility, that it was a cross-cutting matter and that it was for the Executive to do so.

Mr Speaker: OK. Your remarks are on the record.

Mr Carroll: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Minister indicated that I was making this personal: I was merely stating the facts. I would like it noted that I was not making it personal. I was merely noting his lack of action on the matter.

Mr Speaker: OK. Your point has been made.

Mr Swann: I will respond to both points of order.

Mr Speaker: Briefly, please, Minister.

Mr Swann: Mr Carroll can read his contributions in Hansard where he made it very personal.

I saw Ms Sheerin speak from a sedentary position, and I assumed what she said. If I misheard or misread what the Member said, I apologise to her.

Mr Speaker: Thanks, Minister.

Mr Swann: I think I saw what the Member said, but I will apologise if I was wrong.

Mr Speaker: OK, thank you all. That concludes the item of business. Members, please take your ease for a moment or two before we move to the next item of business.

Private Members' Business

Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly recognises there has been a failure of leadership to deal with issues that arise around flags, identity, culture and tradition in Northern Ireland; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to publish the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition report, and to bring the report recommendations to the Executive for review, to provide funding and to take forward in order to ensure leadership on these issues and to move Northern Ireland forward together as a united community. — [Ms Bradshaw.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "review," and insert:

"to honour their commitments within New Decade, New Approach and establish the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression without delay, and to provide the necessary funding for these outcomes to recommit ourselves to reconciliation, peace and stability." — [Mr McGrath.]

Mr McGlone: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle agus a Aire. Mar dhuine a chaith cuid mhór ama leis an ábhar seo, go háirithe le cúrsaí Gaeilge, is onóir liom labhairt agus tacú leis an leasú ar an rún. As someone who has spent quite a bit of time on the issue, especially its Irish language aspects, I am happy to speak in favour of the motion and, obviously, the amendment.

The SDLP welcomes the debate. We believe that the original motion has merit, but, at this late stage, it is time that the public saw action from Ministers and the Executive on the matter. The Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition has experienced many delays since it was first announced in December 2014. Significantly, its work was put on hold between 2018 and 2020 because there was no one to give a report to. The fact that the Executive collapsed in no small part because of the lack of respect shown to the Irish language and to those of us with an Irish identity is highly relevant to the debate.

The First Minister and the deputy First Minister have apparently been considering what to do about the commission's final report since July last year, including whether to publish it. Unless and until the report is published and people get to see it and start to take action on its recommendations, it will have been a waste of money. The public deserve to see the commission's recommendations and to see what it is that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister find so difficult about them. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister and their advisers have had ample time to consider the report. Certainly, everyone understands that the issue is politically sensitive, but it is also essential for reconciliation on this island that the issue is addressed comprehensively and collectively and in a spirit of magnanimity and respect. That is why the commission was set up in the first place. It has done its bit of the work, and it is time for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to take action.

One area where they can take action immediately is to honour their commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach'. They have committed to establishing an

Office of Identity and Cultural Expression to promote cultural pluralism and respect for diversity, to build social cohesion and reconciliation and to celebrate and support all aspects of Northern Ireland's rich cultural heritage. That would seem to be the ideal body to take forward and oversee the implementation of the recommendations of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition.

It would also, naturally in my view, include the appointment of a commissioner to recognise, support, protect and enhance the development of the Irish language in Northern Ireland, and to provide official recognition of the status of the Irish language within the North. Sin stádas oifigiúil a bhaint amach don Ghaeilge. It, too, is a commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach'. The commissioner would:

"protect and enhance the development of the use of the Irish language by public authorities".

Again, that is a direct quote from 'New Decade, New Approach'. Such a language commissioner would not be unique. In fact, their role with regard to the Irish language is pivotal. Such commissioners are present in countries across the world, from Canada to Catalonia and from Wales to Kosovo. One already exists on the island of Ireland. The International Association of Language Commissioners, which has 11 members at present, is there to support regions that wish to create the position of a language commissioner. Let us be the twelfth.

There is no better time to promote cultural pluralism and respect for diversity than right now. There is no better place to start doing this than right here. An cóimheas, common respect, an t-íolrachas cultúir, and cultural diversity, rud an-saibhir é sin agus rud atá le baint amach, are very rich, and they are within our grasp.

Let us publish the commission's report and see the recommendations. Let us honour the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' and establish the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression without delay, gan mhoill. Let us see the First Minister and deputy First Minister taking actions towards reconciliation across the island of Ireland, rather than paying lip service to it.

I heard the reports on the radio this morning. I hope that they are just reports and that this is just loose talk from individuals seeking to undermine the years of hard work that has been done by many. The Irish language is not going away. We are here. Cainteoirí Gaeilge, Irish-language speakers, deserve official recognition, just as others do. I respect entirely people's right to differ. I also respect entirely people's right to have their culture and identity enshrined in law and recognised properly. That is what this society should be about: an cóimheas, joint respect for one another, respect being a two-way street. So, let us start in the Assembly, and let us see some more progress. Feicimis tuilleadh dul chun cinn. Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Go raibh míle maith agat. Thank you. I call Matthew O'Toole to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. The Member has five minutes.

Mr O'Toole: I thank all those who have spoken in the debate so far, including my colleague Patsy McGlone, a proud and distinguished Gaeilgeoir, probably the most talented in the Assembly. He spoke passionately and very well on the subject.

We could talk about flags, identity, culture and tradition all day. Of course, in this part of the world, we do. That does not mean, though, that this debate is not important or that the motion, and the amendment that the SDLP tabled — I am glad that it is being supported — are not important. They are critical.

This institution exists. It is the way it is because we are a divided society, and the way to move on from being a divided society is to move to being a shared one. No matter what your constitutional preference, and I am clear on mine, by taking our seats in this place, we have all agreed that the only way to pursue constitutional preference is by enshrining the principle of living in a shared society. That means, as the Good Friday Agreement says, not just tolerating but treasuring all the traditions that exist on this island, particularly in Northern Ireland.

As an Irish nationalist, someone who believes in removing the border on this island, it costs me nothing to say that this part of Ireland has a particular, important and unique relationship with Britain. That will be true for as long as we are in the United Kingdom, and it will be true when we leave it, if and when that day comes.

When we have these debates, it is important, as Patsy McGlone said and others reflected, that we are serious and substantive. Unfortunately, however, listening to debates in the House can be depressing when we hear people slagging each other off across the Chamber and using identity and language as tribal sticks with which to beat one another over the head.

Over the weekend, I was doing some research for winding on the motion. I read A T Q Stewart's famous book, 'The Narrow Ground: Aspects of Ulster', which is about Irish history, particularly Ulster history.

At the beginning of the book, he famously quotes Sir Walter Scott:

"I never saw a richer country, or, to speak my mind, a finer people; the worst of them is the bitter and envenomed dislike which they have to each other. Their factions have been so long envenomed, and they have such narrow ground to do their battle in, that they are like people fighting with daggers in a hog'shead."

We do not have to be like that. We do not have to use culture and language to beat one another over the head. As someone who treasures his Irish identity and aspires to not having a border on the island of Ireland, I have no problem standing up and saying that Britishness, particularly Britishness on this part of the island, needs to be not just accommodated but treasured. That is why I want to see the report from the Commission on Flags —

4.00 pm

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member and I work together in Committee, and I know that he is deeply respectful of the tradition from which I come, and I respect his. I also respect his party's vote last week on the memorial stone for the centenary of Northern Ireland.

Does the Member understand the hurt and the strong feeling on this side of the House when a party cannot vote for a stone to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland — it

regards it as partition, while we regard it as the centenary of Northern Ireland — because of the shape of the stone? Where is the respect and tolerance in that?

Mr O'Toole: Yes, I do. I have no problem accommodating other people when they seek to mark something that is important to them. I will clearly have a different narrative about the history of partition and this jurisdiction, and I will not be shy about engaging with events that allow for that view to be held. We need a systematic approach to all of this stuff, however. That is why we need the commission to report and why we need to set up, as our amendment makes clear, the office of cultural identity. We should not be scared about any of this stuff. Whether you have a constitutional preference or not, we live in a contested space, and we need to find a way of managing those issues.

I come from Downpatrick. The patron saint of this island is buried under a Protestant cathedral: that is great. The constituency I represent now is South Belfast. It is the most diverse on the island of Ireland. What is it all about? It is all about diversity. It is all about mutual respect, and that is what we should be about in this place because constantly beating one another over the head with language and flags does not do any of us any good.

Let us move on. Let us publish the reports, and let us finally find a better way not just of accommodating one another but of looking one another in the eye and treasuring one another. I commend the amendment and the motion to the House.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the seconder of the motion to make a winding-up speech, I invite junior Minister Kearney to speak.

Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Speaker. Cuirimse fáilte roimh an díospóireacht seo ar thuarascáil an Choimisiúin ar Bhrathacha, Féiniúlacht, Cultúr agus Traidisiún. Tuigim go maith gur ábhair dhúshlánacha iad seo go léir. I am grateful, however, to be afforded the opportunity to respond to the motion and amendment tabled by Members of the Alliance Party and the SDLP on the current position of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition.

I begin by acknowledging that any discussion on the issues brings with it a number of perspectives and views, and that has been reflected throughout the debate. We should not underestimate the challenges involved, nor should we shy away from those challenges. We must all work to create common ground. We have done that with other recent challenges, such as the pandemic, or on successful initiatives such as Together: Building a United Community. We need to do it again with FICT.

The commitment to establish the FICT commission formed part of the Stormont House Agreement and the subsequent Fresh Start Agreement. The commission consisted of 15 members, seven of whom were nominees appointed by the leaders of the five main political parties that sit on our Executive. The remaining eight members were drawn from outside government through an open competition.

To remind Members, the main objectives of the commission were:

“scoping the range, extent and nature of issues relating to flags, identity, culture and tradition; mapping the benefits and opportunities in terms of flags related issues whilst highlighting where challenges remain; and producing a report and recommendations on the way forward.”

The role of the commission in that regard was to consult established and new elements of the community — reference was made earlier in the debate to newcomers to this place — identify key areas of commonality as well as difference and encourage shared learning, active listening and understanding in a meaningful way across our traditional boundaries.

The work of the commission aimed to contribute to a number of shared outcomes. They included the development of an open, tolerant and mutually respectful society; the development of a shared identity that relies on its mutual interdependencies and seeks to identify areas of common value; and an improved approach to dealing with contested displays and expressions of identity. Further, the commission sought to maximise opportunities to achieve significant reductions in manifestations and levels of hate crime; to develop a society that can seek to identify areas of commonality and have constructive debate around where the challenges remain; and to maximise the opportunities to promote the benefits of diversity and cultural expression in our society.

The commission was cognisant of ‘New Decade, New Approach’ in concluding its work, and it provided its final report on 17 July 2020. I take the opportunity to thank the joint chairs, Professor Dominic Bryan and Neville Armstrong, and all the other commission members, both lay members and party-political representatives. They all — each one of them — deserve credit for the work that they have done. It is important to emphasise the commission’s inclusive make-up, albeit, as Mr Beattie highlighted, that only one female sat on it. All parties were involved in the commission’s work, and all parties have a stake in the resulting report and the recommendations that have been made. It is also important to recognise the key role played by the commission’s independent members. They provided critical input from the wider community beyond politics. Their contribution undoubtedly added value to the commission’s work and report.

Junior Minister Lyons and I met the commission’s joint chairs in October 2020. We also met officials in our Department in September 2020 and again in January 2021 to consider the next steps. After that series of meetings, it was agreed that the next steps should be to convene a working group to consider the issues discussed in more detail and to agree on a way forward in relation to the report itself. I will talk about the working group in more detail later.

Before I do so, it is important that we acknowledge the context that surrounds the issues that we are discussing today. The commission did important work. However, it is plain that the wider societal issues relating to flags, identity, culture and tradition are bigger than the FICT report or any other report. That was reflected in earlier contributions today. Those issues can be understood and advanced only if we look at them across the board and at every level in society. Mar tá siad uile go léir fite fuaite ina chéile. To do that, we must focus on the principles that

seek to address the causes of those issues rather than the potential ways to manage them. I agree with many Members: I suggest that commitment to the principles of equality, parity of esteem and respect and an absolute commitment against any forms of intolerance are essential to creating the environment for change. It is collective leadership on those issues and principles that will foster an environment in which the FICT report can flourish.

The multifaceted challenges that have arisen from the ongoing pandemic have been unprecedented in many ways. That has, in fact, impacted on our consideration of the progression of the report. Our priority — all Members will agree with me on this — must be constantly to keep people safe and save lives. However, Minister Lyons and I, supporting the joint First Ministers, are committed to working with Executive colleagues to take this important work forward.

As part of its work, the commission considered some of our most complex societal issues with impacts across many aspects of our daily lives. As Members know, many of those issues have been with us for generations. Tá siad linn leis na glúnta, ó chuaigh an saol ar suíochán. They were with us then and remain with us today. The report has the potential to provide us with pathways to make progress, potentially, on a number of those core issues. However, I repeat that we should remember that no single report, publication, policy or strategy could hope to provide conclusive solutions to all the long-standing issues. The extensive list of outcomes sought by the commission that I mentioned should leave us in no doubt of the scope and ambition of the FICT process, but we should all be realistic. It is inevitable that, at the conclusion of any such process, the challenges will remain. While the report could never have been expected to provide the solution to all the issues and challenges that it considered, it will, nevertheless, provide us with avenues of progress for many of them.

Real change in any of these complex and challenging issues will be achieved only when all parties represented in the House show the necessary leadership and commitment to that change, and it is in that context that I absolutely agree with the wording of the motion when it states that decisions on the implementation of the report should be made by the Executive. There needs to be collective leadership from us all in that regard. The scope of the work of the commission and the cross-cutting nature of the report are such that support and leadership will be required in a number of areas for us to make progress. Organisations, public bodies and the wider community will all need to take responsibility and show leadership in how we go forward.

I mentioned that a working group had been set up to consider how to progress issues arising from the FICT report. The Members’ motion raises the issue of publication and the need to bring recommendations from the report forward for the Executive to review. I can confirm that the first meeting of the working group took place last Thursday, 18 March. The meeting was very productive, and discussion focused on a proposed road map. That extends to include initial engagement with our full Executive later this week and the subsequent development of a detailed work plan, including resource and funding implications. Steps will also include engagement with the joint chairs and all

relevant Departments. The working group also discussed issues around publication of the report, and, subject to any emerging pressures, we plan to deliver on the totality of that work over the coming months. The proposed way forward will also link closely to the ongoing work on a revised Programme for Government.

Members have also spoken more widely of their wish to see the Executive honour the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' on the establishment of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression in terms of funding and their wish for us to recommit to reconciliation, peace and stability. I welcome that emphasis from the Members who addressed those points. Be assured that we are committed to the development and implementation of the rights, language and identity proposals contained in 'New Decade, New Approach' go huile is go hiomlán. That includes arrangements to progress, during the current mandate, the NI Act 1998 (Amendment No. 1) Bill, which provides for the creation of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression. We intend that the work on mapping a way forward in relation to the FICT report will also link into that wider agenda. On a recommitment to reconciliation, peace and stability, I reassure all Members of our continuing commitment to those aims, agus tá mé fein tiomanta agus lántiomanta do na cuspóirí sin. As I mentioned, the work of the commission and the FICT report are inextricably linked to the work on strategies at the heart of the Programme for Government, the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression and NDNA.

In closing, I refer to another important strategy that I touched on at the outset. As Members know, the Together: Building a United Community or T:BUC strategy reflects the Executive's commitment to improving community relations and continuing the journey towards a more united and shared society. The T:BUC work enshrines a framework for government action in tackling sectarianism, racism and other forms of intolerance while seeking to address division and sectarian segregation. The Executive fund seven headline actions in the strategy along with a number of good relations programmes and initiatives and — I refer to comments made by some Members — actions to support our ethnic minorities.

We can be very proud of the progress made to date. Since coming into office, I have closely engaged with participants in local groups involved in the delivery of the T:BUC programmes. Last Tuesday night, alongside junior Minister Lyons, I was genuinely privileged to attend an online shared learning event hosted by young people from the good relations ambassadors programme. The programme is funded by the T:BUC strategy and is delivered collaboratively by officials in the Executive Office alongside other partners. In today's debate, some Members referenced our young people. Those young people, from all sorts of backgrounds — built-up areas, rural areas and all parts of the Six Counties — provided an inspirational account of their shared experiences of working together. The event was another reminder to me that each new generation can bring different perspectives to the challenges that we face.

4.15 pm

We who hold political office should take inspiration from our young people. Our priority must be to build bridges towards a better future where our young people can truly

flourish. Standing still is not an option; that would be an abdication of our shared political and civic responsibility to our children and young people. We should ensure that our young people are liberated by the decisions that we make and can enjoy the benefits of living in a united community devoid of sectarianism, intolerance and segregation.

In conclusion, T:BUC is a shining example of how we can create positive engagement around identities, cultures and traditions for the common good. We hope to develop that collective spirit, as the full Executive consider the work on the FICT report. We have an opportunity, colleagues, to make real and lasting change. With support from our Executive Ministers, Members, Departments and the wider community, I believe that we will be able to do that together. Mar sin de, go mboga muid chun tosaigh le chéile.

Mr Speaker: I call Andrew Muir to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the debate. The Member has 10 minutes.

Mr Muir: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. It falls to me to make a winding-up speech on the debate. The tone and nature of the debate demonstrate how much Northern Ireland is a divided place and the scale of the problem now facing us. A FICT report will not solve that problem in one instant, but it is progress. We understand the background to the FICT report: it came from the Fresh Start Agreement, and then we had New Decade, New Approach. If FICT is to succeed, it requires a fresh start and a new approach. Some contributions today did not demonstrate a new approach: they demonstrated an old approach. We all need to come into this place aspiring to a fresh start and a new approach in our society.

People came with very different perspectives on the past and visions for the future. As someone fortunate enough to come from a mixed marriage, I have some — not an entire — understanding of the perspectives and backgrounds. I come from a mixed marriage between someone from a very proud republican background and someone from a loyalist background. I am very grateful to have had that experience. Over many years, I have greatly enjoyed attending not only the Twelfth with my family but the Felons Club, and those perspectives enrich you.

Mr Speaker: Did you buy any drink in the Felons?
[Laughter.]

Mr Muir: I will not comment on that.

Those perspectives enrich you and help you to understand the perspectives of others. We should learn that our past and our shared history is something to celebrate rather than to cast up against each other. Our shared past and our history will enhance us going forward. Regrettably, some view that in other ways.

I make this winding-up speech from the perspective of someone fortunate enough to have been an elected representative for the last 10 years. Throughout that time, many people have contacted me about different issues. However, one issue remains with me, and that is the issue being debated here today: flags, identity, emblems and culture. I have an email that I received in 2015. I will anonymise the area because Members will be able to understand the perspective. It states:

This area is a lovely place. A lovely street with no hint of trouble. A flag has been erected on a lamppost outside my house and is something a lot of home owners don't want to see. I am a catholic man living here and I don't want to be seen complaining or putting my face out there.

That is why I am making the winding-up speech to the debate. My response to that individual was one of powerlessness.

Another piece of correspondence read:

"I wish to pass on the strong sense of annoyance and outrage shared by my family and our neighbours at the unwanted placement of flags on lamp posts in" —.

The correspondent then names the area. The area:

"has always been a road where people of all/no faiths and differing backgrounds have lived together in peace and harmony. It is outrageous that our lamp posts are now festooned with flags and offensive para-military banners. These have no place in our neighbourhood".

As an Assembly, we must do better to respond to those individuals and create a better society in which we do not receive correspondence like that.

The Alliance Party's view on the issue is that a clearly communicated, respectful and time-bound flying of flags and emblems in public places can be a genuine expression of cultural celebration in Northern Ireland. The current situation serves no one. I have read out that correspondence, and I am sure that there would be correspondence from my unionist friends and neighbours from another perspective.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member for giving way. I echo what he said. Like one of his colleagues, I represent areas like Finaghy, Rosetta and Carryduff, which are proud of their diversity. For a lot of those people, it is not so much that they object to the flying of flags in any circumstances per se, it is that they object to the sense that it is done unaccountably and with very little structure, and if those flags stay up or turn into rags, they have no means of removing them or understanding why they were put up in the first place.

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I agree with him. On many occasions. I have seen how flags and emblems are used to divide and mark out territory. For someone who has respect for different identities, I do not think that national flags flying in tatters in November shows respect to a culture or identity. To use flags and emblems to divide and mark out territory is wrong. It is particularly insidious when terrorist organisations use their flags and emblems to mark out areas, yet no action is taken by statutory bodies to deal with that. That creates a sense of powerlessness in the communities that it has been inflicted on and creates a desire for the Assembly and the Executive to come forward.

Some are aware of what is in the FICT report; I am not. However, it is there, and it should be published. There should be no reason for any more delay. Since joining this place in December 2019, I have asked questions about a number of things and have been told, "In a number of months" or "In due course". Publish the report, let people know its recommendations, and step up to deliver them.

As one Member said, a significant amount of money has been spent on the report. It would be a criminal waste of money if the report was not published and acted upon. We charged individuals to take it forward — I acknowledge the lack of gender balance; that was wrong — but, after investing so much money in the report, it should be published and its recommendations acted on. Indeed, the many other commitments in New Decade, New Approach should be acted upon.

This place has gone through a horrendous period with the pandemic. We have lost so many people, and lives and livelihoods have been destroyed, but that cannot continue to be used as an excuse not to act upon the obligations and commitments in New Decade, New Approach. This place came back on the basis of New Decade, New Approach and a collective commitment to a new approach, not to tear each other apart day by day as we have seen today, but to try to work together for the common good of the people in Northern Ireland. It is incumbent on us to deliver that.

I will now summarise some of the comments that were made during the debate. First, I thank my colleague Paula Bradshaw from South Belfast for her work over many years on the issue. I also thank Chris Lyttle, my colleague from East Belfast. Through very difficult times, they have remained steadfast in bringing forward constructive proposals on the matter. The publication of the FICT report and the enactment of the obligations in New Decade, New Approach are required to allow that to be progressed.

Paula referred to the fears of what lies ahead of us in the summer. I share those fears. I share the fears about phone calls from pensioners who are crying down the phone saying that flags have been erected outside their house, that there is nothing that they can do and that they are worried about what would happen if they spoke out about it. It is incumbent upon this place and the Executive to progress what has been asked for in the motion. If the motion is passed, let it be not just noted but a motivator for change.

Colin McGrath referred to the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' and the need for action. Trevor Lunn said that it was traditional for reports to be delayed. Reports are delayed by Departments more often than buses and trains in Northern Ireland and very little progress is made on them. A lot of work, including research and engagement with members of the community, as Paula outlined, is put into a report, and any delay is an insult to that work. It is therefore incumbent on Departments to publish those reports.

Christopher Stalford, who is not here at the moment, referred to the fact that the huge majority of people in Northern Ireland are tolerant. I agree with that. I think that Northern Ireland is a great place to live. I would not be here if I did not believe that. He said that the dignified display of national flags was right and that he opposes paramilitary flags. I agree with that, but we need to be able to go further. We need to put a framework in place in order to ensure that people do not feel intimidated, that flags are not used to mark out territory and that actions are taken on paramilitary flags.

Jim Allister, who is not here — Chris has taken his place — made an intervention about the centenary stone and the position on that. That was given quite an airing here

today, and other comments were made. I am, however, conscious of the 10-minute time limit. Mr McGlone, who was the last Member to speak, said that there is a need for magnanimity. There is indeed. That is required in relation to the centenary stone and the expression of identities and cultures other than unionism or nationalism. The ultimate measure of this place when the mandate finishes will be whether we were able to show magnanimity to one another.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises there has been a failure of leadership to deal with issues that arise around flags, identity, culture and tradition in Northern Ireland; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to publish the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition report, and to bring the report recommendations to the Executive for review, to honour their commitments within New Decade, New Approach and establish the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression without delay, and to provide the necessary funding for these outcomes to re-commit ourselves to reconciliation, peace and stability.

Mr Lyons: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I speak as a DUP Member for East Antrim. Earlier this month, Mr Speaker, you issued two Members with the behaviour code, which we are to adhere to. It states that we need to:

“Display the highest ... standards of integrity, courtesy and ... respect.”

The Sinn Féin speeches in the debate that we have just had were little more than diatribes against British and unionist identity in Northern Ireland and against Northern Ireland itself. Indeed, Ms Anderson said that it is, apparently, “insensitive” for us to even ask for a centenary stone to commemorate 100 years of Northern Ireland. Mr Speaker, if we are to move on as a society, we need to treat each other with a little bit more respect. I do not think that that was evident here today. I ask you, Mr Speaker, whether you believe that the Sinn Féin Members displayed the highest standards of “integrity, courtesy and mutual respect”?

Mr Speaker: What I will say, Mr Lyons, is that today I have been quite disappointed at the manner in which a range of matters were raised. I do not have to identify one party in that respect; I can do that. I intend to review a number of the contributions today. I do not think that “respect” was at the core of a number of those contributions. You do not need me, from this podium, to spell out all those to you at the moment. I will review the Hansard report of today’s debate and some of the debates that have been had.

I am disappointed that not enough respect has been shown by a whole number of Members. Not just one party was involved; a number of Members’ contributions, in my opinion, fell well short of the standards that the House expects and, more importantly, what the people whom we collectively represent have a right to hear from the Chamber. I will review that, but I will not review it on one side.

I ask Members to take their ease for a moment.

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

4.30 pm

Job Start and the Impact of the Pandemic on 16- to 24-year-olds

Mr Frew: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people, their personal and professional development, mental health and career prospects; recognises that 16- to 24-year-olds have been among the most disproportionately affected by the pandemic and lockdown restrictions; expresses deep concern that the Minister of Finance has not provided certainty that funding commitments for the Job Start scheme in Northern Ireland can be honoured in the next financial year; and calls on the Minister for Communities to commit to the implementation and roll-out of the Job Start scheme without further delay to address serious youth unemployment challenges.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and a further 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. I invite Mr Frew to open the debate.

Mr Frew: On Monday 23 November 2020, I asked the then Minister for Communities — not the Minister who is sitting in front of us today — why she was failing the most vulnerable. I talked about people not being able to go through personal independence payment (PIP) and employment and support allowance (ESA) appeals. I also mentioned the Kickstart programme and asked why it had not been commenced. The then Minister answered:

“The Kickstart scheme will not be introduced this month, because we are not calling it “Kickstart”; we are calling it “Jobstart”. It will be far better than what the British Government in England introduced. It will be a bespoke programme, and, if I introduced it, it would be done during a two-week lockdown. I do not want that to happen, because, as soon as it is introduced, the clock starts ticking.” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 133, p213, col 2].

The clock is ticking grievously for those young people who have degrees and all sorts of qualifications, having passed exams at the highest level, because they are finding it very difficult to find employment. It is not about lockdown. A lot of the potential employers are from the digital world, from the high-tech end of manufacturing and data processing and from computer firms, all of which can operate almost as normal in a lockdown scenario. Lockdown should not be the excuse for any Minister in this place’s failure to act. In fact, lockdown should be the inspiration and stimulus to do more, to react better and to achieve something for our young people, knowing the damage that the economic and societal lockdown is having, particularly on those who would benefit from the Job Start scheme. We have seen nothing roll out, however. It has not been better for young people in Northern Ireland compared with those in GB. There has been no bespoke programme put in place to help them. By debating this motion and having the Minister

address it, I hope that we can give those young people hope today.

I believe that there has been commentary about the tone of the language in the House today, but let us leave the House today inspired, having given our young people and our employers hope that something good could come out of the motion. I stand here today to tell the Minister very plainly that if she were to bring forward a programme, she would find support from me and my party to roll it out, but I do not understand why, after so many weeks and months, we have seen nothing.

There seems to be an issue with the Department for Communities and the Department of Finance, but when you look through all the financial documents that the Executive have published, you will see clearly that the licence is there for the Minister to move forward, even in the draft Budget that is out for consultation at present. A bullet point from the Department for Communities in it states that its functions include:

“Supporting people to find work and the provision of a tailored recruitment service for employers across the region”.

Even in the Budget Bill, which was debated and passed in the House, it is stated across all four schedules to the Bill that there is:

“provision of youth and adult employment services programmes and skills training programmes”

and

“employment schemes and services, including those for people with disabilities, and career information, advice and guidance services”.

In every single schedule to our Budget Bill, which has now been passed, you can see very clearly that there is provision left for such a scheme, and it is very important that the Ministers involved roll out the scheme, because it is important that those young people are picked up and given hope for the future.

In summer 2020, the Chancellor announced a new employer initiative aimed at creating six months' paid work placements for young people who are at risk of long-term unemployment. He called it the Kickstart scheme. I do not care what this Minister calls it, but a scheme needs to be rolled out here, because we have seen its benefits. By 25 January, more than 120,000 jobs for 16- to 24-year-olds had been created in GB. The Government also made it simpler for employers of all sizes to benefit from joining the scheme by removing the limit requiring that they create a minimum of 30 vacancies in order to apply directly. That meant that employers of all sizes could avail themselves of the scheme, but, here in Northern Ireland, there has been nothing.

I met with employers and potential employees a number of weeks ago, and they are so downhearted. Employers are downhearted because they want to employ these young people, and they have them earmarked for employment. They see the talent before them, but they cannot employ them. They need help and support. I spoke to potential employees. The potential and the skills base is brilliant. It is beyond scale. Yet, the Executive is failing those young people, our future and the future of this country. Our young

people think that they are not worthy. They look across at GB and see the scheme, albeit small fry, but it still helps to create 120,000 jobs for six months in GB. We are saying to them that, because of indecision, our Ministers do not see fit to roll out a similar scheme.

Mr Butler: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: If I have time at the end, I will. This was an easy scheme to adopt. It was not a highbrow scheme that had to be developed, engineered and manufactured. All that we had to do was lift it from GB and implement it.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. I do not know if the Member was listening to 'Good Morning Ulster' this morning, but there was an eminent lecturer who was outlining the impact of the COVID restrictions on the different sectors of the community. What the report indicated was that those most disproportionately affected are young people. As the Member alluded to, one of the reasons is a lack of employment opportunities. Does the Member agree that our attention should be focused on that?

Mr Frew: Absolutely. I thank the Member for his intervention because he makes a valid point. It is good to have that on record. Let us remember, not only did the Minister only have to lift a scheme that was already designed and apply it to Northern Ireland, we also received funding for that scheme. Where is that funding now? We have lost a massive opportunity because we should have put something in place this year. However, it is not too late. I want to end with hope that the Minister will be able to put something in place that will do the very thing that is being done in England to support employers and potential employees. Let us get our young people into work and get them motivated to display the skills that they have. They are the future of this country. Why is it that the party opposite seems to think that the scheme is not worthy and that they do not need to support it?

I plead with the Minister, and I thank her for her attendance today. Please, Minister, roll out the scheme. Lift the scheme from GB if you have to. Let us get it on the ground as soon as possible. No more excuses of lockdown or other excuses. Get it rolled out. Get young people employed, assist the employers and the firms and let us get Northern Ireland back to work.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is stifflingly warm in here. I know that there is a lot of hot air at times, but before we move on to the next contribution, could we do something about the heat?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I understand that the engineers are attempting to deal with it. Your point is on the record, thank you.

Ms Mullan: Young people's education, training, skills and opportunities are areas that I am very passionate about. I welcome the opportunity to debate this very important issue as there is no doubt that we can all agree that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on our young people. It is incumbent upon us to ensure that we put measures in place to support young people, none more important than developing their skills and providing opportunities for employment and training. Sinn Féin is fully committed to making sure that everyone in our society has the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to avail themselves of the opportunities to gain meaningful

employment so that people can provide for themselves and their families.

Rising unemployment has been an issue for decades for people aged 16 to 24. Young people were disproportionately impacted on in the last downturn, and youth unemployment is projected to rise as a result of COVID and Brexit. The Department for the Economy and the Department for Communities have a shared role to play in addressing that.

4.45 pm

No one needs to tell me or Sinn Féin about the need to tackle long-term unemployment and neglect. I come from Derry, which, alongside north and west Belfast, consistently ranks amongst the worst areas when it comes to unemployment and joblessness. If we are to truly deliver for our young people and to offer them real hope and opportunity, we need to transform Invest NI. My colleague Martina Anderson recently published a 'Tackling Regional Inequalities, Breaking the Barriers to Employment and Opportunity' policy document, which argues for long-term, strategic solutions to those issues.

Minister Hargey has confirmed her commitment to the Job Start scheme. After discussing the scheme with both Minister Hargey and Minister Murphy, I am confident that the scheme will go ahead. I commend Minister Hargey and Carál Ní Chuilín for their work in addressing youth unemployment. It is important that any scheme that delivers for young people and is providing training and skills addresses all barriers to employment. Those charged with delivering the programmes must be held accountable. If done right, it could make a meaningful difference to the lives of our young people, particularly as we emerge from COVID.

Apprenticeships are a key entry point to the workforce for young people who follow a vocational path at school. The Department for the Economy and the Department of Education have been reviewing the 14-19 strategy for a number of years. I have engaged with both Departments and others on that. Along with schools, further and higher educational institutions and others, I would like to know when that piece of work will be completed. Changes regarding apprenticeships are under way, but those do not go far enough.

As someone who has seen the benefits and difficulties in the apprenticeship scheme, I want to highlight an area of grave concern to me. Each year, I have young fellas from Creggan, Galliagh, Top of the Hill and right across my city coming to me searching for help to find a work placement, often weeks into their course and under real threat of having to leave their course. It becomes a lottery and, many times, is left to pot luck. That is unfair and needs to change now. Young fellas coming into apprenticeships must be fully supported. They must also receive a fair and just wage. I urge the Minister for the Economy to work with employers, trade unions and regional colleges to address that in time for September. The Executive spend millions of pounds a year on public contracts. Again, if we are serious about changing and improving outcomes for our young people, we need to ensure that all government contracts include properly enforceable social clauses.

Finally, in order to bring about the required systemic change, the Executive must work collaboratively across

Departments and make linkages that change people's lives for the better. Sinn Féin will support the motion, but I will put on record that those who tabled it know full well that Minister Hargey and Minister Murphy are fully committed to delivering this programme.

Mr Durkan: The importance of giving young people opportunities here cannot be overstated. It is incumbent upon the Executive to show our youth not only that they have a future in Northern Ireland but that they are our future. On our airwaves again today, we have heard sectarian bile being raked up over Brexit and the protocol in a pathetic attempt to stoke the fires of hatred and to re-entrench division for the purpose of electoral success or electoral survival. We also have the constant undermining of our political institutions. That serves only to send more young people away from here in their droves. The brain drain and its detrimental effect on our local economy has been evident for as long as I remember. Now, with the added challenges surrounding the pandemic and more and more young people finding themselves out of work, we run the risk of forcing even more of them to leave these shores in the pursuit of opportunities elsewhere.

In the summer of 2020, the Chancellor announced a significant £2 billion Kickstart scheme, as part of a COVID recovery package, to prevent:

"an entire generation of young people being left behind".

It now seems that the only ones who are being left behind are the young people here in the North. Once more, they are at a disadvantage to their peers elsewhere on these islands. The youth labour market intervention, which was marketed as Kickstart in England, Scotland and Wales but proposed as Job Start here, was due to commence in December. We were assured that the delivery would be of a new and improved scheme as lessons had been learned from issues that were encountered by the roll-out of Kickstart across the water. Instead, we got false start — the latest twist in a game of smoke and mirrors from the Communities Minister: lots of announcements and not a lot of action. It begs the question: where has the very significant Barnett consequential for the scheme been spent? When it became evident that there may be insufficient funding to run the scheme into next year, did the Minister make the call that no scheme would be better than a reduced scheme?

At a time when youth unemployment stands at 11.7% and rising, the Job Start scheme provided a glimmer of hope for many 16- to 24-year-olds who were facing a bleak job market. However, despite repeated assertions from the Communities Ministers — Carál Ní Chuilín and Deirdre Hargey respectively — that the scheme was imminent, the hopes of the young people were cruelly dashed. In a response to the Committee, departmental officials confirmed that the Minister first became aware that the Executive's draft Budget did not include an allocation for labour market interventions in mid-December and that that resulted in her approval of the decision to shelve the Job Start scheme. That fact did not come to light until a month later with the publication of the draft Budget, and after months of preparation by businesses and many promises to young people.

It is important to note that, last year, a staggering 72% of job losses here were among 16- to 24-year-olds. When we

weigh that up with the Department's proposed cut to the independent advice sector, which we have been assured will not happen, when universal credit claims are up 126% and when the bid for 900 new staff is put on ice, which, mind you, will probably get sorted as well, it is unsurprising that our young people feel that they have been treated with contempt. The Communities and Finance Ministers' approach has been haphazard, with little evidence of any strategy, be that long-term or otherwise. Their failure to commit to the Job Start scheme, while disappointing for the businesses involved, is utterly devastating for young people who have been left in limbo. They do not know where their future lies and feel that the North has nothing to offer them. Furthermore, when our young people voice the fact that the job prospects here, or lack thereof, are impacting on their mental well-being, the Executive have a duty to act.

Our young people desperately need support to enter the labour market at what is the most challenging economic period that many of us will ever face, I hope. It will be ridiculous if the Finance and Communities Ministers fail to get the scheme over the line, and it will cost us much more in the long term, and not just economically. I, of course, support the motion, because, as I previously outlined, the myriad of failures within the draft Budget must be addressed to give our younger generation a fair and fighting chance.

Mr Butler: We will support the motion, and I thank the proposers for tabling it. I acknowledge the ongoing work of my colleague John Stewart in particular in highlighting the issues in his role as the UUP economy spokesperson and as the chair of the APG on micro and small businesses.

It is sad and deeply concerning that we have to debate this motion. There are many things that parties across the Chamber will disagree on, as we heard today, but I never thought that implementing a scheme to support our young people into employment and assist our businesses to grow would be one of them. I truly hope that, on the back of what will surely be a unanimous vote in favour of the motion, we will see the Communities Minister and the Finance Minister move at the speed of light to restart the Job Start scheme and, as was said, perhaps call it something different.

Young people have been among the worst affected by the COVID pandemic and lockdown restrictions due to the effects that they have had on their employment opportunities, personal and professional development, and mental health. Members from Foyle spoke about the lack of hope. I have sat on APGs in and around mental health, so I know how important it is for young people in their areas to receive messages of hope. I hope, for all of our sakes, that we get to hear some of that this evening.

That impact was recognised by the United Kingdom Government when the Kickstart programme was launched. The scheme provides employer subsidies for the creation of new jobs and employment opportunities for 16- to 24-year-olds. The Department for Communities announced a similar programme in Northern Ireland, Job Start, which would commence on 30 November. Unfortunately, the scheme was delayed until 14 December, and, subsequently, postponed, I think due to budget constraints.

Sinn Féin, to be fair, rightly talks about the need to grow the skills sector in Northern Ireland. It regularly talks about

the need to support our young people and to get them into desirable employment. How can it possibly be then that a scheme designed with that sole purpose in mind has been binned, leaving thousands of young people and businesses on a cliff edge because of the actions of, perhaps, the Communities Minister and, perhaps, the Finance Minister?

We have heard from Members about the process that leads us to this point. The delays in getting the Job Start scheme off the ground in the first place were regrettable and led to pressure being put on businesses and young people looking to avail themselves of the scheme. Those delays could at least be explained by a desire to make the scheme a bespoke, Northern Ireland version. In fact, businesses said exactly that: they would happily wait if it meant that the scheme was fit for purpose. How then, after months of delay, promises made and hopes raised, is the scheme now not going ahead? It is simply not acceptable. The Minister may blame lack of funding, but how could that possibly be the case? Perhaps, in her response, the Minister can outline the amount that Northern Ireland has received in Barnett consequential flows from the Kickstart scheme and the cost to deliver Job Start in comparison.

Job Start would not deliver a silver bullet to resolve the lack of desirable employment opportunities for young people. I think particularly of the Member for Foyle referring to suitable apprenticeships, which I am a full champion of, having been an apprentice butcher for many years and really enjoying that role. I know that it does a lot for people and that there are other discussions that we need to have. It would offer hundreds of opportunities if we were to get an announcement today when previously there was none. It would also show that our Executive take young people's employment seriously. This nonsensical decision to postpone or cancel Job Start has had an immediate short-term impact on those many local businesses seeking to avail of the scheme. Worse still, it is a terrible blow to the thousands of young people I have spoken of who were banking on those paid internships.

There are several negative outcomes for our young people and the Northern Ireland economy. Even more worrying are the medium and long-term impacts of abandoning Job Start. As has already been said, it will be exacerbated by the brain drain, which has been a significant hindrance to our economy in Northern Ireland for decades.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mr Butler: Yes.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for raising the brain drain; my colleague across the way also raised it. There is a perverse state of affairs here where employers, perhaps tech firms, can establish a base in Liverpool or Bristol and can encourage young people from here to move to England to avail themselves of a Job Start scheme and be based there instead of Northern Ireland.

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

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for his point. By the time I read to the bottom of my speech, I probably will have given an example of that very outcome.

The postponement of Job Start will encourage 16- to 24-year-olds to move to other parts of the UK, where they

will be able to access support to enter employment. That does not help our economy, as we know. We are globally competitive now, and our approach needs to be collegiate. It was envisaged in the PFG draft outcomes framework, in fact. Just this week, a local business contacted me to say that, following the withdrawal of the scheme, it was transferring all its paid internships to GB because Kickstart is available there. That is the point that the Member was making.

COVID restrictions have disproportionately affected hospitality and retail. Those are sectors that young people and students overwhelmingly work in, and many have lost their jobs through the indefinite nature of furlough. The Job Start scheme can help to bring young people back into employment and give them the skills and experience that they need in a new sector whilst simultaneously improving their mental health.

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

Mr Butler: Minister, this is a no-brainer. The hard work has been done. Our businesses and our people have been prepared. Work with the Finance Minister and get the scheme back up and running, please.

Ms Armstrong: As others have confirmed today, COVID has had a severe impact on our employment market. More than ever, we need progressive and innovative schemes that will ensure that our young adults aged 16 to 24 do not become the so-called scarred generation. Generation Z is entering a jobs market that has been compromised by COVID. Those young people will be permanently scarred by the effects of unemployment and its well-documented negative impact on mental health and well-being. I declare an interest as a mummy of a teenager who is just about to become an adult. She is a member of Generation Z. I do not know what my generation was called; it was probably the Dark Ages by today's standards.

5.00 pm

I get it. The intention of the Job Start scheme was honourable. It was due to start on 14 December. It was promoted as being better than the GB scheme because it was to include options for people with disabilities. It included longer times, and there was more investment for it. It sounded great. As we know, and as others said, the Kickstart scheme started in GB in September and has been rolling forward. I am not so politically naive that I do not understand what happened here. The funding that came across to Northern Ireland was unhypothecated. The Executive chose to spend that money in the way that they chose to spend it, and it was not on Job Start. The Minister at that time said to the Committee that the money would be found in the Department. Unfortunately, time has rolled on. We have had COVID. The opportunities for young people to have work experience and to take up what would have been the Job Start scheme were not there. There are young people who left school last year, but we do not know where they are.

The Minister has been very kind and has responded to lots of questions about the Job Start scheme. Over and over again, we see the Assembly questions coming through, and, each time, she has confirmed that she is fully committed to delivering the Job Start scheme and to engaging with the Department of Finance and

other Executive colleagues to implement it as soon as possible. The Minister also talks about the draft Budget, which presented significant challenges. We know that the consultation ended on 25 February, but we still do not know what is happening with Job Start, what happened to the young people last year or what will happen to our young people who are leaving school this year. On 18 March, the Minister told us about the different schemes that are available, like the adviser discretionary fund, the travel to interview scheme and the work experience programme, but there was still no mention of Job Start. I am a wee bit annoyed that we are hearing that it will go forward when we do not know what the budget will be. I am annoyed as well that the Executive as a whole did not use that money for our young people when it came across as part of the Barnett consequentials.

However, let us move on today. Minister, is there a way to produce a report to confirm what the outcome has been for the young people who left school last year? Where are they, and what help do they need? What support will be provided to our young people this year? If Job Start is there, that is well and good, but I am sick, sore and tired of hearing about bright young people who are going on to do A levels being looked after and cared for in a school system while others who are leaving the school system are left behind. I do not want that to happen again. If Northern Ireland does not proceed with a Job Start scheme, how many young people will be left on universal credit? What will be the resulting pressure on the Minister's Department, especially on benefits, and on the economic recovery of Northern Ireland?

I am not very impressed by businesses that say that they can move young people across to Liverpool. They see our young people as a commodity and cheap labour instead of seeing what we hoped that Job Start could do, which was to develop a system whereby those young people work here, stay here and live here. I encourage you, Minister, to do what you can. You certainly have my backing.

I support the motion today — absolutely. We all need to do more for our young people. I do not blame you completely, Minister; I blame the Executive for using the money elsewhere at a time when we were in crisis. I support you completely in getting the money this time for the budget for the coming year so that our young people will not be left behind.

Mr Easton: Last week, I spoke on a motion on the future funding of welfare support. In that speech, I touched on the Job Start scheme and the serious consequences of the pandemic on the future prospects of our young people in Northern Ireland. I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak further on the issue today.

Young people have missed their classroom education and their opportunity to sit exams. They have missed opportunities to undertake placements and work experience and to engage with careers services and fairs. They have missed in-person learning at universities and apprenticeship opportunities. The past year has deprived young people of so many chances that were open to those who came before them for enhancing their personal and professional development.

We do not know how fast or slow our recovery will be, or how successful it will be. We know that a fifth of young people in Northern Ireland are concerned about their

future employment; that, given the high demand for such services at present, 55% of young people are finding it difficult to receive employment help; and that almost two thirds of young people think that getting a new job will be impossible. We have a duty to our young people to do all that we can to lessen the problems that they are facing because of the current pandemic.

The sectors that have been hardest hit by the pandemic are hospitality, tourism and small retail, all of which employ large numbers of young people. Those in this age group are also twice as likely as those in older age groups to have lost their job. Ongoing restrictions mean that further business closures and job losses are inevitable. The number of young people who are not in education, employment or training now stands at 28,000, which is above the UK average as a proportion of the population.

Just last week, we debated the rise in the number of claimants for universal credit, which is predicted to grow even further before the pandemic ends. We know the pressures that this will put on our public services and the potential for a substantially increased waiting time, from five weeks to eight weeks, for first-time payments. A good uptake of the Job Start scheme could reduce the number of claimants and relieve some pressure on our welfare support services, if the number of claimants continues to rise.

Despite the bad news, some developments are to be welcomed. I am supportive of the apprenticeship week recently launched by the Economy Minister. Importantly, it will include a range of programmes and opportunities. We all know that apprenticeships are often wrongly characterised as somehow less ideal than university or other academic options. However, I think that everyone here would agree that apprenticeships are a fantastic opportunity for our young people and that they are needed to encourage the young people for whom academia and university are not suitable.

I am also pleased to hear of more places becoming available on the Assured Skills academic training programme. However, these developments make me question how valid the excuse from the Minister for Communities is. She says that the current restrictions make it difficult to engage young people with businesses. If the Economy Minister can do it, why cannot she?

These programmes are to be welcomed. However, the lack of certainty about the Job Start scheme is extremely concerning. It is unfortunate that this uncertainty seems to have been caused by the Sinn Féin Finance Minister's failure to provide funding.

A point that I made in my last speech, which warrants repeating, is that the brain drain — people moving from here to other parts of the UK — is a serious problem. We should be doing everything that we can to prevent what has been a long-standing issue. I want our young people to live, work and raise their family in Northern Ireland. In the rest of the UK, over 120,000 young people have benefited from the Kickstart scheme. Therefore, our young people are at a competitive disadvantage at a time when it is already exceptionally difficult for them to find a job. If we do —

Ms Ennis: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member accept that Brexit will also put our young people at a disadvantage? It will have a detrimental impact on skills and apprenticeships, and the British Government's

proposed replacement scheme will go nowhere near to matching the EU social fund programme.

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

Mr Easton: I thank the Member for her intervention.

If we do not get our recovery right and more opportunities are available on the mainland, we will exacerbate the brain drain problem. The scheme would be good for not only our young people but businesses. Hundreds of employers have expressed interest in the scheme. They now face uncertainty: whether they should wait for the roll-out of the scheme and expect to hire a person at the end of it. I find this deeply unfair, given that their taking part in Job Start assists our economy as a whole. Many have already invested time and money in this process and laid the groundwork for participants to train as part of their business. They have no clarity on whether the scheme will go ahead as planned. These businesses are trying to help us, so the least that we should be able to give them is certainty.

In conclusion, our young people have already been deprived of a great many opportunities. They are struggling with mental health issues that are being exacerbated by economic- and employment-related anxieties. The cost of this scheme is very little compared with the other economic support packages that are being rolled out to assist people through the pandemic and its aftermath. Therefore, I call on the Minister to implement the Job Start scheme as quickly as possible to go some way to countering the difficulties that our young people have faced educationally and economically during the pandemic.

Mr McCann: The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on everyone over the past year. It has been particularly felt by our young people in so many ways, as many Members have already detailed. One aspect and the main focus of today's motion is the impact on opportunities for employment and training. We are all aware that youth unemployment has been rising for a number of years. Although that predates COVID-19, no doubt it will be exacerbated by it. The Department for Communities and the Department for the Economy have a joint role to play in addressing that in their respective ways. Immediate interventions from both Departments will be crucial in the time ahead, as will looking towards longer-term measures and addressing what is and what is not working.

The Job Start scheme, as well as the additional labour market interventions that the Minister has previously outlined, has the potential to make a real difference for people in the age group. I commend Carál Ní Chuilín and Minister Hargey for their commitment to ensuring that the scheme will not simply be a copy and paste of the Kickstart scheme but will be tailored to meet the needs of employers here and be more inclusive around participation, particularly for young people with disabilities. From the early stages, it was confirmed that the requirement of a minimum of 30 placements per employer that was proposed in Britain would be removed here, allowing the scheme to support single job creation. That is really important, as many local businesses and SMEs would not have met the criteria, which would have had the knock-on effect of limiting the variety of employment and training

opportunities available. The requirement has since been removed in Britain, which shows the foresight here on the matter. Other changes that the Minister has outlined include increasing the six-month placement to nine months for people with disabilities to allow them time to settle in and for any adjustments to be made, as well as the proposed widening of the criteria to extend the scheme's reach. Given the work and planning that has gone into that to date, I have no doubt of the Minister's commitment to delivering the scheme and to doing it well. For that reason, I am content to support the motion.

It is important to ensure that any scheme delivers for the young people participating in it. It must provide opportunity and the necessary support to obtain the skills and experience that will help them gain employment or to go further in training. If done right, the Job Start scheme could make a real difference to the lives of our young people, particularly as we emerge from restrictions and begin to look ahead to the rebuild. Across all Departments, we must continue to look for ways to support our young people through these challenging times and ensure that no one is left behind. I know of Carál Ní Chuilín and Minister Hargey's deep commitment over many years. To deal with previous failed schemes, their commitment has been to put in place not only a short-term scheme but a longer-term scheme that provides proper training and the apprenticeships that are required, by which I mean meaningful apprenticeships so that people can get decent jobs and have a good standard of living.

Let us not look to the past: let us look at what we can do now. I have no doubt that, in Minister Hargey, we have a person who is deeply committed to ensuring that the scheme works. As I have said, I support the scheme, but, as with everything else, we hope that the future will bring better schemes than we have had in the past.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I am hearing some interference, so I ask Members to check their phones to see what is causing it.

5.15 pm

Ms P Bradley: Tomorrow, as we are all aware, we will reach the one-year milestone of the ongoing lockdown. We have spoken many times, inside and outside the Chamber, in the past year about the impact that the pandemic has had, whether economically, mentally or socially. We also know and have heard that women and young people have been disproportionately affected, especially in terms of employment.

The latest Northern Ireland labour force survey shows that, between July and September 2020, an estimated 26,000 young people aged between 16 and 24 were not in education, employment or training. That is equivalent to 13.2% of all those aged between 16 and 24. In the period between October and December 2020, that figure had risen to 28,000, which is equivalent to 13.9% of all those aged 16 to 24. To put that into perspective, the proportion of young people who were NEET in the UK was 11.3%. In the most recent reporting period, 20,000 of the 28,000 young people who were NEET were not looking for work or were not available to start work.

As has been said already, the Chancellor announced the new Kickstart initiative in the summer of 2020. We were excited, in the Assembly and in the Committee for

Communities, to hear Carál Ní Chuilín's proposals for a better scheme that would be bespoke for Northern Ireland, and all of us in the Chamber backed that 100%. We knew, of course, that the money for it had to come via Barnett consequentials. We know that that money was consumed in the Executive and that the Minister then gave a commitment that she would find the money in her own Department. That is what made things so frustrating.

As someone who sits on that Committee, I know that getting any information from the Department, since the Job Start scheme was first cancelled in November and then in December, as to why we were in the position that we were in was like pulling teeth. I stand to be corrected if I am wrong, but when we came back in January, after the Christmas recess, we discovered that the reason behind it was that the money was not going to be available in the Budget. I welcome what Karen Mullan said earlier, and I am heartened that she said that the scheme will take place. I will support the Minister 100% when she takes it forward.

Some Members have spoken about the cohort of young people in Northern Ireland who left school, university or college last year. People have talked about the brain drain. I have spoken to a couple of graduates, who said that they wished that they had stayed at the universities in mainland UK, where they had trained, because they knew that they would have been able to avail themselves of the scheme over there. They are really disappointed that that did not happen here for them. However, there is another cohort of young people who are due to leave school, university or college this year, and we know that the youth unemployment figures are going to increase. When officials from the Department for the Economy briefed the UNSCR 1235 all-party group (APG) last week on their COVID recovery plan, it was good to hear that they were lifting the age cap on apprenticeships. That will be of benefit to many young people who are in that cohort now and many women who are finding it difficult to gain employment.

I am heartened by what I have heard here today, Minister, but it is absolutely shameful that we could not get the scheme started, albeit I understand the reasons behind it. I look forward to hearing from the Minister what the way forward is going to be for the Job Start scheme in Northern Ireland, and I will give it my wholehearted support.

Ms Ennis: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion on the Job Start scheme. It is really important to recognise the huge impact that the pandemic has had on our economy, on businesses and on the workforce in general. Many Members have said that young people will feel that impact very acutely as they try to establish a foothold on the employment ladder and look for opportunities to learn new skills. We have spoken many times in the Chamber about the need to build our way out of the pandemic and about having the courage to create the economic stimulus that we will need to sustain and grow our economy in the time ahead. Sinn Féin firmly believes that the Job Start scheme is a vital element in that overall recovery piece and is critical for those young people to gain the necessary skills and experiences that will allow them to obtain long-term employment.

While the motion makes reference only to the Department for Communities and the Department of Finance, the Department for the Economy and the Department for

Communities have a shared role to play in addressing youth unemployment. For example, the Department for the Economy is responsible for skills, training, apprenticeships and the Careers Service, and the Department for Communities provides the necessary support for preparation and financial assistance for people seeking employment. While a number of employability initiatives are currently run by the Department for Communities, the Job Start scheme and the additional labour market interventions that the Minister has outlined have the potential to be an important element in the pathway to recovery as we move out of COVID restrictions, especially for people in that particular age group.

I recognise the important intervention by the then Minister Carál Ní Chuilín in not just turning out a copy-and-paste job of the Kickstart scheme in Britain but tailoring the scheme to our unique circumstances. I heard Mr Paul Frew lament the fact that it was not a copy-and-paste job, but I am sure that he will know that that decision has since been vindicated by the scrapping of the 30-employee rule in Britain. That will allow the scheme here to support single job creation. Surely, Mr Frew understands and other Members know that that is really important, as many local businesses here are small to medium-sized enterprises that would not have met the criteria. That would have had a knock-on effect, limiting the variety of employment and training opportunities that were available.

The implementation of the scheme has been delayed, and that has been frustrating for everyone. Parallel to that, the difficulties highlighted by the recent draft Budget have been discussed at length over the last number of weeks in the Chamber: flat budgets, yearly budgets, British Government constraints around the spending review outcomes, late announcements, no ability to carry over the money etc. Those have implications for all Departments, particularly as they try to “build back better”.

I commend the Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey, for launching the equality impact assessment (EQIA), which allowed people the opportunity to have their say on the consultation on the Budget process. She has made it clear that she is committed to taking forward the Job Start scheme, and we await the outcome of the Budget deliberations, which are, of course, an Executive decision.

I make it known to the House and the Members who tabled the motion that I met the Finance and Communities Ministers and that both are in resolution mode with respect to Job Start. Both Ministers remain committed to delivering on the Job Start scheme, and I am entirely confident that we will see it come to fruition fairly soon. That said, Sinn Féin is happy to support the motion. It is vital that we continue to look for ways to support young people through these challenging times, and Sinn Féin's focus remains on making employment, skills and opportunities accessible for our young people.

Ms McLaughlin: I support the motion. We need to stop messing around and to get on with supporting our young adults by providing the best work and training opportunities that we can.

There is a reason why Kickstart has been ongoing in England for the past eight months, and that is, of course, the difficulties facing our young adults. However, if there is a need for a scheme that supports employment and

training for young adults in England, there is a much greater and stronger need for one here in Northern Ireland.

Let us look at the stats. At the end of last year, we had 14% of young adults not in employment, education or training. That compares with 11% in England and 10% in Scotland. There were 28,000 young adults here, aged 16 to 24, who were not in education, training or work at the end of last year. That is a really shocking statistic. We need to ask ourselves what is going to become of them in the future. What sort of start in life is that for them? What does that mean for our society? What social problems will we face as a result? What are the mental impacts for them?

It gets worse than that. Tomorrow, we will consider violence against women and girls. As part of that discussion, we need to consider the plight of young men and the social and economic pressures that are on them, which, perhaps, for a few of them, feed into their anger and frustrations, leading to terrible results.

Just as violence is not gender-neutral, neither is the job situation for young adults. While more than 12% of young women are in job-related training, fewer than 9% of young men are.

There are more young men outside work, education and training than young women. For young men and young women, the number and percentage outside the system of work, training and education has increased in the past 18 months, and we really need to take stock of that figure. It increased to 28,000 at the end of last year, and we all need to sit up and take that seriously. That has serious economic and social implications, and it needs to be addressed.

Young people need jobs and a positive start in life. They need support to get into training and employment. The Minister for Communities has a duty of care and responsibility to put in place an ambitious and comprehensive Job Start programme. I urge the Economy Minister to engage with that programme so that the synergy between the apprenticeship programme and the Job Start programme is rolled out for the benefit of individuals, communities and the economy.

It is intolerable in these difficult times that employers are seeking to engage in a programme and offer young people meaningful work providing skills and experience and a fulfilling future only to be told that the Minister has not established the programme. I spoke to one such employer earlier this month — *[Inaudible]* who runs a company called *[Inaudible]* — and he told me that there was a supply-and-demand need for a Job Start programme. He said that government and businesses should be instrumental in building talent solutions.

I spoke to two young interns in his company who ably articulated what their engagement had done for them in relation not only to skills but to their personal confidence and mental health. We really need to ask why the response in putting forward a Job Start programme here has been so slow.

Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre observed:

“In Northern Ireland, proportionally the young and those at the lower end of the earnings spectrum have been the most impacted by the pandemic.”

Without additional support, it is not only young adults who face a challenging future but all of us. I ask the Minister to get on with it and let us all stop messing with our young people.

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): Thanks to everybody for their contributions to the debate. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion.

I recognise that young people have been adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic — I have said that on many occasions — and, indeed, by the current economic crisis and what will unfold over the next couple of months. The current youth unemployment rate in the North is 12·1%, which equates to 12,000 young people.

My Department's initial labour market response to COVID-19 was to introduce schemes to support the biggest volumes of people affected. Two groups were identified as needing an urgent response: young people and the work-ready — that is, those who are ready to be re-employed but who need help to negotiate the process of finding work.

The first wave of the new provision included the Job Start scheme, which was to provide funding for employers to create job opportunities for young people aged 16 to 24 years of age who are at risk from long-term unemployment. The Job Start scheme has been developed and was due to launch on Monday 30 November 2020 but was postponed due to the COVID-19 circuit breaker that was introduced by the Executive on 27 November. Some Members commented on that, but, if people could reflect on where we were last November, the arguments were about closing up or staying open, and the run-up to Christmas. It was a fractious time that created uncertainty for many, and there was real concern about the spiralling number of people being infected and, in particular, the increase in hospital admissions.

The outline business case for the Job Start scheme was approved by the Department of Finance and allows for 3,313 young people to avail themselves of the scheme at a cost of £24·854 million until 31 March 2023.

5.30 pm

Also included in the first wave of the new provision was expanded flexible support funding through the adviser discretion fund (ADF) to provide up to £1,500 per person with the eligibility criteria to apply, in a 12-month period, to address barriers that face young people when trying to gain employment. That included an expansion of the proposal to pay upfront childcare costs to allow parents to get over the initial cost of registered childcare when moving into employment. It is anticipated that the upfront childcare grants will be operational from the end of October 2021. It is estimated that the expanded ADF will result in over 10,000 awards being made to help people to move closer into employment during the period from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022.

A refreshed work experience programme will provide a financial incentive as an additional motivator for participants and employers to take part in the programme. In addition, a new opportunity guarantee strand for young people will offer placements with the guarantee of an interview for a job or apprenticeship. Costs are in the region of £0·71 million and will provide support for up to 770 people. There is a new provision to help up to

77,000 work-ready people by providing training on core employability skills, such as motivation and confidence, interview skills, CV development, job search techniques and basic digital skills. Work-ready employability services will cost about £4·1 million next year. Further provision is planned to be developed collaboratively with local councils through the labour market partnerships, including schemes similar to the Restart scheme, and to help those who lost their jobs 12 months ago at the onset of COVID and who are at risk of falling into the category of the long-term unemployed.

My Department also bid for £38·9 million for labour market interventions for the 2021-22 financial year. That bid included £20 million for Job Start and £12 million for Restart. Unfortunately, the draft Budget provided no funding allocation for the new menu of provision, including Job Start. As a consequence, the launch of those schemes was paused in December 2020, depending on the outcome of the Executive's final Budget allocation for the incoming financial year. I recognise that, as we move to this stage of the pandemic, labour market interventions that my Department has developed will be essential to help young people to return to the labour market, and those interventions, including the Job Start scheme, are aimed at helping people who have lost a job to find new employment.

As has already been stated, I have had a series of engagements with the Finance Minister. I know that he is fully supportive of the Job Start scheme; indeed, to that effect, it is in the incoming Budget. I hope that all other parties around the Executive table will support it when it is presented to them.

As regards other concerns, people have questioned why we did not run with the scheme that was taking place in England. Indeed, as has already been said, there was a number of differences. I believe that the scheme here is better. First, our scheme is open to all young people, not just those on universal credit. Secondly, it is open to all employers, including small and medium-sized employers. It also includes the voluntary and community sector, which is an important sector here. Thirdly, employers can apply directly to our scheme and not just via the gateway programme. Therefore, they do not need batches of 30 people to apply. As was said previously, England has now moved with regard to the changes that we made. That says a lot. Fourthly, the extended scheme is for people with disabilities, again, for up to nine months, to recognise their challenges and to support them to access the scheme as well.

I welcome the conversation and the motion to place a focus on young people, as I agree that the pandemic has hit that group more adversely than others. It was the same during the financial crash over 10 years ago. Any shock to society here impacts on poor people, women and young people the most. These schemes are, of course, important, but the Chamber needs to introduce other initiatives in order to challenge the precarious working practices that are out there. Those people are the first to end up losing their jobs or becoming unemployed. We need to look at banning zero-hours contracts, make sure that we are encouraging collective bargaining and have a proactive trade union movement that looks at the terms and conditions of all those in our economy.

I agree that we need to have a good conversation. You can get up and make statements in the Chamber, but if Members are serious about targeting inequality and challenging the issues that are related to areas of deprivation, young people and women, we need to allocate our public spend to objective need. Are Members across the Chamber supportive of that? I would welcome further conversations on that.

As I said before, I would also welcome anybody who wants to come to meet me, because Members have raised the matter. It is easy to talk in the Chamber, but very few come and ask me for a meeting to sit down to talk about these issues. It is easy to get up in the Chamber, spout things and play politics — that is fair enough; it is a political Chamber — but if Members are serious, my door is always open for them to come, engage and sit down to work through these issues. You will not find me wanting in that regard.

I agreed with the Minister for the Economy, who I met recently, that a collaborative approach from our respective Departments is essential to achieve a shared economic objective and, in particular, to respond to the challenges that are faced by young people in the labour market. Our officials have been working collaboratively to produce a coherent, joined-up approach that works for individuals and companies and that provides the support and assistance that young people need. I have moved quickly to provide help and assistance in order to ensure that people do not suffer financial hardship as a result of the pandemic, and my officials developed the Job Start scheme in order to help young people move into employment.

I am keenly aware that the last year has been difficult for many, particularly for our young people, who have lost their jobs or have not yet had the opportunity to gain employment. It is clear that the Budget position presents very significant challenges not just for my Department or for the Finance Minister but for the Executive as a whole. We are a collective five-party Executive. It is clear that we need to commit to the Job Start scheme, and, as I say, the Finance Minister has said in engagements that I have had with him that he is supportive of it. I hope that other colleagues in that five-party Executive support me on that in the time ahead.

I assure Members that the Job Start scheme is a priority for me. I will continue to fight to protect the interests of young people and those who are most affected by the COVID pandemic and, indeed, by the current economic crisis. I am committed to working hard in order to ensure that resources are targeted at those who are most in need. I hope that, given the sentiments that Members expressed today, there will be support around the Executive table and across the Chamber for targeting resources at objective need as we move ahead.

Mr Newton: In winding up on the motion, I want to make remarks on my own behalf first before turning to the remarks that others made. In particular, I will refer to the part of the motion that talks about:

“the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people, their personal and professional development, mental health, and career prospects; recognises that 16-to-24-year-olds have been among the most disproportionately affected”.

I will concentrate my remarks on that area.

This DUP motion was tabled out of a genuine concern for our young people and their future — young people who, as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, have been disadvantaged and, indeed, now left behind. Unlike their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales, our young people have not been offered an opportunity for employment and training, and, in many ways, they have been cast adrift.

Currently, unless the Minister can confirm tonight that there is the prospect that 16- to 24-year-olds will engage in the scheme known in Northern Ireland as Job Start, young people will be disadvantaged in comparison with their counterparts in GB. The matter has been discussed since Westminster announced the scheme in July last year. Months of opportunity have been lost, squandered and thrown away.

I will refer to the Minister's response to a question for oral answer from Mr Muir about young people and job schemes. The Minister said:

“I had a meeting on it this morning. We are looking at a bespoke response to needs that we already know. I will also meet service providers, employers and the Children's Commissioner.” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 130, p107, col 1].

That response was in September. The Minister has promised but not delivered. Other Members referred to the fact that 120,000 people in GB are engaged in Kickstart, which gives them a big advantage in the labour market. The Minister knows that there is huge expertise in the Department of Communities in developing programmes and addressing skills gaps. It has a long history of developing on-the-job training schemes. Over the years, the Department has successfully delivered for our young people training programmes that businesses bought into. There is no experience gap. The Department has a successful track record and the skills to deliver. What has been missing? Only one word: leadership. Leadership has been missing in the delivery of the programme.

Let me look at another job training scheme. Under exactly the same pandemic conditions, the Department for the Economy stepped up to the plate. Through ministerial leadership and positive action, it successfully delivered an apprenticeship training programme, along with many other initiatives, in a more complex situation than that facing Job Start. Northern Ireland's future success will be built on and by our young people, and it is vital that we provide them with opportunities. It is essential that young people know that we are investing in them. Young people need to know that they are valued and that they can have hope for a brighter future. The DUP believes that all our young people deserve support. Where is the Minister's practical concern for our young people's future job prospects? Where is the financial certainty for the scheme? We have not heard about that. We have heard about discussions, but we have not heard that there is financial certainty.

On the other hand — this is in the motion — has the Minister had an opportunity to discuss with the Minister of Health the mental health of young people who are facing long-term unemployment? One of the major drivers of the UK initiative was to tackle economic inactivity and improve the lives of young people in receipt of universal credit. The

failure to implement the scheme in Northern Ireland will sustain the rise in claimants caused by COVID-19. The delay in the programme is not only having a direct impact on young people but holding back the attempts to rebuild our economy. The Communities Minister needs to explain in detail why the scheme introduced in Great Britain was not replicated in Northern Ireland, at least as a first start. It could have been modified as it went along.

5.45 pm

I will now refer to what other Members said. Mr Frew kicked off by proposing the motion. He mentioned the Kickstart scheme and outlined the quality of our young people. We have very good young people. He also indicated that they need support and hoped that that support will be forthcoming.

Karen Mullan recognised the need to develop a programme and placed an emphasis on work placements. I agree with her, in the sense that it is no good entering a training programme if you cannot get a work placement. That applies to any work experience scheme that has started, particularly the apprenticeship programme.

Mark Durkan rightly referred to the brain drain and the potential for the lack of a scheme to force more young people into leaving Northern Ireland. I liked his expression, where he said that Job Start has now turned into “false start”. He also said that the lack of a scheme is devastating for our young people.

Robbie Butler hoped that the Minister will move on the scheme and that it will transpire.

Kellie Armstrong agreed on the need for an initiative and that schemes were needed. She said “schemes”. We do not have to limit Job Start to one particular branch. It could, in fact, have a number of themes running through it. She also said that there should be schemes to address the needs of our young people and urged the Minister not to leave them behind.

Alex Easton highlighted missed opportunities when he spoke about young people who have not been in education and about the job fairs, work experience and careers advice that have been missed. He said that young people are now at a disadvantage having missed those.

Fra McCann mentioned the impact that the pandemic has had on our unemployment figures. He also, not unexpectedly, paid great tribute to the Minister.

Paula Bradley referred to the one-year lockdown, highlighted the unemployment statistics and expressed difficulty about getting information on the scheme. She said that it was “like pulling teeth”.

Sinéad Ennis remarked that we need to build our way out of the pandemic. She said that the 30-trainee rule was a factor and that GB had changed that rule. That is no surprise at all. Any scheme makes changes as it goes along.

Sinead McLaughlin said that we need to get on with creating a job scheme and that, considering the challenges and the unemployment situation here, there is more need for a scheme in Northern Ireland than there is in GB. She also stressed the need for an ambitious and comprehensive scheme.

I sat opposite the Minister on Belfast City Council. I believe that she has concern and wants to do something for the unemployed and those from very disadvantaged backgrounds, but, Minister, it has to be delivered. It is no good talking about it. Nice words will not deliver the scheme. We need work-ready young people —

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

Mr Newton: — during these fractious times, in which the Minister stated that it was difficult to start the scheme, yet the Minister for the Economy was able to go ahead and deliver the apprenticeship scheme.

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

Mr Newton: Thank you. I pay tribute to all those who took part in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people, their personal and professional development, mental health and career prospects; recognises that 16-to 24-year-olds have been among the most disproportionately affected by the pandemic and lockdown restrictions; expresses deep concern that the Minister of Finance has not provided certainty that funding commitments for the Job Start scheme in Northern Ireland can be honoured in the next financial year; and calls on the Minister for Communities to commit to the implementation and roll-out of the Job Start scheme without further delay to address serious youth unemployment challenges.

Adjourned at 5.49 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 23 March 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Ms Dillon: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. A Cheann Comhairle, under the code of conduct for MLAs, we are supposed to uphold the law in accordance with the trust that is placed in us by the people. In yesterday's debate on flags, identity, culture and tradition, Mr Alan Chambers declared that he is engaging with loyalist paramilitaries. Those are armed criminal gangs, engaging in drug dealing, racketeering and intimidation in their own communities. Is it right that a Member of the House should be doing so?

Mr Speaker: I will examine yesterday's Hansard report to establish what commentary was made and what role, if any, I have.

Mr Chambers: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I did not speak in the House yesterday. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: As I have said, Members, I will examine the Hansard report *[Interruption]* and determine whether there is anything —.

A Member: Keep to the script.

Mr Speaker: Order, please. Order, Members. I will examine the Hansard report, as I already said, and determine whether any action needs to be taken.

Speaker's Ruling: Points of Order, Standards of Debate

Mr Speaker: Members, I want to return to some issues in the House yesterday. At the Business Committee recently, a number of members expressed concern about the abuse of points of order. Points of order are an opportunity to clarify points of procedure rather than make political points.

Yesterday, Mr Jim Allister asked to make a point of order, but he immediately made it clear that he was raising a query in relation to the Assembly Commission.

Today's Question Time session to the Assembly Commission would have been the opportunity to raise matters with the Commission. When I called Mr Allister to order, he continued to shout over the Chair from a sedentary position. I have been concerned about Mr Allister's behaviour on a number of recent occasions. He has made ill-tempered remarks, including to the Infrastructure Minister yesterday, and has been aggressive in commenting from a seated position while other Members are speaking.

Members will be aware also that, last week, I drew attention to the debate on Standing Order 34 on 8 March. During that debate, Mr Allister also interrupted Ms Bradshaw to the point where she had to draw attention to it, and Mr Allister then apologised.

The authority of the Chair is something that we will always take seriously in the Chamber, and there is clear precedent for imposing a sanction when a Member challenges the Chair in such a significant way. Indeed, in 2014, the Chair at the time was required to similarly rule on a challenge that Mr Allister had made to a Deputy Speaker. On that occasion, Mr Allister was informed that he would not be called to speak for five sitting days. It has been some time since there has been a need to sanction a Member in such a way. However, yesterday was a clear example of unacceptable behaviour that cannot be ignored, and I intend to uphold the authority of the Speaker's Office, regardless of who is in the Chair at a given time. Therefore, Mr Allister will not be called to speak for three sitting days, starting from this morning. That includes all items of business, including questions and interventions.

I also want to comment on the overall standards of debate yesterday. Gordon Lyons raised a point of order on the matter yesterday. I realise that there are political tensions at the moment, and that has been reflected in the Chamber. Yesterday was an example of a discussion on which there were vastly different views across the Assembly, and tensions were not helped by the way in

which Members on different sides of the House expressed those differences.

There needs to be respect for different opinions. That also means that it is not necessary for Members to express their own views in a way that is clearly inflammatory to other Members. I ask all Members to be mindful of that today, and I hope that the sanction that I have reluctantly imposed will act as a clear guide to all Members of the need to adhere to the standards of debate of good temper, moderation, courtesy and respect. I will continue today to review the remarks that were made yesterday and drawn attention to by Mr Gordon Lyons to establish whether any further action is required. I will come back to that when we return at our next sitting.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Ms Dillon: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Mr Allister, you have been sanctioned, which means that you cannot make an intervention.

Mr Allister: On a false basis.

Mr Speaker: I can count. I have determined a three-day suspension. I can add to it. Do not tempt me. I call Ms Linda Dillon.

Ms Dillon: To clarify, it was Mr Trevor Clarke. My apologies to Mr Chambers.

Mr Chambers: Apology accepted.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Mr Chambers, for that magnanimity, as was called for yesterday by our colleague Christopher Stalford.

Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I inform the Assembly that the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill has received Royal Assent. *[Interruption.]* The Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 became law on 22 March 2021. It is chapter 3.

National Day of Reflection

Mr Speaker: Today has been designated as a National Day of Reflection, and, along with other legislatures, I will suspend the sitting at 11.50 am to make preparations to mark the day. At 12.00 noon, I will invite you to join me in observing a minute's silence to remember all those who have lost their lives during the pandemic and to show our support for the many thousands of people who mourn the loss of their loved ones.

Ministerial Statement

Civil Justice Modernisation

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Justice that she 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 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 participating remotely must make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. Members present in the Chamber must also do that by rising in their places, as well as by notifying the Business Office or Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions.

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 Long (The Minister of Justice): I am here today to outline my plans for modernising civil and family justice over the remainder of this Assembly mandate.

I want to set out the work that has already commenced and the further steps that I plan to take over the next year. I am investing time and energy in the area because it is an important one that touches on the lives of so many citizens, often at a point when they are facing some of life's most significant challenges, such as divorce, financial difficulties, injury or the death of a loved one. An effective civil justice system is an important part of a well-functioning economy, helping businesses and their customers to settle disputes quickly and effectively.

While criminal justice often draws most attention, many more people come into contact with the civil justice system each year. For example, in the last business year, 2019-2020, nearly 102,000 parties were involved in civil and family proceedings. Many will have had a positive experience, with cases dealt with efficiently and effectively, resulting in a swift resolution. Others will have found the process long, difficult and expensive. I want to do all that I can to support more citizens to resolve their disputes as quickly, fairly and inexpensively as possible in a system that is seen as just, proportionate and accessible.

Despite all the difficulties caused by COVID-19, we are starting from a good place, with an independent judiciary, a capable legal profession, hard-working staff in the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) and other professionals, such as courts children's officers, all dedicated to ensuring that effective justice is available to all. I support all the effort and commitment on the part of so many people by delivering change that will make the overall system more effective in meeting the needs of citizens.

A wide range of partners support the delivery of civil and family justice, and arrangements for determining how the system should operate are complex and somewhat piecemeal. Policy responsibility is spread across three Departments, with Finance and Health responsible for most of the substantive law and my Department responsible for the operation of courts and tribunals. There is a case for rationalising that complex set of responsibilities. However, recognising that this is a short

mandate and that we are also in the midst of a global pandemic, I plan to focus instead on the changes that I can make more immediately to improve the current system for the citizens who use it. The changes will also help to set the foundation for further reform in the next mandate in a post-COVID environment.

Focusing efforts on the more immediate benefits for citizens will make the best use of the time and resources that I have available. The changes that I am outlining are intended to do two things: firstly, to make the civil and family justice system more accessible for citizens; and, secondly, to make the system fairer, more proportionate and more responsive. In identifying ways of delivering those outcomes, I have had the benefit of the access to justice reviews and Sir John Gillen's civil and family justice review. I am grateful to the Lord Chief Justice for having commissioned Sir John's work and to Sir John for his considered and very detailed report, which contains well over 400 recommendations for a range of sectors and organisations. Around one third of those recommendations touch directly on the work of my Department. They have helped to shape my priorities for improving accessibility and for making the system fairer, more proportionate and more responsive.

I will use the remainder of the statement to outline the actions that I have initiated and others that I plan to undertake to deliver on each of the priorities.

I will start with improving accessibility for citizens. For many, the civil and family justice system feels unduly complicated. We need to do more to simplify the system and make it easier for everyone to access and to use. Clearly, that is not going to happen overnight, and my focus in the short term will be on taking tangible steps forward and continuous improvement while setting a longer-term ambition for transformation of the system through digital technology.

I want to highlight three areas in particular for continuous improvement. The first relates to litigants in person. Litigants in person are citizens who, for a variety of reasons, represent themselves in court proceedings. In partnership with Ulster University and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC), my Department set up a litigants in person reference group in order to help identify and break down barriers that are faced by litigants in person and to improve relationships between them and the other court actors. The group is chaired by a retired solicitor with considerable experience in the advice sector, and it includes representation from the legal profession, the judiciary, Ulster University, the Human Rights Commission, my Department and, most importantly, litigants in person. The group has made good progress on building understanding and identifying areas for improvement.

I am grateful to all those involved in the reference group for their valuable work, and I look forward to continuing to build on that initial success.

10.45 am

One of the messages that has come out of the reference group is the need to improve understanding of how best to engage with the courts system and to reduce the fear of doing so. That feedback has helped to shape the 'Private

Family Law Action Plan' that I am launching jointly with the Minister of Health.

A key early component of that rolling action plan is to demystify the family courts by providing additional information and tools to assist separating parents to navigate the system, to resolve more issues for themselves and to know where to seek further help. A number of animations and easy-to-use documents, such as an outline parenting agreement, have been produced as part of the action plan. The action plan will evolve over time, with further products to be developed to help separating parents to resolve disputes in the interests of their children. Ultimately, it is the welfare of children that lies at the heart of the family justice system and the 'Private Family Law Early Resolution Action Plan'.

The third area where I intend to deliver continuous improvement is in ensuring that appropriate supports are in place for the more vulnerable members of our community who come before the courts. Effective access to justice is dependent on that. I am pleased that, through the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021, by including provision for special measures and provision to prohibit perpetrators from cross-examining their victims in person, I have been able to enhance the protections available to support victims of domestic abuse to give their best evidence in the family courts.

I will now look at other types of special measures to support other vulnerable members of our community in accessing justice. One particular area of focus will be a registered intermediary support for those with communication difficulties. A successful scheme already operates in the criminal courts, and I plan to consult later this year on creating a similar scheme to support vulnerable users in the civil and family courts.

All those acts of continuous improvement will help to make the civil and family justice system easier for citizens to access and to use, but, on their own, they are not enough.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us the transformative role that digital technologies can play in delivering services in new and more accessible ways. IT now plays an important role in every part of our lives, including how we order goods and services, connect with others, engage with government or access learning. Many citizens now expect to be able to interact with services at a time and in a way that is convenient for them. Justice also needs to be able to respond to those new expectations, and there is a growing case for improving access to justice through technology. For that reason, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service embarked on an ambitious modernisation programme that, over the coming years, will deliver changes, in partnership with key stakeholders, to simplify and modernise the current system and improve access to justice for citizens.

These are early days, and, while our efforts have been hampered by the need to divert resources to respond to the pandemic, I am pleased with the progress that has been made so far. NICTS's modernisation programme applies to civil, family and criminal courts as well as tribunals. It will redesign services and adopt digital delivery channels that will improve access to justice and provide simpler and more effective services, making it easier for

citizens to interact with court and tribunal services. The programme will also deliver a modernised courts and tribunal estate to support new ways of working.

As part of the modernisation programme, NICTS is developing a digital strategy for consultation over the coming months with the judiciary, stakeholders and interest groups. The strategy will inform a future road map for the delivery of services. Significant work has already commenced on this ambitious modernisation programme, including the installation of enhanced audio and video technology in 41 courtrooms and the implementation of Wi-Fi across the courts and tribunals estate, to facilitate the display of digital evidence and electronic case bundles. The courtroom technology upgrade project will continue throughout 2021, and the use of electronic case bundles in the courtroom will also be piloted later this year. It is encouraging that the probate online portal, which is the first customer-facing change under the modernisation programme, will be introduced in May. That new portal will enable users to complete key stages of the probate process digitally. It is a pilot service redesign project, so vital learning from the design and delivery of the probate online project will be applied to other NICTS service innovations, and we will build similar online processes for other areas of business.

Aspects of the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service modernisation programme have been accelerated over the last year. Remote working capacity has increased rapidly. Working with partners and stakeholders, we want to build on that momentum to implement a modernisation programme that will provide tangible benefits through a more proportionate system that makes better use of technology and allows faster end-to-end completion of cases. I am keen to explore ways in which online dispute resolution can complement the justice system. My officials are undertaking feasibility work in that area, and I hope to be in a position to launch a pilot online dispute resolution system focused on small claims later this year.

I will turn to the second of my priorities: making the civil and family justice system fairer, more proportionate and more responsive. The system should minimise acrimony and stress and allow disputes to be resolved as dispassionately as possible, using tools that are appropriate to the complexity and nature of the issues under dispute. The system needs to allow disputes to be settled more swiftly, to offer greater choice and to operate at a lower cost.

The court process itself can be stressful, and the adversarial nature of proceedings can increase acrimony and make it difficult to find long-term sustainable solutions. That is particularly the case for separating parents. Each of us in the Chamber is aware of constituents who have fought intractable battles through the family courts. That is of benefit to no one, and particularly not to the children who often find themselves caught in the middle.

The central aim of the action plan on private family law early resolution is to improve the lives of children by encouraging earlier resolution of disputes between separating parents. I am under no illusion that that will be easy to achieve. There are cultural barriers to overcome, and there is a need to change hearts and minds. Many separating parents are not aware that they do not need to engage with the justice system in order to resolve parenting disputes, and others want, for whatever reason,

to have their day in court. The action plan will be there to help separating parents who want to resolve disputes themselves and encourage others to try a different approach in the interests of their children. Changing practice will not be a quick or easy process. It will be a marathon rather than a sprint, but it is an exercise worth undertaking.

As part of the action plan, I will examine the feasibility of introducing mediation in private family law cases on a pilot basis. There is much more to do before we can introduce a pilot, but the idea needs to be fully explored to see whether it offers a viable, affordable way to help separating parents to resolve disputes early in the justice journey. Any approach that achieves early resolution would be a good thing, particularly for the children involved, and would avoid the stress and expense of legal proceedings that can worsen relationships and make successful co-parenting difficult to achieve.

The other issue that I will tackle in relation to family law is delay. That is a matter of great interest for the judiciary, and I am keen to do what I can as well. Earlier resolution of disputes would certainly help, as it would reduce the number of cases and leave more space in court lists for those who really need to be there. There will also be areas of court-linked processes where changes could reduce delay. Many of those processes are outside my Department's control, but one that is within my remit is the speed with which we deal with legal aid applications in family cases. One factor that can cause delay is the process for appointing and paying expert witnesses. I am pleased that we are addressing that through a pilot that launched on 25 January. The pilot is testing a streamlined approach to appointing expert witnesses in the family proceedings court as well as standardising the legal aid rates for them.

Opportunities to make the system fairer, more proportionate and more responsive are not limited to family justice. There are a number of areas in which I want to make improvements to civil justice. Mediation is one of those areas and, to enhance its use, I plan on formalising legal aid remuneration for mediation in civil proceedings. I aim to consult on the issue before the summer. The evaluation will inform wider consideration of the effectiveness of mediation in resolving matters without recourse to the courts.

Proportionality is also about making sure that civil cases are heard at the right court tier in line with their value and complexity. That aim is at the heart of the consultation on changes to the County Court jurisdiction, which I launched on 4 February. Increasing the financial jurisdictions should ensure that more court users have certainty about costs at the outset of proceedings. That should enable them to make better-informed decisions about whether to take or defend legal action. Importantly, my proposals mean that more cases could be heard in the small claims courts where processes are more straightforward, user-friendly and designed so that cases can be progressed without legal representation.

Fairness is also at the heart of the changes that I propose to the legal framework for setting the statutory discount rate. The rate is used when determining settlements in personal injury cases. I introduced the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill on 1 March. The aim of that Bill is to ensure that the assumptions on which the discount rate is

set better reflect the reality of how claimants invest and, in turn, that the discount rate provides 100% compensation to people who have suffered injuries. A further related area that I want to look at is protecting compensation for children arising out of civil claims, such as for personal injuries. Currently, it appears that some compensation settlements for children are not approved by a court or paid into court for protection. I intend to consult on how it might be possible to ensure that all such settlements can be protected in an appropriate way.

Fairness is also a key principle underpinning the housing possession court duty scheme. That important support service, established by David Ford when he was Justice Minister, provides information and advice at the door of the court to homeowners facing repossession and renters facing eviction. I am pleased that I have been able to continue funding the service, which is delivered by Housing Rights. Helpfully, it is also linked to a broader programme of housing advice funded by the Department for Communities. Projects such as the housing possession court duty scheme play an important role in access to justice. I am heartened to see the interest being paid to the project in England and Wales, where the Government are working with the judiciary and other stakeholders to develop a similar service. That type of service is critical to helping to support our citizens when they are at their most vulnerable.

In many ways, the housing possession court duty scheme encapsulates what I am trying to achieve through the broader programme of modernising civil and family justice: having a clear focus on improving the experience and outcomes for citizens; making it easier for citizens to access justice; making the existing system fairer and more responsive; and dealing with disputes in a swifter and more proportionate way. Achieving those aims across civil and family justice will not be straightforward. I have deliberately set out an ambitious programme of work for the short time that is available in this mandate. I am committed to change, as, I know, are many of you. Together, we can improve the lives of citizens who need the civil and family justice system and lay a path for future reform. As I have outlined, we have made a good start, but much remains to be done by my Department and our justice partners. I commend the statement to the House.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): Sometimes the Back Benches are a little more comfortable, Members.

I welcome this high-level document's ambitions for the longer-term transformation of the justice system. I think that all of us will be able to find common ground on that. Looking at it in more detail, I have no doubt that the Committee will want to see clear objectives, timelines for implementation and so on. However, as far as the high-level document goes, I welcome it.

Throughout COVID, the need for technological transformation has come to the fore because of the poor existing technology, which has highlighted the need for significant investment in the technology used in our court system. In 2017, a previous Committee recommended the use of online resolution for small claims, for example, so this is an area that Members have raised before. Does the Minister feel that the resources will be made available in her Department to have the technological transformation needed to facilitate online resolution?

Finally, in a conversation that the Deputy Chair of the Committee and I had with the Lord Chief Justice, he indicated his view that, to keep the focus on the transformation that is needed in the courts, there is an argument for operational decisions to be moved to an independent body for which the presidents of the courts could be responsible, rather than resting in the Department of Justice. I do not have a view on that. Does the Minister feel that the Lord Chief Justice has merit in advocating that?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for both of his questions. The modernisation programme, particularly the digital strategy, remains part of our core project for the next year, so it will have been bid for within our normal boundaries. Of course, the budget settlement will provide challenges, but this is a priority for the Department. We actually managed, because of COVID, to make huge progress in that regard by renewing and introducing better technology to the courts. As a result of that investment, we are now able to move forward much more rapidly than originally anticipated.

Some of that will have been funded by COVID investment but will be available in the longer term for us to make use of. There are also considerable savings to be made from using digital technology in the criminal courts and in the family and civil courts. Although the upfront investment is considerable, the savings that the individual, as well as the court system, will make down the line are significant. It is therefore important that we keep that as a priority, particularly in the context of an increasingly challenging budget situation.

11.00 am

There are disparate views on where the operational decisions should be made and on whom the lead should be. The roles played by the Civil Justice Council and the Family Justice Board are hugely important. The leadership that they are able to show around the issues, and some of their focus on them, has been important as we look at some of the operational measures that can be introduced. I have discussed this with the Lord Chief Justice, because it will ultimately be a decision for him, but I would like to see them move from shadow format to a more formal operating standard, as they have contributed hugely to changes, and I believe that they have a continued contribution to make.

It would also be helpful if their membership were to be expanded to include court users as well as professionals. More laypeople could also be involved. I have suggested to the Lord Chief Justice that the Department should be engaging regularly at ministerial level with the council and the board, because we have to have a streamlined and focused approach to how we take that forward, and that approach has to be coordinated. There are many moving parts in the civil and family courts, and the Department has much less leverage in what it can and cannot achieve. Thankfully, the relationships among those moving parts are particularly strong at this time. There are good relationships among the judiciary, the Lord Chief Justice and his office, the court system and those who are involved in many of the panels and boards. It is therefore about trying to build on those good relationships and ensuring that we coordinate our activities and investment. To be blunt, I am less concerned about where overall responsibility lies.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for her statement. Like the Chair of the Committee, I welcome the high-level document. The devil will be in the detail, no doubt, but I welcome its intent.

As the Minister will know, one of the issues that was raised regularly during the passage of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill was the abuse, rather than the use, of family courts, and the abuse of them by abusers through bringing their victims back to court repeatedly. Some work was done on the Bill to improve that — we did as much as we could — but we know that the system is still very open to abuse. I want to know whether more can be done. I am interested in what you said about having laypeople and court users on the council and the board. That is what we are missing. We need to ensure that those who are being put through the system and those who advocate for them have a say in how the system works, because it is not working. It is not that it is broken. Rather, it was never right in the first place. It is a system that was created by men for men over hundreds of years. I say that with the greatest respect to many of the men in the Chamber and outside it, but it is the truth. We have to look at it and look at having serious reform.

Mrs Long: There is significant female leadership now, in the family courts in particular. Many of those who work in family law are women who are there representing the needs of male and female participants in the court system. There has been a huge change in the culture in the courts, and a lot of that is down to the leadership shown by the chair of the family court board. That is important. She has shown real vision and leadership around how the issues should be dealt with. She has also shown a willingness to innovate and be creative in dispute resolution.

It is true to say, however, that the family justice system and the civil justice system can sometimes be affected by the general adversarial nature of any court system. The criminal courts are obviously adversarial, and they are intended to be so, but the family courts and civil courts can often be perceived as being similar when, in fact, they should be a dispute resolution tool. Of course they are the end of the line when it comes to dispute resolution, in that somebody will have to make an adjudication, but they should not be viewed as a forum for combat between warring parties over childcare and other issues. They should be seen as a way to civilly resolve disputes about the care of children in a way that is in the best interests of the child, and I think that we need to reset, if you like, our attitudes and expectations around the court. That is one of the reasons why I am very focused on the idea of support for mediation as part of the process, in both the civil and family court jurisdictions. I believe that, by encouraging, supporting and funding mediation, we may get to a point where we have less breakdown in relationships post-separation, which would allow families to co-parent in a way that is constructive and is good for the well-being of the child. That should be at the heart of the system and is at the heart of what the family courts are trying to achieve.

As I said, I think that that adversarial nature of the courts is something that the family courts and the civil courts try very hard to avoid. For example, the litigants in person issue is one that we are very conscious of in civil justice. People ought to be able to represent themselves with respect to something without having to go and find a solicitor, a barrister and all the other things that will

potentially lead to a more combative approach, but it is also important that, when we set, for example, the financial limits around these things, we do it in a way that encourages both sides to operate on that basis, as opposed to an inequality of arms building up in either court. That can be incredibly intimidating for someone who cannot and does not want to have legal representation but finds themselves facing off against a barrister over something as personal as a personal loss or the care of their children.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Minister for bringing her statement to the House. She will be aware that retired judge Sir John Gillen criticised the slow response from the Department of Justice on the implementation of his report into how our justice system handles sexual offences cases, and today the Minister has presented myriad reference groups and action plans. However, I have sincere concerns, Minister, that there appears to be no reference to resource being attached to this. While I do welcome the acknowledgement that the problems exist and that there is a need for coming together to resolve them, it does all appear pointless if there is no targeted ambition to pull down resource to implement any recommendations that come out of those reference groups. Can the Minister speak directly to that point, please?

Mrs Long: I am more than happy to do so. Before I came to the Chamber, I met Sir John Gillen because, as you know, his reviews have been around for some time, particularly in respect of this. I will say two things. The Member has taken one extract from a very long interview by Sir John Gillen with respect to serious sexual offences. He said that he had no doubt that I was absolutely committed to making change. He said that he welcomed the progress that had been made but that, like everyone else, he felt that that progress was too slow. He also acknowledged that the justice system, more generally, is slow to change and that not all the levers are within the Department. So, we need to be full and clear when we quote people, otherwise we might misrepresent their actual assessment of the situation.

With respect to this, again, his view was very clear. He feels that it has taken too long for us to get to this point. He would like to see more progress more quickly. Who does not? However, the reality is that I have one year left of a two-year mandate, and therefore I have prioritised particular issues on which I believe we can make significant progress in the next year. I believe that they will also pave the way for any incoming Justice Minister to be able to take forward the more substantive reform of the system to which I referred at the beginning of my statement.

When I spoke with Sir John Gillen, he said that he had a checklist, as you would expect, beside him before the call started and that the things that I said I was going to prioritise were all the issues that he had on his checklist. So, with respect, we have managed to capture, if you like, the priorities that he would capture if he were faced with the same time challenges that I have, albeit both of us share a much greater ambition for change.

Of course there will be challenges with resources, and I cannot deny that any more than anyone else. The one area that I have no control over is the budget that is given to me. I can only control where it is spent, but not how much I get. If others want to lobby for me to get more money in

the Department of Justice, I can assure you that there are substantive projects on which that can be spent, and there is no shortage of issues that I could address, even in the next short period of a year to improve justice. However, even within the constrained budget that I have, we are not talking only about action plans on paper. My statement referred to specific pilot projects that will be rolled forward, and we have the resource to do that. I have talked about investment in technology; we have set aside resource to do that. I have also spoken about our forward plans to look at the structures so that we are in good shape come the next mandate when we will, hopefully, have a full five years to address those issues and will be able to make much more significant and substantive reform to the system.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister for her statement and update. She covered a range of issues. It gives us a really good direction, but I am always concerned that that direction could be undermined if outputs do not match what the Minister is trying to achieve. I have represented a military veteran who had to live in the Mourne mountains for three years because of the slowness of the family courts, and also a father who received a contact order two years ago but is yet to have contact with his children. Such outputs could undermine the very sensible approach that the Minister has taken. What are we doing to ensure that resident parents comply with court contact orders?

Mrs Long: As the Member will appreciate, those are matters for the judiciary. Ultimately, when somebody breaches a court contact order, it has to go back to the court to be enforced, and there will be a series of considerations that the judiciary will make at that point. It is fair to say that, by trying to engage in, for example, mediation rather than going directly to court, we might be able to foster better relationships between separating parents and might not get into the situations that we have all experienced in our constituency offices with respect to one parent frustrating another's access to their children and not being willing to cooperate with the court ruling. We also need to be very sensitive to the reasons why people may do that. It could be perceived threat, perceived intimidation, or a fear of what may happen to their children in those circumstances. That can be very real, even if the courts do not necessarily agree. A lot of work may need to be done to change people's minds and build confidence so that they comply with a court order.

Linda Dillon referred to those who bring forward vexatious claims against their former partner to use the court system against them. We have a duty under the new law to bring forward a report to the Committee and the Assembly on how we will handle the vexatious use of the family courts. We are very conscious of that issue. Early mediation will make a huge difference in terms of resolution. It will not solve all problems, but it will go a long way to addressing some of the issues to which the Member referred.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. I welcome it, including the reference to the private family law action plan. You mentioned that that is a collaborative approach with the Department of Health. Will you outline how the Department of Health will play a role?

Mrs Long: At least part of the feed-in to the action plan will come from social services and other health-based bodies. We are trying to move away from the current situation, in which court is the place of last resort, but often the first place to which people turn, to a situation in which,

through mediation, case conferencing and early resolution, we can start to put the child's needs at the heart of the discussions between parents before they seek recourse in the courts and in a way that will empower parents to make collaborative and joint decisions about how they wish to take things forward.

The role of Health in that area is important, as Health covers most of the law when it comes to family courts. The law, in itself, is not something over which I have control; it lies mainly with the Department of Finance and the Department of Health. Although we are focusing in this mandate on early resolution, there is a very strong case to say that the elements of the law that relate to family courts should be centralised along with all the others. It creates complexity. People often write to me asking what I am going to do about family law. The truth is that I will refer their letter to another Minister, which is not a satisfactory response. People assume that it is part of the justice system; they do not recognise that it is spread over three Departments. It causes huge confusion in how people relate to it.

The Health Department has a huge responsibility not only for reporting to the courts in supporting the decisions that are made but for supporting early resolution through mediation and other means.

11.15 am

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her positive statement, and I hope that it will give hope to many who are going through the family courts.

Minister, your latter point is important. A man was going through court to gain access to his daughter, and the mother made what were proved to be false claims of child abuse that led to the man being removed from having access to and living with the two other younger children that he has with his current partner for nearly two years, leaving one parent to cope with two very young children. The child abuse claims were widened to the other parent, and that put in jeopardy the lives of the two young people living with that parent. They faced the real dilemma of being put into foster care or a care home. For nearly two years, those people were trapped in that nightmare. Social services were a barrier and a hindrance to that family, not a help. I know that that is not the Minister's position, but, if justice had been sped up, that would have helped to get through those barriers. Minister, can you provide hope to people through your statement that, along with the other Ministers you talked about, you will be able to fix this to a point where justice is sped up so that, if vexatious claims are made, they will be resolved more quickly, allowing people to get on with their lives? That man just made a claim for access for one child and was put into a nightmare scenario for many years.

Mrs Long: There are a number of issues in the Member's question that I want to raise. First, as he acknowledges, policy on alienation is a matter for the Department of Health. Where abusive and damaging behaviours are suspected in family proceedings, it is for social workers to advise the court, which will then consider evidence of alienating behaviour alongside all other evidence when deciding what is in the best interests of the child. Therefore, that provision already exists. Although we did not specify parental alienation as an issue in the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act, we talked about abuse

that involved and engaged children. That is because we recognise that it is a real concern. I believe that that can now be prosecuted under that legislation.

I also understand that the Department of Health has committed to exploring guidance for professionals supporting families and experiencing acrimonious disputes as part of that private law family action plan to which my colleague just referred. I want to continue to work collaboratively with Minister Swann to scope out and support future actions. The Department of Health has policy responsibility, but I am clear that one parent should not be able to use a child to abuse the other parent. It is appropriate, therefore, that we have captured that kind of behaviour in the domestic abuse Act.

Ultimately, while those matters are important, the Member is also correct that the speed with which justice is delivered is important, particularly where there is acrimony. Through more focus on mediation, we can take out some of the cases that perhaps do not need to go to court if a resolution can be found between parents and they feel confident that that resolution can be upheld. By doing that, we will take those out of the court and allow it to focus on the more complex cases where there is a need for intervention. That will allow the process to move more swiftly than is the case at the moment.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her statement. I, too, welcome the measure, as it is very positive. Anything that improves the speed and efficiency of family proceedings should be welcomed. It is important to recognise that, no matter what the situation is, the biggest impact is generally on the child or children in such scenarios.

Minister, there is a huge role for digital technologies in transforming civil and family justice, but many citizens, particularly those in rural areas, have difficulties in accessing and sometimes have no access to broadband. What safeguards will be in place to ensure that access to justice is not affected for those people as we go through the changes?

Mrs Long: That is a hugely important issue. Whilst we recognise that more and more people rely on digital technology to interact with government services, do online shopping and all those other things, there will always be a cohort who prefer to do things face to face. That is for a host of reasons, including the digital divide in society or, perhaps, because people have communication challenges or difficulties. It is important that we look at the individual and ensure that whatever method is used in resolving disputes — in the court, in mediation or digitally — we use the correct mechanism for that individual and that their access to justice is not in any way hampered by the technology that is used. Support for people with communication difficulties in the courts is hugely important for someone who struggles to understand the court proceedings or to make their points clearly. All of that needs to be considered. Digital technology is only one aspect of what we are trying to achieve.

For me, it is crucial that everyone has access to justice fairly and can participate as equally and fairly as possible in proceedings that have a huge implication for their personal life. We should not view the risk of exclusion from the courts as an issue: I see this as another mechanism by which people who perhaps struggle at the moment can access justice, as opposed to replacing the current system

in which people can, if their situation makes it preferable, meet in person.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome the statement and its intent. I have been listening carefully to her answers.

Given that children, as everyone agrees, are at the centre of and are most affected by court proceedings and decisions, to what extent have the Children's Commissioner and other organisations, such as the Children's Law Centre, been involved in developing the private family law action plan?

The Minister mentioned mediation a number of times. I agree with that process because it could speed all of this up and it is a better process to deal with. If, for instance, partners reach agreement through mediation, does that become law, or does it remain mediational until it goes to court?

Mrs Long: I will answer the final question first. We will have to look at whether that would be enforced by the court. It would be much better if that were not needed. Often, where people come to agreements, the agreements are not only more flexible but better enforced, simply because of the willingness of both parties and the fact that there tends to be less dispute. Tensions tend to arise at points of change: for example, if a person's individual circumstances change dramatically because they remarry, move home or whatever. By mediating early in such situations, we can probably resolve a lot of those issues.

Will the Member remind me of his first question? It has gone clean out of my head.

Mr G Kelly: It was about the family law action plan.

Mrs Long: Yes, I recall. It was about third sector engagement, which is important.

I mentioned the Family Justice Board and the Civil Justice Council. It is important, for example, that we have businesses, litigants in person and so on represented on the Civil Justice Council. That would be a step forward. Equally, when it comes to the needs of children, having representatives of the children's sector and the third sector involved on those boards may help with the representation of children's needs and concerns.

It is important that we try to make the justice system more inclusive and more representative, particularly in civil and family justice. That is the part of the justice system that the vast majority of people who have interaction with justice will interact with. It tends to be the bit that people know best and, yet, are most fearful of. As we shape the justice system and plan for the future, it is important that ordinary citizens and the groups that represent their best interests are represented. If we are to keep children at the centre, engaging those organisations, particularly when looking at how we go about introducing some of the plans that we have, will be critical.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for her statement and the issues and actions that it contains. Will the Minister give an update on the British Government's application to rejoin the Lugano convention, which we lost access to as a result of Brexit? Would she have any concerns, should that application not be successful?

Mrs Long: I do not have an update for the Member at the moment. Rejoining should be straightforward, as, indeed, should be the ability to get a data adequacy agreement. Doing so is important for the cross-jurisdictional resolution of family and civil disputes so that people cannot simply walk across the border, resulting in no opportunity to be able to deal with the issues. As we know, that has been a long-standing issue. The Member's colleague in the Department for Communities will know about the pain that people go through when the Child Support Agency (CSA), for example, makes a ruling about how much maintenance they should be getting, only for the person who is meant to be paying the maintenance simply to walk across the border, which makes the CSA struggle to enforce its judgement. That is something that needs to be looked at very carefully, and we are keeping a watching brief on it.

Mr Blair: I am pleased to hear the emphasis on fairness in the Minister's statement, particularly the references to vulnerable service users. Can she tell us more about how her actions and proposals will advance fairness in the system, through either the work of the Department of Justice or departmental work with other agencies?

Mrs Long: One of the areas in which we are looking at fairness in the system is through the work that we are doing at the moment to review the financial jurisdiction of the various court tiers. That is hugely important, because there are many people who will suffer financial loss. The last time that our financial jurisdiction was increased was around 10 years ago, if not more. The value of what would be considered a small claim now — if you lose a holiday or something like that — could be considerably more than the current financial jurisdiction of the courts. The purpose of the system is to ensure that, in those circumstances, people are able to get a quick, effective and fair resolution of a dispute with another party. Its purpose is also to do that without there being the need for people to turn up with a large legal defence — barristers and all the rest — and for it to be a much more informal resolution process, and therefore much quicker. We are looking very carefully at how we will raise the level of the financial threshold. It is about balancing the need for our system to remain quick, because it is much faster than the system in England and Wales, against ensuring that there is not an inequality of arms, where people feel that the need to defend a claim justifies huge expenditure on barristers and a legal team, while people who take the claim arrive on their own to represent their own interests and feel that they are not able to do so adequately in front of the court. That is a fundamental issue of fairness that we are working to address.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she give us an update on the commencement of the civil legal aid provisions of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act 2021 and an update on the work that has been done, as was promised during the deliberations on the Bill, to look at having better access to legal aid for domestic abuse victims and limiting perpetrators' access to legal aid?

Mrs Long: The Member will be aware, at the time of the Bill, that I gave a commitment that we would move forward on the issue of legal aid, and we continue to make progress in that regard. As you know, we took legal advice on repercussiveness. We are now working through the consequences of that. We are looking at how we can best

implement the wish of the Assembly, which was that those people who go to court because they are called to court will have access to legal aid but that it will not be available to those who initiate court proceedings, unless they have a material entitlement based on income. That is the balance that we are working on at the moment. We hope to be able to bring forward that advice in the coming weeks.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome all attempts to demystify the courts, no matter at what level. Across society, we need to learn about them, and know about them, especially for children and young people who are involved in the civil and family courts. I hope that resources and information will be made available for children and young people to access. The Minister said that delay is a key factor of interest in the family courts and has answered a few questions on budgeting and resourcing already. Has she, however, had agreement from her Executive colleagues, or does she intend to put in a bid to fund and deliver the necessary changes? On what specific mediation proposals will the Department be consulting?

11.30 am

Mrs Long: The Department of Health has agreed to continue to fund mediation through the action plan that we have set out. We have, of course, put in bids for all aspects of the work in the Department of Justice and, where we have that funding secured, the plan has been cut to fit that cloth. We recognise that we have limited time and resource to make significant impacts.

Of course, if it should happen that more money is made available, there is a long list of issues that we could address in the Department. However, we also need to be realistic as to what we will get from the Department of Finance, given the competing pressures. I am in no doubt whatsoever that, for example, where the Department of Health is working with us on some of these issues, particularly early resolution, it is making a financial as well as a practical contribution to the objectives set out in the report.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. Members may take their ease for a moment or two.

Mr Buckley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Whilst not questioning the ruling of the Speaker, earlier you mentioned that the heckling of Ms Bradshaw was part of your deliberations in the sanctions towards Mr Allister. I ask for clarity on this point, for the sake of —.

Mr Speaker: Mr Buckley, you actually are challenging the ruling of the Speaker, so I do not want to discuss that any further.

Mr Buckley: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: You have already challenged the Speaker. You may not understand that; you are relatively inexperienced. However, I made deliberations and announced them this morning. I do not intend to rehearse them, so I leave the matter at rest. Thank you.

Executive Committee Business

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I beg to move

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

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.

Mr Swann: I bring forward for debate the latest amendment to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations, that is SR 2021/46.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, and the indulgence of Members present, I begin by reflecting on an unprecedented year of challenge for us all, on our National Day of Reflection. All the Ministers in the Executive have had the challenging responsibility of maintaining a delicate balance between protecting the health of our most vulnerable people, our vital health services and our citizens' livelihoods.

I assure Members that my central motivation was and is to act in the best interests of the entire population. Mr Speaker, you will be only too aware of how many times in the past year I have had to bring coronavirus restrictions regulations before the House. I absolutely understand that the regulations were sometimes unpopular and difficult to comprehend, but they always had the overarching intention of overcoming the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today, 23 March 2021, is very nearly one year since the first set of restriction regulations were made, at 9.15 on the night of 28 March. Those initial principal regulations have long since been revoked and replaced, and more than 40 amendments have charted our course through the worst stages of the pandemic.

Little did we realise a year ago what havoc this terrible disease would inflict not only here but across the globe. We have endured many dark days and days of dashed hopes. It is a solemn moment for us to remember the more than 2,100 people who have succumbed to COVID-19 in Northern Ireland over that time.

More often than not, the Executive have had to bring harsh restrictions to the House to protect the most vulnerable and to ensure that our vital health services were not overwhelmed. Today, I find myself in the all too rare position of bringing small relaxations to the restrictions. It is my sincere hope that, with the continued successful delivery of our vaccination programme, I will be able to continue to do that.

I am sure that some of the Members who spoke or wrote to me over the past year may not have fully believed my replies when I said that I would not keep the restrictions in place for one moment longer than necessary. I meant what I said, as I always recognised the harm that the restrictions would cause and what a fine balance the Executive had to strike. Members should understand that the restrictions,

however unpopular, were entirely necessary as the rate of infection spiralled, exponentially at times.

It was on 19 March 2020 that the first of many deaths occurred in Northern Ireland. I offer my deepest sympathies to all the families that have suffered loss, grief and pain since. I do not forget those who may yet experience pain or loss as a result of the pandemic. It is vital that we do not lose sight of why such strict measures were — and are — necessary. Life has changed immeasurably for all of us, but it is my sincerest hope that we can now move along the pathway to a new normal as soon as possible.

If this lockdown has felt more oppressive than any we have endured so far, I hope, like all Members, that it will be the last time that we are forced to deploy such a blunt instrument to this extent in Northern Ireland. Short, dreary winter days in lockdown combined to make poor companions. The previous lockdowns, during the warmer spring and autumn days, at least allowed us to enjoy being outside in the fresh air, with its benefits to health and well-being.

Essential to our being able to leave the lockdowns behind is that everyone continues to keep the rules and follows my oft repeated simple health messages: maintain social distancing; wash your hands frequently; do not touch your face; avoid touching surfaces if you are out of your home; wear a face covering in appropriate settings — and, please, self-isolate and seek a test immediately if you experience symptoms. Remember, we cannot relax our guard yet. We have come a considerable distance, but have still a considerable way to go.

I now return to the amendments. I will set the context, summarise the statutory rule, and be happy to take questions.

When the amendments were agreed by the Executive, on 18 February, we were seeing a decrease in COVID-19-positive cases, hospitalisations and ICU occupancy. There were 460 COVID-positive inpatients, down from 662 on 7 February. However, the number of inpatients remained worryingly and stubbornly high in comparison with the first peak of 322 COVID-positive hospital inpatients, and it was higher than the number on 16 October, when we brought in stronger restrictions to curb the second wave. COVID-positive ICU occupancy had fallen only slowly from a peak of 74 on 25 January to 51 on 18 February.

While those were, clearly, welcome signs, the position in our ICUs remained very serious. The number of ICU patients sat at about the same levels that we experienced at the peaks of the two previous waves. In April and November, there was every indication that ICU occupancy would remain stubbornly high for many weeks.

In the population, the so-called Kent variant was accounting for approximately 70% of positive cases in Northern Ireland. That is a particularly unwelcome strain, being some 70% more transmissible than the original variant. The danger signs were clearly present. Increased interpersonal contact over Christmas had led inescapably towards a sharp rise in case numbers during January. We saw reducing case numbers only in February as a result of restrictions, but they were falling from a very high place. I could not, in all honesty, risk us losing control of community transmission again, with the inevitable surge in hospitalisations and deaths that would follow from

that. In parallel, the health service continued to struggle to manage the severe pressures that were on it as a result of the existing high number of hospital cases. The emergence of other variants was an additional concern for my officials.

In the light of all those very real possibilities, the Executive agreed, at the time of the seventh review of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations on 18 February, that we should continue with the restrictions for another four-week period. A couple of essential technical amendments were, therefore, made to the legislation to extend the operation of the coronavirus regulations once again.

The amendments that we are debating stipulate that a formal review of the need for the restrictions regulations should be carried out on or before 18 March. I must inform Members that that review was carried out a week ago today, on 16 March, and the Executive confirmed that the retention of the principal regulations remained a proportionate and appropriate response to the pandemic, albeit with some further modest relaxations that were announced last week.

The remaining amendments in SR 2021/46 make four changes to the restrictions to allow some small relaxations that, I hope, the House will welcome. The first amendment came into effect on 2 March to permit the carer of a Motability scheme customer to accompany them to assist when they pick up their vehicle. The Examiner of Statutory Rules, in her report on a previous Motability scheme amendment, had highlighted that practical difficulty for some scheme users. The amendment addressed that omission, and I am pleased to say that the regulations now provide for that to take place. I take the opportunity to thank the Examiner for drawing that to my Department's attention.

Three further amendments commenced from 8 March to permit some additional relaxations to the restrictions. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will outline each of them in turn. The first allows a degree of limited opening for non-essential retail by way of contactless click and collect. If I may, I would like to report that, following engagement with retailers and retail sector representative bodies, the Department for the Economy worked with my Department to develop proposals to facilitate the provision of limited non-essential retail click-and-collect services.

The second of the amendments increased the number of people permitted to gather socially outdoors from a maximum of six from no more than two households to a maximum of 10 from no more than two households. However, the restrictions on all other outdoor gatherings, including sporting events and gatherings in private dwellings, would remain unchanged.

The final amendment permits Departments to use conference facilities for the purposes of holding a public inquiry. The amendment extends a similar provision in place for holding courts, tribunals and appeals services in COVID-secure facilities and conference centres, recognising that our vital legal functions must continue to be delivered even in the midst of severe restrictions. There was extensive engagement with a number of Departments about the limits on the number of attendees likely to be involved and, equally importantly, the mitigations that would be in place. The Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and

Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) were content to support that amendment on the basis of risk mitigations that could be put in place.

I believe that the limited relaxations to the restrictions introduced through the amended regulations were a measured and proportionate response to the information that was available at the time of the seventh review of the No. 2 restrictions regulations on 18 February and are in line with the intentions of 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out Of Restrictions', which was published subsequently on 2 March. I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Colm Gildernew. I need to advise you that we will suspend the sitting in five minutes' time.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First of all, I note the continuing improvement in the daily reported statistics. We see more people vaccinated, fewer reported cases of COVID-19, fewer people in our hospitals and, ultimately, lower numbers of people passing away from COVID.

I would, however, like to join you, Minister, in reflecting on the impact that COVID has had to date, including on those who have lost family in the four weeks since we last debated the regulations. I note that, to date, across the island of Ireland, 6,693 people have lost their lives to COVID, and every one of those deaths is an individual tragedy for every one of those families.

11.45 am

We pay tribute to our health and social care workers, who have helped to bring us through what, we hope, has been the worst of this pandemic, and we hope that, over the coming weeks, as some restrictions are eased, those figures will continue to improve. We need to get to the point in the coming weeks where we are able to start our health recovery, reopen a range of services to patients and allow the Department to make inroads into the very lengthy and frustrating waiting lists.

The Committee was briefed on the regulations at its meeting last Thursday. It is a cause of frustration for Committee members that we are debating rules today that have already been in place for a number of weeks. Members are aware that a review took place last week that will result in further regulations that we will debate again in a number of weeks' time. We have concerns about the limitations of post hoc scrutiny and the continuing approach of legislating without formal consultation and impact assessments. It is acknowledged, however, that this opportunity for debate allows Members to place on record their views, and we trust that it will inform subsequent regulations.

The briefing session with the director of population health last Thursday was very useful in that regard. It gave the Committee the opportunity to discuss the regulations in more detail and to seek further information on the work that the Executive are undertaking on next steps. One of the areas discussed was the regulation allowing click and collect in limited circumstances. The Committee welcomes the extension of click-and-collect services to baby equipment, clothing and footwear. However, members raised some concerns about the practicality of

buying baby items such as prams and car seats without physical inspection. The same issue was raised in relation to children's footwear and the need for children's feet to be measured properly. There was a suggestion that an appointment-based approach could be used to address some of those issues.

There was also a discussion on the increase to the limit on outdoor gatherings, concerns around restrictions affecting youth diversionary workers and that the current restrictions prevented youth workers from meeting with more than one or two young people at a time. I welcome the clarity provided by the official that youth support services may continue to operate and provide support for persons if they are at risk of illness, injury or harm. Members also discussed that there may be a need for targeted guidance for young people to manage and mitigate risk when they are meeting. We were advised that work is being undertaken by the Department on assessing adherence and behaviour more widely. The Committee agreed to ask for an update from the Department on that work and, in particular, in relation to an assessment of youth behaviour. The other measures, including allowing a customer's carer to accompany them when picking up a Motability vehicle, are practical steps, and the Committee was content with the rule.

A Cheann Comhairle, I will now make some remarks as a Sinn Féin representative. Would you prefer that I wait until after the break?

Mr Speaker: I will have to interrupt you in a couple of minutes, so we can suspend now, if you wish, or you can make a few remarks. I will return to you immediately after we resume the sitting. I do not want to interrupt your flow.

Mr Gildernew: I will make a few remarks now. I may get through them OK. Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle.

As the transmission of the COVID-19 virus slows and we start to ease the restrictions, we must remain on our guard. Out and about in our communities, we need to continue to practise safe levels of distancing and hygiene even as the vaccination programme continues to be rolled out across communities. There is a huge job of work to be done by the Department. There must be strategic planning for restarting full health and social care services and addressing backlogs, and waiting lists that preceded the pandemic must also be tackled. Addressing the waiting list challenges will require the Department of Health also to address the staffing shortages and the low pay for far too many of our health and social care workers. We need provision of improved find, test, trace, isolate and support services to manage and to press down aggressively on future outbreaks. Last week, I met the COVID-19 contact-tracing team from the Public Health Agency to offer our continued support for a robust system and to seek assurances that it is ready for the lifting of restrictions. Effective contact tracing has an invaluable role to play in stopping transmission, which becomes more important as restrictions are lifted.

I have long called for a new public health-led strategy that is centred on find, test, trace, isolate and support. It is also important to bear in mind that, this time last year, the COVID-19 contact-tracing service was stood down by the Department of Health during the first surge only to be re-established in April. As further restrictions are lifted, the risk of increased contact at work or between households

could lead to further outbreaks, clusters and surges. I am very disappointed to note the latest figures for the contact-tracing complement, with only 46 contact tracers employed on a full-time basis, 100 part-time staff and 170 who work on a bank basis. Minister, the Assembly supported the Committee's motion asking for a significant scaling up of the system, and these figures do not suggest that that has happened. As we move into the next period, that needs to take place urgently.

Mr Speaker: Members, in order to allow the parties necessary preparation time to observe a minute's silence at 12.00 noon to remember those who have lost their lives during the pandemic, we will suspend the sitting until 12.05 pm, shortly after the minute's silence.

The sitting was suspended at 11.50 am and resumed at 12.05 pm.

Mr Speaker: Members, we return to the debate on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations 2021.

Mrs Cameron: After the suspension for the National Day of Reflection, I will say that it is good to remember all those who have lost loved ones and friends and endured a very difficult year. As you have said, Mr Speaker, people have had a time of impossible, unnatural grieving.

I support the motion. As we continue to face the threat of COVID, albeit the threat is less severe, we need to recognise that restrictions must continue to be in place. An extension of the restrictions to 18 March was therefore quite sensible.

Given the lessening of the COVID threat and the reduced prevalence in our community, however, it is right that we look at the restrictions and find a sensible way out of the current measures that we call lockdown. The Executive decision to permit:

"click and collect to operate for non-essential retail businesses"

— such as shops that sell baby equipment, clothing, footwear or electrical goods —

"if payments are completed at time of order, either online, phone, text or post, with no cash transactions permitted"

is a sensible approach, albeit, again, one with some illogical anomalies.

This week, many of our children have returned to school. I am sure that many will have tried on their uniform and shoes for the first time in months and realised that they do not fit. It is therefore rather illogical that a child's feet cannot be measured to allow for the correct new shoes to be purchased.

There are sensible accommodations in the regulations, such as allowing mobility cars to be collected, and we need more of those. Furthermore, it remains a matter of deep regret that the sensible proposal brought forward by my colleague the Economy Minister on click and collect from florists was not permitted. We have all witnessed bunged supermarkets, especially coming up to Mother's Day, and wonder why Diane Dodds's proposal was not accepted as a practical and safe option at the time. We must not unduly penalise local independent retailers

when a sensible way forward is possible and does not compromise public health.

The regulations also increase the limit for outdoor gatherings from six to 10 people:

"from no more than 2 households for the purpose of socialising which is not a sporting event."

That welcome easing is going to be appreciated by many as we seek to address the issues of loneliness and mental health. We ought to consider, however, how larger families can also enjoy socialising with friends in their garden.

Looking ahead, the vaccination programme continues to make great strides. I commend all those involved. We look forward to Easter, and, in that vein, we need to offer people hope. A perpetual lockdown or unreasonably keeping restrictions in place will only damage public support for the wider health message. There are now many postcodes in Northern Ireland with no cases of COVID-19. We long for that to happen in more areas. As we know, communities will ask why they cannot sit for a coffee, get a much-needed haircut or take their kids swimming.

Let the coming weeks see the vigilance message continue to resonate, but let us match the public's sacrifice for so long now with an easing of restrictions and the much-needed freedom that so many people crave. The vast majority of the public are sensible and responsible, so let us treat them as such.

Ms Hunter: On the back of Pam's comments, I thank our front-line staff for their continued efforts and for their continued commitment to tackling the virus. My sincere and deep sympathies go to the families out there who have lost a loved one.

I welcome the opportunity to speak today as my party's health spokesperson on the health protection regulations. The amendment (No. 5) regulations permit click-and-collect services for some non-essential retail businesses. As I said in the previous debate on the regulations, I am sure that that is welcome news to some business owners. I recognise, however, that many will not be in the business of selling the limited types of goods allowed under the regulations. Hopefully, in line with the Executive's plans, all remaining non-essential retail will be permitted to offer click-and-collect services.

Enabling Departments to use Nightingale courts seems to be a sensible measure, especially given the success that they have had in recent months in dealing with the backlog of cases in the criminal justice system.

Increasing the limit on outdoor gatherings from six to 10 people from no more than two households will, hopefully, allow more family members to meet up. I am sure that that was a welcome change to the regulations for many and will, perhaps, allow family members who have not seen each other for a significant time to meet up.

I also welcome that the regulations have addressed the anomaly that meant that carers were not able to accompany Motability customers when they were picking up their vehicles. That seems to be a very sensible decision.

As I have done previously, I continue to urge the public to abide by the regulations and guidance that are before us. It goes without saying that the past few months of lockdown

since Christmas have been extremely difficult. Indeed, the last 12 months have been extremely difficult. With the continued roll-out of the vaccine and restrictions beginning to loosen, it really feels as though the end is much closer. Of course, we all continue to be mindful of the impact that the COVID pandemic and the past year of lockdowns and restrictions have had on every aspect of our lives, whether on our collective mental health and well-being, our children being out of school for long periods, the loss and closure of many small and local businesses or, of course, on our health service and front-line workers.

I urge the Executive to continue with support grants for businesses. As the restrictions have continued, more and more small businesses and business owners have struggled to stay afloat or, indeed, to remain positive about their future prospects and the idea of opening their businesses and operating them as they did before. My constituents in East Derry have found much relief and support from the Executive's financial packages. I hope that that support will continue for as long as the restrictions are in place and businesses are forced to remain closed.

Gym owners are especially feeling the impact of COVID, and I hope that our gyms will be able to open as soon as possible when it is safe to do so. I fear the job and business losses that we will have when we come out on the other side of the pandemic. It is very important that we seek to give businesses as much support as possible, such as start-up grants, to ensure that they can get back on their feet. As the picture with the pandemic improves and we slowly get back to normal, I hope that the Executive will turn their attention to that task. Indeed, all of us here have a responsibility to contribute to that effort.

To conclude, I reiterate my support of the Executive and the Minister in the decisions that they have made so far. However, I find it deeply regrettable that I and other MLAs get a lot of information about what is coming next from Twitter, and often at the same time as the public. That really needs to be addressed

While I am sure that this is not the last time that we will meet to discuss such regulations, each time we meet, it seems that the picture is a bit more improved and positive than the previous occasion. I hope that that continues to be the case. To be clear: we have to learn how to return to normal and live safely with the virus. I support the regulations that are before us.

Ms Bradshaw: I associate myself with the comments of others who expressed sympathy to those who have been bereaved this year and our enduring and deep appreciation for our front-line workers in health and social care for their work over the last 12 months. I, too, look forward to a time when we are no longer debating the lockdown restrictions.

I place on record my thanks to the Health Minister. We may disagree on a small number of issues, but I recognise how incredibly hard he has worked during the pandemic and how much he cares about the general public.

I will highlight a few concerns about the impact of the health protection regulations. The first one relates to crowding in supermarkets at weekends, which I think my colleague on the Health Committee Pam Cameron also raised. People are generally bored at home and think that the only places that they can go to are the supermarkets. We have seen huge crowds, especially over Mother's

Day and Valentine's Day, and, no doubt, Easter will be the same. As the "Stay at home" instruction is lifted, non-essential retail shops should open as soon as possible. The small retailers in my constituency, South Belfast, for example, are very small and run by families, and it would probably be much easier to control social distancing and hygiene in those environments than in the big supermarkets. I also put on record my concerns about the small changes to the click-and-collect provisions. Those could have gone further again to allow businesses to trade more freely while adhering to the public health advice.

At the Health Committee, I raised concerns about social distancing at the vans and coffee stands in our parks and public spaces. I understand why people are trying to make an event out of getting out of the house, but, again, I have concerns about people not adhering to the two-metre rule.

12.15 pm

The issue that the Chair of the Health Committee raised about young people is one that I had also raised. When I mentioned it, it had been 80 days since Christmas, and there was an assumption that all our young people had not seen their friends, had not been to school and had not been gathering. The reality is, if you look down any social media feed, young people are starting to gather, no doubt because of the nice weather. The response from the departmental officials that they were looking at fresh guidance for young people is welcome. We have to deal with the reality that young people want to see their friends and try to support rather than penalise them.

Moving on to my last two issues, one is in relation to golf. There was an announcement that a maximum of two families would be permitted to meet for structured outdoor sporting activities. Anybody who has played golf will know that the majority of games are played as a four-ball, so that is something that should be looked at to make it better for those who engage in the sport. It is a sport that is experienced more by older people or those who took early retirement, who use it as a way not just to socialise but to keep up their physical health. That is something that could be addressed.

Lastly, I would like the Health Minister to give us an update on the work of the Department and the Health and Social Care Board on long COVID and what support is coming forward for those who are suffering from it at home.

Ms Ni Chuilín: I thank the Minister for laying the No 5 amendment to the No 2 rules. There is a feeling of déjà vu at times; nonetheless we are here to support the Minister as best we can. I also want to put on record my appreciation to all the health and social care workers, all the community and voluntary sector workers, and all front-line staff for their work over the past year. I extend that appreciation to families, many of whom will never forget the experience that they have endured this year.

I do not want to go back to what normal was before COVID. There are certain categories in our communities, our families, our society and our constituencies that were suffering long before COVID, but the impact of COVID exacerbated their experience of loneliness, poor mental health, poverty and ill health. Those are issues that we, as an Assembly and an Executive, all have a responsibility to address.

I am also grateful that the anomaly with the Mobility scheme was rectified on 2 March. It was rectified as quickly as it was spotted, so I put my appreciation of that on record. The other three amendments that came into effect on 8 March are also welcome.

There are issues on which we still need clarity, Minister. For example, you said that 70% of infections were a result of the Kent variant. We need to know what strengths and additional measures we are bringing in, including the traveller locator forms in particular. We all want to support our health and social care system, particularly those who work at the intensivist end. The last thing we want is our brightest and best saving lives whilst we are being more relaxed about people coming here infected with more virulent variants of COVID-19. I appreciate that there will always be a need for vigilance, but it would be remiss of me not to raise that issue. Addressing that will be of some assurance to people in the Chamber and those who are listening to the debate this morning.

There is another issue that we still need clarity on, Minister. Liz Redmond was at the Committee last week and, to be fair to her, was very clear about what the regulations meant.

As other colleagues and I have said and will continue to say, it is almost as though, by the time that the regulations come in, we are trying to catch up with ourselves. The Minister, as an MLA, will get that. It is frustrating when we hear something and then our constituents and colleagues ask those of us who are on the Health Committee what it means and we are not fit to tell them. It is not that we are being precious because we are MLAs. We appreciate that the regulations are coming and that we have a bit of catching up to do, but sometimes the gap is so wide and there is so much catching up to do that it just looks wrong, to be totally honest.

Last week, we asked Liz about the relaxations on two households mixing, and that is fine. However, the position on youth diversionary workers, who work with extremely vulnerable children and young people, is still not clear, and, as the Minister will appreciate, I have raised that issue. Paula Bradshaw mentioned the fact that the good weather is coming and that a lot of them are out and about. That does not mean that they are up to any harm or mischief, and I want to put that on the record. In my constituency, I know of a lot of youngsters who are extremely vulnerable. Youth workers go out to them, as do the police, because they know that they are vulnerable, but they are technically breaking COVID regulations. The police have raised that as well. They are making a decision based on duty of care. There may be two youth diversionary workers, three PSNI officers and a parent or a guardian trying to calm down three or four youngsters, particularly at interfaces, which, from time to time, unfortunately, erupt. While the youth workers and the police will do that all day long on our behalf, and we appreciate it, if the local community police do not know the youth diversionary workers, those workers may get hit with a COVID fine, which is the last thing that we want, particularly when they are trying to protect very vulnerable young people. You may not be able to provide clarification on that today, Minister. I am not raising that for the sake of raising it or to be mischievous, but we definitely need clarification on it.

Similarly, clarification was sought on those with mobility issues picking up cars from dealerships. That was

rectified and rightly so. Those issues are coming up right across constituencies, and I know that, right across constituencies, conversations are being had about them, because I am being contacted by people from a part of my constituency that I do not normally represent or have many dealings with.

The other aspect is that the plan for the next set of regulations will all depend on what is relaxed with the Executive's agreement. Pam Cameron commented on flower shops. As you know, I was one of your colleagues, Minister. I am still your colleague, but I mean that I was your "colleague colleague" on the Executive. I am still your friend — sort of *[Laughter.]* Sometimes. For example, is it up to each Department to bring forward the relaxations that it would like to see and for the officials from TEO, your officials and the officials from the sponsoring Department to try to work out what the best fit is? That is my understanding.

Some of the businesses that I know in my constituency have been responsible for years. They are, as the Minister will know, going through a really hard time. They are respecting and honouring the health regulations, and that is absolutely no bother. When I was in a big supermarket, I saw a very young member of staff politely ask a person to wear a face covering, and the rude response that she got had that wee girl in bits. We have all gone into a large supermarket and seen people almost congregated in the area where you get flowers, for example. When that has happened, I have just walked out without my items, because I did not want to take the risk.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. This point has, indeed, been raised right throughout our debates on the COVID regulations: that the safest environments are those of independent retail traders, who have been responsible, and that, unfortunately, the regulations have permitted that unmitigated risk where people gather in supermarkets. Does she agree that it is important that we try, where possible, to give some of those small businesses a lead-in time and even a date, given that there are preparations that they would like to put in place for a proposed reopening date so that they can reopen in a safe and compliant manner?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I agree with the Member up to a point, but, to be frank, in order to give a date, you would need to have a crystal ball. You would need to know how many people have lost their lives to COVID, how many are in high dependency units and, more so, in intensive care units, and then you would work your way back. Regrettably, that is the way that it is, and I completely support that.

I am concerned about trying to strike a balance. There seems to be some relaxation around click and collect, which I welcome, and I share the concerns about youngsters getting their feet measured. I have had the experience in my family of having to buy two pairs of shoes in order to get the right size. However, the issue for me is that we need to start getting into a bit more of a "What if?" conversation, and I assume that that is happening. I will not repeat what I have said, but further regulations will be relaxed when infection rates and, in particular, the number of people losing their lives is greatly reduced.

In relation to the next amendments, I am not putting anybody on the spot, but I would like to see some preparatory work done to see about, for example, smaller

businesses opening up again. We all know that people are still being infected with COVID, but they are not going to pubs or restaurants. Those places are closed, so it is down to their personal responsibility. We all agree on that. Where we are maybe not at the point of disagreeing but are not quite there yet is with us putting out what we would like to see happen. None of us has the foresight that is needed to start that planning. However, with that said and without contradiction, I think that we need to start to tentatively plan for the next set of regulations.

I will finish by thanking the Minister, his officials and, more so, everybody who has stuck with all of us for the past year. They have given us their patience. They have been through the most awful of years and are still sticking with us. As I said before, there is hope on the horizon with the vaccination. I asked the Minister yesterday about when the booking system would open up for Belfast, and I can already see that people are holding their patience and holding their families on the basis that those who are most vulnerable will get vaccinated. Like all colleagues here today, with the day that is in it, I urge people to stay safe and to look after each other in the days ahead.

Mrs D Kelly: I echo Ms Ní Chuilín's thanks and her recognition of the public, who have made those essential sacrifices. Last week, I took my father for his second vaccination, and we were absolutely delighted to have got him through the whole period, thankfully, without COVID. I also place on record my thanks to the staff in ward 2 south and in ICU at Craigavon Area Hospital, who saved the life of my brother. I make no bones about it. He was critically ill with COVID for weeks and, thank God, is making a good recovery, so I thank all those staff.

I also want the Minister to look at the mental health and emotional well-being of staff. I believe that some staff will suffer from what can best be described as "PTSD" when they hopefully relax a bit and come off duty. From personal experience, having family members who have worked in those sectors, I know that it has taken a huge toll on their well-being. Minister, you might be able to encourage your Executive colleagues to work with you in meeting their specific needs as, hopefully, we look to a brighter future.

I have a couple of specific queries on behalf of constituents. You may know that equestrian centres and showjumping are popular in my constituency along the lough shore. I want some confirmation, as it is an all-Ireland sport, that, under the regulations, showjumping and elite sports can recommence on the same basis as in the Republic of Ireland, where eventing has resumed on an elite, non-spectator basis with all the mitigation factors being put in place. That is my constituents' understanding from some in the Department of Agriculture. I want to confirm that.

12.30 pm

Another query came in today from the family of someone whose mother has severe dementia with challenging behaviour and is an inpatient in Gillis ward in St Luke's Hospital. Because of her challenging behaviour and deterioration, her family are very anxious. She has been given both vaccinations. Family members have received their first vaccination and want to know about the visiting policy for long-term patients in a hospital setting as opposed to a care home and when it might be relaxed.

Mr Chambers: I thank the Minister of Health for coming to the House yet again. He said that he wanted to begin his contribution by reflecting on an unprecedented year of challenge for all of us. It has been a challenging year that is worthy of thoughtful reflection by us all. It is appropriate that we had a moment's silence to remember those who have fallen victim to this dreadful virus in the past year and their families.

The Minister said that all Ministers had had the challenging responsibility of maintaining a delicate balance between protecting the health of our most vulnerable people and vital health services and citizens' livelihoods. In fairness, the Executive have faced those challenges without the assistance of a textbook or any experience of managing such a deadly pandemic to help and guide them. The public have had to make sacrifices that involve families being separated from elderly relatives who are in residential care. That hurtful sacrifice extended to the families of loved ones who were hospitalised. The pandemic has also curtailed the joy of new arrivals in our maternity units. It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the impact that the pandemic has had on our schoolchildren, on their education and their mental health and well-being.

One of the biggest sacrifices has been the restrictions applied to laying our deceased to rest. Not being able to attend the funeral of a friend or workmate does not sit easily with the people of Northern Ireland, who want to be part of a tradition of supporting grieving families. Over 2,000 of our fellow citizens have fallen victim to this dreadful virus, but the regulations around funerals and wakes have applied to all who have passed with conditions unrelated to the pandemic. Many of the restrictions and regulations have appeared contradictory at times, and maybe it has been hard to understand the logic behind them. However, at all times, the Executive have worked and acted in the best interests of the public.

The business community has had to pay a huge price for the sacrifices that it has had to make. I appreciate that some have slipped through the net of government financial support. Being part of the Union has permitted Ministers to be as generous as possible in difficult circumstances. The full opening of businesses should be an urgent action once the medical and scientific evidence supports it.

The main role of the regulations has been to try to reduce the pressure on hospitals. We stood at our doors on Thursday evenings and clapped in support of our front-line staff. The greatest acknowledgement that we can offer those heroes, who risked their own health and well-being and made huge sacrifices, is to continue to respect the regulations and reduce the pressure on our hospitals even further. The Ulster Unionist Party certainly backs the regulations.

We also have to remember that there have been other heroes: our shopworkers, our transport workers and a range of people who have tried to keep day-to-day life flowing for us all. I cannot sit down without placing on record a reference to the fantastic roll-out of our vaccination programme. It has been a brilliantly organised and very welcome programme. I thank all who are involved with it.

Mr Buckley: On this day of reflection, I join colleagues in thinking of all those who have, sadly, succumbed to

COVID-19 and passed away in tragic circumstances. I think also of those who have passed on not as a result of COVID-19 but through having suffered from the misfortune of having to adhere to the regulations that we put in place because of COVID-19, which restricted access to care homes etc and meant that they had no access to loved ones at a difficult time. I and, I am sure, other colleagues have been moved by the testimony of Jim Wells throughout this. He reported that he was able to hold his wife's hand for the first time in a year just last Sunday. I put on record Jim's commitment and dedication to his wife throughout that time, when he went to her window at the side of the home to keep her company, albeit that they were separated by a pane of glass. It is truly heartbreaking if we think about it. Sadly, Jim is not the only one. There are so many in our care homes. I have been contacted by many who want just to hold the hand of their parent or loved one at what is their most difficult time. I want to put on record that thought.

Like Mr Chambers, on a positive note, I want to reflect on the success of the vaccination programme. It has been fantastic. We really have reaped the benefits of United Kingdom membership in accessing the vaccine. However, I have listened to Members across the House. I think that it was the deputy First Minister who said yesterday that, with COVID-19, none of us is truly safe until everybody is safe. While the vaccination roll-out has been a success here in the United Kingdom, we have to look at the way in which, unfortunately, its roll-out has been somewhat slower in Europe, to where many of our constituents look forward to returning, hopefully, on holiday or otherwise one day, and for our neighbours and friends in the Republic of Ireland. Maybe the Minister could give us an update on that. I would like to know how the road map to recovery is affected by a slower vaccination rate in the Republic of Ireland. It is always the duty of any Government and any Administration to ensure that their population is safely and promptly vaccinated, and I welcome the fact that we are on course to do that. However, when it comes to the time that we are fit and able to do so, it would be appropriate that, where possible, we help our friends and neighbours in the Republic of Ireland to get to an adequate vaccination level to ensure that they, too, can enjoy life post COVID.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buckley: I will indeed, yes.

Mr Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Member for raising that point. Does the Member agree that that is indicative of the need to develop a robust all-Ireland strategy for dealing with this?

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for his intervention. Of course, as he has repeated time and time again, COVID knows no borders. It is international. It is worldwide. However, the sad reality, which, I am sure, the Minister will touch on, is that the way in which the European Union, of which the Republic of Ireland has membership, has conducted itself in relation to vaccination has made it very difficult for the United Kingdom to engage with it constructively on vaccination roll-out. Say, for example, that we had been sharing the vaccine during the last couple of weeks. I presume that the AstraZeneca vaccine would have been the vaccine of choice that would, hopefully, have reached vaccination centres in the Republic of Ireland. Those vaccines might have sat on a shelf unable to be used, whereas, in Northern Ireland, we

have followed sound scientific information and data and continued the roll-out programme. We are well on the way to vaccinating our most vulnerable and older categories to ensure that we can have a safe reopening. I hope that we can be constructive and help where possible.

I welcome the regulations on click and collect. They recognise the need for interaction between small shops and many of our constituents for the like of shoes and children's clothing, as has been mentioned, but they could go a lot further. Throughout the COVID-19 debates in the House, I have said that our small businesses can be a COVID-compliant environment. The way in which our people have flocked to the multinational shops throughout COVID-19 has been a slight, to say the least, to our small businesses, which could, if given the opportunity, regulate their environment in a much more beneficial manner than the multinationals. I welcome the fact that we are moving in the right direction, but there is always going to be a need for caution when we reopen various sectors. We have a willing audience in our retail and hospitality sectors, however. They are willing to play their part in ensuring that their environments are safe to allow for their return.

On that very point, and as I mentioned in an intervention, different sectors will require different lead-in times. The needs of the population to which they tender are different. I recognise and understand that the Executive want to be data-driven and not date-driven in their approach, but, in a sense, we need both. Many in the hospitality sector, for example, need to plan the way in which they can return, and they can do so only by looking towards indicative dates and timelines. Take the hospitality industry as an example. I am sure that every Member has been approached by some poor bride or groom who has been caught up in the middle of COVID-19 and who has organised not one, not two, but perhaps three weddings. That has put couples under enormous stress. Every time that any of us tries to give them a wee bit of guidance when they ask, "Do you think I'll get 30 at my wedding or will it be 10? I just want to know", we cannot give them clarity. I would like the Minister and his Executive colleagues to look at such sectors and say, firmly, that they can give them an indicative time frame by which they will be able to give indicative numbers that will be allowed.

Mr Chambers mentioned funerals and the restrictions that were put on them, as they were put on weddings. Now that we have seen the return of our Churches, albeit on an individual risk-assessment basis, we should begin to look at funerals and weddings in the same light.

We are moving towards Easter. With the good weather, the clocks going forward, and everybody in much brighter spirits with the hope of what can be, we need to present a realistic options paper to our people in Northern Ireland on what is going to be possible during Easter. Some Members represent the lovely coastal areas of Northern Ireland to which many, including me, love the thought of heading over Easter. I do not think that that will be possible, but I am trying to push the Minister in the right way. Hopefully, if the data continues on its current trend, we can get to a place in which we can give people realistic time frames for the reopening of businesses.

In closing, I thank the Minister for his endurance and for listening to me rant continually on the issues, but they are important. Our people are now looking towards brighter days, but it is important that we try, where possible, to give

them as clear a pathway as we can. I also put on record my thanks to the Education Minister. Everybody was buoyed by expectation at seeing so many happy faces on the TV last night when we saw children returning to school and the ice cream vans outside. I thank the Minister for his work in that regard.

12.45 pm

Mr Carroll: Today being a National Day of Reflection, it is important that we remember all those people who have passed away from this virus. That includes people in my constituency, people across the North, people across Ireland and people across the world; the many millions, sadly, who have passed away from this virus. I think that we would do well to remember the words of Mother Jones, a Cork-born trade unionist, who said, over a hundred years ago:

“Remember the dead, but fight like hell for the living.”

That would be an appropriate mantra to adopt going forward. Anything less would be a betrayal of all those who have lost their lives. Unfortunately, however, we continue to hear a banging on the table for much quicker lifting of restrictions, and lessons seem not to have been learned. I am also concerned that, while people obviously want children to go back to schools when they are safe, there does not seem to be a plan in place to implement restrictions if the cases in education skyrocket again.

Many of the regulations are fairly uncontroversial. People should be able to gather outside in a safe way that maintains social distancing and so on and so forth, but there has been a disproportionate targeting of people in this pandemic, with fines, police actions and powers being used in a way that they should not be. Not only was that the case with the Black Lives Matter protesters last year but, last week, we saw people — women and men — who met at Writer’s Square in Belfast to display their disgust at sexism, misogyny and the brutal killing of Sarah Everard targeted as they gathered, respecting social distancing and wearing masks. Still, many of them were issued with fines, and that is completely unacceptable. When you compare that with the events of the weekend past at Benone beach in Derry, you see that very few people there were wearing masks, and the police effectively took a hands-off approach. In the pictures that I saw, there was just one Land Rover in attendance, with the idea that they would look at the pictures through the week. There has been completely disproportionate policing of this pandemic, where people who are oppressed and are standing up against oppression in a safe way are targeted and others are treated with kid gloves. So, there are fundamental questions that need to be answered here.

With regard to tackling the pandemic, the real issue going forward will not necessarily be about what happens when people gather outdoors in a safe way, adhering to social distancing and so on and so forth. The key issue will be what happens when people are required to — or, rather, are forced to — go back to work. The worst possible thing would be to force people back to non-essential work while we are still waiting for the vaccine roll-out to be completed. We cannot waste the opportunity that the vaccine presents us with.

We also have to address the fact that we have a wholly inadequate level of financial support for people to socially

isolate. The grant system that is in place is unacceptable and insufficient. Reports suggest that only 2% of people were able to get the £500 payment, or the greater amount of it, and that only 12% were able to avail themselves of that more than once. As more restrictions will likely be lifted in the next weeks and months and more people are put into work, people should not be forced to choose between whether they should isolate or not for fear that they will not be financially protected by the state or that they will not be able to pay their rent or their bills.

When it comes to nurses and healthcare workers, claps, platitudes and nice words from me or anybody else do not cut it. People who have navigated us through the pandemic need more than that, and anything resembling a pay offer of 1% or 2% is not only offensive and insulting to those people but risks the future viability of the NHS. If, at the end of a pandemic, health workers are offered crumbs, who could blame any of them for deciding to up sticks and go elsewhere to be respected and paid properly? Those issues have to be addressed. We need to implement a fair and proper pay rise for all our healthcare workers.

Finally, it is concerning to see the worrying rise of COVID cases in the South. The number of daily cases is increasing. Also, cases are rising across Europe, with another wave beginning. Hopefully, the Executive will learn the lessons from that and not implement changes to lift the restrictions too quickly. I hope that the Minister can assure us that that will certainly not happen on his watch.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Minister, I would like to say that we will be suspending at 1.00 pm. Unfortunately, Minister, if you have not finished your contribution by then, you will have to return after Question Time. That might be a hint.

Mr Swann: Thank you, Mr Speaker. That was as subtle as I have heard you this long time.

I welcome today’s debate on SR 2031/46: the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021. I thank Members for their contributions. The regulations were unanimously passed by the Executive. As we move into the phase of lifting restrictions and out of lockdown, the Executive have formed a COVID task force, which will look at the steps. I know the process from the Executive point of view, but it might be worthwhile for the Chair of the Committee to engage with the Executive Office in regard to how the Committee could get access to the scrutiny and look at the process of how the decisions about the next review period are made. That will be useful. It is certainly useful for me, as Minister, to take the feedback from the debates that we have on the regulations. It would also allow for greater input from Committees.

The Chair talked about recovery and rebuilding. I hope to publish our next three-monthly rebuilding plans towards the end of this month for April, May and June, as we did last year, so that we take that stepped approach to how we re-engage many of our services across the entirety of our health service in Northern Ireland as we see the more regional approach that has been adopted.

There is a specific cell in the Executive’s COVID task force in regard to adherence and compliance. That will be beneficial when we engage with young people on how we move forward. My Department is undertaking work with the Minister of Education and the Department of Education

on how we re-engage youth services. Carál Ní Chuilín mentioned that.

The Chair talked about his engagement with our test, trace and protect system. I am glad that he has done that; I think that he will have found a very dedicated cohort of public health professionals who are doing an excellent job in what is a very challenging time. To put things in perspective, last week, 1,242 positive cases were transferred to our test, trace and protect system. Staff were able to contact 94% of them. Of those 1,242, 3,605 contacts were identified. Staff were able to track down 99% of them. Compared to any other test, trace and protect system across these islands, those levels of achievement are outstanding and are to be commended. Weekly updates from our test, trace and protect system show that, on 10 January, for each positive case, we identified 1·5 contacts. As of 14 March — last week — for each positive case, we identified three contacts. That spread is still there in people's contacts; although we are in the same level of restrictions, the numbers of contacts are increasing. That is a concern. It is why we still ask people to conform to social distancing and all the other regulations.

The Chair asked about the number of full-time-equivalent staff whom we have in regard to bank and part-time staff. The idea of where we are in test, trace and protect is so that it can flex up and flex down, depending on how many positive cases are coming through. Often, in that scenario, it is about quality versus quantity. In other jurisdictions, we have seen test, trace and protect being given to private contractors, which perhaps see it as a for-profit exercise rather than a public health exercise. We were very clear in Northern Ireland that test, trace and protect would remain in public health.

I welcome the comments from the Deputy Chair of the Committee, Pam Cameron, that the restrictions that need to be in place are sensible, proportionate and safe. That is so that, when we look to easing those restrictions, we do not end up having to take a step back. The entirety of the Executive, the House and Northern Ireland want to ensure that, once we start down the pathway of easing restrictions, we do not have to step back.

Cara Hunter specifically raised the Nightingale courts, which allow for other Departments to hold public inquiries. I am not sure if she is aware of this, but that measure came forward from her party colleague the Minister for Infrastructure so that she could discharge some of her public duties on public inquiries. That is why that specific request came about, so it is about how other Ministers feed into those relaxations that we need to see.

Much of Ms Hunter's contribution was about the economic challenges that the restrictions face. We in Health are always conscious of that, and we look to the balanced approach that is taken across the Executive when making or easing restrictions so that we are doing it in a proportionate manner.

One of the things that Ms Hunter raised was how she finds out on Twitter what has happened. I have raised my frustration in the House about that because often a conversation is not finished before a journalist reports it. That is detrimental not just to the decision-making process but to the confidentiality and robustness that we need to have in the Executive among ourselves before something is made public. That is because that happening sets up a

train of thought and a chain of challenges and questions that are then in the public domain before the Executive have finished the rest of their discussion, never mind the rest of their meeting. That is something that the First Minister raised this morning again when she reminded all ministerial colleagues about the code of conduct that we have all signed up to, and she reinforced that at this morning's Executive.

With regard to Paula Bradshaw's contribution, I too look forward to when we will no longer be in the House debating these regulations and the easing of restrictions, because that will mean that we have completed a very hard and difficult journey. I also look forward to when we are able to discuss those things that we agree on as well as those things that we disagree on outside of COVID. That is where we should be in the House and what we should be discussing.

I know that the Member and Ms Ní Chuilín raised the guidance that is specific to young people. Other jurisdictions have looked to the numbers of people who are gathering and have come up with a greater number of young people who can gather together. That is because they have recognised the challenges that are brought about in setting targets, numbers or limits for young people gathering. Therefore, that is being looked at, and I think that it was also raised at the Committee by you, and Liz Mitchell from my Department responded to it.

With regard to two-ball and four-ball golf, I will be honest and say that I have never played, so I have no idea. As far as I can see, I thought that they had come up with a graduated response, but that is for another time. However, it is a welcome step that we are looking at encouraging more outdoor sports and facilitating those people who want to get into them. It is an informed discussion and decision that is made on those restrictions. I say that because I can already feel the emails coming in from all the agitated golfers saying that they have not got out. That is something that we will continue to look at.

The Member raised the support for long COVID. She has often raised that in the House. The Health and Social Care Board has been tasked with bringing forward what the model on that will look like. That is now being discussed at a four-nations level so that we can pick up and learn from other jurisdictions that are already looking at services. Some have said that they have commissioned support, but when we delve deeper we see that it is still a process of commissioning rather than having something on-site. Therefore, that is an ongoing piece of work. Like many other conditions, we know that that one will be with us for a long time, and we want to make sure that there is a holistic approach to the supports that are necessary. That comes forward through some of the work that we are looking at in Whiteabbey on nurse-led and allied health professional-led support mechanisms.

I hope that Ms Ní Chuilín and I are still friends, at least inasmuch as she seemed to indicate that we are. I know that she has left, and I say that just in case I maybe said something about her but, hopefully, not. Carál brings value to the debate, having sat in the Executive while some of the restrictions were made and some of the relaxations were brought in. She brings value in understanding the challenges from both sides.

1.00 pm

One of Carál's contributions and topics that was echoed around the House, and it is one that I want to join, was support for those who work in our health family and the dedication and commitment that they have given over the past year. Their families have also borne the weight and cost of seeing their loved ones going out day after day to work in very challenging circumstances.

Carál talked about the strength of our communities coming together through the pandemic. She was right to raise the strength of our communities coming together, but also the light that has been shone on the gaps and weaknesses within our communities. People living on their own and who are lonely have been left and isolated to an extent. Hopefully, we do not go back to what we had before. I am hopeful that our health service will not go back to what we had before but that we can progress and develop it and make it a better service.

I have a number of specific questions from Members. With their indulgence, if I cannot complete them in this session before 1.00 pm, rather than coming back for four or five minutes, if the House is content, I will write to Members with responses. I hope that I answered many Members' queries in the opening debate as well.

In closing, I want to do two things. First, I express my thanks and the appreciation of all of us here today to all those working across our health service during the most difficult time. I also thank the public for adhering to the guidance and regulations. I know that it is not easy. I commend them for their strong support and contribution in reducing the impact of COVID-19 on our community.

Secondly, I want to remind everyone that the most important actions that we can all take to limit the spread of the virus is to stay at home, to limit our contact with others and to isolate from others immediately if we have symptoms.

Mr Speaker, it gives me no pleasure in having to move these regulations or restrictions, but I commend the regulations to the Assembly. With the Members' indulgence, I will write to anyone who asked specific questions in the debate.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Minister. I believe that all Members have expressed that they are content with your proposal to contact them directly about their specific enquiries.

The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I propose, therefore, by leave —.

Apologies, I have to dispense with the business first. It is as well that I have someone beside me here.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

Mr Speaker: 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. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

The sitting was suspended at 1.03 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Justice

Bangor Alternatives: Funding

1. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Justice why her Department has chosen to cut funding for Bangor Alternatives. (AQO 1805/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): No decision has been made by my Department to cut funding for Bangor Alternatives. However, we provide annual core funding — currently £54,000 — to Northern Ireland Alternatives and Community Restorative Justice Ireland to sustain their central administrative infrastructure, assist with the delivery of community restorative justice and help with capacity building. There will be no reduction in that funding for the coming financial year.

In addition, further funding is provided to the organisations by my Department and its agencies for specific projects, including work on the delivery of restorative elements of enhanced combination orders, local projects in association with policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs) and the assets recovery community scheme, and the work of the Tackling Paramilitarism programme through the Probation Board for Northern Ireland's (PBNI) Aspire programme.

I understand that the Member's question may have been prompted by a decision taken by the cross-departmental Tackling Paramilitarism programme board not to award funding for those accredited groups for the coming financial year, 2021-22. That funding, which had been provided for the past three years, is separate from any core funding provided by my Department and has been used to enable the groups to support the delivery of Fresh Start recommendations, in particular the development of a centre of restorative excellence (CORE). I understand that the board took the decision in light of considerable funding pressures and the likely impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic on establishing a new centre in the coming year. The board also noted that there has been substantial investment in restorative practice through other funding streams for the accredited organisations within the overall Tackling Paramilitarism programme.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that Bangor Alternatives does a fantastic job in cooperation with the PSNI? Will she take the opportunity, once the pandemic is over, to visit Bangor Alternatives to see the excellent work that they do with the PSNI?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for the invitation. I would be more than happy to do so. I recognise the important contribution that organisations make in supporting criminal justice partners, whether that is through mediation and support for victims, challenging perpetrators of crime, providing community engagement in areas where none may otherwise be possible or verifying threats and

sharing information. My officials have met both parent organisations to understand better the impact of the board's decision, and I have asked for further advice on the matter. Nevertheless, I will be happy to take the Member up on his invitation.

Miss Woods: It is my understanding that funding for specific project work such as that on the protocol has been cut or is proposed to be cut. I appreciate that it may not be a departmental core funding matter, but does the Minister appreciate that any reduction in funding for restorative justice organisations such as Bangor Alternatives will mean a cut in project work, such as community resolution notices and work on the protocol?

Mrs Long: With respect, the issue for which the programme board was not awarding funding was specific to the work on the delivery of Fresh Start recommendations and, in particular, the development of the centre of restorative excellence. The reason for not proceeding with the additional funding for this year is that the new centre will not be established in the incoming year. However, it is important that Department of Justice funding and other funding streams through Tackling Paramilitarism remain available for other elements of restorative justice.

Ms Ní Chuilín: If I hear the Minister correctly, once COVID regulations are relaxed, there is a possibility that the Fresh Start commitments to Alternatives and Community Restorative Justice Ireland will be looked at again with a view to bringing forward the centre of excellence. She has already said that the proposed cut is not coming from her Department.

Mrs Long: To clarify, the Executive action plan's recommendation A9 commits the Executive to:

“establishing a dedicated fund for restorative justice initiatives to provide enhanced”

long-term funding and support. The Executive are also required to resource the proposal for a centre of restorative excellence (CORE). The Department of Justice has been engaged in the preliminary work on that, including a feasibility study, to identify the best options. CORE would provide for a new, innovative approach to delivering the expansion of restorative justice and also wider restorative practice in Northern Ireland.

The Executive Office has been considering the most feasible approach to how to implement a dedicated fund for those restorative justice initiatives. A series of options for implementing the dedicated fund has been developed, and Executive Office officials are exploring those further with special advisers.

It is fair to say, however, that CORE will not come forward in the current financial year. That is why the programme board decided that the funding to support it could not be justified in a situation in which not all bodies will be able to be funded to the full extent that we would wish them to be. If additional funding becomes available in future financial years in which we are not inhibited by COVID from taking CORE forward, it is something that will be open for discussion with the programme board.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, in your response, you highlighted a number of other funding streams. It is my understanding that £1.4 million is to be shared between two community and voluntary sector organisations, Community

Restorative Justice Ireland and Alternatives, for restorative practices under recommendation B4. That is a substantial amount of funding. There are also statutory agencies responsible for restorative justice. When was the most recent review of value for money in delivery and in working alongside the PSNI across all its crime sections?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for her question. I cannot give her a firm answer on the last time that there was a full value-for-money review of community restorative justice. At every stage of budgeting, we look at value for money in all our departmental expenditure and assess it against the various demands that we have: those that are often unavoidable because of our statutory duties and those with which we may have some flexibility.

The Member asked about investment in restorative justice. She is correct that a number of organisations, including some in the statutory sector, such as the Probation Board, are involved in the delivery of restorative justice. Restorative justice can play a role in the community by challenging perpetrator behaviour and getting further recognition for victims of the harm that crime has caused them. It is important that we continue to develop restorative justice in the context of it being properly accredited, monitored and supervised. It is a hugely important piece of work that we are trying to take forward as part of developing the centre of restorative excellence.

Paramilitary Activity and Crime: East Antrim

2. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on tackling paramilitary activity and crime in East Antrim. (AQO 1806/17-22)

Mrs Long: Members will be aware that, although the Executive action plan 'Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime' is coordinated by my Department, the programme is cross-cutting in nature. Good progress has been made, but we are all too aware that countering the enduring, pervasive nature of paramilitarism requires a long-term, genuinely collaborative approach across government, working closely with community partners.

From a law enforcement perspective, the south-east Antrim UDA remains a priority group for the paramilitary crime task force (PCTF). Recent convictions in the area have related to drugs, ammunition and offensive weapon offences. The paramilitary crime task force continues to work with colleagues in local districts to tackle paramilitary activity and crime. In the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council area, a local drugs strategy has been implemented, not only to target those individuals causing most harm to communities but to support the victims of such activity.

Learning from the delivery of the programme to date has underlined the importance of developing collaborative models of working between statutory agencies and community partners on the ground to respond effectively to issues in areas that are vulnerable to paramilitary coercion and control. That place-based working will be developed further in phase 2 of the programme.

Multi-agency partnership working is already evident in a number of initiatives being delivered under the programme. Those are active in East Antrim and include the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council youth support hub, which

is a multi-agency support network supporting vulnerable young people at risk of being influenced or controlled by paramilitary groups. In addition, the Carrickfergus and Larne area has been identified as one of eight priority areas for the focus of the Communities in Transition (CIT) project. A number of projects are being delivered in the area on issues relating to community safety, community capacity building and restorative justice.

Members will be aware that tackling paramilitary activity and criminality is a priority for the Executive. The initiatives that I have described today are specific to the needs of individuals and communities in east Antrim, but continued investment is leading real change for the better for individuals and communities across Northern Ireland. Collaborative working across Departments, drawing on all their strengths, can really deliver positive change.

Mr Dickson: The Minister will, no doubt, be aware of a recent BBC 'Spotlight' programme in which the horrific murder of Glenn Quinn, a loved son and brother, was highlighted. It shone a much-needed light into a dark and murky corner of paramilitary activity in Carrickfergus. Will the Minister agree that condemnation on its own is wildly insufficient and that we need our communities and people to step up and speak out and to provide evidence of those vile activities to the PSNI and others? That murder is not the only one that has taken place in towns like Carrickfergus and in the wider east Antrim area. Today, while I think in particular of the Quinn family, I think of others going back as far as Simon Tang.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his comments. No one who saw the 'Spotlight' programme last week that featured those affected by the murder of Glenn Quinn could fail to be moved and appalled by what they heard. He was an innocent man who was brutally murdered. The Quinn family have my full support in standing up against those thugs.

I encourage anyone with information to contact the PSNI or to go through Crimestoppers, an independent charity that allows people to provide information anonymously. For people to do that, they must have confidence that there will be a response. I have confidence that, if people report that information to the PSNI, there will be a criminal justice response to those who are behind that activity. It is incredibly important that that is the case.

Mr Beggs: Drug dealing, loan-sharking and brutal violence are hallmarks of organised crime groups. Let us not beat around the bush. It is clear that abusive members of gangs are taking advantage of their local community. I ask the Minister when those responsible for some of the murders will be brought to account. How will she support vulnerable members of the community who have to live there? How can they be protected so that they can be assured that they can live safely with their friends and families?

Mrs Long: The Member makes an important point. For those in communities whom we ask to come forward with information, there is a huge vulnerability and a fear. We already know that people can be murdered in their home simply because they have made an offhand comment about thuggery or drug dealing in their community. They are absolutely ruthless organisations. They are interested only in feathering their own nests at the expense of the local community. They are not paramilitaries; they are parasites. They feed off the backs of local communities,

and they destroy local communities. It is important that we have a criminal justice response. We can do that only with the full cooperation of the community. It is a question of testing the justice system by bringing forward that information to the PSNI and others. If people feel afraid, they should use Crimestoppers to do that anonymously and allow us to work with the PSNI to ensure that those people can be brought to justice. I would be happy for more of those people to be brought to justice and brought to justice very quickly so that the rest of our community can move on and live in peace.

Ms Dillon: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you — Principal Deputy Speaker. I almost forgot it in English. Apologies.

I also watched the 'Spotlight' programme and reiterate the remarks of others who have offered condolences to the family. It was difficult to watch. As somebody who also received a threat for speaking up for others who had been threatened by the organisation that we are talking about, I say that we cannot have enough legislation and policing on the issue. Can the Minister give us a timetable for the additional legislation to tackle organised crime that was consulted on late in 2020?

2.15 pm

Mrs Long: There are a number of threads to the Member's question. I am happy to provide her with a detailed response about the work that the Department is doing. I can give an updated response about the work that commenced last year, with the full support of the Justice Committee, in relation to the commencement in Northern Ireland of the remaining parts of the Criminal Finances Act 2017. We hoped that that work would be brought forward at Westminster in the first quarter of this year. Given the pressures on the legislative programme there, it will now be brought forward by June at the latest. However, the four required pieces of subordinate legislation have been drafted and are going through. Four more pieces are to be done in collaboration with Westminster so that that can complete its course. At that point, we will have access to all parts of the Criminal Finances Act, which includes unexplained wealth orders, forfeiture of accounts and a whole series of other penalties.

I firmly believe that, while these individuals use a cloak of political cover to undertake their acts, they are motivated purely and simply by greed. If there were no money in this, they would not be in it either. The sooner we remove the assets that they accrue as a result of their criminal activity, the sooner we will put a stop to what is going on in those communities.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, in your previous answer, you mentioned political cover being given to these organisations. We cannot ignore the fact that this is happening in the context of increased tension around post-Brexit trade arrangements. Do you agree that there is a real risk that these criminal organisations will use that tension to give cover to their vile acts? Do you agree that it is incumbent on all of us to ensure that, in our words, we do not enable or give "cover" to those organisations to do that?

Mrs Long: I say to the Member: so it is and so it has always been. People exploit every tension in our community to give some form of political legitimacy to the

work that they do in intimidating, bullying, threatening and murdering people in their own communities. It is nothing new, but it is every bit as horrendous now as it ever was during the Troubles.

From the perspective of leadership, there is a conversation that we all need to have with organisations that are still wedded to paramilitarism. It is a simple conversation, which is to ask when they are due to stop. There is nothing to be said beyond that. The time has come and gone for people to continue talking about wanting to move forward, particularly when one month they say that they want to move forward, and the next month they rattle sabres about the potential for further violence.

You cannot ride two horses. You must choose. If you want to move away from violence, you should get on with it. Show us your bona fides and do it, and you will get nothing but support from those of us in the Assembly Chamber. If you want to continue to use violence and the threat of violence to coerce your community, you will meet with nothing from the Assembly Chamber; you will meet with a police response.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that question 13 has been withdrawn, although the Minister would have set a record if she got to question 13. Topical question 7 has also been withdrawn.

Illegal Moneylending

3. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the level of illegal moneylending. (AQO 1807/17-22)

Mrs Long: It is challenging to provide an accurate assessment of the level of illegal moneylending, partly due to the fact that it is under-reported to authorities. However, the indications are that it is widespread in communities.

We know that unregulated lenders — loan sharks — prey on vulnerable people. They take advantage of the lack of regulated loan availability for people who, because of their personal situation or because they need money quickly in an emergency, are in crisis. Evidence suggests that the victims often work in low-income jobs or are in receipt of benefits. They might have mental health issues or addictions. They could be single parents or carers. Crucially, they often believe, rightly or wrongly, that they have no other option.

It is most apparent that this is about vulnerability. The more vulnerable a person is, the better it is for the illegal lenders. People often focus on meeting immediate need without thinking of the long-term consequences. That is a societal issue, which, in my opinion, links to deprivation, housing, social care, education, addiction and general crime. Illegal lending makes vulnerable citizens even more vulnerable and creates real fear in communities.

All of that speaks to why this is an under-reported issue and why people stay silent about it. Victims often fear for their safety and the safety of their family. They might feel shame, which makes them even more reluctant to speak out. That is why the organisations that see the issue most regularly are charities that work with the most vulnerable.

We also know that there is a link with drug supply and the collection of so-called drug debts by paramilitaries and organised crime gangs.

My Department coordinates the tackling paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime programme. Raising awareness of the harm caused by illegal lenders and ensuring that victims are supported are priorities for the programme. A public awareness campaign is under development, particularly on how paramilitary gangs use illegal moneylending to coerce and control vulnerable people. However, it is an issue that crosses departmental boundaries, and I want to be clear that my Department is committed to working collaboratively to stop those who carry out this crime and to help those who fall victim to it.

Mr Beggs: I agree with the Minister that loan sharks are frequently linked to organised crime groups that lend money and get it back by coercion. They inflict great fear on individuals and those in desperate need of money.

Is Northern Ireland the only part of the UK without a dedicated team to target illegal moneylenders? Has she any plans to ensure that there is a dedicated policy and such a resource to tackle this issue, which particularly affects vulnerable people?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his question. As I said, part of the problem is that it is an under-reported crime. That is why education on the topic is incredibly difficult and also incredibly important.

The Financial Conduct Authority regulations are detailed and complex and require specialist knowledge to deliver the sort of sanctions to which the Member refers. Successful prosecutions and interventions by the police need to follow up with a support package for the safety of the victim and wider community.

There is no one type of victim of illegal moneylending. The lenders know who to target. They also understand their finances — the day that they get their benefits or get paid or if they get any kind of windfall — and target them accordingly. The Department is doing a huge amount of work to address this issue and the harm caused. There are strong links between tackling organised crime and paramilitarism and tackling organised moneylending because the majority of moneylending in our communities is, unfortunately, in the hands of paramilitaries, and tackling organised crime is one way to tackle that.

Ms Flynn: The Minister said that a lot of work was being done and it may be cross-departmental. However, given the impact that illegal and legal loan sharks have on our societies and communities, preying on the most vulnerable, are much more comprehensive measures required on top of the systems that are in place?

Mrs Long: It is hugely important that we always look for opportunities to improve the systems that we have. We need to work with the community. My Department will be rolling out an education programme as part of the Ending the Harm public awareness campaign, which explains the difficulties and harm caused by moneylending.

Very often, people imagine that those people are there to help them. They are not. They want to create perpetual indebtedness so that they can manipulate and coerce people to do things in order to clear their debts, which are never cleared. The shame of this is that it creates a constant desire on the person to clear their debt and an inability to do so. It is completely exploitative and wrong. We need to raise awareness of it, but we also need to raise people's incomes. Unless we tackle deprivation and

tackle people's ability to not just manage their finances but have sufficient funds to live on, people will continue to find themselves in desperation, particularly in crisis situations, and they will turn to the easiest source of income. For many who have previously suffered with difficult financial circumstances, there are no viable options for them at that time. That is why it is important to ask, "How do we make sure that those who are most vulnerable are protected not just when they report these issues but from the vulnerability that causes the problem in the first place?"

Ms S Bradley: The Minister, quite rightly, spoke about the nuances behind this and people genuinely believing that the person lending the money is in some way their friend or giving favour, which we know is not true. It is, on reflection, difficult to see who would be reporting these crimes if that were the belief of the recipient of the money.

Given the circumstances that we know that they face, does the Minister intend to target investigatory work into areas where it is known to happen — as the phrase goes: the dogs in the street know that it is happening — and postcode areas where it is most prevalent?

Mrs Long: Any criminal investigation would be a matter for the PSNI. However, work is being done by the Consumer Council to determine the exact scope and scale of moneylending. Whilst the Member is, of course, right that people will often approach someone when they are at a low point, sidle up to them as though they were a friend and offer them money that looks as though it comes with no strings attached, I can assure the Member that it does not take long for the person involved to realise that those people are not their friend. With their first missed payment or difficulty, they find out that those people are not friends. Indeed, they are quite the opposite.

At that point, there is an opportunity for people to come forward. However, often, they are afraid because they are ashamed that they have got themselves into financial difficulties. Often, they are afraid to come forward because they have been coerced into committing crimes as a result of their debt and are afraid to speak out about that for fear of what might happen to them. We need to give people the confidence to believe that, if they come forward, their stories will be believed and they will be supported, and also that those responsible for the moneylending in the first place will be held to account. That is hugely important.

We know the stories of people who get into debt and their children are then asked to run drugs in order to pay the debt off. What an obscene thing to do: manipulate a desperate parent in order to use their child to earn money for a paramilitary organisation or organised crime gang. It is obscene, wrong and needs to stop. However, we need the community to work with us and give us information so that we can target it properly with the resources that we have.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members, we are 25 minutes in, and I am mindful that we are still on question No 3. A lot of Members had indicated that they wanted to ask questions of the Minister on that issue. However, I am sure that, if they let her know, she will be happy to write to them. I call Ms Emma Sheerin.

Prison Service: Demographic Composition

4. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the demographic composition of the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) workforce. (AQO 1808/17-22)

Mrs Long: Prison officers provide a vital public service. I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to them for their commitment and professionalism. Day and daily, they work with some of the most challenging members of society. I have witnessed at first hand, as have many other Members across the House, how they do so competently and with compassion.

As regards the composition of the organisation, approximately one third of the workforce is female; 69% of staff identify as coming from a Protestant background; 13% from a Catholic background, and 18% are non-determined. About one third of the workforce is in each of the following age brackets: from 16 to 34, 33.4%; 35 to 49, 33.4%; and 50 and over, 33.2%.

It is important that all public-sector organisations, including the Prison Service, reflect the communities that they serve. While it is encouraging to see significant increases in the number of women in the Prison Service, and that the majority of those who were successful in the most recent unit manager and senior officer competitions were female, there is further work to do to increase female representation. It is a matter of regret that we have not been able to increase representation from those who identify as coming from a Catholic background.

While the Prison Service will continue to reach out to all under-represented groups, it is important that every Member of the House supports it in doing so. I have, therefore, asked the director general to engage with all political parties in the Assembly to discuss how we might best reach all minority groups to increase representation and better reflect the community as we prepare to launch a further recruitment campaign in the autumn. It is incumbent on us all to encourage those whom we represent to consider a career in the Prison Service.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Minister for her answer. As she outlined, workers who are perceived to be from a Catholic background are massively under-represented in the Prison Service. Inspection reports into several prisons, including Magilligan and Maghaberry, have reported worse outcomes for Catholic prisoners, presumably as a result of that. Can the Minister advise the House of the steps that are being taken to address those issues?

Mrs Long: The 2018 Criminal Justice Inspection's report on Maghaberry prison recommended that there be investigation into the outcomes that are experienced by Catholic prisoners. In response to that, the director general commissioned a research report from Queen's University Belfast. The report found no significant difference between Catholic and Protestants when all factors, including individual, societal and prison-related variables, were considered in relation to adjudication charges, guilty adjudications, the progressive regime and earned privileges (PREP) level, and supporting prisoners at risk (SPAR) involvement.

2.30 pm

NIPS establishments have an equality and diversity committee, chaired by the deputy governor. The committee considers a range of longitudinal data reports on all aspects of the prison regime. Whilst NIPS strives to provide equality of opportunity, it is reliant on prisoners volunteering for certain posts and certain activities. Access to some posts may be restricted by disciplinary issues. However, it is important to us that all prisoners entering the system, regardless of the starting point, come out of the system rehabilitated and able to re-engage successfully in society.

Mr Givan: The point about the need to encourage all people, irrespective of their community background, to apply to the Prison Service is well made, and that should be encouraged by all of us. However, it is worth putting on the record, Minister, that, for decades, prison officers were targeted by terrorist organisations from across our community, not least by those in the Provisional IRA. Will she reject the slur by Ms Sheerin that, just because a prisoner is Catholic, they have somehow been targeted on the basis of their religion, which she clearly inferred and should retract?

Mrs Long: I will not take that line of approach, though I accept entirely what the Member says in good faith. I think that Ms Sheerin was highlighting a report that showed that there was an issue with the outcomes for prisoners from a Catholic background. However, thankfully, when that was looked into in detail, it was found that it was not as a result of discrimination being operated in the prison, and that is an important point. Too often, people attribute causality where there is simply some coalescence around other factors, and we need to be incredibly cautious about that.

I entirely agree with what the Member says about the level of threat. Let us be clear: this is not an historical artefact. Prison officers today are facing threats in the community. Prison officers and their families are being intimidated today. It is not an easy job to do, any more than it is an easy job to be a member of the Police Service. However, it is a crucial job and one that gives really important service to everyone in our community. We must remember that many of those in our prison system are there because we are trying to protect the entire community, not just one part of it or another, from people who would otherwise be a danger to society. Prison officers put themselves in a situation where they not only have to work with those people but try to develop them so that, when they are finally released from prison, they are able to contribute to society in a constructive way. Prison officers deserve huge support and credit for that, and I want to see prison officers from every possible background in our Prison Service continuing that good work.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes this section of Question Time. We now move on to topical questions to the Minister.

John Mitchel Place Health Centre: On-street Protests

T1. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister of Justice to outline what measures are in place to ensure that women are not intimidated or deterred from accessing vital health services due to protests outside the clinic at the John Mitchel Place Health Centre in Newry. (AQT 1151/17-22)

Mrs Long: I realise that abortion is an emotive subject and one on which people have very strong views. However, whilst everyone has the right to express their views, women have the right to access medical treatment without fear, intimidation and interference. Those protests mean that women, at a very vulnerable time in their life, have to endure further trauma and distress. Where protests are directed at trust premises, they also impact those, including children, young people, the elderly and health trust staff, who may be attending the facility for many other reasons. No one in our society should be deterred from accessing healthcare or be subjected to protests and images that they find distressing or offensive. That is an issue that I will continue to monitor and keep under consideration, because I believe that, whilst the right to protest is important, the responsibility to do so respectfully is also of extreme importance.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, will you commit to implementing safe zones around healthcare facilities that provide compassionate care like that in order to ensure that women do not have to suffer further intimidation, harassment or abuse while accessing those services?

Mrs Long: The Member will be aware that, as a Member of the Assembly, that is something that I support and would like to see brought forward. I believe that people have a right to protest, but I think that asking them to protest at a distance where they are not able to intimidate or cause fear to those approaching a place is a reasonable request. However, Executive agreement would be required for us to bring forward such legislation.

There have been previous debates on the matter in other places. In Belfast City Council, for example, there was almost unanimous support for a motion saying that the harassment of people seeking services should not be acceptable to anyone. That support came from right across the political spectrum, from those who consider themselves pro-life to those who consider themselves pro-choice. To take this matter forward, we need to open the conversation. Irrespective of how passionately one holds an opinion on the termination of pregnancy, showing dignity and respect to the woman, the pregnant person, in these situations is incredibly important. Everyone ought to be able to agree that any form of harassment, intimidation or distress caused to women approaching a medical facility is unacceptable.

Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy

T2. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Justice whether she will commit to introducing a violence against women and girls strategy. (AQT 1152/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Member may be aware from discussions over the weekend that I have submitted a paper to the Executive. The paper was discussed at the Executive today and will be discussed further, hopefully, before a decision on Thursday. I am committed to ensuring that direct and indirect violence against women and girls is tackled. I think that it is hugely important. However, I make the point that I have made many times: by the time that people contact the justice system, they are already victims. The emphasis must move upstream. How do we protect women and girls from violence? How do we change the societal attitudes that make it acceptable for people to be

screamed at in the street, wolf-whistled at or heckled and abused on their way to work? How do we deal with the attitudes that give people that sense of entitlement? We need to move the matter beyond simply a response from the Department of Justice, albeit a Justice response is hugely important.

I have recommended a cross-departmental strategy that will encompass Education, Health and all the other Departments. Rightfully, the response should be led by the Executive Office. Ultimately, it has the responsibility for coordinating Departments. However, I am committed and will not step back from the issue. When it comes to criminal justice, the law must be blind to gender issues. Any victim of domestic and sexual abuse must be able to seek recourse from the law, be protected in law and have access to the support services that they need. The approach to dealing with attitudes should be gendered, as we know that more women than men are affected by these crimes.

Mr Boylan: I agree with the Minister and appreciate her answer. Will the Minister agree that gender-based violence leads to gender-specific issues that require gender-specific interventions? A strategy to deal with violence against women and girls would complement existing strategies and the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act.

Mrs Long: I agree with the Member, but, as I said, we need to move upstream. I have attached a particular priority to this since taking on the Ministry. The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act was agreed very swiftly by the Committee. We have now moved to look at the Protection from Stalking Bill, which is before the Committee. We are looking at speeding up justice, which is a recommendation of Sir John Gillen's review, to ensure that those who have been the subject of serious sexual offences can get justice quickly. The Miscellaneous Provisions Bill, which will, hopefully, be before the Assembly by May, will take forward many of the other recommendations of the Gillen review and some of the areas that disproportionately affect women and girls, such as upskirting, downblousing and other intrusive practices.

We are doing a lot in the legislative sphere but also with policy and practice. We are creating evidence centres to give additional support to vulnerable victims and witnesses that will ensure they give their best evidence.

The Member mentioned how we respond. We have a strategy for dealing with women in custody, and that is out for consultation. The strategy is about targeted responses to offending from women and girls, which often has a very different driver from that of their male counterparts, and their rehabilitation needs to be dealt with differently. Further to that, it is important that we do not have only a criminal justice response to these issues. The point that I was making is that we need a much wider response. It is about society saying that it is unacceptable for women and girls to be treated in this way. If we value the women in our society, we need to treat them with dignity and respect. If we value the young men in our society, we need to raise them with stronger values so that they do not think that it is acceptable to be disrespectful to women.

Justice: NDNA Commitments

T3. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Justice what her Department is doing to progress the New Decade, New

Approach (NDNA) commitments that fall within its remit, given that, in the past few days, much focus has been on NDNA, with some Members particularly focused on their own pet projects, and, for him, much focus on not achieving the aim of 7,500 new PSNI officers, which is a commitment in 'NDNA' and in a previous agreement as far back as 1998, which promised 2,500 Reserve officers. (AQT 1153/17-22)

Mrs Long: We have started work on fulfilling our NDNA commitments. For example, the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act was part of the NDNA commitments.

On the specific issue of policing numbers, there is a real challenge because of the budget. A flat-cash budget will not allow for a huge amount of wiggle room for the PSNI. Indeed, having spoken to the Chief Constable, my fear is that we could end up with a reduction in numbers rather than an increase. I have bid for the additional funding that was committed to in 'NDNA' and asked that it be made available. How the Chief Constable would spend that money is obviously a matter for him, and I would not direct him on how to spend it. We know, however, that around £40 million would be required per annum in the budget to allow the Chief Constable to recruit the number of additional officers that he requires. That would also take time, so it would not be an immediate panacea for police numbers, but there should be a commitment to fund what we agreed in 'NDNA'.

I also recognise, as will anyone who reads 'NDNA', that the ambition of the wish list that was attached far exceeded the financial commitment. It is a point of constant disappointment to me that many of the things that were promised in 'NDNA' were never properly assessed on whether they represented value for money or were deliverable. I will, however, continue to bid for that funding for the PSNI, because I believe that it does need additional officers and additional support.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for her answer and for some of the work that she has done to bring forward the projects to which she referred. You have made the bid, and you said that you cannot direct the Chief Constable, but if we cannot hold the Chief Constable to account on the 7,500 new officers, that calls into question the purpose of having a target.

Will you also address the old commitment to 2,500 Reserve officers, which I referenced in my question? Those officers would pick up the slack for some of our officers on full-time duty. I have listened to the tenor of the questions today, and most of the issues raised will eventually fall back on the police and be an additional burden and workload for them. I welcome the work that the Minister has done, but can she answer specifically about the 2,500 Reserve officers?

Mrs Long: As you know, it is not my job to oversee the PSNI budget. That is a matter for the Policing Board. With Mervyn Storey sitting just down the Chamber, I know better than to try to trample on that territory. I would be very quickly shooed away, so I will stay away from that.

It is for the Chief Constable to decide how best to deploy resources, and that is as it should be. If he decides that the money should be spent on other things because he feels that that is a better way in which to deal with things, that is a matter for him. The fundamental point from my perspective, however, is that we made a commitment

to fund the Chief Constable so that he could have an increase in numbers. It was never agreed that that would happen by a certain date or time, but if we are moving in the reverse direction, that does not set a good example.

We are working with the Chief Constable on an outline business case and all those other processes and will continue to do that, but, unless we get additional funding, the Chief Constable will not have any realistic scope to expand numbers by any level in the next year. That is a matter of regret for me, because, as the Member said, we ask a lot of the police. We ask them to intervene, particularly at the moment, in situations that are not strictly criminal justice issues but health issues and on a range of complex issues, yet we have not yet prioritised sufficiently the funding. To put that in context, it is not simply a matter of jiggling things about in the Department's budget to make it work. The PSNI already takes up 70% of the budget of the Department of Justice, and we have other statutory duties that we cannot evade that need to be met from the rest of that budget.

2.45 pm

Court Recovery

T4. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Justice, given that, over the past year, owing to COVID restrictions, some court dates have slipped, to outline a timeline for family court proceedings and to clarify for the many people who require those courts whether their schedule is almost back to normal. (AQT 1154/17-22)

Mrs Long: With respect to court recovery, I am bringing forward a cross-Justice agency bid for recovery funds in order to let us, first, recover the criminal justice system and bring forward a number of other issues. Work has continued throughout the pandemic on the civil and family justice side, though it may have proceeded more slowly than is normally the case. We are now back at a situation where the family courts are operating. They have been operating in new ways, such as through digital justice, and trying to find alternative ways to move forward. Of course, not all of the levers in the family and civil justice arena are in my control, but, as I set out in my statement to the Assembly this morning, I want to see progress on the issue over the next year. We are very focused on recovery. It is an important issue and one that we have to take forward.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am afraid that that concludes Question Time to the Minister of Justice. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments while there is a change at the top Table. We will then move on to questions to the Assembly Commission. If you are leaving the Chamber, please do not forget to wipe down the surface where you were seated. Thank you.

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

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before I call Mr McNulty for the first question, I want to make the Assembly aware that the Speaker has today made provision for remote participation to allow Commission members to respond to questions for oral answer on the same basis as Ministers.

As Mr Buchanan is self-isolating and has been unable to arrange for an alternative Member to attend the Chamber and answer on his behalf, the Speaker is satisfied that he may participate remotely.

MLA Maternity Provision

1. **Mr McNulty** asked the Assembly Commission to outline its plans to bring forward maternity provision for elected representatives, to assist in improving the gender balance in the Assembly. (AQO 1819/17-22)

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Member for his question. I am very mindful of the recent debate that the Assembly had on International Women's Day on promoting a gender-sensitive Assembly and improving the gender balance in the Assembly. I can inform the Member that the Commission has asked for a paper on those issues to be brought to its next full meeting.

The Commission will have to take account of the fact that maternity provisions, because they relate to a Member's salary, are set independently and not by the Assembly Commission. The salary that a Member is entitled to receive under the determination made by the Independent Financial Review Panel (IFRP) in March 2016 is not affected by the fact that the Member is having a baby. However, the Commission is aware that Members have asked about what may be done to assist a Member with her representational duties when she is having a baby, and that is one of the issues that will be discussed by the Assembly Commission at its next meeting in the context of the matters within its responsibilities. Clearly, the Commission cannot alter any matters that fall outside its remit — for example, the co-option of a replacement Member during a period of maternity — but the Commission will consider the matters that fall within its responsibilities.

The Commission is also aware that there are likely to be issues related to a Member's work in Parliament Buildings and the provisions of Standing Orders; for example, participating in debates or voting. Those would be for the Committee on Procedures to address. However, the Member can be assured that the Commission will give full consideration to any aspects under the Commission's remit. I encourage all Members to pass their views on the matter to their Commission member.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Member for his answer. I think that the Member will agree that we must do more to encourage and empower women to stand for election. In that regard, what plans does the Assembly Commission have to bring forward maternity provision for elected Members? Please outline the decision-making process. Can you provide details of how long that process will take?

Mr K Buchanan: As I outlined in my response, our next meeting will probably be within the next four to five weeks, and we will have a paper at that meeting indicating what the Commission can do as its responsibility. We have just over 30 female Members out of 90 Members in total, and that paper will include all options, including maternity, paternity and adoption issues. It is not just a female having a baby; there can be other adoption issues. That paper will be broad. I assure the Member that all issues will be looked at.

Ms Kimmins: Will the Commission also consider measures to make the Assembly more family-friendly through childcare provision for Members and staff?

Mr K Buchanan: Yes. In the past, the Commission looked at that, and there was a paper approximately two meetings back. I will ask the director to bring that to the Commission again. From memory, that was looked at. We are still waiting for additional information, but I will get a full and detailed response to the Member on that point.

Lighting Requests: Decision-making Process

2. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Assembly Commission to outline the process used in deciding to refuse a request to light up Parliament Buildings for the European Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Terrorism 2021. (AQO 1820/17-22)

13. **Mrs Barton** asked the Assembly Commission why Parliament Buildings was not illuminated in red to mark the European Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Terrorism 2021. (AQO 1831/17-22)

Mr O'Dowd: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will group questions 2 and 13 together, so I may need an extra minute. I thank the Members for their questions.

The external lighting of Parliament Buildings is covered by the Parliament Buildings special lighting policy, which was first agreed by the Assembly Commission in 2014 and updated last year. Under the policy, which is available on the Assembly's website, the Commission agreed that the Building would be lit annually on four days to mark International Women's Day, Saint Patrick's Day, the Twelfth of July and Armistice Day. In addition, requests for special lighting to mark other occasions or events can be made by Members, subject to cross-designation support, and by registered charities, public-sector bodies, community or other non-profit-making organisations. Such requests must meet certain criteria to be approved. Those criteria include that the special lighting must be in connection with an event that is of exceptional local, national or international significance and/or achievement; of constitutional or democratic significance; or a significant anniversary of a significant local, national or international event. Other than the four days agreed by the Commission, special lighting will not be approved to mark an event that occurs repeatedly, unless it is a significant anniversary of that event. Furthermore, no such event can be marked by special lighting more than once in any three-year period. All requests for special lighting are put to the Commission, and approval requires Commission consensus.

An application to light the Building red to mark the 17th European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Terrorism on 11 March was made by the South East Fermanagh Foundation. The request did not meet the requirements of the policy because the Building had been illuminated in 2019 to mark the European Day, and, when it was put to the Commission, consensus was not achieved. Therefore, the request was not approved.

The Commission has been considering whether the lighting of the Building might be appropriate to mark additional events over and above the existing four days chosen by it and named in the current policy. That consideration continues.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Commission members that, if they need extra time, they can request it.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for his response. The decision has understandably caused great hurt and disrespect to thousands of victims of terrorism in Northern Ireland. Will the member outline exactly how consensus is determined and reached by the Assembly Commission?

Mr O'Dowd: Consensus means that all Commission members are in agreement and/or that members have not given a contrary view in respect of a matter. Commission members have 48 hours to confirm or object to the recommendations of officials on whether a request for special lighting should be approved or declined. A non-response is taken as confirmation of the recommendation of officials.

Mrs Barton: Thank you, Mr O'Dowd, for your answers so far. You spoke about the events that Parliament Buildings can be lit up for: can you give some idea of what you would consider as additional events beyond the four days?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for her question. Each application would have to be taken on its merits and matched against the policy and the recommendations of officials, and Commission members would then have to respond in due course.

Ms Sheerin: Do you agree that the lighting policy and the overall ethos and symbolism of the House needs to be inclusive and representative of all the communities that it represents and that there is a massive imbalance in symbolism that needs to be addressed?

Mr O'Dowd: As I mentioned in my original answer, the Assembly Commission is attempting to bring forward a policy on lighting that is broader and more representative of the community that the Assembly represents. The Commission is also looking at an artefacts policy in relation to the symbolism around the Building in order to better represent the widely diverse communities that the Building now represents.

Catering Contract: Subsidies

3. **Mr Clarke** asked the Assembly Commission what additional subsidies have been paid to the catering contract since the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. (AQO 1821/17-22)

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for his question. The Assembly Commission requires that catering services are provided to Members and all other Building users during all the hours when the Assembly is operating. During sitting times that are uncertain or out of the ordinary — for example, the later-than-normal times that have occurred recently with plenary sittings — catering services continue to be provided until 30 minutes after the House rises. Where the cost of providing those services exceeds the money taken in through catering sales, the extra cost is incurred by the Assembly Commission. That operating cost is sometimes referred to as a "subsidy", and it varies on a monthly basis depending on the level of sales in the catering outlets.

Due to the extremely low footfall in Parliament Buildings during the pandemic, sales in the catering outlets have been severely reduced. The reduction in the level of sales has led to an increase in costs, given the reliance on sales

income to assist with offsetting the catering operating cost. By way of comparison, from April 2019 to February 2020, the cost of catering was £157,000, while, during the pandemic, from April 2020 to February 2021, the cost was £327,000.

The Member may wish to note, however, that the majority of the costs to the Commission arise from the costs of staffing in the catering facilities. In line with other publicly funded entities, the Commission did not request that the catering contractor make any member of staff redundant during the period. Additionally, the Commission did not seek funding for that increase in costs over the past year, as it was able to deliver savings across its other categories to meet the increase.

The Member will know that the catering and cleaning contracts are held by the same contractor. One of the measures taken in response to the coronavirus pandemic was to allocate a number of catering staff to sanitising duties for hand-contact areas etc throughout Parliament Buildings.

Therefore, the staff costs of this additional and necessary sanitising are included in the catering cost between April 2020 and August 2020. That was the case until a formal variation to the contract, agreed and introduced from September 2020, recorded the hours dedicated each week to this task.

3.00 pm

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for the answer. I put on record that my question in no way reflects on the staff. The staff have been professional in what has been a difficult 12 months for them. However, there is uncertainty for staff about their hours and contracts. On some days, it is difficult for Members to go down to the canteen to eat because of the seating arrangements. There were other facilities in the Building for use by Members at unsociable hours. Rolling all those things together, when will the Commission make a decision to try to bring the contract back to as near normal as possible? That would give certainty to staff, who would know, when they come in in the morning, what time they will be working to. They will also have some job security and know that their jobs are safe. We can also get back to normal practice in the Building, with Members being able to dine without any difficulties.

Mrs D Kelly: As the Member will know, we are guided by the health regulations that pertain not only to this place but to all facilities and all providers of services across Northern Ireland. We hope that, in the forthcoming debates and Executive meetings in April and thereafter, and as the statistics continue to improve and the vaccination programme continues to roll out, we will be in a better position to start to look at whether visitors can return. The Commission will debate that at our next meeting. We had anticipated that the health regulations would prevent the public from entering the Building until at least the end of April. However, we hope that we will start to have some further relaxations from mid-April onwards, which, one hopes, will assist with catering income.

Mr Gildernew: Does the Commission agree that it is important to ensure that workers employed by catering and other contractors do not suffer as a result of the Assembly's response to the COVID crisis?

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for his question. You will have noted from my initial response that no member of staff was made redundant and that people were redeployed to other necessary duties, such as sanitising, in line with the COVID restrictions. I assure the Member that that remains the position of the Commission. No staff were furloughed either, in line with many other public bodies. We have a very tight-knit and dedicated workforce here, who look after the needs of Members and the public. Their interests form part of the broader considerations, as well as value for money and the public purse.

Irish Language Signage

4. **Ms Anderson** asked the Assembly Commission what actions it is taking to comply with obligations under the Charter for Regional or Minority Languages to promote Irish language signage. (AQO 1822/17-22)

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for her question. The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages is an international agreement. The UK Government signed the charter in 2000 and ratified it in 2001. It is designed to protect and promote regional or minority languages as a threatened aspect of Europe's cultural heritage. The United Kingdom Government recognised Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, Scots, Irish, Ulster Scots, Cornish and Manx Gaelic as regional or minority languages under that charter. The charter contains a non-discrimination clause concerning the use of those languages and provides for measures offering active support for their use across a range of areas, including in administrative settings.

The charter obliges the United Kingdom Government to ensure, amongst other things, that administrative authorities use regional or minority languages. It should be noted that, for the purposes of the charter, neither the Assembly as a regional legislature, nor the Assembly Commission, are administrative authorities or a body acting on behalf of such an authority. No domestic national legislation incorporates the charter, and, consequently, the Assembly and the Assembly Commission do not have obligations, as a matter of domestic law, to comply with the provisions of the charter.

The Assembly Commission is, of course, mindful of the contents of the New Decade, New Approach agreement.

The Commission anticipates that it will have to consider and review a number of areas within its remit in the context of any legislation that is passed by the Assembly under New Decade, New Approach, or in the context of any other legislation. In addition, the Commission has indicated that it awaits the decisions of the Committee on Procedures and the Assembly on the detail on making provisions for simultaneous translation. The Commission will ensure that the required resources and changes to services are put in place.

Ms Anderson: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a fhreagra. I thank the Member for his answer. Does he agree that Irish language signage in the Building would be reflective of the community that it serves?

Mr Butler: On behalf of the Commission, it is important that I address that, and perhaps more, so that Members are aware of what the Commission has done. The Commission's Education Service currently provides online sessions for schools, including Irish-medium schools, and

an education officer is available to deliver sessions in Irish. Work is also under way to update and translate sections of the Education Service's website into Irish. That work is nearing completion, and that resource will be available to Irish-medium education in the coming months.

Hansard reports Assembly proceedings in whatever language is used. If Irish is used, that is the language that is reported. In normal circumstances, simultaneous translation is provided for the Speaker and the two Clerks at Table during plenary sittings. Hansard also provides translation into and from Irish on demand, depending on capacity and when resources allow.

The Commission avails itself of a framework for the provision of interpretation, translation and transcription services for the Northern Ireland public sector. Irish is one of the languages included in that framework. It includes a range of services, such as face-to-face interpreting services, telephone interpreting services, sign language interpreting services, and translation and transcription services.

The Member may be aware that the Speaker held an event on 10 March 2021 to mark Irish Language Week. This year's event took the form of a short virtual class that focused on the Irish language in a parliamentary context and highlighted phrases that are often required in the Assembly.

On the Member's specific point, Braille signage is provided in the Great Hall, while pictorial signage for toilets is provided at the entrances to the toilets on the ground floor. I am sure that the Commission will, in time, consider anything that is put to it.

Ms Armstrong: I was glad to hear the Commission member mention sign language, but I would like clarification that sign language would be welcomed in this place. The Commission, in waiting for simultaneous translation to come forward, is not currently providing any alternatives for someone who has a hearing difficulty, as I do. There are no subtitles for me. I do not want to wait, but is the Commission going to wait until the Disability Discrimination Act has to be invoked before someone like me who has a hearing impairment finally has subtitles in this place?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Pam Cameron. Sorry, my mistake. I call Robbie Butler to answer the question on behalf of the Commission.

Mr Butler: It is great to know that I am not the only imperfect person in the Chamber, Mr Deputy Speaker. I know that the Member is an outstanding advocate for those with disabilities, particularly those with her disability. I have been with her when she has raised issues at the Business Committee and on the Commission. I give an undertaking to write to her on the subject. The Commission will take that very seriously.

Mrs Cameron: My question also relates to the provision of sign language. The first language of the deaf community is not English or Irish but signing, and communication is very difficult. There is an equality issue around communication and access to information for the deaf community. Will the Commission be looking at the provision of sign language for plenary sittings, for example?

Mr Butler: The Executive provided sign language in their response to COVID, and the value of the language was

shown. If we are going to value our community and all who are part of it, I imagine that that will be a matter for the Commission to attend to. If the Member is happy, I will write to her on the issue.

Wi-Fi Connectivity: Parliament Buildings

5. **Mr Stewart** asked the Assembly Commission for its assessment of Wi-Fi connectivity in Parliament Buildings. (AQO 1823/17-22)

Mr Blair: I thank the Member for his question. The current Wi-Fi network was installed in Parliament Buildings in 2013 and originally consisted of 84 wireless access points located throughout the Building. As the current system supported a maximum of 100 access points, an additional 16 were purchased and installed in 2015 in order to improve the overall Wi-Fi signal coverage for Building users.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in significantly increased demand for Wi-Fi services by Members and staff, and there were some Wi-Fi connectivity and signal quality issues for some Members, particularly in regard to videoconferencing. Much of that is due to the nature of the construction of Parliament Buildings, which presents a number of challenges to providing universal Wi-Fi coverage in all areas.

In response to that, webcams were provided for use by MLAs and party support staff. The webcams have been deployed on desktop PCs in Parliament Buildings, and, as those use the Assembly wired network, they provide a much more reliable service. The current Wi-Fi network shares the Assembly's main internet connection, which is monitored on an ongoing basis, and that is currently operating well within the capacity of the connection. The IS Office also recently reissued the written advice to Members on how best to manage Wi-Fi connections on mobile devices.

Should Members experience any difficulty with Wi-Fi access or performance in Parliament Buildings, they should, of course, contact the IS Office service desk, ideally at the time when the difficulty is experienced, so that the matter can be investigated. The IS Office will continue to monitor the current Wi-Fi service in Parliament Buildings and will respond appropriately to any specific issues as they arise. As the current system is not fully meeting the Assembly's needs and is approaching end of life, the IS Office intends to undertake a review of the system and to set up a project to replace the Wi-Fi network infrastructure before the end of the current Assembly mandate.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Commission member for that very thorough response. I do not think that I am the only person in the House who, from time to time, feels like banging their head against a brick wall when it comes to accessing either the Wi-Fi network or the hard-wired network. I have just come from two Zoom meetings, both through the PC in the office, where I had to turn off the camera. That was probably a good thing for those at the other end of the line, but it was not so practical for the actual running of the meetings. It seems that, given the ongoing number of meetings that are taking place, we will need more and more access. Is there any way that we can look at speeding up that connection so that we can get more for the ongoing number of meetings that we are having?

Mr Blair: I thank the Member for his further question. I think that all of us have experienced problems with slow connections, be it with meetings from the Building or when trying to connect virtually. Wi-Fi speeds can be affected by many different factors, including physical obstructions, proximity to the nearest Wi-Fi access point and the number of devices that are currently connected. On Assembly sitting days, some access points, particularly those around the Chamber, for example, are being required to service a large number of devices, and that can cause the delays in connections that have been referred to. As I advised, due to the nature of its construction, Parliament Buildings presents some challenges to providing universal Wi-Fi coverage in all areas, however the IS Office will continue to monitor the service daily and will respond to requests for support as they arise.

Youth Assembly: Update

6. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the Youth Assembly. (AQO 1824/17-22)

15. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the Youth Assembly. (AQO 1833/17-22)

Mr K Buchanan: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will group questions 6 and 15, so I may need a few extra seconds to give my response. I thank both Members for their questions.

As Members may recall, the House was last updated on the Youth Assembly on 8 December. Since then, a number of important developments have occurred, and I will outline some of those for Members. Assembly officials have continued their work to develop the practicalities and arrangements needed to enable the Youth Assembly to start its work. In particular, a co-design panel of young people was established to help to shape the principles and best approach to recruitment for the Youth Assembly. The panel met during December and January and produced and agreed its report at the end of January. Based on the panel's findings, officials have subsequently designed and developed proposals for the recruitment of the members of the Youth Assembly.

In addition, the Speaker established a Youth Assembly advisory group to provide the Commission with advice and guidance from the youth sector and other relevant stakeholders in relation to establishing, implementing and reviewing the operation of the Youth Assembly during its two-year pioneer phase. The group comprises the Speaker; senior Assembly officials; Professor Laura Lundy from the Centre for Children's Rights at Queen's University; the Children's Commissioner, Koulla Yiasouma; and adults and young people from the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, YouthAction and the Education Authority.

3.15 pm

The recruitment proposals developed by officials were presented to and considered by the advisory group at the start of this month. The group very much welcomed the engagement with young people and the co-design panel report. The group also provided useful and practical advice and endorsed the concept of the recruitment proposals. Officials subsequently considered the group's advice, refined the proposals and presented them to the Commission at a meeting last Thursday. The Commission

is now considering them, and a decision will be taken soon.

As we look ahead, subject to agreement, it is anticipated that the recruitment of members of the Youth Assembly will take place during April and May, in the hope that it will be able to meet for the first time before the summer. That is a challenging timescale, not least because of the current public health situation, but we are committed to doing all that we can to meet that aim.

Finally, it is worth emphasising that the work and proceedings of the Youth Assembly will not be party political and that its members will represent their lived experiences and the views of young people in general.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Commission member for the answer and welcome the detail, particularly on the timeline for recruitment. Will he elaborate on how the Commission will make sure that any Youth Assembly reflects our increasingly diverse society? Does he anticipate that the use of technology, as he is so ably demonstrating today, will be used as a tool to allow more young people to engage with this place?

Mr K Buchanan: If I may, I will take your second question on technology first. The aim is for the Youth Assembly to be operating prior to the summer. Restrictions will obviously need to have eased to allow 90 young people to be in the Chamber, so I suspect that technology will be used at that stage, purely for social-distancing reasons.

I assure the Member that all section 75 groupings will be included. The method of selection will be, first, three members from the 18 constituencies. That gives 54 members, which will provide a broad spectrum of members from across Northern Ireland. We will ensure that the remaining 36 members reflect all section 75 groupings. It is important that that happens. A random selection approach will be used. For example, if Mid Ulster had three female members in the initial 54 members, the selection process to incorporate the remaining 36 members would counterbalance that, if you understand the point that I am getting at. I assure the Member that the membership will cover all section 75 aspects.

Ms Armstrong: Will the Commission member clarify whether the issues that the Youth Assembly considers and may consider in the future will link into any possible citizens' assembly, as mentioned in 'New Decade, New Approach'?

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Member for her question. My understanding is that the 90 members will have it very much in their own destinies. Ultimately, the 90 young people will be a young persons' assembly. Out of that, there will be up to four Committees, and the young people will agree which Assembly Committees they will, for want of a better word, shadow.

Effectively, there will be a two-year test phase, with the young people heading in whatever direction they see fit and "shadowing" — we will use that word — whatever Assembly Committees they want to follow. It will be a two-year programme. Depending on how well that goes, it will be developed, and it will be up to future Commission members to see how far it goes. The Youth Assembly will very much be driven by those within it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of the period for questions to the Assembly Commission. I invite

Members to take their ease for a few moments before we return to the debate on the coronavirus restriction regulations. Apologies: I understand that we have finished debating the coronavirus restriction regulations. After our brief interlude, we will begin the Committee motion.

Assembly Business

Mr Clarke: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. A point of order was raised about me in my absence this morning. Is it in order for a Member to mislead the House about what another Member said and to make disparaging comments about that individual when he was not present? If Ms Dillon had looked at the Hansard report, or if she had been at the debate yesterday, she could have reflected exactly what I said. Is it in order for a Member to suggest that I was breaking the law? That same Member attended the IRA funeral in July last year of a man who was sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment and was involved in the Maze breakout. Is it in order for her to suggest that I am currently working with paramilitaries? If she had read the Hansard report, she would have seen that I said that, in my area, I worked with loyalist paramilitaries to move things forward.

I would like you to rule on that, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has put his points on the record very fulsomely. I am sure that the Speaker's Office will reflect on what has been said.

Committee Business

Review of the Assembly Members' Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members: Stage 1

Ms Ennis (The Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee on Standards and Privileges on its 'Review of the Assembly Members' Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members: Stage 1' [NIA 82/17-22], laid in the Business Office on 25 February 2021; affirms its commitment to high ethical standards and to the Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members; agrees that the Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members should be amended in accordance with the annex to the report; and further agrees that the amended Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members should come into effect on Monday 12 April 2021.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour 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 who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Ms Ennis: I welcome the opportunity to bring the motion on behalf of the Committee on Standards and Privileges to the Assembly today. The purpose of the motion is fourfold. First, it is to seek Assembly approval of the Committee's 'Review of the Assembly Members' Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members: Stage 1'. Secondly, it is to affirm the Assembly's commitment to high ethical standards and to the code and guide. Thirdly, it is to seek Assembly approval to amendments to the code and guide in accordance with the annex to the report, which sets out the necessary changes in a tracked format for ease of reference. Fourthly, it is to seek Assembly approval for the amended code and guide to come into effect on Monday 12 April 2021.

I shall address the second limb of the motion first, given that a commitment to high ethical standards provides the foundation on which the codes of conduct are built. It has been said:

"Integrity has no need of rules".

Although that might be true in theory, regrettably, the international experience of government is that rules and codes of conduct are a necessity in practice.

When the Assembly last considered a motion along these lines in 2016, my predecessor, the Committee Chairperson Cathal Boylan, drew on the words of President John F Kennedy from 1961 when he was delivering a special message to the US Congress on conflict of interest legislation and on the problems of ethics in government. President Kennedy pointed out that the basis of effective government is public confidence and that confidence is endangered when ethical standards falter or appear to falter. Public confidence in the Assembly as an institution

is, of course, a key reason why we need to promote and maintain high ethical standards.

However, it might be argued that there is an even more fundamental reason. In that regard, I draw on the words of another and more current American political analyst in Noam Chomsky, who, in pointing to the principle of universality, said:

"If an action is right (or wrong) for others, it is right (or wrong) for us. Those who do not rise to the minimal moral level of applying to themselves the standards they apply to others — more stringent ones, in fact — plainly cannot be taken seriously when they speak of appropriateness of response; or of right and wrong".

That highlights the importance that we, as individual public representatives and this Assembly as an institution, need to place on high ethical standards.

In turning to the Committee's report, it is the usual practice that the Committee reviews the code and guide in each mandate to ensure that it is kept up to date and reflects good practice with regard to parliamentary ethical standards. As such, the Committee's strategic plan for 2020-22 provided for the review to be undertaken in two stages. That is with stage 1 addressing urgent and straightforward amendments and stage 2 covering more complex and detailed issues, including the arrangements for handling complaints of inappropriate or unacceptable behaviour. The issues covered under stage 1 were identified since the code and guide were last updated in June 2016, including by the previous Committee, the last Commissioner for Standards, as a result of the experience of the registration process in the current mandate, and in developments in comparator legislatures.

The detail of the proposed amendments to the code and the guide is set out in the annex to the report, and the associated rationale is explained in the body of the report. At this point in the debate, I will highlight the two key changes proposed. First, the Committee recommends a move away from the approach of setting registration thresholds as a proportion of a Member's salary to one of expressing them as rounded cash sums. That is the approach generally taken in Dáil Éireann, Seanad Éireann, the House of Commons, and the House of Lords. The Committee considers that it will offer a clear-cut and accessible approach, with less scope for misunderstanding by Members.

Secondly, the Committee recommends that a gap in the rules be addressed to require Members to register the value, or estimated value, of gifts, benefits, hospitality and visits. The value of a gift or other material benefit can be a key consideration in determining whether it could reasonably be thought to influence a Member's actions. This new requirement would support the sixth rule of conduct, which states:

"You shall not accept any gift, benefit or hospitality that might reasonably be thought to influence your actions as a Member."

The proposed new requirement would also be in line with the arrangements in the Scottish Parliament and the House of Commons. While I will not go into detail, the Committee also recommends various textual improvements to clarify the existing provisions and to achieve consistency in the code and guide.

In conclusion, the Committee envisages that the outcome of the review recommendations will be an improved code and guide that reduces the risk of non-compliance, with the resulting reputational damage; increases transparency; and leads to increased public confidence in the Assembly through a strengthened standards regime. I look forward to hearing the contributions from Members in the debate.

Mr Dickson: I welcome the opportunity to make a few remarks about the report, and particularly to support the motion on the Assembly's code of conduct. As Members representing the people of Northern Ireland, we must ensure and uphold the highest ethical standards and set an example. The standards to which we are to be held have not been updated since June 2016, so the Committee's review is overdue. The report covers stage 1 of the Committee's review of the code and seeks to deal with urgent and straightforward amendments. A lot of the amendments here are simply amendments in fact. The purpose of bringing the document into line with salary changes since 2016 is with regard to the threshold for declaring interests.

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

3.30 pm

Typically, those thresholds were set as a proportion of salaries, which, as the Member who spoke previously said, is the case in the Welsh Parliament and the Scottish Parliament. However, both Houses of the UK Parliament and the Oireachtas follow a system of absolute rounded numbers that are not specifically aligned to salaries, which has been recommended by the Committee. That is a clearer and simpler way of doing things without the need for calculations. However, we will, of course, need to keep that under review.

In the clear interests of transparency, it is also recommended that gifts, benefits, hospitality and visit registrations include their value or estimated value. Previously, gifts of over £245 had to be declared, but no estimate of their value was required. Obviously, for transparency, there is considerable benefit in understanding the value of gifts, so I welcome that change. In addition, a number of clarifying and tidying amendments are included that help to make the document clearer for easier use. I welcome that for ease of use for Members and for members of the public who wish to scrutinise our activities.

In closing, I am sure that all Members agree that clearer, meaningful and ethical rules are vital in order to ensure confidence in this place and that those reviews are a key part of ensuring that. I look forward to stage 2, when we will seek to review in detail issues that are of a more complex nature.

Ms S Bradley: On behalf of the SDLP, I welcome the motion. It and the reasoning behind it have been elaborated on. I agree with the Member who spoke about the appropriateness of responses. We all need to be mindful that, in our duties not just at Committee but in the House and outside it, we reflect the values of society and that the people who are listening to us expect a standard to be set. This is an attempt to do that. I will keep it short. On behalf of the SDLP, I will say that we welcome the proposed review.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Mr William Irwin to make a winding-up speech. The Member has up to 10 minutes.

Mr Irwin (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges): I thank Members for their contributions. I speak as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. As we heard, there is a clear connection between public confidence in this institution and a robust standards regime for Members. I will reflect on the particular points that were raised on the proposed amendments to the code and guide in a moment. However, it is important to reiterate that there is an onus on each of us, as elected Members, to be conscious of our ethical responsibilities and to lead by example. Observations of the Chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, Lord Evans, are instructive on that. He recently stated:

"Maintaining standards in public life takes sustained work. I am sorry to say that there is no silver bullet. It remains the case that ethical standards are first and foremost a matter of personal responsibility."

Some Members, including Stewart Dickson, made the point that Members should set an example in their conduct. That is very important.

As outlined in the report, the Committee's stage 1 considerations have been informed by information on the approaches that are taken by comparable legislatures to the issues identified as well as by advice from the Commissioner for Standards, Dr Melissa McCullough. In summary and as highlighted, the two key areas where the Committee is recommending change include, first, the approach to setting thresholds and the registration of various interests and, secondly, the introduction of a new requirement on Members to provide the value or estimated value of gifts, benefits, hospitality and visits.

On the first issue, the Committee believes that its recommended changes to the thresholds for registering interests continue to strike the right balance between ensuring transparency and placing proportionate requirements on Members. On the second issue, the Committee is firmly of the view that the requirements for registering gifts, benefits and hospitality under category 3 and visits under category 4 of the guide should aim to ensure that sufficient information is included in the Assembly's Register of Members' Interests in order to inform any necessary decisions on compliance with applicable rules of conduct.

As detailed in the report, the Committee has also taken the opportunity at stage 1 of the review to identify various textual improvements to the provisions of the code and guide. While it is important that such amendments are made at this juncture, the Committee recognises that stage 2 of the review will offer another opportunity to clarify further and improve the provisions of the code and guide. The work at stage 2 will examine the arrangements for handling complaints of inappropriate or unacceptable behaviour, with a view to ensuring that a best-practice approach is maintained.

Going into more detail, I wish to pick up on an issue in paragraph 5 of the introduction to the guide to the rules, which currently states:

“The Ministerial Code of Conduct is entirely separate to the Assembly’s Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules. Complaints that the Ministerial Code of Conduct has been breached fall outside the scope of the Assembly’s Code of Conduct and outside the remit of the Committee on Standards and Privileges and the Assembly Commissioner for Standards.”

However, Members will be aware that the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 means that the arrangements have now changed. To address the timing issue, a footnote will be added to that paragraph of the amended guide. It will state:

“Clause 5 of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, which received Royal Assent on 22 March 2021, extends the powers of the Commissioner for Standards to investigate complaints against Ministers”.

The footnote will also include a link to further information on the Act.

In conclusion, the motion serves to highlight the importance of the standards regime for Assembly Members. The proposed amendments to the code and guide will reduce the risk of non-compliance and resultant reputational damage to the Assembly, increase transparency and help to promote increased public confidence in the Assembly as a result of a strengthened standards regime.

Again, I thank Members for their contributions. I expect that the Committee will continue to lead the further improvement and refinement of the code and guide during the remainder of the mandate. Subject to the motion being agreed today, the Committee will circulate copies of the revised code of conduct and guide to the rules to all MLAs for their information ahead of 12 April 2021, which is when they will come into effect. I encourage all Members to remain mindful of the need to continue to develop their knowledge and awareness of their responsibilities under the code and guide. I ask Members to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee on Standards and Privileges on its ‘Review of the Assembly Members’ Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members: Stage 1’ [NIA 82/17-22], laid in the Business Office on 25 February 2021; affirms its commitment to high ethical standards and to the Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members; agrees that the Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members should be amended in accordance with the annex to the report; and further agrees that the amended Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members should come into effect on Monday 12 April 2021.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask Members to take their ease before we move to the next item of business.

Private Members’ Business

Strategy to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls

Ms S Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly condemns violence against women and girls in all forms; notes with concern that Northern Ireland is the only place on these islands that does not have a specific strategy to tackle gender-based violence and abuse; regrets that the Executive are failing to meet their international obligations in this regard; and calls on the Minister of Justice and the First Minister and deputy First Minister to take immediate action to eliminate gender-based violence in our society by introducing a violence against women and girls strategy, underpinned by legislation and resourcing that includes a commitment to legislate to make misogyny a hate crime and prioritises early intervention in schools to erode sexist attitudes and build lifelong positive relationships.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

Ms S Bradley: I am proposing the motion on behalf of the SDLP. It condemns violence against women and girls in all forms and seeks to get the support of the House for plans to devise a specific strategy to tackle gender-based violence and abuse.

In doing so, I am particularly mindful of the horrific events that occurred in Newtownabbey over the weekend, and I place on record my sincere condolences to the families of the deceased. The images of Karen and Stacey flooding our media are simply heartbreaking, coming as they do so soon after the loss of Sarah Everard. Many families are left grieving and feeling re-traumatised each time that another woman loses her life.

Our motivations to deal with the horrific circumstances that lead to such brutal and final outcomes for so many women should be drawn from our genuine hope and aspirations to make this place — our shared home — a safer place for all women. We must collectively weed out misogyny and the behaviours that it provokes. We must find a serious and concerted way in which to recognise that our world is changing, and changing at a very fast pace. Addiction to being online is prevalent and has been spurred by the isolation of lockdown. The anonymity afforded to online users reveals a level of misogyny that is not otherwise captured by any data. The casually or thinly disguised dislike of, contempt for or ingrained prejudice against women can be found on many social media platforms in a matter of seconds. One search reveals plenty. The innocent sharing of memes that degrade women, or the normalised register of language that would never be uttered offline, depicts a fertile environment for hate to grow.

I acknowledge that these are complicated and complex matters, with no easy fix, but we must try. It is simply not good enough that we are lagging behind all other parts of these islands in forming a strategy that seeks to make a

fundamental change to our culture and to how we view the topic of gender violence.

During our deliberations on the now Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act, it was made abundantly clear that the levels of violence being directed towards women and girls were and are frightening. In a call for evidence during those deliberations, the Women's Aid Federation, which I must commend for being so steadfast in its determination to see a strategy developed, submitted a paper that shone a harsh light on the reality of domestic abuse that is only a partial depiction of the abuse that women face. In June 2020, it noted that there were a total of 16,182, domestic abuse crimes reported in 2018-19. That is 16,182 abuses too many. In 2019 and 2020, which included lockdown, the PSNI reportedly responded to 32,105 incidents of domestic abuse, with domestic abuse accounting for 17% of all crime reported to the police.

There were 11 murders linked to domestic abuse in 2017-18. Since lockdown began, eight women have been brutally murdered in Northern Ireland.

3.45 pm

Domestic abuse and gender-based violence are, of course, not exclusively female problems, but there is no escaping the fact that females are disproportionately affected. I commend groups such as the Men's Advisory Project, which correctly points out that men often also experience domestic abuse. That is a valid concern, and it will have its own targeted measures to help those men, because we cannot say that men are immune to this; they are not. However, it really paints a picture when we look at the disproportionate effect of domestic abuse on women.

The need for us to urgently intervene to keep women safe and alive cannot be overstated. A fully resourced strategy could seek to adopt a preventative and proactive approach. It could include providing age-appropriate and timely education on healthy, loving relationships and the better identification of early signs of abuse. It could prevent abusive behaviours becoming normalised or entrenched, seek to prevent perpetrators moving from one victim to the next and offer critical support before a crisis develops. Whilst I, like many others in the House, am not privy to the ministerial paper that was presented to the Executive, I am hopeful that it will include topics such as those.

Through open conversations and debates such as this, we blow away the myths associated with victim blaming and stigma. We remove any remaining taboos and begin to empower women. I welcome the First Minister and deputy First Minister being in attendance, and I note the First Minister's comments in the media in support of this type of strategy. I also give recognition to the Minister of Justice, who, originally a little hesitant to see the need to break this down in a gender-specific way, has more recently come out to suggest that she is supportive and has acted on her word by bringing that paper to the Executive.

I urge every Member to support the motion. I also wish to take a moment to speak about the amendment. The amendment reorders the wording, I suppose, but I was trying to find where it actually brought a differential to the original motion. The one significant deviation that it appears to make is that it calls for the standardisation of the relationships and sexuality education (RSE) programme in schools. I made the point in Committee and

will make it again in the House that a large body of work could be developed in the form of an RSE programme before any Member would diverge from their views. The basic building blocks of respect and love are fundamental to all healthy relationships. Standardising may set a limit on how far those age-appropriate conversations will go and does not negate the critical role of parenting. The rules of respect are universal and need to be promoted and reinforced by all. Therefore, we have no objection to the amendment and will support it. However, we want to make it clear that it may be a limiting factor as we go forward, and I hope that people are respectful of that.

I cannot state enough the need for Northern Ireland to act on the issue. I look forward to hearing Members' contributions, and I urge all Members to support the motion.

Miss Woods: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "regard;" and insert:

"and calls on the Executive to take immediate action to eliminate gender-based violence by introducing a violence against women and girls strategy that is fully resourced and underpinned by legislation to make misogyny a hate crime, and to introduce standardised, comprehensive relationships and sexuality education in our schools to eradicate sexist attitudes and build lifelong, positive relationships."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member will have five minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. Please open the debate on the amendment.

Miss Woods: Over the weekend, I was chatting to my partner about this public debate. I asked him whether he had ever been taught or warned about not running at night, keeping to well-lit areas and avoiding going out on his own. Had he ever had his choice of outfit commented on, been verbally abused or victim-blamed, been inappropriately touched or warned about being sexually assaulted? Never: not once. That is the polar opposite of my and many other women's experiences, not because we went to different schools or were brought up differently, but simply because he is a man and I am a woman.

Violence against women and girls has been described as:

"one of the most pervasive violations of human rights in the world [yet] one of the least prosecuted crimes".

Throughout history, women and girls have been subjected to patriarchal structures in society, which give men the social power and legitimacy not only to make the rules but to police them. That is the firm reality of the society in which we live, not just in Northern Ireland but globally. The system is not working. It is a fact that, in most societies, men have power over women. That is shown in many ways: in spheres of influence, in the so-called traditional roles in the home, in relation to children, in the division of labour and in wages and property rights. The global average for women's income is around half of what men are paid. In the midst of those inequalities, and practically symptomatic of that gender imbalance, we have a problem. The problem is male violence: that which is perpetrated by men against women and girls.

Globally, one in three women has been subjected to physical or sexual violence in her lifetime. Research from the femicide census shows that, on average, a woman is killed by a man every three days in the UK. The report makes for grim reading. From 2009 to 2018, 1,425 women were murdered. Almost half of the men who killed women during that 10-year period were known to have a history of violence against women. Seventy per cent of the killings took place in the home that the perpetrator shared with the victim or in the victim's own home. The sad reality is that violence and abuse against women and girls is endemic across the world, and responses to it are woefully inadequate legally, institutionally and societally.

The unfortunate circumstances in Northern Ireland are compounded by the fact that we have always lagged behind when it comes to legislation, policy and change. Other jurisdictions moved to criminalise coercive control many years before a Bill was brought before the House. Criminal offences such as stalking have been introduced previously in other places. England introduced a strategy to end violence against women and girls in 2010, Scotland in 2014, and, in 2015, Wales passed the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act, which imposes a duty on the Government to prepare, publish, review and implement a national strategy.

What do we have in Northern Ireland? Very little. We have, it seems, a plethora of gender-neutral policies and strategies but nothing that really recognises gender-based violence. The question, therefore, is this: what is going on? I welcome the debate and recent statements to the media by many Executive Ministers on a strategy. However, after everything that has happened, and, in the past year, for example, woman after woman being murdered, the fact that it has taken so long for us finally to kick into action is disappointing, frustrating and absolutely disgraceful.

In June 2020, I listened carefully to Women's Aid call for a strategy on violence against women and girls, and, as a member of the Justice Committee and as an individual Member, I made representations to the Minister of Justice to bring one forward. We pressed for that continually in Committee. The response that we received from the Department was deeply disappointing. I will quote from the Committee's report on the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill, which was published in October 2020. The Department said:

"There would be concerns that the adoption of a gendered strategy could send out a message that tackling abuse against men is less important."

As Women's Aid explained to the Committee, a gendered strategy:

"is not about a hierarchy of victims with one group deserving of more, it is just about that recognition that it is a gender-based crime"

and about grasping the facts and reality in order to develop evidence-based interventions.

We discussed an amendment to the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill to introduce a strategy but were advised that it would fall outside the scope, and we did not pursue it. With the help of Assembly staff, I drafted an amendment and published it on 2 November 2020. It was there for every MLA and Minister to see, but it was not selected.

I am glad that the Executive will look at the issue as a matter of urgency, and I hope that any forthcoming strategy will be cross-departmental, fully resourced and effectively implemented with a delivery model that incorporates regular reviews of its effectiveness. I also congratulate and pay tribute to Women's Aid for its campaign to get this to the Executive table.

We need to recognise the specific nature of the context in which we live. Studies have shown that it remains the case that the legacy of the conflict, such as paramilitarism, ethno-national antagonisms, party politics and political focus on identity issues at the expense of others, continues to have a negative implication for victims and survivors of domestic abuse. The traditional public-private divide has meant that the legal system is simply not equipped to deal with the issues that affect women and girls more widely, and we have a system that, for too long, has institutionalised gender bias and stereotypes. It is time to change that. I welcome the intervention from Sir John Gillen yesterday, when he criticised the pace of change of the reforms to the justice system, and I fully agree that those recommendations around serious sexual offences need to be implemented urgently.

We must recognise abuses that target women, those who are transgender and those who are non-binary simply because of their gender identity for what they are: hate crimes. Misogyny is a blight that affects us all, and I give credit and thanks to the Raise Your Voice campaign and the councils that have led the way on this, raising awareness in the council chambers. I welcome Judge Marrinan's recommendations and urge the Justice Minister to bring forward hate crime legislation as soon as possible with buy-in across the Executive. We know what we need to do, so let us get it done.

Earlier this month, the expert advisory panel on a gender equality strategy appointed by DFC described relationships and sexuality education in our schools as "inconsistent and insufficient". There is no uniform pattern to the provision of RSE in schools. Provision is not the same across the board. For every young person who has engaged with some form of RSE, many others have not had anywhere near the same experience. Another expert panel tasked with looking at a sexual orientation strategy has advised that RSE should not be dependent on school ethos. What more do we need?

Our young people tell us that RSE is not sufficient. Research by Belfast Youth Forum showed that only 66% said that they had received RSE in school, and 60% felt that the information they had received was either "not very useful" or "not useful at all". We need age-appropriate, standardised, comprehensive RSE, including the teaching of issues such as gender relations and responsible sexual behaviour, delivered by professionals using a rights-based approach and a gender-focused programme that reflects the realities of society and the relationships that people are in.

UNESCO has also published technical guidance on RSE since 2006, and its 2016 review found that using an explicit rights-based approach in comprehensive sex ed programmes leads to positive effects on attitudes, including increased knowledge of one's rights in a sexual relationship, increased communication with parents about sex and relationships and greater self-efficacy in managing risky situations. There are also significant longer-term

positive effects around the psychosocial and behavioural outcomes. The review of evidence also found that gender-focused programmes are substantially more effective than gender-blind programmes at achieving health outcomes such as reducing rates of unintended pregnancy or STIs.

We need a strategy to tackle gender-based violence. We have always needed one. A strategy will provide the framework of accountability and oversight that we need to tackle misogyny and improve RSE in our schools. The evidence stares us in the face, and it shows that educational programmes that explicitly address gender inequality by confronting beliefs that support male authority over women, for example, are more effective in reducing partner violence and changing sexual behaviour. Our amendment calls for that to be recognised and for comprehensive RSE to be standardised across all our schools. It also situates the strategy across the entire Executive, recognising that all Departments must play their part and that Ministers should allocate sufficient resources to deliver change. I urge all Members to support the amendment and the motion.

Mrs Cameron: As a party, we fully support the calls for a Northern Ireland strategy on violence against women and girls. It is regrettable that Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK not to have such a strategy in place. That is worrying, as sexual and violent crime against females continues to rise, and it is astounding that, across the UK, one in five women will experience sexual assault during their lifetime. The Justice Minister's commitment to bring forward a paper to the Executive to kick-start the process of devising a violence against women and girls strategy is, therefore, not only welcome but long overdue.

4.00 pm

I put on record my thanks to Women's Aid and other advocates who have consistently and passionately highlighted the need for stronger measures on the issue. The issues surrounding violence against women and domestic abuse have not disappeared during the COVID-19 pandemic; if anything, they have increased. A strategy must recognise our situation and the consequences of COVID-19 and lockdown on vulnerable women and, often, their children. The support given by organisations such as Women's Aid during the pandemic has been nothing short of phenomenal. They have adapted to the challenges and continued to support women and children across the country. Any steps to develop and implement a Northern Ireland strategy must be co-designed and must command the support of our committed and highly valued community and voluntary partners. More long-term funding for core services in the community and voluntary sector will also be necessary to achieve many of the aims of a successful strategy.

PSNI crime and domestic violence statistics paint a frightening picture of the situation in Northern Ireland. In 1998-99, almost 900 sexual assaults on females were recorded; in 2019-20, that number had grown to over 1,400. The recent horrific murder of Sarah Everard in England and, indeed, the tragic killings in Newtownabbey on Friday have really brought home the issue of violence against women. Our justice system, police and other public services must be given every possible tool to tackle violence of that nature.

The recently passed Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act is an important step in the right direction. I hope the Act's powers of tougher sentencing will be properly utilised. Legislative progress on stalking and upskirting will also make a positive contribution to tackling some of the abuse faced by women in our society. I commend the Justice Minister and the Department for the progress made in those areas over the past year. There is, however, a risk that the current mechanisms to address harm against women and girls are not being used to full effect. Many will, rightly or wrongly, say that our justice system is not tough enough on criminals on a wide range of crimes. I have the same fear about how those who commit crimes targeting women are dealt with in the courts. My party colleague Lord Morrow's Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Further Provisions and Support for Victims) Bill received Royal Assent in 2015, yet referrals, prosecutions and convictions for human trafficking and the sexual exploitation of women remain unacceptably low in our Province. We need to ensure that the existing tools are applied effectively by the judiciary to protect women and girls. The exploiters of women must feel the full force of the law and be made an example of, and a clear message must be sent that we will not tolerate their behaviour.

A strategy should include mechanisms for monitoring the success and outcomes of all paths and forthcoming legislation. By doing that, we can better identify what more can be done. All of that must be put in the context of a wider strategy to deal effectively with present issues and prepare for new challenges. Over the past few years, we have seen the emergence of new forms of abuse and violence against females, including cyberflashing, upskirting and revenge pornography, to name a few. There are increasing reports of abuse and extreme sexism in online forums and social media platforms, which is not recorded in official data. The pace of technological change means that evolving forms of crimes against women and girls are emerging. The key test of any strategy is how it identifies new trends as well as the volume and prevalence of offences.

A strategy must also consider the importance of prevention and education. Women need to have confidence that any report of violence and abuse will be taken seriously, that they will not be victim-blamed and that the perpetrator will not be able to harm them any more. Education is vital in tackling negative and toxic attitudes towards women. Our young people need to be educated about healthy relationships, how to recognise dangerous and coercive behaviour and where to turn to for help. As a society, we should address and never tolerate attempts to victim-blame, excuse or justify violence against women, and that includes those who perpetrated violence and who disappeared, murdered, maimed, abused and orphaned many women and girls under the guise of so-called political objectives during decades of terrorism in Northern Ireland.

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Cameron: I will.

Mr Givan: Will the Member agree that there are people with information who should come forward with that evidence? Lisa Dorrian is one example. They perpetuate the violence that they did to her in the past against the family today.

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

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for his intervention. I fully agree with his comments. We must call out harmful behaviour and attitudes from wherever they come.

I welcome all the steps being taken to initiate a strategy to tackle violence against women and girls.

I recognise that a difficult task lies ahead for all of us to make it a success, but it is most necessary. As an Assembly, we must take a firm stance against all forms of violence. Our justice system must get tougher on violence against women and girls. We cannot have a light-touch approach to perpetrators and abusers.

Ms Dillon: I thank the proposer of the motion and the proposer of the amendment for bringing them to the House. We raised the issue on a number of occasions with the Justice Minister during the Committee Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act. That was not just the Sinn Féin representatives but other members of the Committee, because we felt that it was important. Whilst that piece of legislation was perhaps not the right place to address the issue, it absolutely needs to be addressed, so I welcome that we are discussing it today.

It is extremely sad that we are discussing the issue against the backdrop of the killings of two women on Friday night and the killing of Sarah Everard the week before. Unfortunately, those are not the only women or girls who have suffered or who we have lost in the community, so I offer our sympathies to all those who have lost members of their families: their mummies, their sisters and their daughters.

I listened to Frank Mullane yesterday on the radio. A number of Members were interviewed as part of that piece so they probably heard him, too, but he talked about the murder of his sister and about his and his family's campaign to effect change. One issue that he raised was the importance of the first response and protection service. On that, we are talking to policing and justice, which is why I felt that it fitted with the Department of Justice. It obviously is a cross-cutting issue that goes across all Departments; every Department will have to have an input to the strategy and face up to their responsibilities. For that reason, the Department of Justice probably needs to take the lead. Somebody needs to take the lead. We need to see an effective strategy, not something like the piecemeal and gender-blind approach that we have had to date.

We all have men in our lives whom we love, who love us and who are good to us, so we do not need to constantly defend the fact that we are talking about a strategy to address violence against women and girls. We do not need to keep balancing that by saying that men are victims. We know that they are, but the statistics bear out that the victims are mostly women and that the perpetrators are mostly men, even when men are the victims. We need to stop trying to balance things out and to accept that those are the facts.

We are all well aware of the under-reporting of domestic and sexual violence against women, so even the statistics that we have are not right and are not close to being right. I welcome what the Minister of Justice has brought forward so far through the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings

Act and the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill. Hopefully, we will have a miscellaneous provisions Bill that deals with upskirting, downblousing and some of the Gillen recommendations, and we have the stalking legislation. All that is progressive and good. That is what we are here to do. We are here to legislate, but we need to ensure that we talk to and engage with the victims and the sector on the strategy. We, as legislators, will absolutely do our bit, but we need to engage with those people. We need to engage with Women's Aid, which has done so much in this campaign, with the victims who have survived and with the families of those who have not survived, because they will help to inform any strategy that we bring forward.

I absolutely support the amendment. I have talked in the House before to the fact that we need standardised sex and relationship education across our education system. I, as a mummy, have a responsibility. I take that seriously, and I will do my best to educate my child on what a healthy relationship looks like. However, not every child has that in their home. Not every child has parents, and not every child has good guidance. That is the reality of the world that we live in, so our education system has to pick up the slack in that, as do we, as a community. In saying that, one of the reasons why we have failed to recognise domestic violence as a whole, but particularly violence against women, is that we decided that it was a problem inside the home and not one for us as a community. It is, and I am glad to see that we are finally recognising that.

A strategy will, hopefully, bring us forward and ensure that all our community, including those who want to resist this, finally recognise that the issue has to be dealt with.

Ms Armstrong: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I welcome the motion and confirm that we will support the Green Party amendment.

In the last week, Northern Ireland has heard more sad news: another two women have died following an act of violence. If only that could be the last time that we hear such devastating news. Sadly, as we in the Chamber know, it will not be. When the next news report comes, we will shake our heads and express sympathy, knowing that that will not be the last time either. Violence against women and girls will continue until society as a whole says, "Enough". I support the amendment, because I believe that it is time that the whole Executive acted as a single unit to eradicate misogyny, sexism and violence against women.

By the time that an attacker reaches the criminal justice system, they have already acted violently against their victim. We need to stop women and girls, or anyone, becoming a victim in the first place. That has to start right at the beginning by ensuring that there is appropriate support through pregnancy and effective help through a child's early years and school years, and that, through the curriculum, everyone is taught to recognise what a positive relationship is and what to do if someone treats them badly, is abusive or is physically violent. We should seek to prevent people from becoming victims.

In the House, Members have, over a number of debates, confirmed the need to recognise that, while far too many women bear the brunt of violence, it is an issue not solely for women and girls but for all people. We all understand that, in creating a violence against women and girls strategy, we must take a gendered approach. As mentioned by others, men are, by far, the abusers, and

they must therefore be part of the strategy. It cannot be hidden away as a women's issue. We have the chance to change, to improve and to encourage healthy relationships for everyone across society, but it will take a joined-up, targeted and funded approach to eradicate the scourge of violence.

I know that the Minister of Justice brought a paper to the Executive today. I do not know what the paper's contents are, but I hope that it has been or will be discussed. Violence against women and girls is a pertinent and live issue. It is not going away. I sincerely hope that the Executive take positive action and take forward whatever is set out in the paper. That would send out a clear signal to all that acts of violence against women and girls, or anybody, are wrong and that we are committed to preventing anyone from ever being a victim again.

I mentioned the Minister of Justice, a woman who takes her fair share of abuse, I have to say, inside and outside the Chamber. I would like to thank Pam Cameron for recognising the work of the Minister. These are tough times.

Many in the House have spoken in debates about and been involved in scrutinising the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act, which received Royal Assent on 1 March. The Minister is also bringing forward investment for advocacy support services, which will support victims of domestic and sexual abuse as they go through the criminal justice system. The domestic violence and abuse scheme enables police and their partners to manage risk better through the sharing of relevant information about a person's history of domestic abuse. The behavioural change programme aims to ensure the safety of women and children and prevent further abusive behaviour. The programme will develop an effective partnership with the five trusts across Northern Ireland. The Minister introduced domestic homicide reviews in December 2020 to enable learning from cases of homicide resulting from domestic violence. The consultation on enhancing legal protections for victims of domestic abuse closed last month. The consultation, as many know, sought views on creating new domestic abuse protection notices and protection orders. The Minister continues the work on modern slavery and trafficking and will publish her annual modern slavery strategy. The review of hate crime, as presented by Judge Marrinan, was published on 1 December. The Minister and her officials are considering the 34 recommendations, and a response is expected. On top of that, the Protection from Stalking Bill was introduced. The Minister and her officials are taking forward Sir John Gillen's recommendations through the implementation plan that will present a programme of transformation across the criminal justice system. Changes that many welcome include trauma-informed training for police, the Public Prosecution Service, legal professionals and other justice partners.

As we know and others mentioned, the Gillen report recommended that relationships and sexuality education in schools be progressed under the Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007.

The Department of Education has agreed to take the lead on the working group, and I look forward to it taking forward that work to ensure that issues such as consent, rape myths and use of social media are covered in the school curriculum.

4.15 pm

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

Ms Armstrong: Alliance absolutely supports the strategy mentioned today. As the amendment confirms, it is for the whole Executive to take responsibility for taking forward a strategy and ensuring that resourcing is available.

Mrs Barton: Given the sad news last weekend, the motion is extremely timely, and, I, too, wish to be associated with the condolences to the Newtownabbey family.

Gender-based violence against women is the systematic use of violence to reinforce power over women. That generally involves domestic violence and/or sexual violence, which is used to reinforce that power. While all violence is wrong and I recognise that there is violence against men by their partners and same-sex violence, the violence directed against women is disproportionate in comparison. As a result of gender-based violence, women are left with physical and non-physical symptoms, including feelings of worthlessness, disbelief, shame, disgust, utter humiliation and guilt, making it extremely difficult for them to report the violence, and even preventing many from reporting it, to the appropriate authorities.

Sadly, as we read in our press today, since the COVID restrictions were introduced in Northern Ireland, the number of women murdered has doubled. Eight women have been violently killed as a result of gender-based violence since last March, so, if evidence were needed, there is no doubt that a violence against women and girls strategy is a must. At the very least, the strategy must reflect the thoughts of those who have been victims and of the many agencies that offer support, and it must reflect how the perpetrators are to be held accountable for their actions.

One of the key considerations in the strategy must be education. Educating our youth is necessary. From primary school onwards, young people must be encouraged to respect, listen to and accept that violence is not the way forward. They must have an understanding of what is considered acceptable towards a young girl or a woman, but, most of all, they must have positive attitudes towards one another, and those must be encouraged. Our society must be educated. Through awareness campaigns, there needs to be change in the long-established societal attitudes to domestic and sexual violence until the statistics start to reflect respect towards women and girls.

Another key consideration must be to improve the support available to victims. In 2019-2020, Women's Aid supported 560 women and 316 children in its refuges. From our community outreach support, we know that 5,536 women and 5,143 children experienced domestic abuse across Northern Ireland.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way and for citing those numbers. Does that not make the point that Women's Aid and organisations like it need to be associated with any strategy and funded to implement any resources that are required from it?

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

Mrs Barton: Thank you for your intervention. I totally agree.

The PSNI has attended domestic abuse incidents every 17 minutes. Those statistics prove how necessary it is to have emotional support, counselling and referral support, such as that from Women's Aid, but they must be properly resourced and funded.

The third consideration for the strategy must involve the perpetrator being brought or held to account for their actions. Once the victim has reported the incident, they want to see the wrongdoer being brought to justice and taking responsibility for their actions, together with their being given the support to understand the consequences of their behaviour and the impact that they have had on the victim.

The strategy needs to be effective and cross-cutting across Departments, including Justice, Education, Health and Finance. It needs to encourage a society that is inclusive of equality and mutual respect and that repels all forms of violence against women and girls. It must recognise the importance of early and effective intervention to maximise the safety and well-being of women and children. I look forward to the day when the success of the strategy —

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

Mrs Barton: — will be measured by a year-on-year reduction in victims. The Ulster Unionist Party supports the motion.

Mr Givan: This morning, when I looked at the front page of the 'Belfast Telegraph', I was struck by the image of the eight women who have been killed over the past 12 months. When I looked at the images of Natasha, Elizabeth, Emma Jane, Patrycja, Stacey, Karen, Susan and Katie, the timeliness of today's motion struck me, as did the need for a gender-specific strategy when it comes to tackling violence against women and girls. I see no contradiction whatsoever in having gender-neutral legislation that seeks to capture all those criminal offences, whilst recognising that, in the majority of cases, the victims are women and the perpetrators are men. Not to have a strategy that recognises that, in my view, would be failing to deal with where the problem exists. I support the gender-neutral strategy.

Linda Dillon touched on the fact that the Committee dealt with the matter when it considered the domestic abuse Bill. The Committee considered tabling an amendment to compel it to happen but was not able to do so. As a result of some of the engagement during that process, the Committee raised this as one of the issues, and I am pleased that the Justice Minister now supports this approach. The Department came back, at that time, to say that there were concerns that adopting a gendered strategy could send out a message that tackling abuse against men is less important. In her opening remarks, Sinéad said that there was some nervousness about going with that approach. However, I welcome the real commitment that we will take this forward and have a gender-based strategy, because it is right that we do so.

We have the seven-year strategy, 'Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse'. It is an overarching gender-neutral document. However, this would be a specific document on tackling violence against women and girls. It is right that we have that.

I put on record my thanks to Women's Aid, which supported Committee members when we considered the issues. Women's Aid led on the petition and the campaign, and some credit can go to it for getting us to this place today. We have heard repeatedly when considering these issues at Committee that it is vital that support services are supported and that organisations such as Women's Aid get the financial resources necessary to support women when they come forward seeking help.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for taking an intervention. I spoke with representatives from Women's Aid yesterday, and the day before, on this issue. One of the concerns that they raised was that, currently, an excellent Committee is working tirelessly on this issue. I assured them that, no matter who sits on the Committee, that work would continue in the next mandate. I am delighted — I think that the Member will agree — to hear the voices across the House, because it gives a reassurance to Women's Aid that, no matter who sits on any future Justice Committee, this issue will be very much focused on.

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

Mr Givan: I agree with the Member. It is because of that commitment that the Committee took forward amendments on things like access to legal aid, which was not originally in that Act, and compelling the Police Service, the courts and the Public Prosecution Service to have mandatory training so that there is a much better understanding. Some of the experience that we heard spoke to the need for that type of mandatory training. We were able to enhance the legislation and are looking at more legislation, which Members have touched on.

My colleague Pam Cameron spoke about the Human Trafficking Act. Again, that speaks to an important issue. The Assembly passed that Act, but one aspect created some controversy: payment for sexual services. I raise that to draw out a story from the time of that Act. I remember debating this very issue during an engagement with students and young people. Some of the young men said, "If I want to pay for something, I should be able to do that". It was the girls in that class who said, "How dare you think that I am a commodity that you can buy". That response was powerful. It is right that there is a job to be done for some men and some young people — not all, and we should not stereotype all men. There is a job to be done for some who regard women as a commodity and who objectify women. That has to be challenged. I agree that it has to be challenged in schools and in society at large. It is vital that work be done on that.

It is important that work is also done around social media platforms. We see all the time how females in particular, but not exclusively, are pursued and trolled by men over their appearance, and it is just appalling. Westminster has a job to do on that front in the communications legislation. There must be a much tougher approach to social media platforms. New laws must be brought in to deal with that.

I commend the proposers of the motion.

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

Mr Givan: The motion will have my full support. I will do whatever I can, in my role on the Justice Committee, to help to create better legislation in this arena.

Ms Brogan: I take this opportunity to join other Members in sending condolences to the families and friends of Karen McClean and Stacey Knell. Nothing that I can say can ease the pain that their friends and families are feeling. However, it is important for us to remember them here today and to acknowledge the many other victims of violence against women and girls.

As Sinn Féin spokesperson on children and young people, I speak in support of the motion and the amendment. The horrific events in Newtownabbey last week and the killing of Sarah Everard in England at the beginning of this month have brought the issue of violence against women and girls to the fore. Those events cause profound sadness, widespread fear and deep frustration. It is incumbent on us, as Members of the Assembly, to evaluate what we, as legislators and policymakers, have done and to identify what still needs to be done. It is regrettable that we do not have a specific strategy to tackle gender-based violence and abuse in the North. I urge the Minister of Justice to initiate the development of a violence against women and girls strategy as a matter of urgency. I welcome this debate and believe that the development of such a strategy would offer a positive way forward.

Statistics reveal the scale of the task that we have ahead of us. An NSPCC report found that one in three teenage girls had already experienced some form of violence from a boyfriend. Other figures show that one in four women experiences domestic abuse. Proportionately, the rate of women murdered by a partner here is one of the highest in Europe. At the same time, statistics show the difficulty that women face in pursuing justice. Scrutiny of rape cases over a four-year period revealed a shockingly poor rate of reported cases leading to court cases, with even fewer resulting in convictions.

A strategy to tackle violence against women and girls would be a small step towards ensuring that all our children grow up in a society of equals. We all must ask the following questions. Without a strategy, are we sending our young people out into a challenging world well equipped to understand and reject violence against women and girls? Are we empowering women and girls to challenge intimidation and violence effectively? Can we teach our boys to understand that masculinity should never be expressed through the medium of violence against women and girls?

Such a strategy should consider cultural drivers of misogyny, representations of women and girls, and the way in which our children are educated. Schools across the North should have mandatory and standardised relationship and sexuality education. Our young people should be informed and educated on healthy relationships, abuse and consent, and our schools should be equipped with the necessary training and resources to provide effective and high-quality RSE. Fundamentally, violence against women and girls is not about being ill-informed or misguided. It is about inequality and the operation of power — power asserted through a direct, illegal use of violence and control, or through an indirect failure to effectively challenge that.

4.30 pm

As well as seeking changes in understanding behaviour and attitude, a strategy must scrutinise and challenge the operation of state institutions. We need to see greater

determination by the police and the Public Prosecution Service to pursue perpetrators. We need properly resourced support services to empower our victims and, on conviction, have appropriate sentencing. Last week, the British Tory Party introduced legislation in Westminster that makes toppling a statue of a slave owner subject to harsher sentencing than that given for most rape convictions. There is something seriously wrong about that. A violence against women and girls strategy should seek to identify institutional misogyny and call it out. Misogyny should be listed as a hate crime, and appropriate action should be taken.

The message must be clear: violence against women and girls has to stop, and it has to stop now. We owe it to our children and young people — girls and boys — to act with certainty and clarity. We must address our failures to ensure that their future is a future in a society of equals; a society where boys and girls, and men and women, can live without fear of abuse or violence.

Ms Sheerin: I rise in support of the motion and the amendment. I commend the Members who have brought them to the Assembly. It is timely. Others have made reference to the sad murders of two women, last week, just a couple of miles up the road. I add my condolences to those offered to their families.

According to the UN, women, worldwide, aged 15 to 44, are more at risk from domestic violence and rape than they are from war, malaria, car accidents and cancer. It is a risk that we as women are acutely aware of. When it is normalised and deemed necessary to give teenage girls rape alarms, the course has been set for their lives. Women shoulder the burden of caring responsibilities, the brunt of domestic duties, responsibility for family planning and contraception. Perhaps, it stands to reason that ensuring that we are not the victims of crime is also our job, solely.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Last week, I had a conversation with a male friend that exposed how differently we think about the issue. We were talking about the echo chamber that is social media. My politics, by virtue of my Sinn Féin membership, are fairly obvious, so my timelines are full of other lefties who will have reposted Black Lives Matter slogans, condemning racism following the killings of George Floyd and George Nkencho respectively; who will criticise Members for homophobic letters that they have written; who have expressed disgust at the cruel and insensitive protests that have been taking place at clinics, such as the protest in Newry, which has been going on for weeks. However, nothing that we have seen being discussed in the public discourse in recent times sparked the same level of reaction on my feeds, from friends as well as fellow politicians, as the murder of Sarah Everard. As I was remarking to my friend about the number of people whom I would not count as being political commenting on the issue, he was expressing shock at the levels that women go to, on a daily basis, to keep themselves safe.

Sarah Everard's murder resonated with so many women because we can all relate. We have all noticed a taxi driver taking an unexpected route, instantly felt our throat tighten, and rung a friend to tell them where we are; crossed the street on a walk at night and fashioned our keys as a weapon; told someone that we had a boyfriend, even when

we did not; laughed along at an inappropriate joke so as not to be seen as difficult; or felt a hand where we did not want one. Sarah Everard did everything that she was supposed to do — we have heard that over and over — because we are supposed to keep ourselves safe.

How many times have you heard about someone getting assaulted and then hearing a running commentary about what she was wearing, how many drinks she had consumed, whether she was on her own — whether she deserved it? It is not many years since, during a highly publicised trial relating to an alleged rape, a woman's underwear was displayed in court to prove the innocence of the accused by way of insinuations of the alleged victim's character. Lacy underwear does not mean "up for it". This sort of victim blaming is another symptom of the misogyny that is the root cause of our high levels of gender-based violence in the first instance.

Misogyny and the continued existence of the patriarchy hurt us all. Yes, it is women who bear the brunt of attacks, women who suffer the raw end of the deal with the pay gap and career advancement, and women who have to endure commentary about our appearance, our behaviour and our morality, but the societal norms perpetuated by outdated patriarchal structures hurt us all. The narrative that all men are physically strong, violent, irresponsible ogres incapable of controlling their animal instincts could not be further from reality. It does our men a huge disservice. It creates unhelpful stereotypes that prevent male victims of abuse from coming forward, prevents men from accessing mental health services, and puts up barriers to men talking about their feelings and experiences in an open way. It is not all men, but if you snigger at rape jokes or belittle the reactions of female friends or colleagues, you are part of the problem. It does us no harm to check ourselves on internalised misogyny and ask ourselves whether we are doing enough to challenge the inequality that we all witness daily.

CEDAW's concluding observations in 2019 listed worries 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. With that in mind, I welcome the introduction of this strategy, and I commend the motion.

Ms Hunter: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important topic. Our society has a deep-rooted problem with misogyny and violence against women, and I echo the previous comments of Members from around the House. The brutal murder of Stacey Knell and Karen McClean on Friday has brought the clear inadequacy of the systems designed to protect women into sharp focus. This is one of the many reasons why today the SDLP is tabling this motion.

It is unacceptable that we remain the only place on these islands without a specific strategy to address violence against women and girls. What message does that send them? There is no space for complacency while women face misogynistic abuse every day, even women in this Chamber. Unfortunately, none of us is a stranger to misogynistic abuse online, on Twitter, on doorsteps and in our everyday lives and to the fear of walking home due to those who do not understand or who choose not to understand the important concept of consent.

A key part of this debate is that there is an evident call for a shift in how we tackle this issue from an educational perspective that can act as early intervention. Younger years are where healthy perceptions and respect for women are formed and created. Society is fast-changing. Our education system must reflect its commitment to teaching about true equality in society because, if we do not teach our children to respect women, the internet will get there first and teach them, as the Member who spoke previously hinted at, to objectify women and to view them through the lens of sexuality before humanity. How many times as a woman have you been in a bar or a club or at a festival or a gig and a man has groped you? It is time to put consent on the curriculum.

As a former pupil of a Catholic school where the word "sex" was practically considered a curse word, suitable relationship and sex education was not delivered to either boys or girls. You may ask why this is relevant to the debate. Relationship and sexuality education is a vital tool in empowering our young people to overcome societal and cultural pressures and learn effectively about the power of consent. I agree with Sinéad that parenting plays a huge role, as do our schools, in ensuring that our young people build a healthy understanding of what relationships are and what they look like. Instigating sexual advances without consent is a crime that is an everyday act of violence against women.

A comprehensive student survey carried out last year laid bare the extent of sexual harassment in Northern Ireland's third-level educational institutes, with one in three students revealing that they had experienced unwanted sexual behaviour during their time at university or college. That is an astonishing statistic when you consider the psychological impact that sexual misconduct can have on each and every victim and survivor.

I am grateful for charities like Nexus NI that support victims and survivors of sexual assault. We need to play our role now and intervene. We are calling today for the introduction of a robust strategy that is underpinned by legislation.

Early intervention in our schools would play a key role in eroding sexism and place a focus on building positive lifelong relationships with women. Abuse in teenage relationships can impact all genders, but it is very important to raise that. In young adulthood, females in particular who experienced teen dating violence reported increased depression symptoms, and they were 1.5 times more likely to binge-drink or smoke and twice as likely to have suicidal thoughts.

What could we do more of? We do not teach young people enough about healthy relationships and how to identify and recognise abuse. More importantly, we do not equip them with the language to understand or talk about abuse. It is time that we instilled a core belief of equality and sent a strong message to our young people, with appropriate education, in order to prevent further violence against women across the North.

Mr G Kelly: I welcome the fact that a number of Members tabled the motion, and I am glad to be able to speak on it.

Over the last short while, I have heard a lot of the discourse about the issue. One of the things that really stood out for me was how women are taught to protect themselves, and Emma Sheerin shared some of the ways

of doing that, which I had heard about on the radio. Many women walk home alone at night carrying keys between their fingers in case they have to fight someone off. They have to plan their route home to make sure that they are on busy roads with plenty of lights and cameras, just in case. They are taught to tuck their long hair into the backs of their coats, and they get male taxi drivers to drop them off a few doors away from their home as they worry about those taxi drivers knowing where they live.

Members talked about statistics, and I was struck by those in the recent investigation by UN Women UK. It found that 97% of women aged 18 to 24 had been sexually harassed and that a further 96% did not report those situations because they believed that it would make no difference at all.

What are we to do? I firmly believe that, as men, we need to listen to the voices of women and to amplify their voices. We need to change the attitudes that feed that violence. We know that men suffer violence too, and a number of Members said that, but this is about women and girls, and the research and statistics show that the overwhelming and vast majority of victims are women and that men perpetrate the majority of that violence. World Health Organization statistics show that 82% of the victims of intimate partner homicides are women.

The discussion should not be focused on how women can protect themselves but on how men challenge and change their behaviours. That does not just mean avoiding being a perpetrator but challenging other men and calling out insulting or inappropriate behaviour. Often, misogynistic comments are passed off as jokes. However, what starts as jokes about women are insults. Those insults feed into a culture of misogyny, which leads to more serious incidents of violence. We need to have the uncomfortable conversations, because the longer that we go on without tackling the fundamental problems of misogyny and sexism, the longer that levels of violence against women will remain unacceptable.

A YouGov survey that was carried out by UN Women UK found that only 4% of women reported incidents of sexual harassment. That is a shockingly low figure and a damning indictment of how the criminal justice system has failed women for too long. There is a responsibility on the police to take complaints of sexual harassment and other forms of violence seriously. As a member of the Policing Board, I know that moves have been made in that area, but they have not been enough, by any stretch of the imagination. The police need to be given sufficient training to allow them to effectively investigate claims of violence against women and girls and to spot offences and gather evidence so that those cases can be effectively prosecuted. There also needs to be training in the Public Prosecution Service and the judiciary. When the retired judge John Gillen spoke in the media yesterday, I think it was, I noticed that he mentioned specifically that the judiciary needs that training also.

I was pleased to see mandatory training for police officers in the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act in order to allow them to police the newly introduced domestic abuse offence. Training needs to be rolled out on all forms of violence against women and girls, including issues such as harassment, stalking and sexual violence.

4.45 pm

I finish by emphasising what I said earlier: there is an imperative on men not just to listen to women but to amplify what they say so that we can all reduce misogyny and violence drastically until it becomes a thing of the past.

Ms Bradshaw: I support the motion and the amendment. Sadly, the motion is very well timed. It comes after a weekend in which it appears that we again faced the horror of two women being murdered here in Northern Ireland. It is deeply shocking, yet it continues to happen.

In my constituency, in the past year, there have, sadly, been other tragic examples. We remember Emma McParland, who was murdered in the Ormeau Road area in April, and Susan Baird, who was murdered in the Four Winds area in August. Given that the murder rate in Northern Ireland is comparatively low, the fact that we can easily recall incidents in which women were the victims within the past year and within a few miles of the Chamber reinforces that we have a specific problem that requires a specific intervention.

It was, of course, the deeply troubling murder in London, some distance from here, that really hit the headlines. Perhaps that is because Sarah Everard did everything right — she made her route known, kept to well-lit locations and notified people that she was leaving — yet she was still the victim of a chilling murder. That led to an outpouring of women sharing their experiences, and every single woman has experiences to share.

Before continuing, I put on record that, when I talk about women, I of course include trans women. I also recognise the particular vulnerability of sex workers.

Of course, men can be victims of violence. Indeed, they are proportionately more likely to be, but we have faced up to the challenge that that is largely because we tolerate too easily violence and toxicity among males from an early age. We need to move towards a society where violence is never seen as the answer. There are specific circumstances here in Northern Ireland that we cannot ignore. We still have a hangover from the Troubles, where pain and injury were used as legitimate mechanisms to try to exert authority and control and to instil fear, and we have done little to tackle the resulting gang culture that is still referred to as paramilitarism, where men who threaten or use violence are seen by some as role models in their community. There is something deeply toxic and troubling about that and the fact that it is still going on a generation after the agreement.

What about the victims? Women who suffer gender-based violence often do so in silence. Such is the way in which society has skewed this that victims often end up feeling shame and as though they have only themselves to blame. Why should women just walking home be expected to do so many things right? It is an example of why Naomi Long's work in the Justice Ministry over the past year has been vital. She has brought forward the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill and the Protection from Stalking Bill. As my party colleague outlined, work has also begun to outlaw upskirting and to develop a victims of crime commissioner's office. That is vital work. It is essential that it proceeds quickly so that not only are clear offences created in law but a message is sent that violence against and the abuse of women and vulnerable people will not be tolerated in any way.

If we are really interested in preventative work, we also need a complete shift in social attitudes. That is why the strategy to tackle and prevent gender-based violence makes this a seminal moment. It is urgent, but the process of developing the strategy must be far-reaching and inclusive.

We are well behind our neighbours. The Irish Government have had a strategy since 2010. Only this month, the Citizens' Assembly was looking at the issue. The potential for a victims of gender-based violence commissioner was raised, although I would like there to be a focus on having fewer victims in the first place. Scotland's Equally Safe strategy focuses on preventing violence and maximising safety. Surely we must draw on that. It also has a delivery plan from 2017 that is, rightly, based on a shared approach. That will be vital here.

It is important to acknowledge that there have been some improvements in how the PSNI handles allegations of domestic abuse and attacks on women, but there is still some way to go. We need to move as swiftly as possible to continue to deliver on the recommendations in the report of the Gillen review of law and procedures in serious sexual offences.

Even getting the issue into the public domain has not been possible without the help and campaigning of the likes of Nexus, Women's Aid, Victim Support, Reclaim the Night and Raise Your Voice. As others have mentioned today, MAP has also been very prominent in keeping the agenda in the public mind. It has been responsible for raising awareness and providing emotional and practical support, without which many vulnerable victims —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Bradshaw: — would sadly be lost. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Carroll: I begin by thanking the Members for bringing the motion and the amendment to the House, both of which I will be supporting today. As others have noted, the motion is extremely timely, given the devastatingly tragic deaths of Karen McClean and Stacey Knell. It is hard to imagine the grief that their families and friends feel at their loss, and I extend my sympathy to all of them today. Although the motion is timely because of the tragic circumstances that saw two women murdered, it is also long overdue. The senseless deaths of women before Karen and Stacey are evidence of that.

Violence against women that has not led to their death is also something that is far too common. From the beginning of October 2019 to the end of September 2020, over 32,000 domestic abuse incidents were reported across the North. Domestic abuse crimes made up almost a fifth of police recorded crime during that period. We have heard of the impact of COVID on victims of domestic violence, and those figures are a reflection of the increase in such crimes, but domestic violence rates were unacceptable long before the pandemic. Support for women in those situations has been unacceptable for far too long. From the underfunding of rape crisis services while the number of recorded rapes rose to the implementation of welfare reform, which has hindered the ability of women to leave abusive relationships because their husband is often the sole recipient of their household's earnings, the Assembly has made conscious decision after conscious decision to underfund, cut and limit the help that women across

the North need in order to protect themselves. As has been referred to already, hard-working organisations such as Women's Aid and Nexus have had to fight very hard indeed for rape crisis services. Women who face intimidation and violence in their home are still eligible for fewer intimidation points than someone who is facing a paramilitary threat. What message does that send out to victims of abuse? Some of those women in abusive relationships —

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for taking an intervention. I absolutely agree with you on your point about intimidation points. It is an issue that one of our councillors has raised with Mid Ulster District Council over the last number of years. I am delighted that Minister Hargey initiated a review, which was carried on in her absence by Carál Ní Chuilín. It is an unacceptable situation and circumstance that we have had women who could not be rehomed, yet their abusers could be. I therefore absolutely agree with the Member, but I have to point out the fact that the issue is being addressed.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for her intervention. As I am sure is the case in her constituency, I hear too often in my constituency of cases of women having non-molestation orders (NMOs) and having to take action against abusive partners or ex-partners. I therefore really look forward to the work coming forward from the Minister on dealing with that.

Some of those women who are in abusive relationships have to carry their abuser's child, potentially tying them forever to that person because they still cannot access basic abortion services in our society. Basic consent and respect, to which Members have referred, is still not taught to many children in schools, despite the overwhelming evidence that such early intervention is crucial to preventing sexual crimes against women. This has already been mentioned, but it is quite shocking that we have generations and generations of young people who can access sexual images and pornography at the touch of a button when they still do not have access to proper consent classes in schools, in which young people can discuss these things openly. That really does baffle the mind. We also need to desegregate schools so that boys and girls — young men and young women — are being educated together. That is very important.

There is also the utter failure to address the lack of conviction rates for rape and assault and to put in place measures to prevent questions in court and reporting in the press that normalises the behaviour of talking about women's sexual history and, as has already been referred to, disgracefully showing their underwear in court.

How disgraceful that a Member of the Assembly attends protests outside health clinics in Newry alongside people waving traumatising images and crucifixes of women and normalises that behaviour.

Verbal and emotional abuse towards women is unacceptable and has to be challenged and called out. As I said, during the debate on the Justice Minister's Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill recently:

"The biggest challenge to gender-based violence will come from the fight against inequalities and oppression in society, which are, very often, not

only enshrined by institutions but made worse and perpetrated by those in the institutions.” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 135, p44, col 1].

The Minister agreed with me and said:

“We have to look at how society is structured if we are to do that successfully. It is not simply about one piece of legislation or action.” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 135, p48, col 1].

At the time, I and others in the Chamber pushed for a targeted strategy for women and girls, recognising that they are overwhelmingly the victims of gender-based crime, but we were told that it was not the remit, at the time, of the Justice Minister to oversee such a strategy. I have no doubt that any such strategy should be cross-departmental, with funding committed from each Department and prioritised by various Ministers. The Department of Justice should play a leading role to tackle the ways that women are further victimised and traumatised by the criminal justice system here.

We support the motion and amendment today, which strengthens the onus on the Executive to act, and we are adamant that this issue cannot be shirked nor the buck passed. It must be prioritised and funded right across Departments.

Mr Speaker: I call the First Minister to respond. The Minister will have 20 minutes.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate today. It is always good to come to a debate where there is, more or less, unanimity on where we are going. I stand here today as a mother, a daughter, a wife, a sister and a friend. It grieves me that we are still having this conversation about the unacceptably high levels of violence towards women and girls in Northern Ireland and, of course, right across the globe. That is the reality that we still face.

I want to join colleagues from across the Chamber and extend my condolences to the family and friends of Karen McClean and Stacey Knell at this terrible time of sadness and grief. I note, from today's local media, that the families have said that they do not want us to politicise their deaths but, rather, see them for what they were — murder. It is very important that we remember that families are grieving, because their names, like that of Sarah Everard, will be said over and over again. Sometimes that is very difficult for families to hear, but families are in such grief today. Sadly, they are not alone. A new report shows that, in the United Kingdom, a woman is killed by a man every three days.

I also share the many concerns expressed today by Members across the Chamber. I thank those who have shared their experiences. We have heard some of them. There have been some terrible stories about the experiences of too many women and girls. The Member for South Belfast Ms Bradshaw said that, after the murder of Sarah Everard, people wanted to come forward and talk about their experiences of when they were out on a Saturday evening or walking home in the evening. I am not that old that I cannot remember being at university and walking home late at night and being worried about who was watching me. I had my keys in my hand, ready to put them into the door the minute that I got there. Of course, it is totally unacceptable. We must all unite to send a clear

message of zero tolerance for this behaviour, and we should all stand shoulder to shoulder with the victims. As an Executive and a community, we need to work together to address this scourge.

5.00 pm

When I was at Queen's University, one of my favourite books as a law undergraduate was 'Eve Was Framed', by Helena — now Baroness — Kennedy, who was shining a light on the legal system and what the experience was for women, whether they were defendants or complainants or, indeed, practitioners. Unfortunately, we still have a long way to go. She was pointing out all the experiences that she had had as a young barrister, but she was also reflecting on the experience of female defendants and complainants at that time. There is much more that needs to happen so that women's voices in the legal system are heard in an appropriate and effective way.

As a young lawyer, I was often given the non-molestation applications — as you can imagine, it was a case of, “The young woman in the office can deal with those” — so I have some personal experience of how women were treated in the legal system, albeit about 20 years ago now and, as a young lawyer, of presenting cases to magistrates, as they were at that time. If I am honest, it was not always a positive experience, so I was pleased to hear Members — for example, the Member for Lagan Valley, Mr Givan, who was the first male to speak in the debate — reference training for the justice system and the police family. That is so needed, but, of course, we always want to do more.

The terrible murders at the weekend show once again not only that women feel afraid or under threat from danger and violence on our streets but that, for so many, the danger is in their home. For far too many women and girls, the home is not a place of sanctuary where they can feel safe but rather one of harm and violence. Those of us who live in the safety of our home and who, sometimes, long for its safety find it very difficult to understand that as being the case. Not only should we send a clear message of zero tolerance of violent behaviour, it is critical that we tackle the root causes of the behaviours that women and girls experience in their daily lives.

Members have spoken quite a lot this afternoon about co-design. That is important for the new strategy. Obviously, there are key stakeholders, and many have mentioned the wonderful work of Women's Aid across Northern Ireland and others. However, I feel that it is important that we also engage with young women in the design of the strategy so that we hear their voices and experiences and that we are not just hearing from the stakeholders, important as that is.

Ms S Bradley: Will the First Minister give way?

Mrs Foster: Yes, I will, absolutely.

Ms S Bradley: I appreciate the Minister's words. Would you also agree that there is a perception that it is just young women? Violence is directed towards all women equally, and older women are more hesitant to come forward and tell their story.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for that point. It is important. I remember one terrible sexual assault and rape case involving a pensioner. It was horrendous to listen to the details. I absolutely agree with the Member that there

is a need to speak to older people and even, perhaps, to engage with the Older People's Commissioner as well.

Social media has been mentioned, and I and many others have spoken in the House about the personal abuse that we have suffered as public representatives, much of it based on sexist and outdated attitudes; indeed, it is a sad reality that women in public life endure that type of hate on a regular if not daily basis. It is indicative of the sheer extent of the problems in society and demonstrates a deeply rooted hate and prejudice that is, sadly, something that social media seems to have exacerbated. It needs to be dealt with, and I agree with my friend, the Member for Lagan Valley, Mr Givan, when he says that Westminster must take steps on the matter. I know that colleagues in Westminster are raising that issue.

It is the underlying sexism and misogyny that give rise to domestic abuse, violence, injury and the murder of women and girls.

We need to make cultural and societal change in order to ensure that there are healthy behaviours and attitudes towards women and girls. We need preventative initiatives that build on positive experiences and work with a proven track record that actually makes a difference. While good work is being carried out, I agree absolutely that more needs to be done. It is critical that we tackle those attitudes at the earliest opportunity through education, community initiatives and in homes right across Northern Ireland.

I welcome that the Executive and the Assembly have been able to prioritise action to tackle domestic and sexual violence and abuse as well as stalking and harassment since the restoration of the institutions in January last year. That was a recognition of the serious issues that are involved, the lack of progress on them in Northern Ireland compared with elsewhere and the need to take urgent action. I also note what has been said today about hate crime and misogyny. I know that there has been some consideration of those in the hate crime review, and we will closely examine those recommendations and the consideration of the proposals that I know is happening elsewhere across the United Kingdom.

Ms Dillon: I thank the First Minister for taking the intervention. Obviously, we are late coming out of the blocks on the violence against women and girls strategy, but that gives us an opportunity to learn from the other strategies across these islands, such as those in Scotland, Wales, England, and in the Twenty-six Counties, where they are on their second strategy, covering 2016-2021. We should try to learn from good and bad practice in all those strategies.

Mrs Foster: That is a very important point. Part of the delay is, obviously, because this place was not functioning for three years. If you look at some of the strategies that are in place, you will see that they came into being around that time, albeit the Republic of Ireland's strategy has been in place for longer. Certainly, the strategies in England, Wales and Scotland were made at that time. It is good that we can learn from what is in place in those jurisdictions.

As I say, there has been consideration of the hate crime review. We will look at those recommendations and take into account what is happening across the UK. It is also important that any proposed action on this is workable and that it genuinely tackles violence against

women and girls. Undoubtedly, the issue will require the careful consideration of all the potential implications. In that context, we are debating the specific issue of the dedicated strategy to tackle gender-based violence and abuse. The action is urgent and most needed. We recognise that our neighbouring jurisdictions, as pointed out, have strategies in place, and we will, of course, look at them and take them into account. Northern Ireland also needs to take action and give dedicated consideration to how best to change behaviours and protect women and girls. No woman or girl should live in violence.

I listened very carefully to what the Member for East Londonderry Ms Hunter had to say about students and their experience of sexual violence. It is not just sexual violence that young women at university have to deal with; it is general violence as well, and, unfortunately, for some political activists whom I have been associated with in my party, there is also politically based intimidation and threats towards young women who are identified as vulnerable because they are young unionists in a university setting in Northern Ireland. That is totally unacceptable. We always have to make space for difference and for people to be allowed to articulate their political viewpoint. I find it so offensive that young women who identify as unionists at Queen's University in Belfast are under threat and are intimidated. It has to stop. I hope that we can also address that in any strategy.

I welcome that the Assembly and Executive are considering all those matters. I am committed to being a champion for supporting meaningful actions to produce real results. I am fully supportive of the task force that will examine all the suggestions that have been made today and that will look at those and other strategies in other jurisdictions in order to identify what we need to do and what actions we need to put in place.

It is a matter of huge sorrow to me that, once again, there are families and friends grieving today due to violence against women.

It grieves me that there are many homes across Northern Ireland where there are women and young children living in fear of violence. It is an issue that we can unite on, with a firm commitment to work collaboratively to do all that we can as public representatives to help and support all those women and girls to live a life free from fear, pain and violence.

Mr Speaker: I call Rachel Woods to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. The Member has five minutes.

Miss Woods: In my closing remarks, I thank all those who have indicated their support and highlighted the reasons why the changes that we need are so significant for victims of violence, abuse, harassment and misogyny. All the Members who spoke have touched on the need for a strategy; the need for things to change; the need for the experience of victims to be reflected; the need for education on consent, respect and being believed; and the need for support and help. I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for being here today. I also thank the First Minister for her comments. There is a shared will across the Chamber to do something. As the First Minister said, there is unanimity across the Chamber on the need to tackle the root causes of the reality that faces women and girls across Northern Ireland and to listen to their lived experience. I recognise that producing a violence

against women and girls strategy is the responsibility of the whole Executive. Each Minister and Department needs to consider what is within their remit and how they will contribute to the changes that we need to see. It is clear that what we have been doing is not working. Something needs to change. Women have been failed for too long.

As noted in the 'Belfast Telegraph' today, eight women have been killed in Northern Ireland since our society and economy were first plunged into lockdown in March last year. That does not include a mother and her daughter who were murdered in the previous March in Newry. They will never be forgotten. Our thoughts are with them and their loved ones. I do not want to be back here in several weeks, months or years to hear about more women being murdered or to ask and urge the Executive to do what we already know needs to be done.

The time for action is now. We need to stop neutralising gender in government policies. We must recognise how gender norms shape identity, desires, practices and behaviours. We must teach our young people how gender norms can be harmful and negatively influence people's choices and behaviour, and we must acknowledge that gender roles and expectations can be changed. Those social constructs are not set in stone. They are learned behaviours, and they can be changed. We must recognise gender-based violence and understand that our ideas about gender and gender stereotypes can affect how we treat other people. That includes discrimination and violence, which includes bullying, sexual harassment, psychological violence, domestic violence and abuse, rape, female genital mutilation, forced marriage and homophobic and transphobic violence and abuse. We must acknowledge that all forms of gender-based violence are wrong and a violation of human rights.

We need to teach our young people how gender stereotypes can contribute to bullying, discrimination, abuse and violence and explain that sexual abuse and gender-based violence are crimes about power and dominance, not about one's inability to control one's sexual desire. We need to recognise that gender inequality and gender role stereotypes contribute to gender-based violence. We need to demonstrate ways to argue for gender equality and to stand up to gender discrimination or gender-based violence. Those are all points taken from UNESCO's guidance on comprehensive sexuality education. It needs to happen for Northern Ireland.

A strategy is better late than never. Proper resourcing and implementation will be the ultimate test for the Executive. We do not want some words on a page that gathers dust on a shelf. We need change and action. We must rely on evidence-based policies and interventions to ignite and sustain wider societal change. The research, reports and recommendations are all done and are there in front of us. We need to get it done. Let us get it done together. I commend the motion, as amended, to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call Justin McNulty to make a winding-up speech on the motion. I advise the Member that he has 10 minutes.

Mr McNulty: I thank every Member wholeheartedly for their impassioned contributions today. I rise with a deep sense of sadness in my heart to speak on this sensitive and crucial motion on a strategy to tackle violence against women and girls. It is so sad that the North of Ireland has

the highest rate of domestic violence in Europe. Why? There have been eight violent deaths and over 32,000 instances of domestic violence since lockdown began. My heart bleeds for the women and girls who feel unsafe in their own homes. My heart bleeds.

5.15 pm

I spoke to Women's Aid. What a powerful force for good and what a wonderful organisation it is. Its representatives say that we need early intervention and prevention, with frameworks for teaching children and young people about trust, equality, respect, consent and healthy relationships. Women's Aid knows that males need to be included in that. It wants men and boys to have the confidence to call out and challenge threatening or abusive attitudes towards women. It says that men should be as horrified by the stats as women are. I am. From that perspective, I wholeheartedly support Judge Gillen's recommendations.

Women's Aid says that the system is totally bent towards perpetrators being able to abuse women and children. How can it feel like that in 2021? If there is an instance of violence in a pub, the perpetrator is charged and goes to jail. If it happens in the home, the perpetrator gets away with it. Perpetrators get legal aid while victims have to finance their own justice, but they never get there. How can that be? The system aids and abets perpetrators. The experience of many women is that of fear, shame, guilt and trepidation. They worry about their safety while in their own homes and live 24/7 under the threat of constant violence and abuse.

Those women know that physical wounds can be healed, but emotional and mental wounds are much more insidious, and it takes much more to recover from them. Under that constant threat and coercive control, these women are living in an environment of sheer hell in their own homes. That is why Women's Aid and the safe refuge that it provides are so important.

We must also remember the suicides, which are not included in the stats. Trauma, fear and despair have driven many women to take their own lives.

Sadly, we are all aware of the stark data that shows that instances of domestic violence have escalated during the pandemic. Women's Aid says that lockdown has inadvertently created a perfect storm for domestic violence. The "Stay at home" message has been devastating for many women and girls for whom home is not a safe place.

There is a 15-year high of instances of domestic violence in the North. What do you think happened to funding for Women's Aid here during that escalation? The funding went down. How can we explain that? How can we justify that? How can that be acceptable? I am disgusted.

Women's Aid welcomes the U-turn by the Minister. The Minister is on record as previously wanting to stay gender-neutral. Today's debate shows that that position is at odds with Members' views.

I place on record my thanks to Women's Aid and to my colleague Sinéad Bradley, who no doubt strongly influenced the Minister's change of position. However, nobody will take away from the greatest influence of all in this sensitive issue: the sad deaths of women over recent

months, all the instances of domestic violence and the fear and threats experienced by women in their own homes.

I will touch on Members' contributions. Proposing the motion, Sinéad Bradley stated strongly that she wants to make this place, our shared home, a safe place for women and girls. It is simply not good enough that we lag behind other parts of these islands in protections and supports for women and girls. The need for us to keep women and girls safe cannot be overstated.

Rachel Woods said that the system was not working. The problem is male violence against women and girls. It is very sad that, despite the issue having been raised by Women's Aid, it has taken so long for action to be taken, and women have lost their lives. A focus on identity issues to the detriment of keeping women and girls safe is wrong. Flags do not protect women in their homes.

Pam Cameron said that one in five women in the UK will experience a sexual assault. That is shocking and disgusting. Linda Dillon expressed her condolences to all families who have lost loved ones to domestic violence. Kellie Armstrong wanted to send out a clear signal to all that acts of violence against women and children are wrong and will not be tolerated.

Rosemary Barton said that gender violence against women is systematic abuse to reinforce power over them. Women are left with physical and non-physical wounds. Since lockdown, the number of women who have experienced a domestic violence incident has doubled.

Paul Givan stated his support for a gendered strategy that focuses on tackling violence against women and girls. Nicola Brogan said that violence against women was about power and that the police and the PPS needed to pursue perpetrators.

Emma Sheerin spoke about her Sinn Féin values. She said that she was disgusted at how horrific it is for rape victims to be made to feel like the guilty party. Cara Hunter said that there is no room for complacency when women face misogynistic abuse every day. She said that we have to teach society to respect women.

Gerry Kelly said that this was about women and girls. He said that, in 82% of intimate partner homicides, women are the victims. Paula Bradshaw said that this is a seminal moment in tackling gender-based violence, and we all agree with that.

Gerry Carroll said that women facing intimidation in the home get fewer intimidation points than those who claim to have received paramilitary threats. How can that be justified? The First Minister said that she saw the deaths of the victims of domestic violence for what they were — murder. She wants to stand shoulder to shoulder with every one of those victims, and I think that everybody in the House stands shoulder to shoulder with those victims.

Thank you all for your contributions. I support the motion and the amendment.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly condemns violence against women and girls in all forms; notes with concern that Northern Ireland is the only place on these islands that does not have a specific strategy to tackle gender-based violence and abuse; regrets that the Executive are failing to meet their international obligations in this regard; and calls on the Executive to take immediate action to eliminate gender-based violence by introducing a violence against women and girls strategy that is fully resourced and underpinned by legislation to make misogyny a hate crime, and to introduce standardised, comprehensive relationships and sexuality education in our schools to eradicate sexist attitudes and build lifelong, positive relationships.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a moment before we move to the next item of business.

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

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask Members who are not participating in the Adjournment debate to take their leave of the Chamber.

Motion made:

*That the Assembly do now adjourn. —
[Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.]*

Adjournment

Road Safety at Schools in Mid Ulster

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: In conjunction with the Business Committee, Mr Speaker has given leave to Mr Keith Buchanan to raise the matter of road safety at schools in Mid Ulster. The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes.

Mr K Buchanan: Road safety affects everyone. Communities are very sensitive to road safety and related issues, such as speeding and heavy vehicles. Road safety, especially the safety of children outside schools, is one of the frequent concerns received by my constituency office. By maintaining children's safety outside schools and exercising a little extra care and caution, drivers and pedestrians can coexist safely in and around our schools.

There are approximately 120 preschool, nursery, primary and post-primary schools in Mid Ulster registered with the Education Authority (EA). Some of them are on shared campuses and some are in large towns, but many are in rural locations. Statistics for the 2019 calendar year, published on 27 March 2020 by the PSNI, showed that there was a total of 5,676 injuries as a result of road traffic collisions. Sadly, 56 fatalities were recorded and 774 people were seriously injured. Seventy-one children under the age of 16 were killed or seriously injured during the period. That number had risen by eight children from the previous year. Any death on our roads is a tragedy, and we must do all that we can to prevent further death or injury because of road traffic collisions. Seven districts showed an increase in overall casualties between 2018 and 2019, most notably in my own constituency of Mid Ulster, which increased from 598 to 704 casualties overall. That shows the need for this timely debate.

When we talk about road safety at schools, a number of key issues need to be considered. In general, they include the speed of traffic; road layout; the need for additional safety and road awareness; traffic overtaking near schools; parking; school entrances and exits; unsafe crossing facilities; inadequate or poorly designed drop-off/parking areas, especially at rural schools; lack of cycleways and footpaths; unsafe pedestrian activity to and from school buses; unsafe bus-stopping locations, again especially at rural schools; and speed indicator devices (SIDs), to which I will refer later.

During schools' drop-off and pick-up times, roads in their immediate vicinity are especially busy. On a number of occasions, constituents have expressed their frustration with the congestion and parking in and around schools. The 2020 edition of 'School Site Road Safety' by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) states the following:

"Child pedestrian road risk increases as children become more independent (from aged 10 upwards), with most child casualties occurring between the school run hours, namely 8:00–9:00 and 15:00–16:00. This is due to this age group being more likely to move around unaccompanied by adults, and also having ...

physical limitations that make them more vulnerable in road traffic than adults."

Parking on pavements is an important issue to consider. Let us look at that from a child's perspective. A child's-eye view is much lower than that of an adult. Children's height already restricts their view. Add a parked car or other vehicle to that, and one can appreciate how limited their awareness is. Pavement parking not only restricts children's vision but hinders those with a pram, pushchair or wheelchair and, indeed, those who are visually impaired. Everyone needs to practise and consider responsible parking.

5.30 pm

In a recent response to a question tabled by my Committee colleague and Chair of the Infrastructure Committee, Michelle McLlveen, the Minister for Infrastructure stated that her Department:

"is committed to increasing the level of sustainable travel in Northern Ireland and I am aware that cars parked inconsiderately on footways present real challenges for footway users, including for people with visual impairment and mobility issues."

She went on to say:

"I am ... keen to explore if further measures may be necessary and I can confirm that my Department is currently investigating options for dealing with pavement parking on a broader basis."

That is very welcome news, especially to many in Magherafelt, which is local to me, who have raised particular concerns about parking on the pavement in the vicinity of Greenvale Leisure Centre. Those attending to exercise want to park right beside the building, which is somewhat strange when there is a car park right beside it. They want to park right beside it, on the pavement, and then go in to exercise.

A report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People said that parents, children and young people voiced their concerns about traffic congestion close to schools and how that has an impact on the safety of students who are walking and cycling. The report stated that, in some cases, pupils expressed their concern about the absence of school crossing patrols, insufficient pedestrian crossings near the school and the lack of traffic-calming measures around the school. I urge the Minister for Infrastructure to work closely alongside the Minister of Education on that.

In September, along with other MLAs, I welcomed the news of the roll-out of the 20 mph speed limit at 100 schools across Northern Ireland. I also welcome the news, yesterday, from the Minister that part-time speed limits have now been set in legislation for 103 schools at 90 sites across Northern Ireland. It is hoped that, with the implementation of those speed limits, children, parents and teachers across Northern Ireland will see an improvement on the roads around their schools. Schools in my constituency that have benefited from this are St Trea's Primary School in Ballyronan, Ampertaine Primary School in Upperlands, St Brigid's Primary School in Mayogall, St Eoghan's Primary School in Draperstown, Edendork Primary School and Orritor Primary School. Woods Primary

School close to Ballyronan benefits from a part-time speed limit of 20 mph that was introduced in September 2018. I believe that more schools, especially in rural areas, could benefit from these measures, and I encourage the local PSNI to ensure that the limits are enforced.

The signage and speed limit change should bring about a reduction in speed at those locations and are welcome, but, as was previously mentioned, the speed indicator devices, or SIDs as they are commonly known, give the actual speed that a vehicle is travelling at. It promotes immediate and future behavioural change. In recent months, I have worked with the local policing and community safety partnership (PCSP) to purchase more SIDs and have them located across Mid Ulster at strategic points, including close to schools. I work with local businesses, and a local business in Newmills purchased one, at a cost of £2,800. That device is currently in operation, and the community in this through-village, as it is known, has seen immediate benefits due to the flexibility of the device, which can be moved to other roads in the village. Other groups and communities across Mid Ulster that I work with see the benefits of these simple devices and are striving to have them installed in their area.

Improving the physical infrastructure is an effective way of reducing road safety risk, and there is a wide range of examples, including improvements to road layout, street lighting, road signage and traffic management. It is also important to remember that the planning, design and build of new roads and housing developments should ensure that road safety and access is a key priority. Road safety interventions can help to encourage physical activity by creating a safer physical road environment and reducing the level of danger posed to vulnerable road users. It is, therefore, imperative that we consider what we can do to improve road safety, especially around our schools, as that will not only enhance our children's safety but encourage parents to allow their children to walk or cycle to school, thereby improving their health and well-being.

Physical speed-reducing measures, such as road narrowing or roundabouts, can help to ensure that cars maintain a safe speed. In some areas, speed bumps or humps, as they are referred to, can also be used, but they are not always appropriate. The responsibility for road safety in and around our schools is something that we should all consider and is everyone's responsibility, but it is important that schools, the PSNI local roads division, parents and local community groups all avail themselves of road safety training and ensure that training is delivered to all our schoolchildren, both primary and post-primary. A holistic approach to road safety is needed and should be advocated where policy, engineering, awareness campaigns and education are used to improve the road safety at all our schools across Northern Ireland.

I welcome the introduction of the 20 mph speed limit at 100 schools across Northern Ireland and would welcome funding for that initiative to continue for additional schools.

In summary, I call on the Minister for Infrastructure to commit to looking at the use of SIDs more widely at schools, which would be more cost-effective, in conjunction with the actual speed limit for that location, either the current speed limit or the roll-out of future 20 mph zones at the schools incorporating SIDs. I am more than happy to work with her Department on a trial of this principle at a Mid Ulster school. The devices have an

immediate impact on driver behaviour and are a visual indication of the vehicle's speed. I ask the Minister to work with the Minister of Education to promote road safety and awareness not just for pedestrians but for all vehicle users at all our schools.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: In a debate such as this, the proposer is allocated 15 minutes to propose the motion, and the Minister is allocated 10 minutes to respond. There are three other Members listed to speak. I did some basic mathematics, and that gives every Member 11 minutes and 46 seconds each, should you choose to use them. Given that Mr Buchanan did not use his full allocation, you may choose to use a little more if you wish. No pressure.

Ms Dillon: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Thank you, Deputy Principal Speaker. Sorry, Principal Deputy Speaker. I keep forgetting how to say it in English. I assure you that I will not be using anything near the 11 minutes.

To be fair, Mr Buchanan has covered many of the points. It might seem that I am repeating some of them, but they are extremely important. I know that the Minister has rolled out the 20 mph limit outside schools, and we campaigned for that a number of years ago. The campaign started in Conor Murphy's time, but I want the measure to be rolled out further. Some schools in my constituency are in a very precarious position and have dangerous roads outside their gates. I specifically refer to St Joseph's Primary School in Galbally, which has a real issue with speeding cars.

We are engaging with the Education Minister because both the school and its site are not fit for purpose. In the interim, we need to ensure that the children are safe. There have been a number of serious accidents on that road. I would be grateful if the Minister could give us a timeline for the roll-out of 20 mph speed limits. I also welcome Mr Buchanan's mentioning SIDs. They are an extremely useful tool in the fight against danger on our roads.

As I said, Galbally is one primary school, but there are many primary schools with similar issues. I am sure that other Members will mention the fact that we represent a very large rural constituency and have many schools that were probably not built in the best place. However, they are where they are. We have very dangerous roads outside those schools with speeding traffic — often heavy goods vehicles — breaking the speed limit. I have regularly seen vehicles moving at 70 and 80 mph outside schools. Recently, there was a situation in Aughmullan where young people were dipping outside the school and almost hitting the wall of the school. If anyone had been leaving the school at that time, it would have been very dangerous. There were pupils in the school because we were still catering for key workers. All those issues have to be dealt with.

In his opening and closing remarks, Mr Buchanan said something of vital importance: the Minister for Infrastructure and the Minister of Education need to work together because there are schools that need footpaths. St Brigid's Primary School in Brockagh has been promised a footpath for quite some time. St Mary's Primary School, Dunamore, in my constituency, which looks up the road to Orritor Primary School, which has beautiful footpaths, has been left behind. The school feels that that is historical neglect, and it is historical neglect. Such areas need footpaths.

Other areas have worked together with the Education Authority to find the best solution, whether a transport

or a DFI solution. We need to be more imaginative and work together. Again, Mr Buchanan said that we need to work together as a community with DFI, Education, and the police to find solutions. DFI may have a large part of the responsibility, but I recognise that it does not have sole responsibility, and I appreciate that the Minister has come here today. I ask the Minister to work closely with the Education Minister. Maybe we need to set up a task force or a working group to address the issue with other Departments, as I do not believe that it can be addressed by the Minister for Infrastructure alone. However, as I said, it does need to be addressed by the Department for Infrastructure. I know that funding was put into the Safe Routes to School initiative, but there needs to be a greater understanding of the position in rural constituencies.

You may need only a small stretch of footpath if you are in a town or a large village, but if you live in a small village or an outlying area, you are starting from a point of zero. For those communities, £10,000 is no good, so we need to start being more imaginative and look at what we need to do rather than filling in patches of footpaths in big towns and villages where, in some cases, there is already plenty. We should start looking at those areas where we are starting from the point of zero and where we have growing numbers. My area of Clonoe, where I live, has grown massively, with at least five new developments over the last few years. That is great to see, and the Minister's Department has put some investment into the area. We fought hard for that and got a good response, which I welcome and acknowledge, but much more needs to happen and to be done because we have growing communities, and we need to put the infrastructure in to allow people to remain in the areas that they want to live in, where they have grown up and where they want to raise their families. Thank you for coming to the Chamber.

Mr McGlone: I thank Mr Buchanan, if he is listening, but maybe he has gone, for introducing the Adjournment debate on road safety at schools in Mid Ulster. It is an issue that I have highlighted repeatedly during my time as a councillor and as an MLA working with other elected representatives, and we have successively lobbied different Ministers on behalf of many of the rural schools in the constituency to introduce measures to improve road safety.

One issue, and I thank Ms Dillon for touching on it, is the location of the schools. Many of them, with a few additions or renovations etc, have been in the exact same location for many years. When the roads that they are on were built, the only means of transport were horses. Those roads remain, by and large but with a lick of tar on them, the exact same. Some of the schools are on corners, twists and bends and the like; they are part of the community, and that is the way that it is. Those elements have to be taken into consideration too as we adopt a creative approach. There cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach by any means, manner or fashion, because measures that will work at some schools will not work at others. We have to bear that in mind.

The Minister recently announced part-time 20 mph speed limits for 103 schools at 90 sites across the North, including several in Mid Ulster and at my alma mater, St Trea's in Ballymaguigan, and I thank her for that. Such speed limits should be in place at every school.

Although the greatest threat to road safety in general is excessive speed, there are practical measures that can help to make our roads safer, particularly in rural areas. Along with new speed limits, those include warning lights and road markings. I would maybe venture as well, and I have discussed this with the Minister, that where there are school buses transporting youngsters to schools, we could look at the possibility of them having flashing lights and it being illegal for drivers to pass them. I know of some very sad instances where youngsters have got off a bus and made a dart across the road. I can think of one incident in particular that sadly wound up with a fatality. That is the practice in some other countries in other parts of the world, and, although I do not know about its effectiveness, it sounds like a very practical and good idea.

Ms Dillon: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: Sure.

Ms Dillon: On the point that the Member just made about young people trying to exit a bus, we have had a number of those incidents across Mid Ulster. Also could gritting rural roads that have schools on them be considered, Minister? The schools on those rural roads are mostly primary schools, and it is extremely dangerous for children who are trying to get out of cars to cross the road. As a result, we have had a number of incidents that have almost been serious and some that have been serious.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for that.

Warning lights and road signage are practical measures, and we can make it safer to cross roads by adding fixed crossing points and islands for pedestrians. We can also improve street lighting in order to ensure good visibility for pedestrians at all times of the day, particularly during the wintertime when it gets a bit bleaker in the mornings and the evenings for the kids and motorists who are arriving at schools.

The more the populations of our rural towns and villages and, indeed, scattered rural areas grow, the more important the issue will become.

One recent example was in the town of Moneymore, where a local SDLP councillor Christine McFlynn successfully lobbied for the extension of the 30 mph speed limit at a school to cover access from a newly built housing estate. Efforts continue at that site to include measures such as extending the street lighting and providing pedestrian islands to further improve the safety of children attending the school.

5.45 pm

Mr Buchanan referred to SIDs. I find those very effective, for as long as they last in a particular place, given that they are, if you like, a transient feature. As a motorist, I find that my driving speed flashing in front of me is a very effective warning, but they are a transient measure. I can think of a couple of locations where they are positioned. They are very useful and are funded through the PCSPs. If they are there for six weeks and then removed, the impact is, to my mind, by and large, gone after those six weeks. They are, however, an important feature.

We have argued repeatedly down the years for a properly funded programme of maintenance and repair of our rural road network, and I believe that the Infrastructure Minister has been unsuccessful in seeking sufficient funds

from the Finance Minister at this time. Nevertheless, the Minister was able to announce a total investment of £75 million in the structural maintenance of the road network in 2021. That included the allocation of £12 million to a road recovery fund, with £10 million directed towards repairs along rural roads. There are around 80 locations in Mid Ulster where work is planned or has already been completed under that programme. Those repairs will inevitably contribute to the rural road network and, hopefully, to improved road safety.

Mr Buchanan referred to one of the 20 mph pilot projects at the Woods Primary School, which is not that far away from where I live. That has been very effective. For those who may not know the geography of the area, the traffic on the road between Ballyronan and Magherafelt can get very speedy at particular times of the morning, especially at school time. That speed limit has proven very effective and useful.

I have, indeed, a list of schools for which I would like to see a variety of measures introduced to improve road safety. I, with DFI officials, have been on-site at some of those schools, and others remain on my, if you like, to-do list or wish list. Nevertheless, I want to put them on the record here today. They include Derrychrin Primary School and Ballylifford Primary School, both of which are in the parish where I live. Another factor that I want to mention is that those smaller rural roads, and the locations around them, have been altered by the build-up of traffic and have very heavy volumes of traffic, including heavy articulated lorries. Those lorries bypass the main towns, because those do not have bypasses. They bypass the likes of Dungannon, Cookstown and Magherafelt, although it now has a bypass. Many use those rural roads as a bypass route. Parents have expressed their concerns to me about that on numerous occasions, and two of the schools affected are Derrychrin and Ballylifford.

Other schools include St Patrick's Primary School, Loup; St Patrick's Primary School, Moneymore, which I already mentioned; Lissan Primary School at St Michael's Church, where we have met DFI officials on a number of occasions; St Malachy's Primary School in Drummullan; Spire Integrated Primary School, Magherafelt; St Mary's Primary School, Dunamore, which I have been asked to raise as well; St Peter's Primary School, Moortown; St Mary's Primary School, Clady and St Conor's College, Clady, which are within walking distance of each other; St John's Primary School, Kingsisland; and Little Flower Nursery School at Coole Road.

I have reserved mention of these last two schools for a particular reason, and that is to put these examples on the record. A speed indicator device outside the primary school in Aughmullan recorded the speed of passing vehicles, and one driver was logged as travelling at 92 mph. However, that comes nowhere near the one at St Joseph's in Galbally, which Ms Dillon referred to, where one driver was logged as doing 112 mph past the school, which is in a 40 mph zone. Thankfully, that was not during school time. Nevertheless, someone travelled along that route at 112 mph. There are headcases out there, and I do not think that flashing lights or anything else will curb their speeding. It will have to be the rigours of the police.

I could probably add to that collaborative working between the Department of Education and the Department for Infrastructure, but the police and local policing

partnerships need to deal with such issues, because those speeds are incredible. It is madness.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board. Last week, along with the chief executive and the chair of the Policing Board, I had the privilege of launching the police property fund, to which I alert Members' attention. If there is work that can be done that meets community safety requirements, small grants of up to £10,000 are available through the scheme. If parent-teacher associations or boards of governors have charitable status, they might consider working alongside their PCSP or their local neighbourhood team to see whether they can run some education programmes. There is only up to £1,000 capital available, however, as the scheme is primarily about education. That might be an idea for some Members to take back to their relevant schools.

Mr McGlone: Absolutely. I thank the Member very much for that. Education is definitely one part of it, but there is only one thing that will settle the guy — and they are mostly guys — who is travelling along in his wheels at 92 mph or 112 mph, and that is somebody pointing a hairdryer at his car and giving him a lengthy suspension.

In addition to the need to put in place physical measures, there is a role, as we referred to, for the Department of Education to play in educating our young people and our future drivers on how to use our roads safely, and some of those schemes could possibly be helpful. All drivers should instinctively look to reduce their speed if they know that they are approaching an area around a school.

The SDLP will continue to lobby the Executive to approve further investment in road safety across our rural road network through all possible measures, and, as you have heard today, I and other colleagues will continue to lobby for further investment in road safety at schools around Mid Ulster.

Ms Sheerin: Like others, I start by thanking Keith Buchanan for bringing the topic to the Assembly this evening, and I put on the record my well wishes to him. He is self-isolating, so I wish him all the best and hope that he is in good health.

Since I first got involved in political activism in my community, I can say wholeheartedly that roads issues and safety relating to roads have been the number-one concern when I meet constituents. Concerns range from maintenance of roads, such as potholes and other road surface issues, to winter gritting, such as rural roads that do not receive any winter treatment in icy and snowy conditions, to speeding on rural roads.

I was laughing at the Principal Deputy Speaker's facial expressions when the Members beside me were listing some of the schools in our constituency. I have to say that we are very parochial in Mid Ulster, and there are bits of east Tyrone that I could not take you through if you gave me until tomorrow. I have to say, however, that the schools that I work with in south Derry have concerns about safety. Those concerns play very heavily on the minds of parents and teachers alike, and when the Minister announced at the end of last year the temporary 20 mph measure, I had never heard such a response from parents. It was one of pure relief. I wrote to the Minister on several occasions about some of the schools that are affected, such as Crossroads Primary School on Drumagarnner Road in

Kilrea. The parents who take their children to that school, which runs alongside a road where the national speed limit applies, were fearful for their children's lives every day. To get an announcement that the speed limit was going to be 20 mph was life-changing. It was a weight off their shoulders. It struck me when I was discussing it with parents and teachers that, if you go into a town or city anywhere in the North, you know that the speed limit will be 30 mph or lower, but if you travel for 10, 15 or 20 miles, you can pass schools where the speed limit is 20 mph, 30 mph or 60 mph. There is no uniform approach. You then have drivers acting the eejit, as Mr McGlone outlined, and the school is upon them before they realise. There is not enough awareness.

This debate gives us an opportunity to raise specific issues that have been raised with us in our constituency. I will speak about a few schools, some of which have already been mentioned.

Spires Integrated Primary School in Magherafelt has a 40 mph limit outside the school, which needs to be lower. Mr McGlone referred to St Patrick's Primary School in The Loup, on the Ruskey Road. I know that a reduction from 40 mph to 30 mph is being considered, but there is a football club nearby and there is no street lighting or pavement. There are evenings when training is happening or people are trying to get out for a walk, and it is just an accident waiting to happen. There is also St Mary's Primary on the Glen Road in Maghera. I used to take the hand out of Ian Milne, saying that he was the Member for Bellaghy when he was an MLA, but I am quickly becoming the Member for Ballinascreen. We have couple of schools in Ballinascreen, and I have raised the issue and reached out to the Minister about them. St Eoghan's Primary School in Moneyneena will benefit from the 20 mph scheme, which is welcome news. We got a road resurfaced in Moneyneena: it now has its own motorway. However, as a result of that, people are just driving harder, and the 30 mph zone is not respected at all.

I echo the remarks that my colleague made on the SID signs. They are a great addition and are very helpful. Road users will tell you that it focuses their mind on the speed that they are driving at. We can all subconsciously speed, especially when driving in a rural area. If the road below you is smooth, you do not notice your speed. The flashing indicator that tells you that you have gone over the speed limit is helpful. However, we need increased speed camera measures in Moneyneena from the village — if you can call it that — to the school.

There are two schools in Straw, and, when I was first co-opted into this role, one of the first things that I started to work on was getting a zebra crossing in Straw. I went to school in St Columba's Primary School in Straw, and parents were talking to me who had children at that school or had themselves gone to that school when I was there. It was an issue that had been there for 20 years. The reaction to that was massive. However, the speed limit is still not being respected. It is a through route to Magherafelt, and you will find lorries flying along the road. I have written to the Minister about the road between Straw and Draperstown. There is about a mile-long stretch, where, in between the two centres, there is an increase in road speed. There is no street lighting for a portion of that. Our football club is in Straw, which means that people will be walking to and from it in the evening. It is

a great walking route, particularly in these times when people cannot go out and about and do the things that they would like to do. We all know the benefits of increased exercise and getting out and about in the evening, and the lack of street lighting there is a real issue that is always raised with me. I know that it does not meet the criteria, at present, on the number of front-facing properties, but it is something that I would love to see a reconsideration of and a change to the criteria to allow street lighting. It would increase the safety at that site. There is a Gaelscoil there with pupils and parents going to and from the car park between St Columba's Primary School and Gaelscoil na Speiríní, and it is a massive safety issue.

I have also written to the Minister about some of the schools that Mr McGlone referred to in Derrychrin and Ballylifford. We await a decision on speed camera measures at both of those sites.

I reiterate my thanks for the debate. It is really important for our constituents. When you are up here talking about important legislation, rural roads may not seem all that important or a priority, but, for people from rural areas, it affects their life every day.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister now has more than 10 minutes to respond if she wishes to take them. I call the Minister to respond to the debate.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. First of all, as other Members have done, I add my thanks to Mr Buchanan for instigating the debate on road safety at schools in Mid Ulster. I have listened with interest to the comments and issues raised by Members. It is clear that this is a topic of huge importance for all Members. As Ms Sheerin rightly said, road safety, particularly in and around our schools, is a hugely important issue in our communities. It is extremely important, understandably, to parents, teachers and principals.

6.00 pm

I am determined, as the Minister for Infrastructure but also as a mother of three small children, to improve road safety, particularly on roads and streets near our schools. As Members mentioned, I made a commitment last September to take forward legislation to introduce part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools so that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from school every day. Yesterday, I was pleased to announce that part-time speed limits have now been set in legislation for 103 schools at 90 sites. Children, parents and teachers in every part of the North will see positive, practical changes to limit vehicle speeds on the roads around their schools.

Road safety, especially around our schools, is a priority of mine. It is my intention that, through future programmes, many more schools — many of the schools that have been referenced in the debate — will have a 20 mph speed limit on the roads outside their gates. My officials are working to complete the schemes, with the legislation now in place to enforce the part-time 20 mph speed limit measures at those schools. Ms Dillon asked about time frames for this. We have a number of signs already implemented, and officials are working hard to complete the programme in the coming weeks.

This is another step forward in our efforts to make our roads safer for all users. However, I reiterate that we all have a collective responsibility to take care when using our roads. At each of the schools, new standard fixed speed limit roundel signs will be erected, with a flashing amber light set to come on at the times that the reduced speed limit applies. As Mr Buchanan highlighted, this follows trials at a number of schools in 2019 to determine the effectiveness of the arrangement of signs, when it was found that they reduce the mean speed. In Mid Ulster specifically, this will include Crossroads Primary School, Edendork Primary School, St Trea's Primary School, Orritor Primary School, Aughnacloy College, Aughnacloy Primary School, St Eoghan's Primary School, St Brigid's Primary School and Ampertaine Primary School.

Ms Dillon: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Mallon: Of course.

Ms Dillon: I appreciate the Minister's response, but what I was actually asking for is a time frame for the roll-out to other schools. Obviously, there are a number of schools that I am concerned about that have not been included in this scheme. Sorry.

Ms Mallon: No problem. I will go on to address that in respect of next year's budget.

I reiterate that this is a commitment of mine. I want us to do what we can. For me, this is about ensuring that we create safe active travel for our children on particular routes.

I turn to some of the points raised during the debate. Like Mr Buchanan, my thoughts are with those who have lost their lives on our roads. In some instances, that has involved children and young people. Mr Buchanan is right to highlight that there are a number of approaches to this. We need to tackle speed; we need to look at road layouts; we need to look at parking, and I will come back to that point. It is about engineering solutions and education.

Mr Buchanan talked about the importance of ensuring that people park responsibly, particularly around our schools. I assure Members that DFI will continue to take enforcement action against irresponsible and unsafe parking. We will also work in partnership with the PSNI, given its remit in this area. Mr Buchanan pointed to the fact that I have asked my officials to scope out what more we can do in this area. I am very conscious of the moves in Scotland towards a ban on pavement and double-parking. I am conscious that, in England, they are going to consult on a number of options, and that the issue is being addressed by councils in Wales. I have asked my officials to prepare a submission on what we can do in this area. Being mindful that we have limited time left in this mandate, there are challenges around the legislative changes that I would like to see.

As I said, eight schools in Mid Ulster will be in this first tranche of the roll-out of the 20 mph scheme. I want to say to Members that I am very committed to rolling that out to further schools. The extent to which I can do that will depend on the budget allocated to me. We have not yet had confirmation of final allocations, but I am committed to doing what we can and will keep Members regularly updated on it. St Joseph's Primary School in Galbally, Holy Family Primary School in Aghamullan, and St Mary's Primary School in Ballinascreen were all mentioned.

Those schools will all be assessed as part of the further roll-out of the schemes.

Mr McGlone spoke about people travelling at hugely dangerous speeds.

While traffic calming and the roll-out of 20 mph zones will go some way to addressing that, we have a collective responsibility to get the message to all our drivers that they need to travel safely and at safe speeds.

I pay tribute to Mr Buchanan in particular, because he has been very active in working on SIDs and has been working with local businesses to gather funding so that they can be purchased. I assure Members that I am aware of the benefits that can come from the use of SIDs, so I have asked my officials to prepare a guidance note in order to ensure that we have a consistent approach across divisions when responding to requests for them.

In an intervention, Mrs Kelly referenced the importance of education and training. She highlighted potential sources of funding, which is very useful for Members. I reassure Members that my Department has a cycling proficiency scheme; the practical child pedestrian safety training scheme; the Active School Travel programme, which we work in partnership with the Public Health Agency to fund; and the junior road safety officer scheme. I hear what Members are saying about the need to expand footway provision for children getting to and from schools, particularly in rural areas. That is the kind of project that I want to be able to support through the £20 million blue-green fund that my Department has set up.

I am very conscious that Members referenced the fact that, in rural areas, schools are located in places that we would possibly not choose if we were doing it all over again. It is, therefore, very important that rural communities are not left behind and that there is not always a focus on urban areas. By setting up the rural roads fund, I want to demonstrate my commitment to ensure that we are doing much more to provide safe infrastructure in rural areas as well.

Members highlighted the importance of gritting, which I understand, and the importance of street lighting, and a number of Members spoke about the importance of site-specific solutions. That is the kind of approach that I want to have, but you are always constrained by the budgetary reality within which you have to operate.

All Members who spoke talked about the importance of partnership working. That is really important. If we are going to create safer environments for our children, young people and other road users, we have to work in partnership with communities. The community safety grant is one way that my Department helps to support communities to have their own safety programmes. We absolutely have to work with local representatives, who know their area best, and we have to work with our school leaders and the PSNI. As all Members rightly pointed out, we have to work in partnership with the Minister of Education. I will not be found wanting in that regard.

In conclusion, I thank all Members for their interest in the issue. All Members have written to me on it. It is a matter that is very close to their hearts, and I reassure them of my commitment to do what I can to make it safer for our children and young people to walk, cycle and wheel safely to and from school.

Ms Sheerin: Will the Minister take an intervention?

Ms Mallon: Yes, of course.

Ms Sheerin: Sorry to interrupt. I should have said this in my contribution, but I neglected to. I am sure that the other Members would echo my thanks to the DFI staff, particularly Tracy Bratton, who, I know, has just departed her post. They respond to our queries and requests.

Mr McGlone: *[Inaudible.]*

Ms Sheerin: *[Laughter.]* I am trying not to take it personally that she left so close to my coming into this role. We have them tortured, and they are always quick at coming back. Thank you.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for that intervention. It is important that DFI officials get to hear that. They live in and very much care for their communities, and, often, because we care about our communities so much, DFI officials bear the brunt of a lot of frustration and anger.

Mr McGlone: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Mallon: Yes, of course.

Mr McGlone: May I, too, associate myself with the Member's comments? Tracy Bratton, who has now moved to another location in the division, was very useful and very effective not only in dealing with public representatives but in working with communities.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is testimony to the fact that, when we work in partnership and work to find solutions with communities instead of imposing them from the top down, we get much better outcomes for everyone who lives in the areas.

Again, I offer my appreciation to Mr Buchanan for bringing the Adjournment debate and to all Members for their representations to me not only this evening but outside the Chamber, which they do on a very regular basis. I thank them for that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister.

Before I adjourn the Assembly, I assure Ms Sheerin that my smile was not at Mr McGlone listing the schools in his constituency but was, in fact, at his reference to hairdryers. *[Laughter.]* Anyone who knows anything about Alex Ferguson knows what the hairdryer treatment is and knows that speeders should be given the hairdryer treatment by Patsy McGlone at every opportunity. *[Laughter.]*

Adjourned at 6.10 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Thursday 1 April 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Buckley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Standing Order 69(5)(b) relates to Members' interests. It states that, in relation to declarations:

"A member who has ...

(b) a relevant interest in any matter,

must declare that interest before taking part in any proceedings of the Assembly relating to that matter."

Mr Speaker, given your involvement, through sharing the details of the Bobby Storey funeral on your social media sites, have you sought advice on the matter? Given the huge public interest in today's proceedings and the crisis in confidence and accountability at the heart of the Assembly, it is in the public interest and in the interests of the credibility of the Assembly and transparency that today's debate is seen to be chaired by someone who does not have a perceived conflict of interest. Mr Speaker, have you taken such advice, and can you share it with the House?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for raising the point of order. The Member will know that the matter has been raised before, and I made it clear, in the first instance, that in no circumstances would I wish to breach any guidelines. I make that very clear yet again. I have sought advice, and I am perfectly entitled and able to participate in and preside over this plenary sitting, which was called to discuss an important matter. I am satisfied that I am well able and professional enough to conduct my role as Speaker. I think that I have proven that since the day when I took up the role. No one can say that I have acted in a prejudicial way towards anyone or any party on any item of business over the past year. I will stand over that record until the day on which I leave the position. I invite Members to recognise that fact.

As far as I am concerned, it is in order for me to preside over the proceedings. I draw it to Members' attention that two of the Deputy Speakers signed the notice for today's recall and the Principal Deputy Speaker is on record as saying that he will speak on the matter, as they are quite entitled to do.

It is incumbent on us as the Chairs of these proceedings to act in a professional manner and to conduct ourselves impartially and independently, as we are obliged to do by law. I stand over my role and my competence and professionalism in that.

As far as I am concerned, the post that was shared on my constituency Facebook page, which I do not manage and never see, advertised the online streaming of the event. I have no further comment to make on that matter.

Mr Buckley: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. Given that you shared the social media post promoting a mass gathering during COVID regulations that prohibited such gatherings and that some of your family members attended said funeral, is it in order for the House to adjourn to see the advice that you have received to ensure that today's proceedings have credibility and that the public can, rightly, ask for transparency in this place, given what has gone on over the past few days?

Mr Speaker: I will make a final comment on that. You are starting to stray into very difficult territory when you refer to members of my family. I think that you should desist from that line of approach. As far as I am concerned, Members of this House can all testify to my impartiality and independence in presiding over all the proceedings in the past year. By the end of the proceedings this afternoon, Members of this House and the general public will be able to determine that I have continued to act professionally and that I have conducted myself on the basis of the legal status that I have here and that I am professional, competent and well within my entitlements to preside over these proceedings in a professional manner. I will not respond to any further points of order on this matter.

Mr Buckley: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The credibility of these institutions is at stake. The public are, rightly, calling for transparency. I am, in no way, commenting on your previous conduct in the Chair. What I am saying is that I, and many in the House and in our community, perceive there to be a direct conflict of interest in your proceeding as the Chair of this debate. I ask further, whether the House can adjourn to receive such advice that you have been given. If it is the case that the Deputy Speakers are not available, can we not move to appoint a temporary Speaker to ensure that the public can have confidence in this sitting today?

Mr Frew: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Given everything that you have said to my colleague and given that you have stated your position, based on guidance, is it wise for you to have the Chair in this debate?

Mr Speaker: All I will say is that matters arise in the Chamber throughout the tenure of all mandates. Very difficult and very challenging debates often ensue, which have to be presided over by somebody. Since the start of the Assembly in 1998 and 1999, there have been many very difficult and very challenging and controversial

matters and the Speaker of the day always presided over them. By the end of each mandate, whether people liked them or not as individuals, regardless of anything else, we have always made sure that we have lived by the rulings of the Speakers. The Speakers have always managed to preside over the proceedings of the Assembly in a professional, independent and impartial manner.

You have acknowledged that you have no grounds on which to accuse me of doing anything else since I took on this role. I invite you, then, to make your judgement at the end of the proceedings when I will, again, demonstrate my professional ability and my impartiality and independence in the way in which I conduct the business of this Assembly.

Mr Buckley: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. There is a credibility issue in relation to today's debate. There is public confidence at stake here. I urge the Speaker to adjourn the House to brief party leaders as to the advice that he has received and to seek a temporary Speaker. Thousands of families have had to endure restrictions whereby they have laid their loved ones to rest in isolation. Meanwhile, we have a party in this House, namely Sinn Féin, that went to that funeral and had no regard for the regulations that were put in place. Mr Speaker, that calls into question your credibility as an independent Chair of this debate, given your role in that funeral by promoting it online.

I ask you, Mr Speaker, to think of the credibility of this institution, to allow Members time to hear the advice and to reconsider your position and put a temporary Speaker in place.

Mr Speaker: You will be aware that it is not at all the common practice, the convention or the appropriate action to share with Members the legal advice that one has received. I propose, therefore, that we move on to the debate and let Members judge the credibility of the proceedings at the end of them. It is an unusual step to adjourn in such a fashion. As I have said, there are many issues that are challenging for all sides of the House. No matter who takes the Chair in any particular session, questions may well be asked as to whether it is appropriate. We have to judge the Speakers and respect the role of the Speakers, even though we may sometimes feel uncomfortable about the matters under debate. That is my view.

Mr Buckley: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, I clearly outlined the Standing Order under which I think that the sitting has to be adjourned:

"A member who has ...

(b) a relevant interest in any matter,

must declare that interest before taking part in any proceedings of the Assembly relating to that matter."

There is no doubt that on the matter before us today — the very serious issue of public confidence — your impartiality is in question. I ask you, Mr Speaker, for the credibility of this institution and for the sake of the debate, to adjourn the House, appoint a temporary Speaker and allow a fair hearing of the debate so that it can be perceived by all in our community as fair and balanced.

Mr Speaker: I have heard the Member and, again, I thank him for bringing that to the attention of the Assembly. It has been discussed before. In fact, as I understand it, it was discussed last July while I was shielding. As far as I am concerned, I have ruled that I have received advice. I am satisfied that I have proven, since the moment that I took up office as Speaker of the House, that I have demonstrated my utmost professionalism, impartiality and independence in the conduct of my role. I will continue to do that, and people will judge me on that basis. I am satisfied that the judgement will be positive.

The Speaker's ruling is final. I do not intend to adjourn the House. I intend to proceed with the matter in the Order Paper. Let us conduct the business on a professional basis and give confidence to the public that the very important matter that is the subject of today's motion will be dealt with professionally and in a mature way. People will have their robust arguments and so on; that is the entitlement of every Member of this House. I have made a ruling. The Speaker's ruling is final, and I ask Members to respect that. I want to move on to the business in the Order Paper.

Mr Buckley: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am sorry but I cannot let the matter drop. Public confidence is at stake. You asked that we proceed in a professional and mature manner. Surely, that means proceeding with an impartial Chair who has no perceived conflict of interest on the matter. We have the ability to appoint temporary Speakers. It was done when the matter was debated in July. I ask that it is done again and that we can ensure full public confidence.

Mr Speaker: Mr Buckley, I have made a ruling. The Speaker's ruling is final, as you are well aware. You and I have discussed the matter privately, in my office, in the last number of months. I think that you fully understand my position. You personally acknowledged in the House this morning that you have no issue with any of the conduct of my role as Speaker. I have made a ruling and I am not going to change that. I want us to move on to the Order Paper and conduct the business that we are here to discuss.

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I inform Members that the Budget Bill has received Royal Assent. The Budget Act (NI) 2021 became law on 23 March 2021. It is chapter 4.

Private Members' Business

Ministerial Breaches of the Executive's COVID-19 Messaging

Mr Speaker: Before we begin the debate today, I clarify for Members that I am not aware of any active proceedings in relation to the matter addressed by the motion. Therefore, the sub judice rule does not apply. However, I am aware that a statement from the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) yesterday referred to an entirely separate decision to prosecute two individuals. Members are therefore encouraged not to refer to the substance of what may be active criminal proceedings. If they do so, they must ensure that their remarks will not prejudice the outcome. As I said, the sub judice rule does not apply to the motion.

Having been given notice by not less than 30 Members, under Standing Order 11, I have summoned the Assembly to meet today for the purpose of debating a motion on breaches of Executive COVID-19 messaging by Ministers.

12.15 pm

Ms Mallon: I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges the pain endured by families across Northern Ireland who have experienced loss during the COVID-19 crisis; expresses its sincere condolences to those who, in periods of trauma and loss, were unable to say goodbye to loved ones; further expresses its gratitude to those who have followed the public health guidelines and played their part in keeping their neighbours, communities and the health service safe; regrets the actions of those in positions of elected office who breached the Executive's public health messaging and undermined efforts to prevent transmission of the virus; and condemns the deputy First Minister and the Minister of Finance for their actions, which have caused immense hurt and undermined the Executive's public health message.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for this debate. You will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to wind. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. As the motion refers specifically to two individuals, they will be given an opportunity to reply as private Members at the end of the debate, should they wish to do so. Before we begin the debate, I want to make clear that I am not aware of any active proceedings in relation to the matters addressed by the motion and, therefore, the sub judice rule does not apply.

Ms Mallon: I will speak as the deputy leader of the SDLP and with deep regret that, in the midst of a public health crisis, we have had to come here today to give voice to so many of our citizens who feel so hurt and so betrayed. I rise not to score any political points, not to add to the grief of any family in the North that has lost a loved one in the past year and certainly not to undermine the important messages and instructions that we must all continue to follow in order to suppress COVID-19 and to move our people into a more hopeful and new era. I speak as a political leader who genuinely believes that we are, in fact, all in this together and that all those in power must be held to account for their actions.

The belief that we must all adhere to the regulations and the guidelines and look out for and support each other has been my approach and the approach of the Social Democratic and Labour Party to dealing with the pandemic in the Executive, here in the Assembly, in our communities, in our sports clubs, at our school gates and on the ground, and we will not deviate from that. In the Executive and in the Assembly, we have asked our citizens to make huge sacrifices. The biggest sacrifice asked of our people since last March has been that asked of the family and friends of the deceased. To bury a loved one with no wake and only a small number of people in attendance robs us of a final act of love, an act of grace in parting and a final comfort for the bereaved. It goes against our very nature. We have a uniquely Irish way of managing death, and it gives enormous comfort to our people to open up their doors when faced with death to embrace the comfort offered by our family and community. On this island, our wakes and burials are a crucial act of closure.

The restrictions require people to set that aside, and what a sacrifice that is. Our people said almost unanimously, "If that is what must be done, we will do it". Most of us will know someone directly or indirectly who has buried a loved one during the pandemic, perhaps stood on the roadside as a cortege has driven past or watched a funeral service on Zoom. It does not even amount to a substitute for the true way that these things should be done. So, when the leadership of Sinn Féin and 22 of that party's elected representatives decided to attend a funeral and a graveside rally last June, it was a knowing act. It was not surrounded in ambiguity, and there was a slight question mark over whether public health advice, guidelines and legislation were broken. Please do not let us hear that today. It is an insult to the bereaved across Northern Ireland and across our island, and it is an insult to all those who have followed and adhered to the rules over the past 12 months.

It was a proactive decision that they chose to make. They made the choice. They knew that the consequences for public health would be severe and even fatal, but, still, they made that choice.

They knew that hundreds of other families had acted within the law, the guidelines and the public health advice. They knew that, by their actions, they were putting themselves above the law, but they still made that choice. They also knew that there would be political fallout but they still made that choice. They knew what the restrictions that they had designed and implemented in the Executive meant. They knew because, along with the guidance and public health advice, the deputy First Minister and the Finance Minister made them. I sat in the meeting and saw them do it. Then I watched on television as they broke them. If they were confused, as they subsequently claimed in police interviews, why did they not raise this around the Executive table at the time? Why did they pretend to the public during the daily press conferences that they understood? If virtually every family knew, then why did Sinn Féin public representatives not know? The truth is that they did. We all knew, but they chose to break them anyway. It was a deliberate and proactive calculation that they set aside the law that they had made because it suited their agenda. They made that choice. Sinn Féin chose not to stand with the people, but to put themselves above them.

Over the past few days, there has been commentary in certain quarters that the SDLP is acting for political capital. That is untrue. Today, it is not just the SDLP calling out the purposeful rule-breaking, but every single party in the Executive, alongside our colleagues in the Green Party. This is not a political fight. It is a question of doing what is right. It is to show people, families across our island who have made huge sacrifices, that those who imposed the rules and then broke them must be held to account.

This is no longer about a funeral. It is now an issue of why Sinn Féin believes that it is above the restrictions, above the law and above the public health advice. We are here today to hear Sinn Féin account for its actions and answer the question that countless citizens across the North are asking: why is it one rule for the political elite in Sinn Féin and one rule for the rest of us?

Had the deputy First Minister acknowledged last July that mistakes had been made and had she made a sincere apology then, we would not be here today. However, it is the arrogance of Sinn Féin and its refusal to acknowledge, explain and give a full apology that brings us here today. Enough of the wordplay. No more diluted craftily worded apologies. I ask the leadership of Sinn Féin to let this be the day that, without qualification or equivocation, they offer the people of the North a full explanation.

At all times, but especially in a crisis, people look to those in positions of political leadership to be honest with them, protect them, put their interests first and to lead by example. They look to leaders to stand with them, not above them; to hold themselves to a higher standard, not a different standard; and, at the very least, to follow the rules that they and their party set. There can be no excuses; all of us are fully aware of the seven rules of public life that all Ministers have committed to upholding: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. Leadership underpins it all. The truth is, be it the actions of Sammy Wilson and Arlene Foster's refusal to sanction and condemn his actions, or the actions of Michelle O'Neill and Conor Murphy in this instance, people rightly feel failed.

Just as people look to their political leaders for leadership, at all times people look to the police for independence, impartiality and consistency in upholding the rule of law. Where is the consistency in the policing response to the Black Lives Matter protesters, to the family of those remembering their loved ones brutally murdered at Sean Graham bookmakers on the Ormeau Road, to the crowd of loyalist paramilitaries in Pitt Park, to the funeral of Francie McNally or to the funeral of Bobby Storey? Those are serious questions and we will rigorously pursue answers to all of them through the accountability structures of the Policing Board.

As I draw my remarks to a close, I call on this Assembly to stand up for people across our island who have made so many sacrifices, for truth and justice, and for fairness and accountability.

It is what all the families grieving across our island and all our citizens who are struggling through this painful pandemic deserve.

The SDLP brought this motion today to give a voice to our citizens. As I end, I make a plea to the people across Northern Ireland, who have faithfully followed the asks made of them time and time again at the joint press

conferences by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I appeal to all those who have adhered to the regulations and the guidance, who have made countless personal sacrifices for the common good and who rightly feel angry and betrayed. I plead with the people of Northern Ireland, and, in the words of James Mayne, a grieving son who could not lift his father's coffin, who watched his father's cremation through a screen and who sacrificed that crucial act of closure that we all need: regardless of those who break the rules, please know that you are a better person for following them.

Mrs Foster: Often in Northern Ireland, too much is made of what divides us, but what we do hold in common is a reverence for life, for family and for community. That is demonstrated by how we remember people in death and is displayed in the support for those who grieve, whether it is at the wake, at the funeral or in the time afterwards. These are unspoken obligations, inherited right down throughout the generations.

All of us who made the decisions and set the rules knew that the regulations on wakes and funerals would be the limits on life that would cut the deepest, ask the most of those at their lowest moment and frustrate the most basic human response: to console the grieving. It is to the immense credit of the bereaved and their families, and of communities right across Northern Ireland, that the most difficult limit on our lives was abided by throughout the pandemic by the vast majority. They bore a heavier burden than us, they protected us and they acted in the common good. The credit that they deserve is matched only by the shame that members of Sinn Féin should feel for their actions last June.

I take nothing away from the grieving family on that occasion. Sinn Féin, however, chose to act in a way that breached the regulations on funerals at that time, and, in so doing, happily sent a signal to everyone else in Northern Ireland that it was one rule for Sinn Féin and another rule for the rest of us. The actions of senior Sinn Féin representatives, the Sinn Féin deputy First Minister, Sinn Féin's Executive Ministers and Sinn Féin members of the Northern Ireland Policing Board sparked the political crisis, and, once again, the message from Sinn Féin was clear: Ourselves Alone — ourselves first — regardless of the cost of undermining the public health messaging.

The wake, the funeral procession of thousands and the political rally were clear and premeditated breaches of the COVID regulations. The prioritisation at Roselawn over other grieving families was hurtful, ignorant and callous in the extreme. Acts of arrogance, acts of self-entitlement, acts of privilege: Sinn Féin calls for equality, respect and integrity, but actually demonstrates the opposite.

When someone believes that they are above the law and where clear and premeditated breaches of COVID regulations are made, everyone has a rightful expectation that the police and the justice system show that such people are not above the law. To add insult to injury, that rightful expectation has been failed. Sadly, the police abdicated their responsibilities before the funeral, at the funeral and since the funeral. Decisions not to gather evidence; collaboration and knowledge of the plan to break regulations, facilitating the breaches of thousands; foot-dragging on the investigation: individually those are unacceptable but, collectively, they show that something is very wrong. Much work will be required to rebuild

community confidence in the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

That really concerns me, because it is the failure of the PSNI command that has become the primary justification for the PPS's refusal to prosecute, allied with the absurdity from the PPS that ignorance of the law is a defence in general. The Northern Ireland public were not confused about the law, and yet we are asked to believe that those who enacted the laws were confused.

12.30 pm

Mr Lyons: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Foster: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Lyons: Was the First Minister confused by the regulations at any point? Is it credible for people to say that they were confused by the regulations, when they were involved in the drafting and passing of that legislation?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mrs Foster: I was not confused about the regulations. We had many discussions about policy. We took advice from our Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and our Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA), and there are many funerals that I should have been at that I was not.

Many will say that Sinn Féin has no sense of shame. That may well be true, but it cannot be the way forward. It is important that we start the journey forward today with a common rejection of the idea that there are different rules and laws for different groups of people. For our part, we hold strong to the cherished ideal that all citizens are equal under the law and equally subject to the law. If we are to build a better society for all, it must be fair for all. If we are to do what is right, we must unite around that principle with no exceptions and no special favours for Sinn Féin or anyone else. While the deputy First Minister, the Finance Minister and their colleagues have tried to justify their behaviour and excuse their elitist attitudes to everything that has happened, we cannot tread that path.

I and my party stand with the families who sacrificed so very much for the common good of Northern Ireland. The battle to defend and protect the principle of equality before the law is more intense than ever, but it is a cause that we must win for everyone.

Mrs O'Neill: First, I confirm that I speak in the Chamber today in my role as an MLA. I take the opportunity to contribute, as I have done on every available opportunity over the past nine months since the death of my friend Bobby Storey. I have done so in the Chamber on many occasions, at the Committee for the Executive Office, at the Executive, at the party leaders' forum and via the media press conferences.

I wish to say again today and to put it on the public record that I am truly sorry for the hurt that has been caused to so many families who have lost a loved one during this time. My attendance at the funeral of Bobby Storey was to support a family during their grief as he was laid to rest. Over the past nine months, I have worked tirelessly to rebuild trust and confidence with the public as a result of undermining the public health message. I will continue to work every day with ministerial colleagues and will continue to work across the five parties to take us through

what is a global health pandemic to save lives and to protect livelihoods.

I am truly sorry that my actions have contributed to the grief or the heartache that has been felt and experienced by many people who have lost a loved one during the pandemic. That was never, ever my intention, and, for that, I offer my heartfelt and unreserved apology to the families who have lost a loved one.

I take very seriously my responsibility as a public office holder and as deputy First Minister and joint head of government. The events of that day were investigated by the police, to whom I gave, as you would expect, my full cooperation. The report published on 30 March by the PPS set out its judgement, which was made independently and impartially by the team of senior prosecutors, assisted by senior counsel. I now understand that a review of that judgement has been requested, and I will await the outcome of that. Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that the matter has divided the Executive and the Assembly that many of us worked so hard to bring about and to restore, in order to get on with delivering public services to the public whom we serve.

We have made good progress in suppressing the virus and establishing a route map out of restrictions and in vaccinating the population, despite all of the difficulties. The progress that has been achieved is entirely due to the support and the concerted effort of everyone. As a result, we have now reached a key turning point in the management of the crisis, when the Executive's attention is now able to move from purely controlling the public health response towards planning for economic, health and societal recovery instead. My sincere commitment is to continue with that work, and that remains my number-one priority.

Dr Aiken: The events surrounding the funeral of Bobby Storey, with the mass breaching of the COVID rules and regulations by members of Sinn Féin, including the deputy First Minister, the Finance Minister, MLAs, TDs and other elected representatives, have undermined the rather limited faith that the people of Northern Ireland have in the integrity of our Government, the rule of law and, indeed, the very process of democracy itself. At the core of all our concerns is the fact, rather than the perception, that there is now a two-tier justice and policing system in Northern Ireland. There is one rule for Sinn Féin and another for the rest of us.

Those of us who could not attend the funerals of our loved ones and believed that, by our actions, we could reduce the enormous burden on our health service and believed in adhering to the rules thought that our sacrifice would be matched by those in government; indeed, we all had a reasonable expectation that the very government members who set and agreed the regulations would show leadership and actually follow the rules that they had agreed. Many of us, despite our political differences, recognise a sorrowing and grieving family. I can understand grief, and I say to all of us that we cannot forget the very real sadness of the Storey family and the fact that the loss that they suffered is being revisited by these events. However, there were many thousands of others, including the Hume and Dallat families, who also wanted to grieve but accepted that sacrifices had to be made for the good of us all. Those families did not have organisers, stewards and liaisons or coordination organised between the police and elected

representatives. They did not allow their funerals to be used for propaganda. Above all, they did not flout the rules, not because they did not want to grieve but because they understood that, in the midst of a pandemic, it was the right thing to do.

Let us remember why the rules and regulations were introduced and by whom. We are in the midst of an unprecedented public health emergency that has, so far, cost 2,115 lives and infected 120,000 people, many of whom continue to suffer long-term effects. There is no doubt that there will have been and are direct links between crowds, proximity, public gatherings and the spread of the disease. While Sinn Féin Members opposite believe that the rule of law does not apply to them, the sharp scientific reality of viral infection does. Sinn Féin and its followers are not somehow immune. Infection, as they have been keen to point out, recognises no borders; indeed, Sinn Féin's president, its finance spokesperson and the many others who travelled to Belfast breached the Irish Republic's rules on distance and travel. They were, in all probability, vectors for the very disease that the Northern Ireland Executive, of which Sinn Féin is supposedly a part, said they were trying to control. In the midst of a pandemic, why would you risk it? Unless, of course, unfortunately, you did not care.

We have heard today that this is not an orange and green issue, and it is not. It is an issue of public health, integrity and morality of government. The first duty of any Government, regardless of circumstances, is the protection and safety of their people, not a small section, an interest group or even a political party but all their people: the old, the sick, the vulnerable, and, above all, the vital healthcare and public service workers who, on several occasions, have been nearly overwhelmed by the tsunami of hospital admissions. It was to prevent the collapse of our national healthcare system, to stop hospitals being overwhelmed, to avoid running out of ventilators and ICU beds and to stop the burnout of critical staff that restrictions on our daily lives were introduced.

They were restrictions that none of us wanted, but they were based on the best scientific, medical and UK-wide advice that was available. We must all continue to follow that.

As I draw my remarks to a close, I thought that the deputy First Minister had the opportunity today to apologise for breaching the rules and regulations and for attending that funeral rather than to apologise to the Assembly for the hurt that was caused, but I have not heard that. That is what the people of Northern Ireland wanted to hear today to draw a line under this matter. Is there an opportunity for her to change her remarks and address the real issue at hand?

Ms Armstrong: If anyone had said a year ago that we would be here on April Fool's Day discussing how, after announcing to the public that they should stay at home in lockdown, a party of the recently formed Executive would then ignore that message and, instead, choose to congregate in a group of up to 2,000 people, with the result that our pandemic public health message was undermined, people would have said, "No way. That is not possible". So much for New Decade, New Approach.

Here we are discussing the actions of Sinn Féin, which knew that its actions were not in the spirit of the

regulations, but chose to flout the guidance because the republican family needed it. No matter the technicalities of law that led the PPS to its decision, Sinn Féin played fast and loose with the rules that it asked the rest of us to follow. I am from one of the families who lost a loved one and was not allowed to attend a funeral. My aunt was one of the many people who saw her husband go into hospital only for him never to come out, to never have a wake, to have a closed casket and to have only a few people by her side as he was laid to rest. I come from a large family, and we are extremely close. We wanted to be there for her, to pay our respects to him and to grieve as we would normally have done, but we could not. We stuck to the rules. We did not find a loophole.

My intention today is not to upset a grieving family. Sinn Féin brought that family into the spotlight through its own actions. By holding its own version of a state funeral, it decided that nothing, even a health pandemic, would stand in the way of a public show of republican strength for a former senior member of the IRA.

That event has been accepted by Minister O'Neill as having undermined our COVID health message.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Ms Armstrong: Not just at the moment.

I put it to the House that the impact of that event possibly led to the spread of the virus and more COVID deaths as people disregarded the advice to stay at home.

It is not enough to apologise for the hurt that others feel. On behalf of the Alliance Party, I want a public apology from Sinn Féin for its actions and for the event. As Mary Lou McDonald has confirmed, the event was meticulously planned. It was wrong. It went against the spirit of the regulations, and they, and we, all know it.

To reiterate, I do not want the Sinn Féin leadership to say that it is sorry that I and others have been hurt by its actions. I want an apology for its actions. I want it to say sorry for holding an event that went against the spirit and intention of the COVID regulations that you demanded that we follow. I do not know at this point whether you regret the event, and, if it were to happen again, would you do it again? PPS decision or not, this country needs to be able to trust political leaders.

Following RHI, there was a huge hill to climb to undo the damage done by the DUP on that matter. Instead of leading by example, Sinn Féin compounded the public's lack of trust in all of us. I have heard attempts to shift the blame on to the police, the Public Prosecution Service, the Justice Minister and even the Health Minister for how the regulations were written. Those are all a distraction. Let us get back to the core issue. As outlined in the motion, Ministers O'Neill and Murphy and others attended an event that was not in the spirit or intention of the regulations. Will they resign? No. Will this pull down the Assembly again in the middle of a pandemic and during an economic crisis? It better not. I think that I speak for the majority of people outside the House when I say that we need to get back to work and stop undermining the very hard work that our community is completing and what we are all trying to achieve.

I say to both named Ministers that instead of talking about being sorry, be sorry and understand the pain caused to my aunt, my family and the many families who are angry at

all of us and at themselves as they ask, "Why did we stick to the rules? Why did we not just have a wake and go to the funeral?".

That horrible guilt-ridden feeling of not being able to honour our loved ones lingers on. I know. That feeling has been reawakened with the PPS announcement. It has not gone away.

12.45 pm

We are very close to Easter, another time when families want to be together. An apology would go a long way to help encourage those who are struggling to stick to the rules over Easter to know that they are doing the right thing by staying at home and not getting together. The message that this Government need to share is that we are still in lockdown and that regulations matter because they save lives. If leadership fails, the consequence will be another spike in numbers after Easter. We all know what that means: more lockdown.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member draw her remarks to a close, please?

Ms Armstrong: Let me be honest: I, my family and our whole community are sick of lockdowns, but we stay in lockdown to protect our loved ones, the community and the health service.

Mr Givan: Respect, equality and integrity. That has been Sinn Féin's mantra for many years. Michelle O'Neill stated:

"What we are seeking is respect and equality for all of the people. And what we are seeking is integrity in the political institutions. That is what Martin McGuinness stands for. That is what Sinn Féin stands for. That is what I stand for."

The Minister in my church in my constituency responded to that adequately. He emailed me last night. He wrote:

"As a result of the decision to not prosecute those who attended the Storey funeral, I am at a loss as a clergyman. Hypocrisy, one rule for them and one for everyone else, injustice and equality are some words that I can pen."

He went on to write that he has buried 53 parishioners in his parish in Lisburn. All 53 of the families concerned knew the rules. They worked with the church and the undertakers, and he wrote, "There is much hurt".

What I say will have no impact on Sinn Féin, but listen to the hurt from people like that clergyman and people across Northern Ireland. Thousands of people have buried their loved ones during the past year, but special status was given to one individual. It was not just one individual — it was a terrorist. Special status for one individual. Where was the respect for the rule of law, which was broken by the very lawmakers? Where was the equality? Thousands were buried, but was Mr Storey treated equally? No. Special status was given to that one funeral. Other people were locked out at Roselawn. Special status was given to that one family. Organised by Sinn Féin. "Meticulously planned", in the words of the Sinn Féin president, with the PSNI. Meticulously planned.

Mr Stalford: I thank the Member for giving way. Would he agree with me that, seemingly, in the republican world

view, collusion with the PSNI is perfectly acceptable in certain circumstances?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Givan: I will get to that point. I agree with the Member.

Integrity. Where was the integrity for the Nolan principles of public life or the ministerial code that the deputy First Minister and the Finance Minister are pledged to? Where was the setting of an example and leading the community? That was abandoned when it comes to the special status of a terrorist who needed to be buried.

We have heard more shallow, hollow and meaningless words from the deputy First Minister. She was unrepentant about organising and attending a funeral but sorry that other people in Northern Ireland felt hurt by that attendance. When will we hear, "We were wrong as a political party", or, "As the deputy First Minister, I was wrong to have attended that funeral"? No, the record remains that the deputy First Minister will never say sorry for attending the funeral of a friend.

What about my friend who died during the past year? I did not go to that funeral. Should I have gone to that funeral? Is my friend not more important than your friend? Many of us did not go to funerals because of the regulations that this Executive brought in.

This speaks to the behavioural attitude that goes to the core of Sinn Féin: supremacy, not just over unionism but within its own community as well. It is supreme. One rule for us, one rule for others. We see its behaviour in its disrespect of centenary celebrations, comments about the Prince of Wales, referred to as POW, and so it goes on. New Decade, New Approach, new spirit of cooperation: there is no evidence of it, none whatsoever.

There are consequences that flow from the behaviour of Sinn Féin. This is just one example. The Finance Minister fired out a statement last night; again, this is the behaviour of those who believe that they are supreme and that people do as they are told, rather than seeking consensus when it comes to a Budget. The supremacist attitude that exists within Sinn Féin is infecting our political institutions. It infects our society, and it has infected the police, who were collaborators, facilitating this and signing off on plans. They did not engage, did not inform and certainly did not enforce. I feel sorry for the rank and file, because they are lions led by lambs to the slaughter. There are consequences for confidence in policing as a result of the way in which the very highest levels of the police are now infected by seeking to appease the pervading republican campaign. That has to change, and that is why we are right to seek change.

There has not been a change in Sinn Féin's approach. There has not been an apology that stacks up. Sinn Féin will need to learn very quickly; if it wants to share power and build a society, it has to change its attitude, because it is causing huge damage to not just Northern Ireland but these political institutions.

Mr Stalford: It is important that we place this debate in the context of the period that we have just lived through. Our people are living under crippling restrictions, with access to their friends, family and place of work actively restricted by the Government. Our people have lost huge swathes of their liberty and freedom. Our economy has been driven over a cliff in the name of controlling the COVID-19 virus.

People have sacrificed and sacrificed and sacrificed, over and over again, in almost every aspect of their lives. For many people, the epitome of the restrictions that they are living under relates to the circumstances in which they can bury their loved ones.

I recall last June, when this issue first presented, presenting to the deputy First Minister at the Executive Office Committee the example of a constituent of mine from the Belvoir estate who had had to bury her mother. She was devastated at the behaviour of the deputy First Minister. Until that point, she had said that she admired the approach and the collaboration taking place between the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in trying to get COVID under control.

We now know that the credibility of government messaging was shot by the actions of the deputy First Minister, and we also know what we saw with our own eyes. There were thousands of people in attendance at this funeral. It was widely advertised on social media. A PA system was set up in a cemetery in order to hold a political rally. There were hundreds of people at the wake house, and now we know that that was facilitated by the PSNI. Collusion with the state is clearly acceptable in certain circumstances.

I find it outrageous that the Police Service of Northern Ireland acted in such a way. I agree with my colleague in expressing sympathy and support for the lower-ranking officers, who are being extremely badly led. I repeat the call of the First Minister that the Chief Constable of the PSNI should do the honourable thing and resign from his post.

The conduct of Sinn Féin on the matter is a slap in the face to everyone else who has sacrificed so much during this period. Again, we heard from the Floor of the Chamber a classic politician's apology: "I am sorry if you were hurt". That is not the same thing as "I am sorry". "I am sorry if my actions offended you" is not the same thing as, "I am sorry". In fact, it puts the onus on the person who was hurt: "Well, it is your fault that you are offended, but I am sorry for that". People can see through such weasel words.

The people who have been fined, cautioned or threatened with fines or had their access to beauty spots or other places restricted are now well within their rights to demand their money back because it is now an accepted principle in Northern Ireland that ignorance of the law is a defence. If that is the case, the PPS has fundamentally undermined its own credibility. The thing that sticks in people's craw most is that it reeks of a policy of entitlement and privilege: "Do as I say, but not as I do". People have had enough of being governed like that.

I recall the deputy First Minister's comments when she defended the fines issued to Black Lives Matter protesters. She said that it was the right thing to do because we were trying to control the spread of the virus and the virus was killing people. She said that in the context of Black Lives Matter protesters, but, seemingly, when republican royalty die, that principle no longer applies. I accept that the deputy First Minister has referred to Mr Storey as her friend, and that is her right and her privilege. However, because of policies and restrictions that she authored, other people were not able to give their friends or loved ones the send-off they would have wanted. The hypocrisy is astonishing. Michelle O'Neill should resign.

Mrs D Kelly: Having to stand here today does not fill any of us — certainly not me — with any great sense of joy. Today, we have to remember that people are burying their loved ones under the COVID restrictions and will not get the send-off that they deserve or the comfort that the family needs. We, as a party, had to bury colleagues of ours and adhere to the determinations and restrictions. We had no confusion about it: it was “Stay at home and limit the numbers attending”. We buried someone who won the Nobel peace prize. We buried John Dallat, a man who gave his whole life to public service, without any political elitism and without the trappings that others also did not receive. Members across the way recently buried their party colleague Jimmy Spratt, another man who dedicated his life to public service. The political elite in here are the Members to my right. They have set themselves above all others in society, who have followed the rules and regulations.

I regret the fact that the police are the boys and girls caught in the middle because, today, there are police officers out on the beat protecting our community and putting their lives at risk. It is not right that they have been put in that position. The PPS made it clear that there was a lack of clarity in the interpretation of the regulations. Who signed and put into law those regulations and restrictions? I will give way to Mrs O'Neill if she wants to make a full apology for offending not only the people in the House, because this is not a green and orange issue, and it reflects the anger and hurt that is felt across the community. People could not call at a house and give comfort to people who had lost loved ones. Families had to draw lots to see who could attend their family member's funeral.

1.00 pm

Yes, there are questions for the police to answer. I have just finished a private meeting of the Policing Board. Later, there will be a public opportunity to hear the Chief Constable and the senior officer team being held to account for their decision-making, and it is right and proper that that be done. However, the Members to my right have questions to answer. I do not know what part of the public message on the motorway they did not understand. Many of them saw it as they drove down the M1 to go to that wake house or funeral. Did they not know what “Stay at home” meant? The rest of us knew, stayed at home and made the sacrifice, alongside our friends, neighbours and people across this community. The political elitism and arrogance of Sinn Féin is beyond belief. I still have time, if Mrs O'Neill or, indeed, Mr Murphy want to stand and give their apologies, but I do not hear them. The silence is deafening.

We have seen the reports in the papers and heard people who are not normally on the airwaves say how deeply hurt and angry they are at what has happened. It is right that that anger and hurt is acknowledged in the Chamber, the Chamber where people are elected to be the voice of the people. That is right and proper, for this is the only democratic Chamber.

If these people had anything about them, they would reflect on their actions and what they have said. Last July, there was a scandal in Clifden in the South of Ireland, now known as “Golfgate”. Mary Lou McDonald said that it was “chaotic and unstable” government and that people

must and should be held to account for it. Do the same principles not apply in the North? Is that a partitionist attitude from Sinn Féin? Do those principles apply only to every other party on the island of Ireland but not to them? That is the question that, I hope, some of them will address. Mary Lou McDonald said that one of the representatives, Phil Hogan, should resign and that it was clear that he had lost the confidence of government. I say to Sinn Féin today, “You have lost the confidence of Members of this House because of your failure to take responsibility and your failure to set the same standards for yourselves as you do for others. I hope that you reflect on what damage you have done, not only the hurt that you have caused to people across Northern Ireland but the way in which you have dragged policing into the debate by your actions”.

Mr Nesbitt: I speak as a Member of the Assembly, obviously, but I also declare membership of the Policing Board of Northern Ireland. I also acknowledge that, early in the pandemic, I transgressed the regulations. That is a matter of continuing regret. I have no difficulty in repeating my apology to the House and the broader population. It was a wrong action, and I resigned as Deputy Chair of the Committee for the Executive Office, because I felt that it was untenable to continue in that role. All I can say is that, sometimes, people do things that they can explain but cannot excuse. We are debating one such occasion. We are debating it because of a widespread public perception that there are people and organisations who are, in some sense, above the law. That has implications for public confidence not just in those organisations and individuals but in organisations like the Public Prosecution Service and the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Some Members have already made the point that the statement on Tuesday from the PPS was extraordinary in that it seemed to suggest that ignorance was a defence, going against the centuries-old legal maxim that ignorance is no defence in the face of the law. There are other extraordinary statements in the nine pages published by the public prosecutor. On page 9, paragraph 24, he refers to a “lack of clarity” in the regulations. I have two issues with that. If the Police Service agrees that there was a lack of clarity in the regulations, how could they deploy the policy of the four Es: engage, explain, encourage and enforce? You cannot, if you are unclear, explain. Explain what? Regulations that you do not understand? Also, if I may, every time the regulations are changed, there is a debate in the Chamber, one that is recorded and transcribed into Hansard — the Official Report — verbatim, word for word.

Find me one occasion when a Member opposite has stood up during the debate and said to the Minister who is explaining the changes, “I'm so sorry, I don't understand that. Would you please explain?”.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does he agree that, over the course of this event, the police have created the dangerous impression that they will police those whom they can police while other people can get away without being policed?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention: he reflects a commonly held public perception. I make a distinction between the leadership of

the Police Service of Northern Ireland and those who are on the ground.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he acknowledge that the police sent 24 files for prosecution?

Mr Nesbitt: I understand that. The Member will know that there were two reasons given by the PPS for the decision to not prosecute, and one of them was the engagement by the PSNI with the event organisers ahead of the funeral. I understand that, in principle, for a major public event, it is right for the police to liaise, but the question is: what was the nature of that engagement? Again, I go to the Public Prosecution Service's nine-page report. On page 4, paragraph 16(iv) quotes from the gold strategy for the day. It says that the purpose was to:

“facilitate the funeral arrangements ... in a dignified manner which takes into account the wishes of the family, is sensitive to his community and which does not significantly compromise public health”.

I find that extraordinary. What I wanted to read was that the PSNI wanted to facilitate funeral arrangements in a manner that upheld the regulations regarding public health while, at the same time, doing everything possible to respect the wishes of the family and be sensitive to the community. It seems to be the wrong way around.

So, the police have questions to answer, and, as Mrs Kelly said, there will be a public session with the Chief Constable at 4.00 pm. I am very much of the opinion, and have been for a very long time, that the police had advance written notice of the funeral plans; everything from the wake to Milltown to Roselawn Cemetery.

A few weeks before Mr Storey was cremated, my mother was cremated at Roselawn Cemetery, aged 93. We were allowed nine people at the crematorium, which was fortunate because she had three children, five grandchildren and a minister there, adding up to nine. A few weeks before she died, her best friend passed away, and her beloved St Columba's Church was full to the brim with mourners. When my mother passed, we were into COVID, and the church was not even half empty; it was practically empty. She deserved better, but our glass is half full because we got a church service and we got a cremation. Those are the times that we live in and those are the conditions that we have to accept.

Mr Frew: In Northern Ireland, indeed the whole island of Ireland, bereavement and the process that is encountered around that is extremely important. The wake brings such comfort to so many loved ones who will be in shock and going through trauma. Looking back on my own life, wakes were critical in helping to comfort me as a child with the acknowledgement of, the coming to terms with and comforting each other on the mutual loss. Then there would be the family friend in the corner telling the room a funny story about the past. At that point, the laughter in amongst the tears has the most healing qualities imaginable. There is comfort from seeing so many folk turn up at the funeral of a dearly missed family member. They do not have to say anything; they just have to be there. You are physically carrying your loved one on your shoulder.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Member giving way. Does he agree that one of the absolutely galling things about this situation is that, for week after week after week, the deputy First Minister, alongside the First Minister and sometimes

the Minister of Health and the Chief Medical Officer, has fronted up press conferences to tell our people how essential the restrictions are?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Frew: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank my colleague for his intervention.

When you physically carry your loved one on your shoulder, arm in arm with your brothers and your cousins, out of your home place and along your local street, on their last journey, it has a profound significance. Witnessing the burial of a loved one, no matter the weather, has a lasting anchoring in the mind to the place and time: a connection that will never be broken as long as you live. It is in that context that we find ourselves in this horrendous situation where a political party, Ministers in the Executive and MLAs in this place corrupted and copper-fastened that sense of loss in people who have been deprived of that relief.

Some 12,000, multiplied many times, is the immeasurable number of people who have been impacted by the actions of Sinn Féin. It is not only anger and frustration that have gripped the people of Northern Ireland but a deep sense of sadness and depression. More hurtful and impactful than that is that Sinn Féin has spread a cloak of regret and, dare I say, a sense of guilt over all those people who buried loved ones without giving them the funeral service that they deserved. All those families who sought guidance from undertakers and from the local minister or priest about what could and could not take place. All those families who had to choose which brother or sister, cousin, nephew or niece could attend the funeral. How cruel is that? How cruel are these restrictions? How cruel is Sinn Féin? All those families and individuals who sought advice were all too aware of the restrictions. Yet, the very people who formed the restrictions and scrutinised and created the law make excuses that they did not understand it. That is why those people who had to make difficult decisions and choices now live with regret and guilt.

This has always been about supremacy. When mourners were locked out of Roselawn, Sinn Féin members were parading in their thousands down the street and organising sham funeral orations in Milltown — a place where the remains were not even interred. When Sinn Féin was promoting and organising travel arrangements, speaker systems and crowd control, and negotiating with the PSNI and inserting its Sinn Féin plan, law-abiding citizens could only give their loved ones a small, humble send-off for fear of fine and penalty.

Sinn Féin cannot be seen to be above the law. It has corrupted the democratic process of the restrictions and it has corrupted the police actions. It has corrupted the actions and determinations of the PPS. It is a corruption that cannot be tolerated. This is not 1930's Nazi Germany and nor should our people have to live in that world.

Mrs Long: I thank the Members who have contributed to the debate.

I regret that we have to have the discussion eight months after Bobby Storey was laid to rest, but it is necessary because we have yet to have an unequivocal, unambiguous apology for the actions of the deputy First Minister, the Finance Minister and, indeed, of Sinn Féin collectively for the blatant breach of the regulations.

1.15 pm

People — members of Sinn Féin — have significantly underestimated the amount of hurt, grief and anger that they have caused right across the community, particularly to those families who have had to lay their family members to rest in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. We have seen people who went to hospital, who never got to hold hands with their loved one again after that point, who never got to accompany them on their final journey to the crematorium or the graveside, and who have been profoundly hurt. They have also, I believe, been profoundly damaged by an incredibly painful experience. Whilst they were gracious and generous in making those tremendous sacrifices, it has been a burden for them to bear. It has been made worse by the fact that those who made the rules did not make the same sacrifice when their turn came. For many, that has been too great a burden. That explains why people are angry. It explains why people are upset, and it explains why people require us, as Assembly Members, to come together today to have the discussion and communicate that hurt and anger to Sinn Féin Members of the House.

We all recognise that there is a grieving family at the centre of this. None of us wishes to compound the family's pain or hurt, because we recognise the pain and hurt in our community over all of that. We have to communicate, accurately and honestly and candidly, that what happened breached not only the regulations but the bonds of trust between elected representatives and those whom they represent that require us to hold ourselves to the same and to higher standards than those to which the rest of the community is held. That is what is expected of us, whether or not it is fair. We have a duty and a bond of trust that we have to uphold with our constituents.

With respect to the decisions made this week, Members will appreciate that, although I speak as a leader of the Alliance Party, I will not engage in commentary about the PSNI and the PPS because, in my role as Justice Minister, I respect their independence and the integrity of their offices. It is important that I do not stray into that territory. It is also important that people fully understand the rulings of the PPS. When the PPS refers to confusion about the regulations, it is not to be critical of those who drafted the regulations. It is not to be critical of the police and the way in which they interpreted the regulations. It is not to exonerate those in Sinn Féin who claim that they did not understand the regulations. It is simply to state that the prospect of prosecution, on the basis of some of the conflicts in the regulations and of the rapid changes in them, was diminished.

Having read the PPS decision and having sat at the Executive table along with all the other Ministers when the regulations were discussed, I am absolutely clear that none of us could have been in any doubt about what we were asking of our community, what we were asking of grieving families and what we were asking people to forgo in the interests of public safety, protecting lives and protecting people's health. Irrespective of whether the regulations were sustainable in terms of prosecution, no one sitting at that table could have been in any doubt about what the rules were when it came to gatherings and funerals. We need to be absolutely clear about that.

There are many wrongs in this world that cannot be prosecuted in court, but we can still apologise for those

wrongs. We do not need to be found guilty in a court of law to know that we have broken the spirit —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Mrs Long: — of the law that we created. I appeal again in my final comments to those in Sinn Féin to step up, to make that fulsome apology and to give some comfort at this late stage to the families who have been affected.

Mr Buckley: This morning when I woke up, I brought into sharp focus what today's debate is about. Today at 3.00 pm, my neighbour of 25 years will be buried, a lady whose table I ate at throughout my childhood and whose garden I played in. That family will follow the restrictions and make that tough decision on who can and who cannot attend that funeral. For many of them, it will be making a decision between families.

Over 12,000 people have died in Northern Ireland since the Bobby Storey funeral. Families right across the length and breadth of Northern Ireland, regardless of community and regardless of religious background or political preference, have had to make the difficult decision to bury loved ones in isolation. I cannot but be moved by their accounts of what they have had to deal with. I listened to Mr Nesbitt's account. How could you not be moved? I listened to the accounts of Kellie Armstrong and Edwin Poots. How many other stories do we have where people feel a sense of regret that, because they followed the regulations and the law, they were not able to bury their loved ones in a manner that they felt was befitting for their memory?

What the public rightly want to see today is remorse from Sinn Féin, an apology, recognition of the hurt caused and, going a step further, its members saying, "We are sorry for what we did", and action taken. At the heart of Sinn Féin's mantra is respect, honesty, integrity and, indeed, equality. I, as an elected representative in this House, and many of the people whom I talk to can only conclude that by their actions, you will know them. For Sinn Féin, it is very much a case of Ourselves Alone. That is regrettable. Northern Ireland has come a long way over many dark years of our past, where politicians and political parties have had to work together for the common interest. I am sad to say it, but that message has been undermined, and undermined by the party opposite. We have all had to play a part, a shared effort, and obeyed life-altering circumstances even at the behest of social and economic well-being. Few in society have been confused by the term "lockdown", but we are expected to believe that 24 Sinn Féin representatives were blissfully unaware that the rules applied to them. Really? Is that how low politics in Northern Ireland has got?

Any prosperous and free society relies on a fair police and a just law, so we are right to examine the police actions throughout all of this. By 24 June 2020, police were aware that Sinn Féin was preparing a management plan for the funeral, and police intended to comply with the plan for public safety and traffic management. Listening to 'The Nolan Show' yesterday, I heard ACC Todd give an account of how he policed that operation, and I, like many other Members, was confused. Who was ACC on that day? Was it ACC Todd or was it ACC Gerry Kelly? The public are rightly asking the question today. Who was in control? It certainly was not law enforcement. In fact, policing

responsibilities were handed over to Sinn Féin, which was an absolute dereliction of duty.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for giving way. The police, having surrendered the streets of west Belfast to Sinn Féin, justified not intervening because there would have been “a real threat of violence”. Is it not outrageous for the police to use that as an excuse for handing over the policing for Sinn Féin to manage?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Buckley: The Member nails the point very well because, let us face it, where were the efforts to engage, explain, encourage and, ultimately, enforce the regulations during Bobby Storey's funeral? Their conduct served only to draw the conclusion, that many have sadly come to, that Sinn Féin is above the law that it sets. The Chief Constable has to consider his position. He has to go because there is a crisis of confidence, and Members need to take note of that. I mentioned ACC Todd: the man charged with the task of upholding the rule of law was party to the breaking of the law. He let down and undermined the very police officers who have had such a difficult job throughout COVID. We have asked them to do some incredibly difficult things.

In closing, although we were told of the much-heralded New Decade, New Approach, there has been a new decade but no new approach. Sinn Féin needs to reflect on the damage that it has done to Northern Ireland society by its actions and failure to own up, recognise its mistakes and deal with the situation.

Mr O'Toole: It is important that we are clear on what today's debate is and is not about. It is not about Bobby Storey or his family, who are entitled to respect and privacy as they grieve. It is incumbent on us to remain measured and respectful in our language and tone. Despite what some have said, the debate is not about broader perceptions of policing or criminal justice decisions. There are other channels for those questions to be asked and debated. This debate is about the actions of senior politicians, indeed serving Ministers, in the Assembly. We hold Ministers to account for their performance in office every day that the Assembly sits. That is core to the functioning of the Assembly and any legislature. This institution is imperfect and frequently dysfunctional, but it is essential. Despite all the difficulties and complexities in society, people want political power exercised locally. That means that those who hold power must be held accountable for their actions. That is why we are here today.

When we first debated the coronavirus regulations in the Chamber, many of us remarked on the extraordinarily invasive restrictions that we were placing on the everyday lives of citizens. Notwithstanding the various amendments, these regulations are still in place more than a year after they were first enacted. For more than a year of our lives, we have lived with enormous restrictions that, previously, would have been simply unthinkable. I remember saying in the Chamber last year, as did others, that restrictions on funerals and wakes would be especially difficult. The restrictions were necessary to deal with a previously unthinkable threat — a virus that has killed nearly 3 million people around the world, including more than 2,000 in Northern Ireland, 7,000 across the island of Ireland and 127,000 across the UK. The public accepted and complied

with these restrictions based on a social contract between the state and citizen. An implicit part of that contract is the understanding that those who make the laws are bound to follow them like everyone else. We make the laws so we have to be willing to make, and be seen to make, the same sacrifices that others have made.

There is an Irish way of death that spans major denominational differences and even includes those of us who are not religious. It is a shared, cultural instinct to come together to envelop families in support, solidarity and love. I have no doubt that some of those sincere instincts lay behind the gathering on 30 June last year. Given the cultural importance of marking death here, ordinary people are entitled to ask, “Why not me? Why not my family? Why was my loss less important than someone else?”. Hundreds, if not thousands, of families have lost loved ones in circumstances where not only were they unable to mark the passing in a proper funeral, but many did not even see their loved one before they died in a hospital or care home.

Many were not able to view the remains of their loved one because of the restrictions that we in the Chamber enacted last year, which were signed off by Ministers in the Executive. As has been said in the debate, probably all of us have experienced real regret at not having been present in churches, funeral homes or graveyards to mark the passing of someone we knew. It may not have been a family member or even a close friend, but it may have been someone in our community or neighbourhood whom we knew and admired and whose life meant something to us, even in a small way, and to whom, we felt, we owed the small debt of bearing witness to their life. But we did not do that. Many hundreds and thousands of others did not do that, because the rules were made to protect us all.

1.30 pm

The idea of a social contract, which I mentioned earlier, first emerged in the 18th century, at the same time as another idea: the republic. At the core of the idea of a republic and, therefore, surely at the core of the values of anyone who is republican is the principle of equal citizenship, the idea that, in a republic, unlike in other systems, all citizens are equal before the law and all rules apply to everyone equally. Whatever the findings of the PPS were, whatever conversations were had with police officers and however complicated the changes to the regulations were, it is clear that, on 30 June last year, multiple breaches of the rules took place involving senior members of the Executive. People of all backgrounds are offended, especially those who have lost loved ones and have not had the same opportunity to mark their passing.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member please draw his remarks to a close?

Mr O'Toole: They are offended because the principle of equal citizenship, which is core to the principles of a republic, has clearly been undermined. The very least that they can expect is a clear and sincere apology.

Mr Easton: On 30 June last year, over 2,000 people, including Members of the Assembly, attended the funeral of Bobby Storey. Every day before that and every day since, for the duration of this pandemic, families across the country have lost loved ones. Many have not been able to visit their dying loved ones in hospital, and some have had

to say goodbye on the phone. Some of the stories that we have heard are, frankly, inhumane.

There is one rule for Sinn Féin and another for everybody else. If that had been me, a unionist politician, you can guarantee that I would have been arrested by the PSNI, recommended for prosecution by the PPS, taken to court and fined. My party probably would have asked me to resign. I would basically have been hung, drawn and quartered. It pains me to say it, but it is absolutely clear that there is a two-tier political policing system because of the fear that Sinn Féin will be upset and because of the underlying threat that there is a potential for violence.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. He makes a valid point regarding policing and the political party, Sinn Féin. Days before the funeral, there were warning signs at the wake. I think that 400 people attended the wake of the deceased. Surely, that should have raised sirens for the political party of Sinn Féin and the PSNI.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Easton: I thank the Member for his comments. He is right: that should have sent a warning signal to the PSNI and Sinn Féin.

I hate to say it, but the fact is that Sinn Féin is treating my community and the Assembly like dirt. That needs to stop, and it needs to stop now. That is how Sinn Féin makes me and my community feel.

The PPS's decision not to prosecute was, sadly, predictable, but that does not make it less abhorrent. The most unbelievable part of the entire episode is that the decision was justified on the basis that Members of the Assembly were confused by the rules. I do not recall that ever being mentioned last year.

Where do I begin with this? Do I begin with the thousands of families across the country who have carefully abided by the restrictions when holding funerals; with the fact that the Sinn Féin Ministers in attendance at the funeral had helped to draft and approve the regulations in the Executive; or with the fact that those Members have repeatedly criticised those who have taken part in other large gatherings? Perhaps a good starting point is to actually believe the PPS. Let us all pretend for a moment that the Sinn Féin members who went to the funeral were genuinely confused about the rules. If that was the case, why did they not share their confusion with the PSNI when they met them to discuss the funeral arrangements? Perhaps there is a considerable difference between 30 and 2,000, but that cannot be used as an excuse. I have never heard a more ridiculous justification for a decision with such huge ramifications.

The position of my party is that the Chief Constable should resign. I have been led to that conclusion by a considerable list of failings. This is not an orange or green issue: people on all sides of the constitutional debate are rightly angry about what happened, and many have lost faith in the Chief Constable. However, it must be said that the unionist community in particular has lost confidence, especially in the Chief Constable, and policing here relies on cross-community consent. The Chief Constable appears to be oblivious to the damage that has been done to unionist confidence in policing, and this is the latest in a catalogue of mishaps. There has long been talk of two-tier

policing in Northern Ireland, and those at the top in the police insist that that is not the case.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to my colleague for giving way. Does the Member agree that what we have here is a case not of confusion but of collusion? They plotted and conspired jointly — the police and Sinn Féin — to put in place the arrangements for that funeral.

Mr Easton: Yes, there is no confusion whatever.

If it is mere perception, how does one explain the Storey funeral and the subsequent investigation compared with how the unionist community has been treated? The Chief Constable still seems not to grasp the political repercussions of how this has been handled.

On another matter, the deputy First Minister was only interviewed five months after the event took place. Meanwhile, the PSNI continued to issue on-the-spot fines to members of the public and could arrest loyalists within three days for alleged breaches of COVID regulations, normally with less evidence than we have for Sinn Féin Members attending that funeral.

There is a picture of the deputy First Minister at the funeral with a man's arm around her. Some people in this country have not hugged their mother for a year. The policing of the event has made a total mockery of the regulations. The actions of the deputy First Minister and other Sinn Féin politicians last year undermined the public message, and I have no doubt that it reduced public compliance. Yet, throughout the most recent lockdown, the vast majority of people have continued to follow the restrictions. The decision by the PPS not to prosecute will, I fear, shatter compliance with restrictions. As a result of what happened, I have already heard about cases in which people are going to challenge in the courts the fines that they received. How can we tell members of the public with any authority that their businesses must close, they must not see their families and they must not leave their homes? The public will laugh at us.

The apology of the deputy First Minister was not enough and is not good enough. She has failed to acknowledge any wrongdoing on her part. It remains my view that her position is untenable and that she should resign, but you just do not care. The deputy First Minister has no authority to lecture people on what they should and should not do, because the message on COVID regulations has been shattered. The Chief Constable must also consider his refusal to resign. He should reflect on the magnitude of the events and their effect on the confidence of policing in Northern Ireland. What happened last June and the decisions in recent days cannot and should not be ignored. There must be serious consequences as a result of the actions of Sinn Féin.

Mr Carroll: People Before Profit have consistently opposed police powers to fine and prosecute people for gathering throughout the pandemic because the virus should be approached with a proper public health response, not a tougher police state. The Executive utterly failed to deliver the health response that we needed. Endowing the police with more powers has created the conditions for minorities to be targeted. When the debates around the funeral kicked off last year, we had no truck, therefore, with calls for prosecutions against Michelle O'Neill or, indeed, others for attending funerals, particularly when such a spectacularly disparate approach

had been taken to other gatherings by those often leading the charge.

That is not where the disparities end, of course. For some time now I have strongly rebuked the PSNI for its disproportionate approach to gatherings across the North throughout the pandemic. There seems to be a thread that links the events that have been strongly targeted by the police that we cannot ignore today or during the rest of the pandemic. It appears that those standing up against systemic oppression have been treated differently from those who are in or are well-connected to Stormont. A gathering predominantly of women protesting against sexism and violence after the murder of Sarah Everard a few weeks ago was targeted and fines up to £500 doled out. A few months ago, an event with a handful of people commemorating the Sean Graham bookmakers' massacre ended seriously and faced unnecessary hostility from the PSNI. As, I know, some in the Chamber and some who have called in via video today are tired of hearing, a gathering of people taking a stand against racial injustice was targeted, first, by politicians in this room, who passed last-minute regulations; secondly, by the police, who kettled people in a way that was unsafe and broke social-distancing measures; and, thirdly, by the justice system, which continues to go after them for prosecutions. None of those gatherings of people had the benefit of claiming that the regulations were too complicated. None of those groups had the benefit of being offered police assistance to work through and manage their events; in fact, with the Black Lives Matter protest, the police went after organisers the night before the event attempting to hand out cautions before any gathering had taken place. Those people faced police repression, fines, threats of prosecutions and arrests for some. When you compare that with the likes of how Michelle O'Neill or Sammy Wilson have been treated, the disparity could not be clearer.

What astounds me further is the brazen hypocrisy. Sammy Wilson has made a habit of actively flouting the regulations, including going into an ice cream shop without wearing a mask. He did not care how dangerous it was. He did not like the regulations, and he knew that he could flout them with impunity. What a brass neck then for Sammy or his party to lead the charge against others who have broken or may have broken regulations during the pandemic.

Similarly, the fact that Michelle O'Neill has refused to retract her comments about the police response to the Black Lives Matter protests being proportionate, when she was involved in a gathering that appeared to be less socially distant, is hypocritical. I have asked her before and will put it to her again: when will she apologise for the defence of the PSNI's actions and stand on the side of those who were disproportionately targeted on that day?

In the wake of Minister O'Neill not being fined or prosecuted, the Executive should move swiftly to ensure that prosecutions for others gathering are quashed. Ordinary people, including the most marginalised, have been targeted while those in power and the bosses who force people into unsafe workplaces have been left untouched. What a terrible look for the Executive. It is fitting though, as a report shows how Stormont's racial equality strategy has utterly failed and the First Minister refuses to meet the leadership of the trade union movement in the North. It is disgraceful stuff.

I want to issue a warning. If the case against the Black Lives Matter protesters is allowed to proceed through the courts and results in prosecutions, the impact on the lives and careers of those protesters will have been caused by the Executive and their Ministers. It will be on their hands, so do something about it. Otherwise, I imagine that it will be very difficult to answer this question: how can it be that those who took the most stringent measures to socially distance and who met in the smallest groups were targeted with a heavy-handed police response, yet those who did not so much as wear a mask were not? It would be the reverse, if the police responses were about COVID at all, but they are not. They are about who you are and why you are gathering, and the state has sent out a clear message: organise around police brutality, violence against women by a police officer or collusion by the state —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Carroll: — and you are fair game. Establishment politicians, on the other hand, are untouchable. I will continue to call out that rank hypocrisy going forward.

Ms Sugden: I begin by thanking all those who have kept to the rules over the past year. It has been a difficult year, and it has been a significant sacrifice. Every day, I hear stories from people crying to me on the telephone about missed appointments for critical surgery or about not being able to see their loved ones and pleading with me to give them permission to travel to see someone whom they have not seen in years, because that is all that they have. I also pay tribute to all those whose lives have been lost over the past year. I am sorry that, as an Assembly, we had to take measures that saved more lives. I am sorry that we stopped people mourning in the way that they would have expected.

I will begin this where it should end, and that is with political leadership. I am so disappointed in the deputy First Minister and others, not least because they have yet to give a full apology for their actions, not apologising for someone's hurt. You do not own their hurt to apologise for it: you own the actions that led to their hurt. If anything meaningful can come out of today's session, deputy First Minister, it is that you apologise for what you did. It leads me to believe that, if this circumstance were to happen again and you had a choice to make about attending another funeral in similar circumstances, you would do it again. Sadly, the people of Northern Ireland believe the same. People are so angry. They have been angry since last July. The messaging around the COVID regulations was diminished at the point at which you appeared at that funeral.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I am very interested in what she just said. Does she agree with me that that illustrates that the movement rather than the people, the health service or the economy always comes first with Sinn Féin and that it is not a conventional political party in the sense of every other party in the Chamber?

1.45 pm

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Sugden: Thank you. I thank the Member for his contribution. I will summarise by saying that I do not believe that there was any political leadership. Members

on this side of the House have as much responsibility to everyone in Northern Ireland, not least the people who they would have vote for them. It is disappointing that that was put above the people of Northern Ireland last year.

Whether or not you believe that you knew the regulations, you acted against the spirit of the regulations. Further, it is your job to know the regulations, so if you are claiming ignorance, you are also admitting to incompetence. As political leaders, as the deputy First Minister, as the Finance Minister, as members of the Policing Board and as Members of the House, we are held to a higher standard because people look to us as an example. It is not an excuse for you to say that you did not know. If there was any doubt, you should not have been there. You intentionally flirted with the rules hoping that it would not be noticed — but it was. It was noticed by every person in Northern Ireland, particularly those grieving families.

I could say a lot about what happened this week. Ultimately, it was the result of poor political leadership. To an extent, it was also the result of poor legislation and an inconsistent application of said legislation. I agree with the Justice Minister, insofar as the justice system is there to seek to prove alleged crimes, and that can be difficult to an extent. However, I have significant concerns that the police did not even seek to gather evidence, which is a critical part of that system.

I also share in other Members' comments about policing and confidence in policing. I feel very sorry for police officers on the ground. I feel particularly sorry for them in my constituency, where we are expecting people to descend on the north coast. Not just that, but we are expecting people to come and break the rules because they feel that there will be no consequences. That gives rise to fears of a very uncertain summer in Northern Ireland, and that worries me. I make this appeal to everyone in Northern Ireland: you are better for following the rules, and you are saving lives by doing so. Do not let the bad example of others discourage you in that.

On 10 April, it will be 23 years since the Good Friday Agreement. That agreement was a significant leap for all people from all sides in Northern Ireland. They accepted things that no person should have to accept, but they did that for the sake of peace and a better future. Last July, we saw thousands of people in uniform on the streets of Belfast. I do not think that that goes to the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement nor is it conducive to an inclusive society or a peace that those people made sacrifices for.

It is the sacrifices of the last year that we have to be acutely aware of today. I appeal to all leaders of the House, even those who broke the rules. I appreciate Mr Nesbitt's contribution. He broke the rules, but he said sorry for breaking the rules and took action that was symbolic of that apology. I want to see that from the deputy First Minister.

Mr Murphy: I welcome the opportunity that the debate gives me to set out my position on the funeral of Bobby Storey. Hurt has been caused to many families who had to bury their loved ones during this unprecedented health crisis. That was never my intention, nor do I believe that it was the intention of anyone involved in the funeral. However, hurt was caused, and I apologise for that unreservedly.

Let me be absolutely clear: the law does not distinguish between one set of people and another or one funeral and another.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Murphy: I am not even sure who is speaking to me, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Wells: I am Jim Wells, and you certainly know who I am.

Mr Murphy: OK. You will have a chance to speak later on, and I will not interrupt you.

The law does not distinguish between one set of people and another nor one funeral and another; nor should it. I accepted and cooperated with the police investigation into the events. The PPS has now said that it will review the decision it made, and I await the outcome of that review. I fully accept the outcome of those processes.

However, let me reiterate today that I regret the political division that the matter has caused in the Assembly and to the public health messaging that we, as a collective, worked so hard to develop and get an agreed response to this terrible pandemic. More importantly, however, I want to say sorry to the wider community, but, more particularly, to apologise fully and unreservedly to those families who were hurt in any way by my actions.

Mr Speaker: I call Doug Beattie to make a winding-up speech on the motion.

Mr Beattie: In making a winding-up speech on the motion, I will reflect on nearly two hours of robust debate that was heated, certainly passionate, moving and angry at times. The debate ebbed and flowed, as it has done inside and outside the Chamber, about bereavement and how we remember lost loved ones, which, as Paul Frew said, goes to the heart of our society.

I thank everybody for their contribution to the debate. I timed Sinn Féin's contribution: it was four minutes. Four minutes of a two-hour debate to set out its stall on the matter. It is just not good enough. Absolutely not good enough. We needed to hear more; we heard nothing. The party doubled down on the position it held before we came to the House today.

Policing and justice has been damaged. Of course it has been damaged. However, like many people in this place, I have to reiterate that we cannot lay the blame on the rank-and-file police officer who has to interpret a set of regulations, written by us, that has to be delivered at the sharp end of justice; mistakes will be made.

People have pointed out the mistakes made by the gold commander at the funeral. Yes, he has made mistakes. Absolutely he has made mistakes. If he had worked on the enforcement aspect of the engagement, we may not be where we are today. If he had simply said, "You know what, you see that Milltown eulogy? It's not acceptable, it ain't happening. Go away and rethink that", we may not be where we are today.

The Chief Constable has come under serious scrutiny and criticism. I have to say, regrettably, that is justified because he is the head of a police force like no other. This is not Kent or the Midlands: this is Northern Ireland. We have a very distinct policing issue and, unfortunately, he has, in many ways, failed to understand that.

Please let us not lose sight of what happened. The very fact that the issue came about is because a political party — Sinn Féin — sat down in ministerial positions and made rules and regulations that they told everybody to adhere to and they did not. They just did what they wanted to do, and they cannot get away in the smoke as we start focusing on other people. It was not a decision made by mistake; it was a decision taken deliberately knowing the consequences. They organised the funeral in detail with the police. They even organised the wake, as Mr Stalford clearly pointed out. They proudly said, “We organised the wake”, even though the rules stated you were not allowed to have a wake. There were signs pointing out to people how to go to the wake. That was compounded when the party refused to apologise and show contrition. They simply promoted the idea that they were above everybody else and that they had some kind of privilege that we do not. The IRA army council directed how the funeral should be done because it wanted to remember one of its own.

That is the reality. If they had shown political understanding, they would not have done it.

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beattie: I will not, Paul, if you do not mind. I just want to shoot through it.

Nichola Mallon, Mike Nesbitt and Claire Sugden raised the issue that the guidelines were said to be confusing. That is an absolutely embarrassing defence. If I were going to organise something, no matter what it was, a garden event or anything, the first thing that I would do is get out the rules and regulations and read them, because I may well have forgotten them over time. That is not a defence, and it should never be one. It cannot be a defence.

Many Members will have received emails from constituents, outlining the hurt that they have felt over this past number of months. I have received moving emails; even last night I received them. On reading them, you can recount the hurt that has been delivered on those people, because they saw one group getting something that they were not allowed, and that was to be able to say goodbye to their loved ones in the manner that they wanted.

Kellie Armstrong's contribution on the issue was very moving. Dolores outlined that although members of her party and her friends had loved ones who had died, they could not attend their funerals. These contributions highlight the issue well. Integrity shown by parties that adhered to the rules and regulations. Of course, my friend Mike Nesbitt lost his mother. There could be no fanfare, no funeral, no lining the route, no ushers, no black and whites, no 2,000 people coming out onto the street. I could not even attend my friend's mother's funeral to show him support. Why not? It was because he adhered to the rules.

The PPS findings are absolutely staggering. Although we watched it all unfold on TV — people deliberately breaking the rules — the PPS said that it could not see them breaking the rules. It was there for all to see on television. There were 24 recommendations for prosecution, but none have been taken forward. Mary Lou McDonald and Gerry Adams were not even questioned or investigated, and no file was put forward. Why not? It is staggering. I wrote to the DPP on Tuesday night and said that the decision is having a material effect on my constituents and he must review it. I do not know whether he took my letter and said, “Let us review this matter”, or somebody else did that, or

lots of people did it. However, it is being reviewed. Let us see the outcome and get some meat on the bones of a decision that was taken that was fundamentally wrong. We know that it was wrong.

This is what it feels like for ordinary people out on the street. It feels like a criminal, maybe a thief, has gone before the courts, got away on a technicality and has come out sneering, only to do the same thing all over again. The difference is that this matter did not even get brought to court, even though so many other people have been brought to court.

This debate will not have any binding outcomes. It is an opportunity for us to express our views, and people will know that we are just doing that. The Sinn Féin Ministers will hope that it is all forgotten about in the days and weeks to come. However, it cannot be. You are the deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland and you are the Finance Minister, and you have shown no integrity, moral courage, compassion or understanding for the very people that you tell us that you represent. I am not talking about anybody in the context of green or orange, but about the everyday people who go to work every day to make a living and who adhere to the rules that we set and that you broke.

2.00 pm

Your apology was poor. It was not an apology. In the four minutes that you gave us, nothing changed. The apology needs to be about what you did. You organised and delivered a funeral and a wake outside the rules and regulations. You have to apologise for that; that is what you have to do. My friend Mike Nesbitt apologised fulsomely — I felt it — and he apologised to me and my party in private. That was a measure of integrity. Claw back your compassion. Claw back your integrity. Claw back your moral authority. Apologise and then resign. That is where we are.

In the last 30 seconds that I have, in the context of the debate, I say to people: do not let Sinn Féin set your moral agenda on this particular issue. Please, everybody, adhere to the health regulations. Do not break them. Doing so will cost lives. The breach nine months ago cost lives.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly acknowledges the pain endured by families across Northern Ireland who have experienced loss during the COVID-19 crisis; expresses its sincere condolences to those who, in periods of trauma and loss, were unable to say goodbye to loved ones; further expresses its gratitude to those who have followed the public health guidelines and played their part in keeping their neighbours, communities and the health service safe; regrets the actions of those in positions of elected office who breached the Executive's public health messaging and undermined efforts to prevent transmission of the virus; and condemns the deputy First Minister and the Minister of Finance for their actions, which have caused immense hurt and undermined the Executive's public health message.

Adjourned at 2.01 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Thursday 8 April 2021

The Assembly met at 11.00 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Private Members' Business

Support for the Rule of Law

Mr Speaker: Having been given notice by not less than 30 Members, under Standing Order 11, I have summoned the Assembly to meet today for the purpose of debating a motion on support for the rule of law.

Mrs Long: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the violence on our streets over recent days and condemns without equivocation those involved; sends best wishes to those police officers attacked or injured whilst protecting the community and extends its sympathy to those members of the public who have suffered distress, loss or damage as a result; reaffirms its full commitment to support for policing and for the rule of law; recognises that leadership comes with responsibility; recommits to upholding a culture of lawfulness in both actions and in words; and calls for an immediate and complete end to this violence.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. You will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. I call Naomi Long to open the debate.

Mrs Long: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is with a heavy heart that I propose the motion for debate today. I thought long and hard before deciding to submit a recall petition. However, in the face of successive nights of violence and unrest on our streets, I felt that it would be a dereliction of our duty as an Assembly not to return to address the issue in a democratic forum and to seek to calm tensions and jointly call for the violence and unrest to end.

Over 55 police officers have been injured in over 36 incidents of disorder, deliberately designed to draw the police into areas to be attacked as they try to protect the community. The scenes that we have witnessed of people forced from their cars, bus drivers and passengers ordered off public transport and vehicles set alight are nothing short of disgraceful.

Anyone who, in any way, tries to justify, excuse or deflect from those abhorrent scenes should also be thoroughly ashamed. I want to place on record my support for those officers and their families and for the Police Service in general for all the work that they are doing, day by day, night by night, to keep people safe. I wish those who were

injured a swift and complete recovery from what could be life-changing injuries.

My thoughts, too, are with ordinary members of the public who are going about their day only to have their lives disrupted and their property destroyed by mindless thugs. It is a mercy that no one has lost their life as a result of this appalling violence. I appeal, again, for everyone with influence in our community to use it to end this. The scenes over the last week have been as depressing as they are disgraceful. Whilst not all those who are involved are young, it has been particularly disturbing to see another generation of children and young people, some as young as 12 or 13, being involved in violent confrontation with the police. However, my horror at that has been intensified as I watched adults old enough to be their parents and old enough to know better standing by and cheering, goading and encouraging young people as they wreaked havoc in their own community. That is nothing short of child abuse.

There are many theories as to why this violence has erupted. Whilst there may be an element of truth in each of them, there is and can be no excuse or justification for what has taken place. Our condemnation of such violence must be unequivocal. For some months, we have all been aware of the simmering tensions in parts of our community over the outworkings of Brexit. Most of us, including those who opposed Brexit, have some sympathy for those people who feel betrayed. They were promised sunlit uplands, and that was a fantasy. It was never how Brexit would end. Those in government knew that, but were more interested in their own ascent to power than the hurt and instability that their deception would cause in Northern Ireland. Instead of calm and measured leadership in the face of challenge, we have heard inflammatory rhetoric, with threats of renewed violence being bandied around by people who claim to be trying to lead others away from their violent past. That dangerous language and foolish talk could only ever serve to further stoke the anger. While people will claim that they were speaking in metaphors, we know all too well that many others hear it literally.

Temperatures were raised still further last week. After a year of restrictions and lockdowns, people were, understandably, frustrated and even angry that those who made the rules and then broke them may not be held to account. Upholding a culture of lawfulness is not only about what we say: it is about what we do. Leadership is about action, not just words. However, few of those teenagers who were burning buses and throwing masonry will have been influenced by the finer points of the Northern Ireland protocol or the COVID regulations. I

hate the phrase “recreational rioting” because it trivialises something that causes untold harm. Nevertheless, many of them are bored, angry, reckless and willing to engage in high-risk behaviour for thrills and excitement. Few of them are considering the impact that a bad decision today will have on the rest of their lives. Some of them are convinced that they have no real future worth worrying about. That is utterly tragic.

Some of those young people are also vulnerable to coercive control from the same gangsters who pollute their community with drugs and who are engaged in extortion, racketeering and thuggery. Those malignant influences have every reason to seek to undermine police engagement with the community, given the recent successes of the paramilitary and organised crime task force in disrupting their criminal activities and their incomes. The evidence of orchestration in some areas is confirmation of that. Last night, as the trouble moved towards interfaces and flashpoints in our city with a depressing inevitability, it became clear that deep-rooted sectarian hatred still propels people towards violence.

All those factors and more may have played a part in creating the toxic environment in which trouble has erupted. However, while many factors have contributed to the febrile atmosphere, there can be no excuses or justifications. There is a common thread throughout: lack of leadership and a common target, which is the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Those who intentionally or unintentionally, through their actions or their words, have helped to position policing as a lightning conductor for anger and frustration in the community now need to step back and reflect. We need to dial down the rhetoric, walk back the ultimatums and allow the accountability and oversight structures for policing and justice to do their job. It is time to support the police — its leadership and its officers on the ground — as they do their jobs.

Therefore, I welcome the unanimous statement that was issued by the Northern Ireland Policing Board yesterday and I trust that, alongside support for the motion today, it marks the start of rebuilding trust, relationships and respect. There are political solutions to all the issues that I have raised. We are not powerless and, if we work together, we can shape things for the better. We can work with business, government and the European Union to resolve the challenges around the operation of the protocol and focus on achievable solutions, such as a full veterinary agreement to mitigate the worst impacts and de-escalate the disruption and tensions. We can ensure that, in all that we say and do, we acknowledge the challenge and sacrifice that lockdown has been for all our people and provide leadership in respecting the regulations and guidance and collectively working to deliver an inclusive recovery. We can work together to tackle deprivation and exclusion, particularly among our young people, that leaves them vulnerable to paramilitary influence. We can invest to build more resilient communities that can resist coercive control from thugs and gangsters. That work is already under way through the tackling paramilitarism programme, and, with focused and sustained investment, it has the power to transform people's lives. We can confront the sectarianism in our society and take action to tackle it through support for integrated education, shared housing and diverse communities. We cannot rewrite the past but we can agree to start a new chapter. One that offers hope in this community. All that needs to be built on a

firm foundation, respect for the rule of law and respect for policing and justice.

The system of checks and balances is designed to ensure that the operational elements of justice are independent and free of political interference. Although we may not agree with every operational decision of the police, the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) or the judiciary, it is vital that, if and when we have concerns, they are directed through the correct channels and due process is respected. Community confidence in policing is not ours to give or take away, neither is it the job of the police alone to build it. Each of us has a duty to build that confidence by our actions and words and our active and visible support for and engagement with the police at every level. The Policing Board has unanimously asked that we invite Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) to assess the policing of the Storey funeral against national standards, and it will report in a matter of weeks. In the meantime, it is not for me or anyone else to prejudge the outcome. None of us has the expertise in policing or full knowledge of the facts. It is profoundly unfair and incredibly damaging to trash the reputation of the Police Service and senior officers without evidence. We must allow those who are tasked with the complex challenge of policing this community to do that job without fear or favour. Our actions today will impact our ability to deliver fair and effective policing right across our community, both now and in the future.

I propose the motion in the genuine hope that, despite our different perspectives, we can unite in support for policing, the rule of law, delivering political solutions to the challenges that we face and, above all, our desire to seek an immediate end to this violence before the damage done is irreparable.

Mrs Foster: I apologise for my voice today. I hope that Members can at least make out some of what I am saying.

I welcome the motion before the House today. The scenes that we have seen last evening and on previous evenings in various parts of Northern Ireland are totally unacceptable. There can be no place in our society for violence or the threat of violence, and it must stop. Just as it was wrong in the past and was never justified, it is wrong now and cannot be justified. The injuries to front-line officers, victims being terrorised, damage to people's property and harm to Northern Ireland's image in this, our centenary year, have taken us backwards. No brick, bottle or petrol bomb thrown has achieved, or can ever achieve, anything but destruction, harm and fear.

11.15 am

We are indebted to the police officers who stand between order and those who prefer anarchy. We are also indebted to all the political representatives, community leaders, parents, pastors and others who have sought to calm tension and urge restraint. Rioting, criminality and wanton destruction destroy lives and livelihoods and bring fear and misery to local communities. It is not in the name of the people who live in the areas impacted on. I have spoken to some of those people, and it is certainly not in their name.

Today is not the time to rehearse the arguments of the last number of weeks, save to say that we should all know well that, when politics fail or are perceived to be failing in Northern Ireland, those who fill the vacuum

offer destruction and despair. We cannot allow a new generation of our young people to fall victim to that path or be preyed on by some who prefer the shadows to the light. Political problems require political solutions, never street violence.

Northern Ireland is faced with a number of deep and significant political challenges in the time ahead. We must work through those challenges collectively. Responsible leadership will not cherry-pick the problems that are easiest. Responsible leadership means actively listening to views that people may not agree with or want to hear. Responsible leadership will not deny the existence of the most politically difficult challenges or wish them away. Responsible leadership will not leave things to fester or worsen. In the Assembly, our democratic forum, we will always have our differences and our different legitimate expectations, but the only bedrock on which we can move forward successfully is to recommit ourselves to redoubling our efforts to solve each and every one of the challenges that we face through politics. A stable and prosperous Northern Ireland requires a solution to all our challenges built on the firm foundation that every citizen is equal under the law and is equally subject to the law, regardless of background or status.

Mrs O'Neill: I also welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate, albeit that I am saddened by the fact that we have to have it. It is incumbent on us all as Assembly Members and political leaders to meet and publicly express our deep concerns relating to the recent violence and the ongoing street disorder over Easter week across Belfast, Derry, Tyrone and other parts of the North. What we saw last night at Lanark Way interface was a dangerous escalation of the events of recent days. It is utterly deplorable.

This morning, I met the Chief Constable, Simon Byrne, who then briefed the special meeting of the Executive, where he gave an operational update on the police response. As we speak, 55 police officers have been injured. I send solidarity to those officers and their families at this difficult time. It is a time when they are out on the front line, tackling difficult situations on the ground and trying to protect people in our communities from harm and protect property. I also reaffirm support for the rule of law and those who are charged with upholding it on our streets.

I am glad to say to the Assembly that the Executive met just this morning and, as I said, had the Chief Constable there. As a result of that engagement, we have issued a joint Executive statement. Our words are powerful, and it is really important at this time that the Executive have sent out that united front. There is an onus on every MLA and on other public representatives to assume our responsibilities, to address the tensions as we see them, to restore calm and to work with credible community leaders and the police to provide the leadership that is required to confront these problems. As political leaders, we must stand united in appealing to all concerned to refrain from further threats or use of violence and recognise that it is only through democratic politics that we can solve our problems and concerns and call together on those organising young people to engage in violence to stop and call on the young people themselves to exercise restraint. Nobody could fail to be alarmed by the fact that these are young people — children as young as 13, barely teenagers

— who have been involved in rioting at Sandy Row and, last night, in similar scenes at Lanark Way.

It is not right; it is dangerous; it is unacceptable; and it is a miracle that, as we stand here today, no one has been killed.

I commend all those who are working really hard on the ground in our communities to try to provide diversionary activities for children and young people, because we know that that can help to prevent further antisocial behaviour by those who face the highest risk of influence. We all know where that influence is coming from: it is coming from illegal loyalist paramilitaries and criminal elements. They are orchestrating this violence and are sending youngsters out to do their bidding, while they stand back. Those people are no role models for our youth. They are outdated and antiquated and are caught in a time warp, which has no bearing on where the vast majority of people across this society now are or, indeed, where they want to be. They are holding back their people and their community.

It is only through dialogue and through the democratic institutions that political solutions to problems can be found. This Saturday marks the twenty-third anniversary of the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which created the democratic institutions, based on power-sharing, and guaranteed equality and parity of esteem between both traditions and the right for citizens to be Irish, British or both. It also created an alternative to conflict. It gave today's generation the precious gift of peace and hope. It is vital that the benefits of the peace process are safeguarded and built upon for future generations, and that all of our people feel the benefit.

The Loyalist Communities Council (LCC) has now, we are told, withdrawn its support for the agreement. What is its logic and, more importantly, what is its alternative? Unionist leaders have withdrawn their support for the Chief Constable, demanding that he resign. When we see that manifest itself, with young people from working-class loyalist areas attacking the police, it seems to me and all who are watching on that those things cannot be entirely divorced. Surely unequivocal support for the police and their leadership is the responsible thing to guarantee today from this democratic Assembly.

Political unionism cannot blame Brexit —.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What we as an Executive, as an Assembly and as political leaders need to do is focus on working together and say very clearly that there is room for everybody at the table. I will, however, tell you whom there is not room for: there is not room for armed gangs and criminal gangs who care nothing about the future of this society. Those people are enemies of the peace, and it is our job to make sure that all generations and future generations feel the benefit of the peace. It is incumbent upon us as political leaders, to whom the public give their support, to work together.

Ms Mallon: I support the motion and speak on behalf of the SDLP. Like others, I want to begin by addressing the escalation in violence that took place in Belfast last night. When I became Infrastructure Minister last year, I never imagined that I would be receiving updates about the condition of one of our bus drivers — a public servant

— after a bus was hijacked and petrol bombed, while the attackers were cheered on by a mob. Last night, a bus driver was attacked doing his job serving the community and a press photographer was attacked for doing his job in capturing the truth. Police officers were, for the eighth consecutive night, attacked for doing their job, protecting communities and keeping us safe. If anyone needed a wake-up call about the dangerous escalation of the situation, they should reflect on those facts. It has to be said that the immediate response on social media from some political leaders fell far short of what was needed to provide assurances to people and communities who are afraid of where we will go next.

Today is not the day for a political blame game. The people of Northern Ireland are not stupid: they know how and why we got to this dreadful point. What the people of Northern Ireland want to know is what we, as their political leaders, are going to do to de-escalate the situation and prevent it from reoccurring and infecting another generation of disadvantaged young people.

I appeal to all Members to reflect seriously on where their words will take us over the next few hours and days. The truth is that the violence, disorder and sustained attacks on police officers are a damning indictment of the quality of political leadership that has been provided to our communities. The fact that children are engaged in violence on our streets is a damning indictment of the quality of political leadership that has been provided to our communities. Those young people should look with excitement to their futures and careers. They should have the world at their feet. Instead, they are looking at criminal convictions that will follow them throughout their lives and limit their ambitions and opportunities. Is that the kind of society for which we want to be responsible? After years of lost opportunities and lives, are we content to sacrifice another generation to our own divisions?

I welcome the voices here that have condemned the violence of recent days. However, the truth is that we have condemned working-class communities to the cycle of violence for generations. I look at those young people in Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey and see the burden of poverty, isolation and alienation that they share with young people in the New Lodge and Ardoyne. This place, these institutions, should have been an example to people everywhere of what we can achieve by living for ideals, rather than fighting for them. Instead of building partnerships, we have allowed division to occupy the heart of our institutions. It has affected and infected our politics and communities. Most unforgivably, it has placed a limit on the scale of young people's ambitions.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to my colleague for giving way. Does she agree that one of the most damaging and upsetting things about what is happening is that we are allowing young people to be infected with the narrative of "win versus lose" in a zero-sum situation where one community is being pitted against another, and that we need to overcome that? This cannot be a zero-sum society. It has to be shared.

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an additional minute.

Ms Mallon: I absolutely agree with the Member. We should all reflect on the sad reality of the commonality that many of our citizens have. As we stand here today, 120,000 children are living in poverty, 40,000 families are

waiting for a home that meets their needs, and thousands of people are waiting for urgent medical care. The children who are wearing balaclavas on our streets this week were born into a society that was not of their own making; an unequal society, where they start off at a disadvantage. They are looking to us for help. What we offer here today and in the weeks ahead needs to be more than judgement or criminal sanction.

I regret that some in the House followed the raging crowd rather than providing direction over the past few months. As leaders, we have an obligation to exercise our influence to reduce tensions and bring the violence to an end. The message that we all need to send today is one of unequivocal condemnation of those who are orchestrating the violence and pushing children and young people into harm's way. Rather than continue to fail those young people and leave them ripe for manipulation and exploitation, we need to be unequivocal in our commitment to tackle the poverty, alienation and hopelessness that are faced by so many young people and citizens in working-class communities. When Lyra McKee was brutally murdered, we all stood together and said, "Never again". We must all unite to act on that pledge.

John Hume once said that if the underlying problem has not changed, the underlying solution has not changed. We have a duty and obligation to work together to address the problems that plague our communities. I assure the people of Northern Ireland that the SDLP remains committed to playing its part.

Dr Aiken: I thank Mrs Long for bringing the motion to the Assembly. Violence on the streets or anywhere is completely unacceptable. Organised criminal gangs bringing out children, young people and others to commit acts of wanton destruction helps no one and no cause. The image that it portrays of Northern Ireland in the 21st century and into its second century is not one that anybody should want to see. The violence must stop before someone is killed.

COVID has not gone away. Creating chaos and disruption not only damages Northern Ireland but creates opportunities for transmission of the disease. The violence is in breach of the law and the health regulations. That, indeed, is the very reason that we have complained so vehemently about all those who have undermined the health regulations so far. It is that breaching of those regulations that puts all people at risk as much as the violence.

The burning of cars and roundabouts in Cloughfern, very close to my constituency, just in sight of where we are setting up a Nightingale recovery facility at the Whiteabbey hospital, is beyond perverse.

11.30 am

I re-emphasise our full support for the PSNI. Given the attacks on any of our police, who are on the front line of defending us against terrorism and who are helping to deliver our public safety during the pandemic, it is beholden on all politicians to support the police as they continue to do the most difficult tasks. They deserve our unreserved thanks.

On behalf of my party, I re-emphasise our abhorrence of attacks on the police, and I wish all 55 who were injured a swift recovery. We also trust that those who have injured

and attacked the police and committed criminal acts will swiftly be brought to justice. We will continue to pass on our support in the discussions with the Chief Constable that we will have this afternoon.

I will comment on remarks that I made last week about Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. I make clear that we fully support the HMIC in its work and that its professionalism and ability to investigate impartially is not in any doubt. We look forward to the publication of its findings on the policing of the Bobby Storey funeral as soon as they are available.

The violence and destruction across Northern Ireland is unacceptable and unjustifiable. If it does not halt now, the risk of someone being seriously injured or killed is there. Any anger must be directed through political, diplomatic and legal channels. To use violence is to lose the argument. It is to inflict great damage not only to your cause but to your community, because those in it are the ones who are left to pick up the pieces.

I welcome, as indeed does our party, the joint statement from the Northern Ireland Executive today. That is a start. I say to the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the other members of the Executive that that is an important move towards where we need to get to. All of us politicians must stand shoulder to shoulder to make sure that we use our best endeavours across all of Northern Ireland to make politics work. Violence and the threat of violence have no place in any society. In particular, it has no place in Northern Ireland. We must work together to stop it happening. We support the motion.

Mr Middleton: I am proud to come from the Newbuildings area of Londonderry. My wife is from Nelson Drive. I was born and bred in that community and my roots are there. It is my greatest honour to have a mandate to represent those areas and all the people of the Foyle constituency. The images and the videos that I have seen on news outlets are not a true reflection of who we are. In my constituency, I believe that the sense of community and looking out for one another is second to none. Over the course of the pandemic, we have seen the best of our people step up to help their neighbours.

I unequivocally condemn the violence and disorder that we have witnessed across our communities in recent days. Whether the violence happens in Londonderry or Belfast, Ballymena or Craigavon, it should be equally condemned.

Mr Stalford: I am very grateful to my colleague for giving way. He will be aware that social media postings are being put up that are trying to entice people into further lawbreaking. Will my friend join me in urging young people especially to ignore those voices that will take them down a path that will destroy their lives?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for that and I agree with it.

There can be no excuse for damaging or destroying the property of our neighbours in our communities or, indeed, for attacking the PSNI officers attending the scene. My thoughts are with each and every one of those officers injured and, indeed, all the rank-and-file officers of the PSNI who have, unacceptably, come under attack simply for doing their jobs.

There is no doubt that there are deep frustrations and anger in the unionist and loyalist community. However, the presence of that disorder and rioting on our streets is wholly unacceptable. There is no justification. The fundamental concerns expressed in the wider unionist community are genuine, and they must be addressed. It is of the utmost importance that those concerns are not drowned out by the destruction and mayhem that we have sadly witnessed on our streets. The outworking of that frustration and anger must be entirely peaceful and democratic.

The overwhelming majority of my constituents, and, no doubt, constituents across Northern Ireland are law-abiding and just want their concerns to be heard.

We must never stoop to the level of those who would use terror and violence for political means.

Frustrations have been building for months. In speech after speech in the Chamber, I and others have warned of the complete disregard being shown to the unionist community by those who champion the border in the Irish Sea and call for the rigorous implementation of the protocol. The complete disregard for the COVID-19 regulations shown by the deputy First Minister has caused immense anger and raised serious concerns about the criminal justice system.

In the week that the deputy First Minister and her colleagues received word that they would face no prosecutions for breaching COVID restrictions, at least 12 loyalists of whom I am aware in Londonderry were summoned to court for illegal assembly. The incident that I refer to did not happen last week or last year or the year before that; it happened four years ago, when a group of loyalists gathered peacefully to tackle ongoing issues of antisocial behaviour in the St Columb's Park and Bonds Street areas. Night after night, there was violence and alcohol and drug abuse in that park. There were no summonses for those engaging in that behaviour, yet, four years on, in the week that the deputy First Minister and others got off the hook, the loyalists received those summonses. There are questions to be asked of the PPS in that respect.

The perception of two-tier policing has led to the erosion of support in the unionist community and created a vacuum that, sadly, others seek to fill whether it is a perception or a reality of double standards in the police. That damages respect for the rule of law. When those in senior government positions break the law but are not held accountable, that endangers devolution. It is because we believe in the police and the rule of law that we want to see the law applied equally and fairly. Everyone inside and outside the Chamber must work to rebuild confidence and promote stability. Given the scale of the problem facing trust in politics and policing, while we support the motion, it is self-evident that words of condemnation will never be enough to provide solutions.

We all have choices to make. We have a choice as to whether to engage in violence or not. We have a choice as to which path we take in life. It is the job of us in the Chamber to improve the choices that our young people have, to provide them with a hopeful present reality and a hopeful future, not re-enacting the acts that, sadly, have been too familiar in the past. The Assembly needs to focus on the full reopening of our youth services, allowing for interventions and targeted programmes for our young

people, providing them with an alternative platform to highlight the fact that they have a voice, that they will be heard and that they have a say in democratic processes and will never again turn to the violent acts that, we all agree, are completely and totally wrong.

All of us in the Chamber need to redouble our efforts to bring about calm and hope for all in Northern Ireland. Therefore, I ask the Chamber this: do you care deeply enough about a shared future to take on board the genuine concerns raised by the unionist community? Collectively, we in the Chamber have the ability to send a strong message to every person in our society that we are serious about making Northern Ireland work, that we want to deliver a better future and that we are not going back.

Ms Anderson: The violence that erupted in Derry was mainly in the Waterside Protestant/unionist/loyalist (PUL) areas and was orchestrated by crime gangs. To demonstrate unity of purpose, political leaders — me, Gary Middleton, Karen Mullan and Sinead McLaughlin — met the PSNI district commander, the Chamber of Commerce, the City Centre Initiative and other statutory agencies to discuss reports of ambulances being stoned, petrol bombs being fired at cars, petrol bombs being put into the hands of 12-year-old children and police officers being injured.

Mr Middleton: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Ms Anderson: Afterwards, we issued a joint statement calling for an end to the ongoing cycle of violence.

I and Sinn Féin councillor Christopher Jackson were in small, mainly nationalist areas in the Waterside, such as Curryrierin and Shepherds Glen, with residents who felt utterly terrified in their homes as attempts were made to restrict access into and out of their estates, putting lives, families and communities at risk. There is no doubt that council and departmental support is needed for the besieged community of Curryrierin, for youth services and to build community capacity.

When violence occurs in nationalist areas of Derry, it is community activists, youth leaders and Sinn Féin who are on the ground, assisting to de-escalate the situation and challenge bad behaviour. Today, in the Chamber, we need to demonstrate a generosity of spirit; outreach to one another; dial down the rhetoric; build on the common ground on which we all stand; and, as political leaders, recommit to upholding a culture of lawfulness in actions and words. Twenty-three years after the Good Friday Agreement, we are, thankfully, in the privileged space where dialogue can be used to build relationships between orange and green and all other traditions who call our society “home”. From political representatives, leadership is essential at all times, in good times and in challenging times. The key to that is dialogue and proactive engagement between all traditions and none. We all know that our young people and people collectively deserve a society in which tolerance, equal treatment and the rule of law are standards that govern all institutions and everyday life.

I have listened to people in the PUL community who feel that their identity has been undermined by changes brought about by the British Government and political unionism. Those changes have happened and challenge us, but they have to be managed. So, my appeal, on behalf of the many people in Derry whom I have the privilege to represent, is for us to work together and use dialogue

to meet those challenges together and shape a future that addresses the needs of all of our people together. I do not want to see any young person from any tradition having their life ruined by a criminal record. Young people enraged by dangerous and provocative rhetoric are easy prey for the crime gangs involved in drug dealing, extortion and intimidation as well as attacks on journalists, bus drivers, photographers and representatives. It will be the young loyalists who will face the wrath of the criminal justice system, not those who shamefully stoked and orchestrated the violence.

Today, we must stand together to condemn without equivocation the violence on our streets, which serves as a sobering reminder that peace is a process that needs to be constantly safeguarded. If leadership is shown today and every day and if the rhetoric is toned down —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Ms Anderson: — inevitably the violence will be too. Tá mé ag tacú leis an rún. I support the motion.

Mr Middleton: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Member for Foyle Martina Anderson stated that ambulances were stoned. We need to be careful with our facts and our language in the Chamber.

Ms Anderson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Very briefly, please.

Ms Anderson: I said that we were discussing reports of ambulances being stoned: that is the difference.

Mr Speaker: OK. Let us not have a cross-Chamber argument about reports and so on.

Mr Storey: I declare an interest as a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

No one can be but saddened and depressed at the scenes of violence and destruction on our streets over the last number of days. Let us be clear, with no ambiguity, no double-talk and no smoke and mirrors: this is wrong.

No one should use legitimate political concerns about the events that have unfolded in our country over the last number of months — whether that be the protocol or the circumstances surrounding the funeral of Bobby Storey and how it was mishandled — as cover or as a licence to attack police officers or to burn cars, buses and property, instilling fear in their own and someone else's community.

11.45 am

Today's date is also a sad occasion for the families of two RUC officers who were murdered 44 years ago, on Good Friday, outside Moneymore. One of those officers, Constable John Thompson McCracken, was from my hometown of Ballymoney, and he was murdered along with Constable Kenneth Sheehan. One was 22 and the other was 19. One of the gunmen became a hunger striker: one of the heroes of those who represent Sinn Féin in the Assembly. Was that gunman a role model for our young people? I have heard eulogies in the House that stand in stark condemnation to the bravery of those two constables. When we come to condemnation, let us not be partial or selective. Violence was wrong in 1977, and it is still wrong in 2021.

That brings me on to discuss the issue of rhetoric and how important our words are. Our words are important. We, as unionist leaders, have been challenged about what we have said in recent days. My colleague Gary Middleton referred to the fact that we have listened to a barrage of disrespect against the centenary of this country, which is our home. The Members opposite cannot even recognise the shape of Northern Ireland. They see it as offensive. A number of weeks ago, I listened to contributions in the House from Emma Sheerin, Martina Anderson and Pat Sheehan. If that was showing “respect”, we need to rethink the definition of that word.

This is not only about Sinn Féin. Let us remember that, when concerns were raised about the protocol, members of the SDLP told us, “Suck it up. It’s not changing”. Let us be clear that, on social media, the leader of the SDLP and an Alliance MLA made comments in which they engaged in name-calling towards a particular MP colleague of mine. I would not repeat in this Chamber what he was called. If we want to dial down the rhetoric —

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: Yes.

Mr Clarke: I see that the Member is probably running out of time for his speech but will he touch on some of the comments where Sinn Féin threatened violence if there had not been a border in the Irish Sea?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr O’Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I ask that that comment be withdrawn. There is no evidence whatsoever that Sinn Féin has threatened violence over anything.

Mr Speaker: I did not want to intervene in any shape or form today. The debate has gone quite well, notwithstanding the subject, but, before we continue, I remind Members that an awful lot of people out there are watching and listening to what is going on here this morning. They want to see constructive, positive, measured and principled leadership from Members of the House, across all parties. I do not want to hear any other contributions that are straying into disrespect.

In the past, two Speakers — Willie Hay and Mitchel McLaughlin — brought a departure from the rulings of previous Speakers, insofar as they focused much more attentively on the conduct of the debate, the language that was used, the disrespect and the tone of the debate.

If Members cast their minds back, I think that they will find that they were quite successful during their tenures, notwithstanding difficult circumstances when they presided over the House. I want to remind Members that they should use respectful language to make their points. People here are grown up. They are very mature politicians. You can make an argument without insulting someone and without inflaming the mood out there.

Like every other elected representative in the Chamber, I listened to the fears and worries of people in the communities in my constituency last night. Other Members have testified that they also did that and all other Members can do so. I do not want those people to ring tonight or tomorrow night to tell me of the same fears that they had yesterday.

Our job here is to support the motion. That is what Members are entitled to do. I advise the House that more than 60 Members signed the recall petition. Virtually every element of the elected representatives in the House signed the recall petition, which indicates that they support the motion and that almost the entire Assembly supports its content.

I appeal to Members to watch their language from this point on. Measure your language and be respectful of all sides. Bear in mind that you are demonstrating your leadership, or lack of it, as the case might be, to the general public, who I believe will be looking at the debate, probably in large numbers. Please show what the House can do and achieve when it works together. Those have been the sentiments of the vast majority of the Members who have contributed this morning.

I end on that remark. I appeal to Members to measure their language, to be respectful and to make sure that they give a positive demonstration of leadership to the wider community who are looking in here with hope, and who are looking for hope and inspiration that we are moving forward into a better place, rather than moving back 20 years as we have done during this past week in our community. On that basis, I recall Mr Storey.

Mr Storey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Whenever any call comes from my office, it is wrong.

I want to return to rhetoric. The Alliance leader was on the radio this morning and rightly said that we need to consider our language, but she then said that we had been lied to about Brexit. As we leave the Chamber, if our starting point is to take the advice of the Speaker and the comments of some Members who have already spoken to mind our language, let us be consistent in that.

I said this morning that I have suffered politically and personally because we went into government with Sinn Féin in 2007. People have stopped speaking to me and have stopped socialising with us, but we stretched out the hand to those —

Mr Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Mr Storey: — who were justifying murder and mayhem. Now the time has come to show respect, not only by your words but by your deeds, do what you said others should do and dial down the rhetoric and give leadership to your community, as well as respect to mine.

Ms Hargey: I support the motion and hope that the House stands united in its unequivocal condemnation of the violence that has ensued over the last week. That violence has seen petrol bombs being thrown, a public transport worker being forced from his bus and the bus burned, a photographer being attacked and injured and residents and communities living in fear. We also saw young people being used by sinister elements to attack the police, sinister elements placing petrol bombs in the hands of young people — the same sinister elements who place drugs in the hands of young people — and criminal elements using our children.

I am deeply concerned that protests are being organised at interface areas. Those protests are being widely circulated on social media. I have worked on interface issues for over 20 years in Belfast, and my experience tells me that those who organise at or near interface areas are not intent on peaceful protest. Their intent is organised, and it is a

deliberate attempt to stoke up violence and sectarianism. That is what we saw last night.

We must stand together collectively and condemn that violence. We must stand together and condemn those criminal and sinister elements who are using young people to incite violence.

We can see on a daily basis, even this morning, that there are orchestrated attempts to organise more protests at or near interface flashpoints. Those criminal gangs have nothing to offer the community. They should disband and climb off the backs of their community. Street protests need to be called off, as it is clear that they are leading to tensions and violence. I hope that the House unites around these issues.

I want to take the opportunity to commend the many community and youth leaders and activists who have been tirelessly on the ground and engaging with young people to try to pull them away from the violence. I live in a community with young people who are just like those who were caught up in the violence at Sandy Row, which is in my constituency, and on the Shankill Road. They are working-class communities. We have similar housing. We suffer from poverty. We have the same health inequalities that see people in our communities die almost 10 years younger than the average because of poverty. Our communities are facing the pressure of development without their interests being considered. There are high levels of unemployment. These communities have borne the brunt of conflict and sectarianism and continue to bear the brunt of health and economic shocks.

I have been a youth worker, a community activist and an elected rep in my community and I am also a resident. We need cross-party support in the Chamber, from the Executive and the Assembly, to tackle poverty and inequality and to target resources on the basis of objective need for communities like Sandy Row, the Shankill Road, the Springfield Road and the Waterside and the Bogside. I will work with all those around the Executive table and across the Chamber to achieve that. Now is the time for calm and to call for an end to violent protests. It is time for criminal gangs to go away, leave the communities alone and get off the young people's backs.

To the young people in our communities, I say this: I want to work with you and ensure that your voices are heard. I want to listen to you. I am here to engage with you to address the issues and the hopes for our communities. Let us stamp out the flames of hate and work to allow our young people and our communities to flourish.

Ms McLaughlin: Twenty-three years after the Good Friday Agreement, this is the right moment to reflect on its success and, yes, on where it has been less than successful. It gave us peace but it has not given us reconciliation. Perhaps, just as bad, it has failed to get rid of paramilitaries and the sinister forces in our communities. The people of Northern Ireland are deeply frustrated, depressed and disappointed in our politics and our politicians. Every single MLA in this House has been told at one time or another that their constituents feel let down. Our politicians are not living up to the vision, the spirit and the hope that is contained in the Good Friday Agreement.

When it comes to governing Northern Ireland, the political tension between the DUP and Sinn Féin is palpable. When it comes to big decisions and issues that need to

be resolved such as Brexit, COVID, schools closing and reopening, victims' pensions and the provision of women's health services, there is rarely a meeting of minds and the dirty linen tends to be washed in public. A sectarian mindset still prevails. There is no disguising that we have had our fill of serious pressures in our political institutions. We can all accept that Brexit has, regrettably, reopened old wounds and has, indeed, sharpened all the lines and divisions that the Good Friday Agreement sought to soften around sovereignty, identity and borders.

The SDLP hears and deeply regrets the feelings and frustrations of abandonment that are acutely felt in our unionist community. As a nationalist, I truly understand that. However, John Hume once said that if you fall into reacting to reaction, you lose perspective and judgement. I am afraid that that is precisely what has happened. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister should reflect very carefully on the role that they each have played.

12.00 noon

The outworking of political ineptitude creates a space for violence in our streets.

Political dissension provided a target and an opportunity for the disorder. In the past nine days in Derry, Belfast and other parts of Northern Ireland, we have seen 12-year-olds, 13-year-olds and 14-year-olds on the streets throwing petrol bombs, stones and rocks and setting cars alight. They were not there to demand that the protocol be scrapped or that Simon Byrne resigns from the PSNI. We can be confident that those teenagers were motivated and manipulated by paramilitary groups. In the Waterside area of Derry, that means the UDA. The PSNI has been ramping up its actions against the UDA in recent weeks. It is no wonder that its leaders are causing a ruckus. Whatever the UDA claims to be, it is just a criminal operation that sells drugs, runs protection rackets and engages in loan-sharking. Its members become rich while its victims become poor. The UDA is not unique. In Derry there is a drugs war between the INLA and the New IRA that has led to recent shootings.

We have to do so much more to rid ourselves of the scourge of the paramilitaries. The last thing we need to do is give those sinister forces any type of political cover or credibility. The First Minister must surely understand that this would be a reckless action. These groups do not want to move on because their members do very well, thank you, from holding us back. We must give our young people hope for the future. The paramilitaries offer them a few minutes of buzz followed by years of deprivation and, for some, a criminal record or prison.

Leadership can take us out of this mess. We need to put an end to the zero-sum politics that prevail among us. We need to give our young people hope for a better future, create a more equal and just society, move beyond segregated communities, create good jobs and ensure that people in our poorest communities benefit from those opportunities. Unemployment and deprivation are recruitment agents for paramilitarism.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms McLaughlin: Let us take the oxygen away from them and invest in a good education system in which we support our young people in a better life.

Mr Nesbitt: I speak as a Member of the Assembly and the Policing Board. I was on a Zoom call last night with some very concerned citizens. One made the point that we, as politicians, are not consistent in what we say and how we say it, rather we shape our words to our audience and the forum in which we speak. Is there not truth in that? Another person asked whether, when we are in dialogue, it is civil, constructive, humble and charitable, and he was not joking. It reminded me of the Thursdays at Ulster Television when I chaired political debates. Politicians had no difficulty tearing verbal lumps out of each other on live television but in the green room afterwards, how different it was. Over a tea, wine or beer, they asked, "Did your mum get her hip operation yet?", or, "Did your son get his grades for university?". There were relationships. Where have those relationships gone?

If there is any opportunity in this crisis, is it not to renew our pledge of support for the Good Friday Agreement, which will be 23 years old this weekend, and build new relationships based on mutual respect and trust-building? I heard my friend Doug Beattie on the radio this morning with my friend Matthew O'Toole. I was very struck when Doug said that he wanted to stand shoulder to shoulder with Matthew, not just to condemn the violence but to build a better society. I would like to stand shoulder to shoulder with every single Member of the Assembly to do just that, but I am held back by one party that is making it very difficult: it is the republican party opposite, because it will not apologise for something that it should not have done. That does not excuse the violence because nothing excuses that violence.

We come to what I have described previously as events that can be explained but cannot be excused. We should look for explanations for why this violence is occurring. I have heard many reasons: the funeral, the protocol, two-tier policing, the statement by the Public Prosecution Service, a reaction to the success of the police and the National Crime Agency against some of these organised criminal gangs. By the way, can we stop calling them paramilitary groups, please? That may describe how they are organised, but it does not reflect their intent. Their intent is to terrorise people, to exercise coercive control on communities up to and including child abuse, to intimidate and to extort. Let us think about better language to describe these groups.

However, I have heard another reason to explain the violence that cannot be excused: a sense of alienation in the communities where the violence is taking place. I have to ask this to the parties that brought us programmes such as the social investment fund and Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC): can you, in a civil, constructive, humble and charitable way, say that there has been a failure? Then, can we, as an Assembly and a coalition Government, come together and fix it? If you look at the league tables of areas of deprivation going back 10 and 20 years, the top 10 are still the top 10. Whatever we have done has failed to solve the problem.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. He has made a very powerful point. I remember, when I was Minister for Social Development, asking for a breakdown of all the money spent in certain areas. It was stark. Money was spent in the very areas that we are seeing engulfed in violence and trouble today. Is it because there has been a tendency to feed some others and give priority to some

other people in those communities? Maybe that is part of the problem as well.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank Mr Storey for his intervention. All that I would say to him is that, if he studies my remarks about the social investment fund over the years, he will understand that I was no fan of that programme.

However, let us look forward because there is still opportunity to address those issues. We are, after all, a coalition Government of five parties. That means that we should be a Government for all; not a Government for sections or factions, but a Government for all our people. I can think of no better way to close than to quote from the agreement, which is 23 years old this Saturday. In the "Declaration of Support", paragraph 3 states:

"We are committed to partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships".

It is time — well past time — that we delivered.

Ms Bunting: I declare my membership of the Policing Board.

I deplore violence, all violence, regardless of the source. I am appalled at what we have witnessed. I am sorry for the public and police who have been injured. I am horrified that these children may be criminalised. However, it is so disappointing that civic society is quick to condemn but does not seem to want to understand, never mind address, what is at the root of this. We are always analysing those who commit crime. What was in their background? What gave them the propensity? Was it a broken family, drug abuse, the legacy of the Troubles or violence in the home? We should also want to understand why there is rioting and civil unrest now. We need to look at and consider how we got here, what brought them to this, and what needs to change.

There is massive political and cultural alienation. I am not condoning or justifying their behaviour, because it is never acceptable to burn a bus, throw a petrol bomb or attack a police officer.

However, part of this is that they have watched and learned that violence, or the threat of it, has often paid off, sometimes literally with funding. Historically, they have watched parades rerouted or stopped because of violent protest and fear of disorder. More recently, they have watched the law be blatantly broken, without consequence, by those who wrote it.

The political elite in Sinn Féin, who adopt a "Do as we say, not as we do" attitude, brought thousands on to the streets and hundreds into a cemetery when every other family got 25, 30 or 10 and were not allowed into the crematorium, never mind, what has been viewed as, given control of it. Sinn Féin: happy to write and endorse draconian laws for restrictions, safe in the knowledge that it can flout them without recourse. Those laws may be for everybody else, but there is another set of rules for Sinn Féin, which appears to be above the law. It also appears to be facilitated by the police to breach those laws in ways that are inexplicable and unacceptable. I want to place on record my full support for the rank-and-file police officers who are having to deal with this on the ground,

but something needs to change at the top, and, at the very least, it is the mentality.

The Storey funeral is the benchmark to which the policing of all other restrictions is compared. There absolutely is two-tier policing in Northern Ireland, and the PPS provided the evidence last week. In any circumstance, where the PPS writes that the PSNI's behaviour had anything to do with it being unable to bring a prosecution, that is a massive problem and an epic failure on behalf of the PSNI. I have been harping — that is the only word for it — at the Policing Board about two-tier policing since I got there in 2016. I have raised my community's lack of confidence in the police at pretty much every meeting, private and public, but, until recently, I was dismissed like a child, because the police did not believe that I was right and they did not care if they were wrong. We are all supposed to be equal under the law and equally subject to it, but that is not the case, and everybody in my community sees that. That is why all four unionist parties have indicated that they no longer have confidence in the Chief Constable and some of his team, and nor do the people whom we represent. That should matter.

Another example is recruitment. There are five under-represented groups in the police, but only four have support groups set up in the organisation, and it is only those four with whom the police and the Policing Board proactively engage. When the police advertise, only four are mentioned in the ad. One is not, and the one exception is always working-class Protestants.

Our community has had enough and so have we. Are some of them expressing their anger and frustration in the right way? Absolutely not, but that does not invalidate their fears and views. Those are shared by hundreds of thousands of people who do not take to the streets.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for giving way. You followed on from what Mr Nesbitt and others said about not getting into the detail and about the fact that we are here today to try to calm down the rhetoric, but, do you accept, given your contribution and what Mike Nesbitt said, that there may be an opportunity after this debate to get into those issues and find out what the core problems are in all those areas?

Ms Bunting: I thank the Member. I agree, and I think that we will.

Their behaviour is that of the outlier, but their views are not. Their frustrations are mainstream, and they are also ours. Two things can be true at once. It is entirely possible to condemn the violence and yet still be frustrated at the annexing of Northern Ireland through the protocol, believing that this is not the Brexit for which you voted. You can still condemn the violence and be aghast at a weak PPS, which tells you not to believe your own eyes, that there is nothing to see here and that it is the laws that are very confusing. It is entirely possible to condemn the violence and still be angry that there is two-tier policing. Protestant, unionist and loyalist — I am all of those — no longer feel as though as they are being heard, listened to or valued —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Bunting: — in what is supposed to be a shared society.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Mr G Kelly: I support the motion, and I thank Naomi Long for bringing it forward at this time.

It is important that, after the past week of violence and destruction, the motion gets unanimous agreement. I am glad to hear that the Executive have put out a statement, although I have not seen it yet. The immediate message, of course, is that the violence needs to stop and needs to stop now. There needs to be one voice on this issue, whatever the disagreements are on other issues.

12.15 pm

When I started to write these notes, over 40 police officers had been injured. We now know that up to 55 have been injured. I want to join with others in the Chamber to wish those officers a speedy recovery. Of course, as other Members have mentioned, there are civilians who have also suffered damage as a result of the violence. Last night, there was mayhem at what should have been a historic interface in Belfast. I say "historic" because it should have been a thing of the past that, perhaps, tourists or people with an interest would go to look at, or whatever. I then spent hours at Lanark Way, engaging with the police and others on the ground, trying, along with many others, as I said, to de-escalate the confrontations. That is what we, as politicians, need to do here; de-escalate the rhetoric and show leadership. A good place to start is not with whataboutery — although it might be too late for that — but with having a realistic view of the situation. Crime gangs are orchestrating the violence for their own ends. There can be no justification for the violence, so let us accept no pseudo rationale for it. We must collectively challenge and face down those who are putting stones, bottles, fireworks and petrol bombs into children's hands.

My experience, which is similar to that which was described by Deirdre Hargey, is that those whose intent is the escalation of unrest will always move that unrest near to interfaces and try to turn it into a tit-for-tat situation. In fact, I made that very point in a Policing Board meeting with the Chief Constable a couple of days ago. I should have declared earlier that I am a member of the Policing Board. Unfortunately, I then witnessed that in west and north Belfast because the unrest did spread throughout last night.

We must call out threats of sectarian attacks on elected representatives, journalists and ordinary people in their workplaces and homes. Paramilitary drug dealers cannot be allowed to work as community workers by day and thugs by night. They do not represent loyalism or any other section of society, so let us not join in the pretence that they speak for anyone but themselves. Whatever the criticism or disagreement with senior police officers is, demanding their removal does not solve the problem. Accountability mechanisms have been set up to deal with complaints, big and small. The place to deal with political disagreements is here in the Chamber; not by refusing to meet, but by dialogue and outreach, listening and finding answers collectively when that is possible. Sinn Féin will always work to resolve difficult problems when possible. That can be done only with other parties.

The motion speaks for itself. Let us condemn violence without equivocation wherever it occurs and uphold:

"a culture of lawfulness in both actions and words."

This morning, we got a report that a number of plastic bullets or attenuating energy projectiles (AEP) were fired last night for the first time in many years. That, to me, shows the tinderbox that we are in at the moment. No one wants to go back to those days. I urge the people who are organising these protests — by bringing people onto the streets, the situation will escalate — to stop before someone is killed. Tá mé ag tacú leis an rún.

Ms Armstrong: I will not take up too much time. Folks, I grew up during the Troubles. I just want to take Members back to the reality of what has happened over the past few days. Last night, I watched two women on video. One stood at the side of the road clapping while a group of people wearing masks and dark clothes ran down the road. The other was a health worker who was trying to get her car out before the burning bus blocked her in. Why have we come to this situation? Why do we have two people who live and work in the same area having such different attitudes? It comes back to our failure to deliver a shared society. That has been mentioned previously. We have had T:BUC, shared housing and such stuff. Why has it not worked? It has not worked because, I believe, this place has not committed to it.

Today, all parties need — not “have to” but need — to condemn the violence. We need to reaffirm our support for the police and the rule of law. We do not need to add to the pressures on the police at this time by undermining their leadership. This is an opportunity for parties to work together. When the recall petition came forward, a lot of people said to me, “Sure, this is a talking shop. It means nothing. There will be no action out of it.” Can we leave today with action? It has been talked about by Mr Clarke. I welcome the opportunity to sit down and find out exactly what the issues are. There are lots of issues out there. We all know that. It is time that we in this place take on leadership and bring it forward.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Armstrong: Not just at the moment.

I want to rebuild trust. I want to bring forward political solutions. We know that political solutions can work. They worked in the past. I do not want my child to sit and watch news of petrol bombs being thrown at people. That is attempted murder. It is time that we stopped this carry-on. I am aware that, thankfully, the parties are meeting the Chief Constable and that the Policing Board has been meeting the police. These are the actions that the public need to hear about from us. The public also need to hear us use language not to heighten tensions and cause more problems and give people cover for criminal activities but to bring our community together.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. I make the plea to her and to colleagues around the House that when some of us come to the House with genuine concerns about problems — things that we will disagree on; I will not list them, because that is not for today — we are not dismissed and seen as dinosaurs. We genuinely represent people in our community who hold those views, and we should not be dismissed. If today is to achieve anything, surely to start by putting that respect into action would be a step forward.

Ms Armstrong: I thank Mr Storey, and I thank you, Mr Speaker.

I do not consider Northern Ireland to have two communities. I am part of one community; issues for anybody are issues for all of us. I absolutely agree with Mr Storey, but can we knock on the head this craic about two-tier policing? I appreciate that he has concerns about the police force, but it is the same police force of which 55 members have been hurt. That number will probably increase. Those are people who are trying to protect us. Those are people who helped to get that health worker and her car out so that she could go about her business. At the time of a health pandemic, we need our health workers and our police.

There are young people out there. Mr Middleton said that we could improve choices; as politicians, we can improve choices by not using contentious language. That contentious language gives criminals the excuse that they need to harm our community. They are harming it. I am aware that, while we are here, there is a protest happening outside City Hall by bus drivers who are terrified to go to work because one of their colleagues was petrol bombed.

We need to support our community — our whole community — together, and I welcome the opportunity to sit down with every Member. As for what Mr Nesbitt said, outside this room, I can sit over a cup of tea with any of you and take forward something proactive. It is our time to move all this away from the Troubles, not back into them.

Mr Clarke: When I read the motion, I had no difficulty supporting it to condemn violence. I have never supported violence.

What I want to say has probably already been said by many Members, but I want to pick up what the last Member to speak said about us changing our rhetoric about two-tier policing. More people than the Members on the unionist benches are saying that of policing. Members of the police, possibly including one of the 55 officers who have been injured, are themselves saying that. My thoughts go to each and every one of those officers. Those men and women have been sent out to do a job, and not every one of them agrees with what they are being asked to do. They also have the perception that their job is in a two-tier police force. It is difficult for us to support the leadership of the police until that perception changes.

Ms Armstrong: Will the Member give way?

Mr Clarke: I will in a second. The funeral has already been touched on today. It is terrible that we must continue to rehearse the funeral.

However, the PPS's answer in relation to that says it all, and I think it was my colleague Joanne Bunting who read it out. There is no way to read it other than that the PSNI facilitated that funeral.

Ms Armstrong: Will the Member give way?

Mr Clarke: I will give way in a second. There was no other way to read it, other than as a facilitated funeral.

Sorry, I should have declared at the outset that I am a member of the Policing Board.

I raised with the Chief Constable last week the fact that the police had the plan for the funeral: 30 people attending with provision made for another 94 to participate. That was in absolute contrast to the rules, so they broke the rules. They facilitated Sinn Féin to break the rules.

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Member for giving way, and for pointing out that there are issues. What I would say is that we have mechanisms in place and I would prefer that we used those mechanisms. We all agree here on supporting the police and following the rule of law, and part of that law is our mechanisms. If the mechanisms are not right, then the Policing Board and others have the opportunity to amend them, but the mechanisms must be key, not the media.

Mr Clarke: I absolutely agree. We are waiting on two things. It is right that the board did unanimously agree to the HMIC investigation. I support that and am looking forward to the outcome of that. Also, some members wrote privately to the ombudsman for an investigation, and I am also looking forward to that. Those, I think, will bring answers.

I have listened to what the Speaker said, and I want to keep the tone right because I want to see an end to the violence.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Clarke: I will in a second. I want to see an end to the violence because it serves no good for no one other than giving people criminal records. I think that Mr Storey touched on this: Members across the Chamber need to listen to the genuine concerns that we bring because we speak and listen to people. Those are genuine concerns, and you must listen to them.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. The Member knows that I come from a working-class background and live in a working-class housing estate. Does the Member agree that it is essential that we send a powerful message to our young people that the way to effect change in their community is to get politically involved and active, and to go down only the democratic routes that are available because the other routes will lead to ruin?

Mr Clarke: I concur with that absolutely. I put it on record that I grew up on a working-class estate as well. I may not live in that area now, but I say to many people that I would not think twice about having to go back. It would not cause me a problem to go back because I enjoyed my time there. What I really deplore is seeing our people, people I grew up with, getting themselves criminal records for no reason.

We do need to dial down the rhetoric, but we also need to get to the solutions and fix the problems, change the perceptions and give people hope. As Minister Long said at the outset, there is a list of things that we could pinpoint as reasons, but we cannot dismiss those reasons. I am not saying that the Minister said that we are dismissing them; I am saying that we cannot dismiss them.

We can dial down the rhetoric today and calm things down but we must go back and look at every one of those issues with an open mind and get a resolution to bring as many people as possible with us. We will never satisfy everyone, but there is real, palpable anger out there today. I agree that it could be any one of those issues; it may not be one issue but multiple issues. The sooner that we get to the position to dial down and find out what they are and address them, rather than dismissing people and their genuine concerns, the better.

Mr Speaker: There are five more Members to speak before the winding-up speech. I am prepared to give each

of the five two minutes to make sure that they all get in, but it has to be two minutes. I will ask you to sit down if you go beyond two minutes.

Mr O'Toole: I will be brief. I simply want to add my voice to those of my party colleagues Nichola Mallon and Sinead McLaughlin in condemning utterly the scenes that we have seen and in supporting the motion that Naomi Long and other colleagues have brought.

It has been fairly traumatic for people across this society to look at images on their screens over the past few nights of things that people had genuinely thought were part of our past here. Unfortunately, there are people in this society who seem to be intent on inflicting the past on our children, and making children, some of whom were not even born when the Good Friday Agreement was signed, carry forward a legacy of hatred and division. Those children are being handed petrol bombs by criminal gangs. We cannot tolerate, condone or let that stand. I am glad to see widespread condemnation today. I hope that that will continue and that we can all find ways to moderate our language and come together.

It is important to say, and I will be brief, that these are working-class communities. There is a deep and profound alienation in those areas. Those are loyalist areas and people there care about their identity. I respect and understand that people have legitimate concerns about the outworkings of Brexit and are frustrated about new trading arrangements. I get that — I am not deaf to it, I am not blind to it and I do not seek to demean it — but this is not a tolerable or justifiable response. Nor can we, as elected officials, communicate to people that in a society like this one we can get everything that we want: we have to share this space. The outworkings of Brexit are difficult and —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: — complicated, and the only way that we can get through them is if we accept that we are a shared space and a shared community.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Stalford: Like the proposer of the motion and my colleague from South Belfast Deirdre Hargey, I am proud to come from a working-class background. It is devastating and heartbreaking to see violence on the streets of working-class communities, some of which I have the great privilege and honour of representing.

My message to the young people who are engaging in this reckless and criminal behaviour is to stop. It will achieve nothing, it will advance no cause, and, at the end of it, there is a genuine possibility that you will have destroyed your life forever by landing yourself with a criminal record. You are also destroying public services in your own communities. We have already heard reference to the fact that we have a situation in which transport workers are afraid to go to their place of work. That is hurting the wider community, and it is not acceptable.

There is an alternative to behaviour like that, which is, as I said earlier in the debate, to get politically active and get involved in your local community. If you want to effect change, you can be part of positive change by involving yourself in your local community group, joining a political party, running for the council and making a contribution in that way through democratic means.

I have four young children, and I want them to grow up in a better society than that which I grew up in or that which my mother's generation grew up in at the height of the Troubles. We have a responsibility to point a way to all of our young people, because they deserve better than that which we had growing up.

Mr Beggs: I support the motion and sense the shock and concern at the level of violence that we have seen once more on our streets. Every petrol bomb and piece of masonry that was thrown could have resulted in serious injury to, or death of, a member of the public or a member of our police service. In particular, we have to thank the PSNI for its actions in Lanark Way and keeping the gate there closed. If the two groups of rioters had been able to get into direct conflict with each other, there may well have been a loss of life. We must thank the police for what they did in that particular instance.

Turning to my East Antrim constituency, dreadful rioting occurred in Cloughfern, and there were reports that the south-east Antrim UDA invited businesses to close because there was going to be a riot. Young people — teenagers — were largely at the front line. Some obviously had nothing to lose, which is an issue that we must address. We must ensure that there is a place for everyone in our community and that no one is left behind. Again, there was a wheelie bin set on fire on the North Road in Carrickfergus and police were also attacked. Violence must stop. Thankfully, at the Antiville roundabout in Larne, there were largely peaceful protests, but politics must be seen to work, and that is a challenge to us all.

We have genuine concerns about the Northern Ireland protocol. The community has: this is not just politicians. Anybody who orders items on the internet will find that out.

There are concerns about the criminal justice system, but, thankfully, there is a review of the PPS's decision and an independent review of policing. Hopefully, lessons will be learned. Politicians also need to learn the lesson that they should do what they say and lead by example.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Beggs: Lessons must be learned from what happened at Bobby Storey's funeral so that others do not feel incensed.

Miss Woods: Violence on our streets is depressingly familiar. We have seen this all before. My message today is, "Stop it. It is not worth it". Conflict and disorder form part of a peace settlement for Northern Ireland that is supposedly a beacon of hope for conflicts around the world. Incredibly, I studied this at university as a model of conflict transformation. The reality differs considerably from the myth. We know that this has been a political process rather than a peace process. Everything has changed, and yet nothing has changed. Criminal gangs still coerce communities, and we live lives that are segregated and divided physically and psychologically. We continue the divide between "us" and "them". Words and narrative are used to divide when it suits. There is continued failure of elected politicians here.

Let us not forget that not all of those who have engaged in violence recently are young people. Those who are being sucked or encouraged into violence and into a conflict that does not belong to them are certainly not expressing this kind of anger because of the protocol or the political

fallout over regulations. What about the 13-year-olds who are now in the process of getting a criminal record and all those who have gone before? Should we arrest them, charge them and let the justice system deal with them, as bickering and fighting continue in the Chamber and across society and as the legitimate concerns and grievances of communities are ignored? Should we continue to cut corners, cut investment and cut opportunities, leaving people to fend for themselves and be exploited or be directed into public disorder and criminality? Where is the responsibility? We deserve and need strong, mature leadership from the Executive, but it has been lacking. It has been lacking since 1998. We have had a political agreement but not a peace agreement. People have been and continue to be left behind. That is not good enough. We need to replace hostility with hope.

Mr Carroll: Since the meeting started, we have heard that, in Belfast, bus workers have walked out against sectarianism, violence and intimidation. We have to send our solidarity to them today and going forward. The trade union movement will be incredibly crucial in the period ahead. I also send my solidarity to the driver and passengers of the bus that was hijacked yesterday. I extend my sympathies and best wishes to Kevin Scott, a journalist who was brutally attacked yesterday. No worker should be subjected to that kind of activity. They are providing a public service in the middle of a pandemic.

Last night I was at Lanark Way, an interface in west Belfast, where I witnessed crowds gathering on either side and petrol bombs flying over the so-called peace wall. Some of us were there last night to appeal for calm and for people to desist from the rioting. I say, "Fair play" to all the community workers and youth workers who gathered. They were out last night doing their best to appeal for calm. Today, like last night, I stand with the families at interface areas who are once again living in fear. Cars have been stolen, areas have been petrol bombed, and there has been much trouble on top of that.

There is no doubt that everybody here condemns the violence, as I do, but I am afraid that that is where the cohesion ends for me. Unfortunately, I have limited time to explain that today in terms of supporting the motion, which I do not believe provides an alternative to the same old politics that have fostered division across working-class communities across our society and have enabled sectarian tensions to grow. For that reason, I tried to submit an amendment.

Today, we have heard some talk with no sense of irony or hypocrisy about a law-and-order response. Some of those parties and Ministers cosied up to paramilitaries, who, by definition, are not upholders of the law and, in the last week, have engaged in organising people to wreak havoc out in the streets. Moreover, it is hypocritical that some in the Executive now condemn the same paramilitary groups —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Carroll: — that they have funded, catered to and legitimised for so long. They are the groups that act as gatekeepers of funding and continue to exert control over working-class communities. I would like to say much more, but, unfortunately, I have no time left.

Mr Speaker: All Members always want to say more. That is their right, but it is not always appropriate at the

time, so I thank you for that. I thank all Members for their contributions.

I call Stewart Dickson to wind on the motion. The Member has 10 minutes.

Mr Dickson: It falls to me to wind on the motion and the debate.

I trust that the words that I am about to give to the Assembly will not entirely fall on deaf ears — hopefully not. I thank Naomi Long, the leader of the Alliance Party, for tabling the motion and thank the House and you, Mr Speaker, for accepting the proposal to recall the Assembly.

Today is a day for leadership, to show our commitment to the Police Service of Northern Ireland, to show our commitment to the rule of law and to unite against all violence and lawlessness in our society. Put simply, this must stop. Some 19 Members were able to speak today, and they have put on record their views on the motion. I do not need to amplify what they said, but I place on record my thanks to the Executive, who met this morning, and welcome the joint statement by the First Minister and deputy First Minister on behalf of the Executive of the Northern Ireland Assembly about the issues that have been ongoing for some time.

The violence on our streets over the past weeks is wrong. Some of it has been opportunistic, but it serves only to undermine the communities in which the destruction has taken place. That includes communities in my constituency of East Antrim, where, regrettably, we have seen attacks on police and property. Police officers undertaking their duty to protect everyone have been attacked and injured; people have had cars stolen and destroyed; and public property has been damaged. Those perpetrating the violence have themselves been injured, and, rightfully, there have been arrests. Like everyone in the Chamber, I am deeply concerned that young children appear to have been brought into the protests; indeed, I observed that when some young children were blocking traffic in Larne on Tuesday night.

Members have referred to the need to tackle the structural inadequacies in Northern Ireland. That is evident when we see what has gone on on the streets over the last number of nights. We need to build trust and confidence in this society, in those communities and all communities across Northern Ireland. That can be done only when we listen to everyone in the Chamber. Yes, we must listen to the voices, every one of them, of the Members who have spoken in the Chamber today. Some have said that the violence has been orchestrated in many cases by sinister criminal elements, and, indeed, that may be true. However, those encouraged onto the streets are often vulnerable young people and children who are risking their futures, their safety and, indeed, sadly, in the past day, lives. I do not know whether any of those young people will ever listen to me, but I ask them to think twice before they get involved in that criminality. I appeal to mums and dads and, indeed, to anyone of good influence to speak up. It is extremely dangerous. You are destroying your community; you are hurting your friends and family; and your future prospects will be on the line, if you end up with a criminal record.

Nonetheless, I am strongly encouraged by the resounding rejection of the violence on social media by people in many communities. It is not wanted. What is wanted, however,

is peaceful political solutions to problems, solutions that the House must commit to. Regardless of the breadth of voices that have been expressed in the Chamber today, the one message that I heard coming through was a desire to sit down and talk and start to work out what those peaceful solutions are.

It is our job, as elected representatives, to lead by example and to set an example, so I was disappointed at the examples that have been set in recent weeks. Violence is completely unacceptable and counterproductive, and we have to acknowledge that the words and actions of political representatives have consequences. As expressed by many in the Chamber, there was no excuse for the actions of Sinn Féin, including our deputy First Minister, among others, in undermining the COVID restrictions at the funeral of Bobby Storey last year. No excuses. The deputy First Minister has much work to do to restore any public confidence following that. I do not believe that the immensity of that task has struck home entirely yet, but I hope that her words today were a step forward.

The people of Northern Ireland are understandably upset by the hypocrisy of delivering decisions on regulations that impact lives hugely and, yet, attending such a large event in the midst of severe restrictions. I share the feelings and frustrations of the community when they see that.

12.45 pm

The response of the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party to the PPS announcement that it would not pursue any prosecution was also not constructive. Those parties must also understand that we have to end this two-faced approach of supporting PSNI officers but not their leadership. That is deeply undermining, and it has, in fact, put rank-and-file officers at risk. Rank-and-file officers look to their leadership for direction, and the opportunistic politicisation of the PSNI leadership by the DUP and the UUP is unacceptable and profoundly counterproductive.

Our First Minister needs to show leadership and to meet the Chief Constable, and I am pleased that that is likely to happen. There should be discussion about concerns rather than the pursuit of politicising our police because, simply put, that is what is expected of a First Minister. Undermining confidence in the leadership of the PSNI at such a sensitive time is clearly unhelpful. Sadly, we have seen the outworking of that on our streets. I hope that the First Minister's words today will be seen as a step forward as well.

I want to express my and my party's unequivocal support for the PSNI for the work that it does in extremely challenging circumstances. In addition, we send our best wishes to those who are injured and our sympathy to the members of the public who have faced distress while their property and their communities have been damaged and, indeed, to the bus drivers. The violence is unacceptable and must stop now.

The protocol has been mentioned today. The DUP's attempt to deflect on the matter is simply not working. No one wanted the protocol, but it was the consequence of the hard Brexit that was championed by that party, against the political, economic and social interests of Northern Ireland. The reality is that we have the protocol because that party sank the backstop, which would have seen no customs border throughout the whole of the UK or Ireland. It is time

to wake up to the Brexit reality. It is time to stop and let us move to a light touch on Brexit instead of lighting the blue touch paper on every occasion.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: I want to finish, thank you.

I call on everyone in the Chamber to work to defuse frictions, stop boycotts, stop deflection, stop whipping up tension and do what we have been saying here today: get round the table and work out how we can approach the UK Government together collectively to resolve and mitigate many of the issues.

The message from today is simply that the violence must stop. No one should be above the COVID restrictions or the law in general. As political representatives, we have to set an example. I invite Members to join my party in demonstrating our united condemnation of the violence and our full and unreserved support for the communities that have been harmed by violence and for the PSNI, from the Chief Constable down through every rank. There is no two-tiered policing, and there is no room for it in Northern Ireland.

It is incumbent on all of us to show leadership, dial down the rhetoric and seek solutions. We must all accept when we are wrong and apologise for it — me included. Our words and actions have consequences, especially when we are in positions of leadership. Let us go from this place today determined to address every one of the issues raised by Members in the Chamber.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the violence on our streets over recent days and condemns without equivocation those involved; sends best wishes to those police officers attacked or injured whilst protecting the community and extends its sympathy to those members of the public who have suffered distress, loss or damage as a result; reaffirms its full commitment to support for policing and for the rule of law; recognises that leadership comes with responsibility; recommits to upholding a culture of lawfulness in both actions and in words; and calls for an immediate and complete end to this violence.

Mr Speaker: I thank all Members for their contributions today. I also thank the officials in the Speaker's Office and the Business Office for working with the parties over the last number of days throughout their holiday leave period in order to make the debate happen today. Thank you all.

Adjourned at 12.49 pm.

Ad Hoc Committee on the
COVID-19 Response

Official Report
(Hansard)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

18 March 2021

Ministerial Statement: Education

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Alex Maskey (Chairperson)
Mr Maurice Bradley
Ms Paula Bradley
Ms Nicola Brogan
Mr Jonathan Buckley
Mr Robbie Butler
Mr Gerry Carroll
Mr Pat Catney
Mr Stewart Dickson
Ms Jemma Dolan
Mr Paul Frew
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Daniel McCrossan
Mr Justin McNulty
Mr Andrew Muir
Mr Robin Newton
Mr John O'Dowd
Mr Matthew O'Toole
Mr Pat Sheehan
Mr Christopher Stalford

Witness:

Mr Weir Minister of Education

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): I welcome members to the meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response.

I welcome the Minister of Education to the meeting. I invite him to make his statement, which should be heard by members without interruption. Following the statement, there will be an opportunity for members to ask questions.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I start by commending our school leaders, teachers, school staff and parents for their ongoing commitment to the education of our children and young people in these challenging circumstances. While schools, parents and carers have worked together to support remote learning, most will agree that our pupils are best served through face-to-face school-based learning. That is not only about their education but about the mental health, social development and well-being of children throughout Northern Ireland. That is why the decision of the Executive on Tuesday is so significant. We have collectively stated that reopening schools for all pupils is an Executive priority as we strive to protect the education, health and well-

being of our young people. Our decisions to date have seen preschool and primary 1 to primary 3 pupils return to school on 8 March, and years 12 to 14 are due to return to classrooms from 22 March. Last week, we agreed that the preschool and P1 to P3 classes will not revert to remote learning when years 12 to 14 return and that they will stay in school until Easter.

We have now taken another important step with the Executive's decision to accelerate safely the pace of face-to-face learning and that all remaining pupils in P4 to P7 will return to school from Monday 22 March. That means that those pupils will have the welcome opportunity to reconnect in person with their schools, teachers and peers before the Easter break. Furthermore, subject to a final review of the prevailing public health conditions at the end of this month, the Executive have agreed that the remaining group of pupils in years 8 to 11 will return to school following the Easter break.

Those decisions mean that, after Easter, all pupils should be back in school for full-time face-to-face teaching, taking us to phase 3 for schools in the Executive's pathway out of restrictions. That is a significant milestone in the return to a normalised educational environment. I am confident that, with the public's support, we are now moving beyond the last widespread interruption to classroom learning and that, with additional mitigations, schools will remain fully open until the summer term and in future academic years, bringing all the benefits of school-based learning, social interaction and shared experience.

I recognise that there may be bumps in the road and the need for some localised responses to outbreaks, but our measured approach has created the best conditions for a sustainable return to the classroom for all pupils. This is not an immediate return to business as usual or even to a pre-pandemic school environment. Although school meals will be offered to all children in attendance at school, whether they are in receipt of free school meals or are paying pupils, some areas of provision will remain paused in the short term until advised otherwise, including, for example, school-managed breakfast clubs, education visits, inter-school sports and after-school activities. My Department will liaise with the Department of Health to clarify the position before schools return after Easter.

Furthermore, Youth Service provision and targeted early years programmes such as Sure Start have not yet been permitted to reopen. I wish to pay tribute to both sectors

for the innovative ways in which they have provided targeted support for vulnerable children and young people throughout the pandemic, but I appreciate the limitations and frustrations of continuing to operate in that way. The Executive's pathway out of restrictions document states that, by the end of phase 2, there will be a partial reopening of generic youth services and a resumption of Sure Start. I will continue to make the case for that to happen as soon as possible.

I have continued to work closely with Minister Swann throughout the pandemic to ensure that my Department provides the most up-to-date guidance and support to schools, taking account of all available public health advice. Schools are safe places, and there will be additional measures to help schools to stay safe. The latest version of my Department's guidance, which was issued on 5 March, includes additional requirements for face coverings in post-primary schools and on school transport. Schools have been supplied with additional signage to reinforce the key public health messages for parents and visitors, and the Education Authority (EA) will arrange a programme of compliance checks on school buses to ensure that the guidance is being followed.

A further mitigation available as part of the schools return is the regular testing of people who do not have COVID symptoms. The purpose is to find individuals who are unaware that they are infected so that they can be advised to isolate, thereby reducing the risk of their unwittingly spreading infection in school and elsewhere. This approach makes use of a type of self-test lateral flow device (LFD), which provides a result within 30 minutes. On Monday, Minister Swann and I made a joint announcement setting out our plans, and I have written to schools to provide more detail. Following a successful pilot, regular asymptomatic testing of staff and pupils in special schools using an alternative method also commenced this week.

The roll-out of asymptomatic testing in schools has three phases. In phase 1, from 22 March, all staff in post-primary schools and all pupils in years 12 to 14 will be invited to commence familiarisation to enable twice-weekly self-testing using LFDs. That will cover the period up to the Easter break, and it will allow staff and students who participate to self-test before attending school after Easter, providing further reassurance to staff and students who are returning after the holiday. Identifying infectious individuals early could ultimately reduce the risk of large groups of exam year classes having to isolate during that important period. We have chosen to begin with that group as years 12 to 14 are those with the highest prevalence of infection, and that is where testing will bring most benefit.

A range of information and resources for schools, students and parents will be provided to show staff and pupils how to correctly conduct a self-test. Engagement has also taken place this week with a representative group of school leaders, teachers and support staff trade union representatives. In phases 2 and 3, commencing after the Easter break, the programme will expand to include all staff in primary schools and then nursery, preschool and, at least initially, preschool education providers who are participating in the preschool education programme. Precise details of that later phasing are being established and will be clarified further prior to launch.

No test is completely accurate, but studies indicate that LFDs have a very high degree of effectiveness in detecting those who are infectious. If a pupil or member of staff has a positive result from the LFD test, they and their household must isolate immediately. In-school contacts are not required to isolate at that stage. The individual must then take a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test, which is available in local testing centres. If the PCR test is negative, the individual and their household can stop isolating, and the individual can return to school. If it is positive, the COVID infection is confirmed. The person will continue to isolate, and community contact tracing, including in the school, will be carried out, as with any confirmed positive PCR test. The confirmatory PCR test is an important part of the pathway and reduces the risk of people isolating unnecessarily because of false positive results. It will ensure that we do not unnecessarily ask year 12 to 14 pupils to isolate during the key phase in their return to school and their preparation for assessments.

I understand that post-primary schools, when they return next week for their years 12 to 14, will be busy welcoming back their pupils and preparing for the assessment process. However, I encourage them to participate in the asymptomatic testing programme, as it is another tool to help to keep our schools safe and to minimise any disruption in the coming period.

I recognise that the decision on Tuesday has provided less time for schools to prepare for the return of P4 to P7 pupils than I would have preferred. I had previously said that I would like to give at least 10 days' notice for further changes. While that will apply for the return of post-primary pupils in years 8 to 11 after Easter, it has not been possible to do so for P4 to P7 pupils. I had originally intended that this decision would be taken last week, but the Executive decision-making on the restrictions meant that the P4 to P7 decision was considered as part of the scheduled wider Executive review of the COVID restrictions that took place on Tuesday, as set out in the Northern Ireland pathway out of restrictions process. While I accept that this is not ideal, I strongly believe that we should not delay the return to school for those pupils for a day longer than is absolutely necessary. I know that teachers and all school staff will do their utmost to ensure that pupils can return safely next week. I also look forward to going out to schools, as I regularly do, to see the great work that goes on there daily.

Schools are at the centre of our communities, and their full reopening is an important step on the gradual pathway out of the current restrictions. Our schools and education other than at school or EOTAS centres have provided a vital service to their pupils and wider communities in recent months through the delivery of remote and supervised learning for vulnerable and key-worker children. That meant that we could look after those who need school most and enable key workers to continue with their jobs.

I must also pay tribute to our special schools, which have remained open throughout this period, providing vital education and care to those children who are amongst the most vulnerable in our society. It is for that reason that the Executive agreed a vaccination programme for special school staff who are supporting children who are extremely clinically vulnerable. Those staff are now receiving their vaccinations. Equally, the work done in our EOTAS centres should be commended, along with the

work that the Youth Service has continued to do, often remotely, over the past months.

It has been a very challenging period for all, and, given the significant disruption to our children's learning and mental health, our focus must now be on educational and well-being support, which will be critical to their prospects. With the backing of the Executive, I intend to invest in the necessary resources to help pupils address any disruption to their learning that they may have faced since the start of the pandemic. I will be bringing a paper to the Executive shortly seeking support for a wide range of summer schools and a further Engage programme.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): I thank the Minister for making his statement. I will now allow members to ask questions for a period of around one hour. It is my intention to allow all members who wish to ask a question to do so. There will also be an opportunity for supplementary questions. However, I remind members that that depends on members asking focused and succinct questions. The Chairperson of the Committee for Education will be allowed more latitude than other members in asking his questions.

Mr Lyttle (Committee Chair - Committee for Education): I, too, commend our education sector for the courageous and dedicated leadership that it has shown throughout the pandemic and the resilience shown by families across Northern Ireland. We welcome the news of the school return with open arms. However, in addition to when school will return, how it returns is of great importance.

Pupils and schools were initially told that there would be exams this year. Schools were advised, therefore, not to over-assess. Of course, however, exams have since been cancelled, although recent guidance has told schools that assessment conducted in controlled conditions will have a higher value as evidence in centre-determined grades. As a result of that, I am receiving reports from distressed pupils advising that schools that took that initial guidance are now scheduling multiple controlled assessments, some of which has been referred to as an "assessment blitz". This is happening at a time when advice is that school return should focus on emotional regulation, not testing. I therefore ask the Minister how such a situation has been allowed to transpire and what he will do to ensure that mental health, as well as assessment, is protected.

Mr Weir: I thank the Chair for his questions. It is the case that, with the cancellation of exams, the only other process available is some form of assessment. A tool has been made available as an assessment resource. It has also been made clear by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), in guidance given to schools, that assessment should not be overly used. Earlier this week, the chief executive of CCEA and I did a question and answer session that will go out on social media in addition to the guidance. Some schools may seek to over-assess. There is talk that some schools have tried to schedule 40 assessments, for instance, and that is way over the top. Schools should not be assessing to that extent. It is about keeping things proportionate. Even using the assessment tool that is being put in place for schools is voluntary. It is not compulsory. Rather, it provides schools with another opportunity for assessment.

We are moving from an exam situation to one of robust and evidence-based assessment that will be accepted, for instance, by universities and future employers. There is no easy way in which to make it a light-touch regime, in which no level of assessment takes place. A balance must therefore be struck. There will be some schools that will over-interpret the guidance. We want to make it clear that there should be a limited amount of assessment done by schools to produce the evidence needed for it.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his response, which we will explore in more detail at the Education Committee. What, if any, contingency planning is occurring for post-primary transfer next year in order to avoid the distress to pupils that this year's chaotic process caused them?

Mr Weir: That question lies a little bit outside of the remit of the statement to the Ad Hoc Committee. I am happy to answer, however. As indicated, it is the case that we are working with others to see whether any pathways can be suggested to make things easier. Along with others, I support the idea that, if possible, the tests should take place in primary schools. I am happy to talk to stakeholders about that. There has been considerable effort put into that. The criteria set by schools, and whether they use academic selection as a format, are legally a matter for those schools. It is not something that the Department is in a position to impose on them.

In Tuesday's Adjournment debate on the broader issue of post-primary provision in South Belfast, naturally enough, every Member who spoke eventually touched on the issue of post-primary transfer. There is a concern that, without any form of academic selection, schools will fall back on other criteria, which people will view as also being unfair. Schools may take into account whether siblings are enrolled at the school. We want to reach a situation in which everybody at least has a chance of getting into those schools. It is also the case that, across the board, and not just for the years involved in transfer, I want to see the Executive back the Engage programme, which will lead to a level of academic recovery. That is something that goes well beyond P6 and P7, affecting all the years.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his statement. I join him in paying tribute to all those involved in the education of our children throughout the pandemic.

I noted the very positive media reports last night, following the announcement of the return to school of years 4 to 7. There was joy on the faces of the pupils. I do not understand it, because I was not that keen to go to school. Those young people, however, want to go back to school for all the right reasons. I also noted the support that was offered by parents as their children return to school. I want to pay tribute to a principal in my constituency who has been unique in the way in which she welcomed back pupils in P1 to P3 by providing them with an ice cream when they arrived. Her intention now is to provide the whole school with ice cream when they return on Monday.

The Engage programme has been very successful. Indeed, I hope that it will be rolled out into the next academic year. Minister, will you apply for support from your Executive colleagues? Do you anticipate that you will, indeed, have the support of the Finance Minister as the new academic year comes around and Engage can be rolled out for those pupils?

Mr Weir: I welcome any such initiatives. I know of another school that will get an ice cream van on Monday. It means that, across the system, in every sense, “hundreds and thousands” will be welcomed in a number of schools. *[Laughter.]* It is always useful when you get groans from your own side.

In all seriousness, there is joy at young people returning to school. I have mentioned this anecdote before: last year, one of my officials overheard a conversation involving a parent with two young children, one of whom was behaving angelically and the other less so. Eventually, the parent lost patience with the disruptive child and said, “If you do not behave yourself, I will not allow you to go back to school”. Therefore, there has been an important change, which, joking aside, leads to a very serious point.

I will look, first of all, for the initial funding for the Engage programme, because it is related to the financial year, to be rolled on to the end of March. Therefore, I will look, first of all, for funding to take place for the rest of the school year. As part of that, I will also look for investment for mental health and for an Engage programme that can run from September onwards. At present, the position is — it may also be a moveable feast — that the final draft of the Budget for next year has not, as yet, been agreed by the Executive. Similarly, as part of that, there is a slightly moveable feast as regards the level of COVID funding that would be there. I will seek that support, because it is vital. I do not think that we will ever completely close the gap from what has happened. If we can, at least, narrow the gap between the disruption that has taken place and reaching what would have been normality, that would be good work that could be done across the system.

Mr Newton: Thank you, Minister. Do we know what the gap in learning is for pupils in both primary and secondary education?

Mr Weir: I think that some academic studies have been done. At this stage, the information is slightly tentative. I want to pay tribute, in particular, for the hard work that has been done, especially during this lockdown. With the first lockdown taking everybody by surprise, there was a slightly rough-and-ready quality to it. A lot of good work has been done by way of remote learning. It is difficult to quantify that, but we know that damage has been done to education because it simply cannot be the same as you would have through face-to-face teaching. It is also firmly established that that will be felt most acutely where there is deprivation and where the support in certain families is, perhaps, not as strong as elsewhere. Quantifying that will be difficult. As with mental health, it is not something for which there could be an almost two-dimensional point taken on one particular day; there will be reverberation for some time to come.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): Before I call the next member, I remind members that, as I said at the outset, I am determined to try to give every member who wants to ask a question the opportunity to do that. However, only two members have asked questions, and there is already no chance of my delivering that. I do not want to rain on anybody’s parade, but I would cut the anecdotes, good nature and all that out and go straight to questions. I call Pat Sheehan.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis inniu. I thank the Minister for his statement today. Will

he join me in congratulating St Mary’s Christian Brothers’ Grammar School in my constituency, West Belfast, for the decisive action that it took during the week to abandon the use of transfer tests for autumn 2021 on the basis of the unprecedented mental and emotional stresses that children and young people are facing as a result of the pandemic?

Mr Weir: I thank the member. In the interests of the Chairperson’s ruling, I will not give any anecdotes. There is a wide range of views throughout the Committee on academic selection. I take a different view, but, ultimately, it is up to each school to choose its admissions criteria. While I am not necessarily on the same page as St Mary’s, I respect its decision.

Mr Sheehan: I will take that as a no, Minister. The adverse impact of the pandemic on the mental health of our young children has been flagged up repeatedly. Indeed, you advanced mental health as a reason for getting children back to school. Leaving aside for a moment your ideological commitment to academic selection, do you really think that it is fair to expect 10-year-olds to participate in high-pressure, high-stakes exams in the context of all the disruption that they have experienced during the last year? Will you now act decisively and avoid making the mistakes of this year by telling schools to abandon transfer tests for the coming year?

Mr Weir: The short answer is no. Schools have a legal right to use academic selection, and I believe that it acts as an enabler for many children.

The member talked about the stress that exists. In almost any direction that we go on some of those issues, there will be a level of stress. Stress is also there for families and, indeed, children who will be told, “Because of an accident of birth, you will have no opportunity whatsoever to attend a particular school”. We have to look at that as well.

I suspect that, if we had more time, it would not be a matter that the member and I or, indeed, many other members would necessarily reach a common position on.

Mr McNulty: Minister, I pay tribute to our teachers, principals, staff and school leaders, especially those in our special schools, who have been back at the coalface for so much longer. I also pay tribute to our EOTAS and Sure Start teams for how they have adapted throughout the pandemic. The way that they all have maintained their composure and led our children has been extraordinary, and they have dealt with the challenges that we have faced in an extraordinarily assured manner.

A widening educational gap will be very evident as an outcome of the pandemic, and some kids will fall further behind. What additional resources will you contribute in order to help those kids to catch up? You talked about using the Engage programme, but how will you help them to catch up physically, mentally, emotionally and socially? What focus will be put on the kids that have been left further behind in order to help them to catch up through peripatetic and other support?

Mr Weir: I thank the member. I will be putting that in the paper to the Executive. I indicated that there will be a number of elements to that, but, ultimately, it will be dependent on the Executive signing that off as an overall package. It will involve the roll-out of the Engage programme for the next academic term and the rest of

this academic year; a programme of academic and non-academic activities in the summer; a widened Engage programme for the next academic year; and direct COVID money for mental health. There is a level of interaction between those, and all will depend on receiving support and finance from the Executive. Ultimately, I can put in only whatever resources are made directly available to me, which will, basically, come through COVID funding.

On a broader level, there has also been a recognition of the need for mental health support beyond simply the COVID situation. That is why, a number of weeks ago, the Health Minister and I jointly launched an emotional health and well-being framework, with committed resources that will be baselined. As with all things, if more money was available, all of us could do more, but it is important that we get the maximum amount of investment into our schools, particularly for that catch-up work during that period.

Mr McNulty: Thank you, Minister. I am really worried about the physical impact of the pandemic on kids. In your response, I did not hear any reference to sports. What are the kids going to do? Will they all be piled back into classrooms from Monday onwards or from Easter onwards? They need to have a bit of fun in their lives. They need a bit of physical activity. What is the guidance on returning to the sports pitch to get children out into the open and let them have fun?

Mr Weir: That is part of the wider Executive decision. The first step toward the wider resumption is that physical education will be available. When schools have been open, PE has been available.

The position on sports in schools is largely aligned with other aspects of sport. As with sporting clubs, the next step will be for permission to be given for training rather than for direct competition in amateur sports. In many ways, they will tie in directly. Movement on school sports should certainly not happen any later than movement on sports in general.

I accept what the member said about the great benefits of sport. There may have been a false assumption, because the reference to opening up sports generally is at phase 2 of the sports pathway, and it is mentioned at phase 4 of the education pathway. Immediately after Easter, we will have reached phase 3. It is important that we move ahead as quickly as possible. I think that the member will entirely agree about providing holistic solutions for young people. It is not just about academia or mental health, as important as those are; it is also about the physical side of things.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Minister, for attending today. I know that many parents out there are very grateful that children will be returning to school. They have probably learned to appreciate teachers much more than they ever did previously. We can all see that.

The statement referred to years 13 and 14 in particular. It points to years 11 and 12 and mentions "preparing for the assessment process". As the Education Committee Chair pointed out, students were told that examinations were cancelled. Unfortunately, it looks as if examinations are not cancelled in some cases, and a lot of students are very worried. The CCEA sent out updated guidance this week, and that has helped to alleviate some of the stress.

Can the Minister please clarify something for me? The word "optionality" has been used twice in the past few months. The first reference was about the option of taking different papers, but it has latterly referred to the option of whether or not students take an exam or an assessment. Can you inform students today on how much say they will have in deciding whether an assessment is the best way for them to be awarded their examination results this year?

Mr Weir: Broadly speaking, schools have been deciding for themselves. If a school is not providing an assessment tool, there is the option for an individual student to opt in to that.

It is important to get the balance right. If no exams are to take place, there will have to be levels of assessment. There is no easy way around that. There is no easy way to unscramble that egg. However, it is important that schools do not go over the top. That worry was highlighted in other jurisdictions when they moved away from examinations. That is why there is no easy pathway outside of examinations.

The CCEA has issued advice this week, and I am doing direct question and answer sessions. I did one such session with Justin Edwards this week. That can be provided to schools and the wider public, and it will also go out on social media. It is about trying to provide balance. We must also realise that results will have to be seen to be robust.

Mr Butler: Thank you for your answer, Minister. I welcome the fact that you are giving some comfort to schools that they may not have to lean too heavily on assessment.

If we look at the physical dangers that COVID will present when young people return to school, we see that one of the key fightbacks is ventilation. Some of our school estate is old. What assessment has been done and what has been given to schools to make sure that they can ventilate their classrooms? That could be to ensure that there is finance for heating so that windows can be kept open so that the ambience is regulated and is conducive to learning. Can you give schools comfort that a relaxation on school uniforms might be appropriate as children return to school?

Mr Weir: I want to see what flexibility can be put in place for that. Ventilation will be a matter for each school. If support is needed, we will try to give support.

Other than schools that were built in the last few years, it has become apparent that there is massive diversity in the school estate. Quite often, if you were blindfolded going into a housing estate or housing development in Northern Ireland, you would not have a clue which town you were in. It seems to me that each school, certainly those built more than 10 years ago, is uniquely different.

The other issue, apart from ventilation, was —

Mr Butler: School uniforms.

Mr Weir: Yes, school uniforms. That is a decision for a school's board of governors. I do not have any power over that, but I encourage schools to look at that in a flexible manner, even in the short term. There is a wider discussion, which has exercised me and my predecessors, about the requirement to have school uniforms and how some schools overdo their cost. As we look to the near future, however, there is merit in showing a level of

flexibility and recognising the unique circumstances that schools are in. All of that can contribute to ensuring that there is a smooth flow when it comes to schools remaining in place.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for his engagement on the issue. Many parents whom I have spoken to — every parent, in fact — are overjoyed to see their child returning to the classroom to see their friends and their teachers, as much for their own well-being as that of their children. I thank him on behalf of those parents for leading on that matter. It has been a lonely furrow for him at times, and his dedication and commitment to seeing those children go back to face-to-face teaching are commendable. Does he agree that the return to school is essential for the social and mental well-being of children, particularly as they have had such a prolonged period outside the classroom?

Mr Weir: Yes, I agree with the member. There is a lot of focus on the academic side of things, but we have to realise that, for example, children in P4 to P7, who return next week, will, although they were in school until the Christmas break, have been out of school and out of direct contact with many of their peers for a total of 13 weeks. Years 8 to 11 pupils — in different jurisdictions, they have been phased in as the last piece in the jigsaw — will have been out of school for 16 weeks. To some extent, it may be easier to put programmes in place to achieve a level of academic catch-up. The impact from a mental health point of view will be severe for many young people.

I have said that the two groups in society that have suffered the most from the restrictions on their lifestyle as a result of COVID are the very elderly, some of whom have been left very isolated and have a particular vulnerability to the virus, and the very young. The freedoms that many of us enjoyed as young people, such as the opportunity to interact with our peers, have been, by necessity, denied to them for a period, and I hope that we can gradually move away from that situation.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for his response. I want to follow on from Mr McNulty's point. We all know that, after a prolonged period outside the classroom, returning to school will be difficult for pupils who have been reaching different levels of educational attainment throughout the period, and for teachers. Has he had any discussions with school leaders on how they can break children in gently after what has been a very difficult period?

Mr Weir: Discussions are ongoing with a range of stakeholders, including the unions. As part of that, the advice and guidance that we are giving, particularly the measured advice that was given about P1s to P3s, is that the initial period should be about a certain level of familiarisation and drawing out any problems. On Monday last week, I was at Springfield Primary School, where P3 pupils were doing an exercise called the "Worrysaurus", which involved their putting down their concerns and the things that gave them comfort, and that was very good. There will have to be a period of adjustment, particularly for our young people, and for their teachers and their parents. The sooner that pupils are able to get back, the sooner that they will be able to adjust and move on to the resumption of their academic career.

Ms Brogan: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will the Minister outline how the public health situation will be

assessed so that more year groups can return to school in line with the new timetable?

Mr Weir: We are working closely with the Public Health Agency (PHA). It is important to recognise that part of this will be about monitoring the level of compliance. That will largely be done through working with schools. We do not want to create something that is overly burdensome for them.

In terms of public health, on movement, the provisional position is that everybody will be back after Easter. That will need to be reviewed at the end of the month to make sure that it is all going well. I expect that, unless something dramatically changes with the figures between now and then, everything will be fine. We can also draw on the experience in other jurisdictions. It is not just Northern Ireland that is going back; most of the other jurisdictions are in the process of making a full return. It is about monitoring all those things and working together closely.

The paper that led to the timing of these introductions followed discussions with Health, and Health was perfectly happy to endorse that as a way forward. Therefore, we were able to reach a consensus in the Executive on the paper on school return. It is not about anybody going on a solo run or pushing a particular agenda. Across the Executive as a whole, there has been a desire to show support for our young people and that they ought to be prioritised ahead of anything else. It is very good to see that it has not just been rhetoric but that it has been translated into activity.

Ms Brogan: I agree, Minister. We have said from the beginning that the best place for our children is back in school. We are all pleased about that.

Minister, you will be aware that school principals faced a huge burden towards the end of term last year when they were effectively asked to become track-and-tracers in their schools. What work has been undertaken by you and colleagues in the Health Department to enhance the level of support that the PHA will offer school principals?

Mr Weir: There are two issues on that. There is expanded capacity in the PHA to track and trace. Part of the problem is that this is very difficult to overcome, and I appreciate that it creates a burden on schools. If, for instance, there is identification of an individual or a group of children and they then test positive, knowing who they have interacted with may not ultimately be able to be clearly worked out. Guidance can be given, but it is very difficult to identify individuals other than in a school. We feel that, while this may lead, in some cases, to false positives and a short initial period of some children being off, the lateral flow tests will, alongside test and trace, hopefully create a situation in which, on a precautionary basis, we get a much clearer position of who should be in and who should not be in. Those processes, as they roll out, should be of benefit.

We should also realise that, while transmission of the virus can clearly happen between adults and children and vice versa, the evidence is that the biggest issues have been transmission between children or between adults, which is why there will be concentration on staff members as we move ahead.

Mr Frew: Will the Minister agree that Sure Start and the Youth Service provide critical support for many people? Will he agree to continue to press the Health Minister and

his Executive colleagues to allow those critical services to reopen as quickly as possible?

Mr Weir: That is certainly my intention. I put papers to the task force — they have not yet been considered by the Executive — on a generic youth restart and on Sure Start, and I will work with the Executive task force and the Minister of Health to try to ensure that those papers lead to actions. Both are very important. I am acutely aware that, because of the nature of Sure Start, which is particularly targeted at areas where there is a greater challenge on the socio-economic side of things, there is a particular importance for those families, and these are dealing with very young children. I hope to see progress on both. It is likely that Sure Start will be the quickest potential route, but the sooner that we can get back to all these facilities, the better, because they are of benefit to the children and the families involved.

Mr Frew: Given that, of late, there has been a dearth of information flowing from the Health Department down to the public about lifting restrictions, what evidence has the Health Minister or, for that matter, the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) provided to your Department on the chances of opening up Sure Start and youth services and on the reasons and rationale for keeping them closed?

Mr Weir: The papers were submitted to the task force, but, as yet, they have not reached the Executive. From that perspective, I do not think that there has been anything overly definitive, other than perhaps the fact that some in the Department of Health have a concern about the number of steps that can be taken together and what can be opened up at any one stage. As for the detail of the data on those specific areas, from a health perspective, the Health Minister may be in a better position than I am to provide some of that information to the member.

Mr O'Dowd: As the parent of a son in rang a ceathair— P4 — I am delighted that children are going back. I have to say that I am not half as delighted as his mother, however, who has been his teacher for the past three months. *[Laughter.]* I am not sure that his views about going back are the same, however.

Following on Mr Frew's questions on youth services, I can understand why Youth Service's buildings have been closed, but your Department issued a direction on 6 March that has had unintended consequences for early years providers, because, if youth centres are closed, they cannot access them, and many preschools and playgroups use them for their activities. Will the Minister therefore undertake to review the direction issued on 6 March and amend it to allow preschool and early years groups to use those buildings?

Mr Weir: I will certainly commit to doing that. There should not be any unintended consequences. It is the case that the sooner that we can get our youth centres open, the better, because they play a vital role. I can understand that those involved in youth work feel as though they have been neglected compared with those in schools, given the greater level of publicity surrounding schools. Youth centres play a critical role, however. We need to realise that, although reopening youth services will lead to greater contact and interaction among young people, that will happen in a controlled environment. A lot of the problems that we have had with the spread of the virus have arisen because a level of control has not been put in place when

different groups have been mixing. We will work alongside the Department of Health to see what can be done, but I am happy to review the direction to make sure that there is not an unintended blockage for anyone who wants to make use of those facilities.

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome the Minister's commitment to reviewing the direction, and I await the outcome of the task force's report on youth services.

Does he agree with me that, if we want to keep our children and young adults in school, which is the best place for them, we, as adults, have to ensure that our behaviour does not allow for the continued or enhanced spread of the virus? Unfortunately, if the virus were to reach the peak that it did pre-Christmas, we would again be faced with a decision over whether to close our schools, and that would be an entire shame.

Mr Weir: I agree with the member. In their day-to-day life, adults have, to some extent, been able to work around the restrictions, have a level of resilience and, effectively, get on with their life in a different way. One of the tragedies of the events of the past year has been that, in many ways, our young people have paid the penalty for the actions of adults who have disregarded either good advice or the regulations. There is a role for all of us, either as adults or as parents. Parents have done lots of great work, but there is still work to be done. For instance, signage is being used around schools proactively to say, "Observe social distancing. Wear a mask whenever you are doing the pick-up", but there are still too many cases of people standing at the school gates talking to one other, which creates a level of risk. In my day-to-day life, I am still seeing too many people in supermarkets and garages not wearing a face covering and others, to various levels, disregarding either the health guidance or, indeed, the regulations. For all of us, being responsible has a critical role in how quickly we can get back to normal life, not just in the education sector. If people behave responsibly, we can stop the spread of the virus very effectively. It is up to all of us to play our part in that.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, Minister, for coming here today. The statement says that there may be bumps in the road and the need for some localised responses to outbreaks. Further to what Mr O'Dowd alluded to in his question about the closure of specific schools or sectors of schools, what contingency plans are in place in the Department to ensure that closures are managed properly and that their impact is, ideally, minimised?

Mr Weir: All schools have had direction, from September onwards, that they need to be ready at any stage for remote learning. If we look at where incidents have happened, on some occasions the action to close the school for a short time has been precautionary. In most cases, there has not been the need to close the school entirely. In the interests of contact tracing, there may have been a number of children in a class or a class bubble who have had to be at home for a time. Therefore, contingencies need to be in place.

However, there has been a bigger impact, and it has created a short-term disruption, when, for instance, there has been an outbreak of COVID amongst staff. That creates a short-term scenario because it takes a few days to find substitutes, so that can have an impact. Everyone will accept that, during the autumn, we had high levels

of attendance, as did other jurisdictions. There will be individual cases where a class or a group of individuals have to go out. The lateral flow tests will, hopefully, keep this to a minimum and target those with positive test results. No one is pretending that, for every student, things will be perfectly smooth and that there will not be some interruption for some.

Mr O'Toole: With regard to the academic impact on students, particularly those from poorer backgrounds, what work is going on in the Department to draw on what jurisdictions around the world are doing to measure that impact? We all know that this will have had a terrible impact on all students, but particularly on kids from poorer backgrounds. To address that, in the short and long term, we need a serious quantitative information base. What is the Department doing to study that and take action on it?

Mr Weir: Specific to Northern Ireland, the Education and Training Inspectorate is working to do baselines on that and produce it in more of a thematic approach. The idea is not to say to a school, "Your results are very poor. Shame on you." It is about trying to draw out, on a more thematic basis, what can be done. A lot of the experience that we will see will be drawn from Northern Ireland and other jurisdictions, and it is about pulling that information together. That is the focus of the Engage programme. While there may be slight adjustments to the template, some help was given to every school, but the resource was particularly focused on schools with above average free school meal entitlement.

I appreciate that it is not perfect, but it acts as a proxy to give a greater resource. It is also about delegating, where interventions were needed, to schools themselves. On the ground, principals and teachers could see who the resources needed to be most directed at. We gave them that flexibility, rather than trying to create some sort of imposed system from the top.

Mr Stalford: I thank the Minister for his announcement. I declare an interest as a governor of Braniel Primary School. At least one of my children has already benefited from the ice cream largesse that Robin Newton referred to. Speaking as a parent of a child in P6, P5, P3 and one who is due to start nursery school this year, I am delighted by the Minister's announcement. Will the Minister advise whether the recovery plans that he is talking about in order to help kids catch up academically are not set in stone and that, throughout the period, the Department will be prepared to take advice and suggestions from leaders in the field, especially school principals, who have a particular insight?

Mr Weir: Yes, that is undoubtedly the case, which is why it is about making resources available for the Engage programme. However, the decisions on how resources are spent will be very much delegated down to the schools. If we get an overall package of money for academic catch-up and broader well-being, I would like to see us try to make sure that there is flexibility between the different strands, which is one of the lessons that we have learned.

In a particular school setting, there may be a desire to do that in a slightly different way. Sometimes schools can do very similar things but in ways that are bespoke to an individual school.

"It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it",

may be the case. That is important and can get results for an individual school. It is about giving that flexibility.

For mental health issues, there needs to be adaptability. For example, something about which we may say on day one, "Here is as the ideal model", will have to be adaptable, and the same applies to the emotional health and well-being framework. Some of those models will need a certain level of testing before we make any adjustments that we may need. The COVID mental health and well-being response has been based on giving schools support and a high level of flexibility in not just the support that it gives to children but in the support that it gives to teachers. We are acutely aware of teachers' mental health, which tends to be a slightly forgotten aspect of the situation. A level of flexibility can be given to schools in order to provide that.

Mr Stalford: Still on the theme of academic recovery, I know that, in the past, the EA funded schemes to allow for extended school opening over summer holiday periods. Does the Department have any intention of expanding such programmes in order that the summer period can be used? I am particularly thinking of P6 pupils, for whom the coming November will be extremely important.

Mr Weir: Again, we are looking at a package of measures across schools. Last summer, there was a certain amount of trialling. Last summer, there was maybe the false expectation that we had seen the worst of the pandemic and that everything was behind us, so maybe there was not the same level of need. A range of academically focused activities took place last summer. Again, as with all those things, we sought the voluntary support of schools. Outside of the special schools, which had a bespoke programme, roughly speaking about 50 mainstream schools took part. We have sought to expand some of those activities this summer across primary and post-primary schools.

Initial expressions of interest from schools have been much greater this year than last year, so I think that people realise the extent of the package. Again, if the funding is available, the aim is to have some flexibility. Some schools may want to do activities for a week, two weeks or three weeks, and there should be that flexibility. We want to be in a situation whereby recovery is available for our young people and they can take advantage of the opportunity voluntarily. We do not want to inflict another cruel summer on our young people. We want a situation where there are opportunities during the summer while looking forward to the next academic year.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for his statement. While the emotional health and well-being framework that the Minister references is welcome, it was in development prior to the pandemic, and that has been a recurrent theme of this afternoon's discussion. Given the wealth of additional challenges and pressures that our children and schools now face, will the Minister elaborate on the COVID-specific interventions that he intends to make as our children return to the classroom?

Mr Weir: The member is entirely right, and that is why this is being done on two levels. The Executive approved the emotional health and well-being programme, and funding is now being provided for that. It is part of the overall mainstream Education budget, and the funding has been baselined. At the moment, that will be done on the basis

that there will be a contribution from Health of an overall package of about £6.5 million for that framework, and that is additional to the current spend on things like the child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). It is important that we have something that is both mainstreamed and baselined, which means that we can say with confidence that we will have funding in 2021-22 and beyond. There are specific COVID challenges. As part of the overall academic bid for next year, there will be a specific bid for funding from the Executive for a COVID mental health and well-being response, which, again, will be made available through schools and, to some extent, through the Youth Service. That provides flexibility on the ground. A seven-year-old in rural Fermanagh, for example, may be in a different position from that of a 15-year-old in some part of Belfast. It will not necessarily be a one-size-fits-all approach. We believe that those on the ground in schools and the Youth Service are in the best position to know where that tailored intervention is required.

Ms Dolan: Thank you, Minister, for that answer. You will be aware of concerns from the Audit Office that educational recovery programmes established in England to help to recover lost learning have not reached the most disadvantaged children, which is where they are most needed. What steps are you taking to ensure that we do not face the same problems here and that those children who most require assistance are able to access it?

Mr Weir: On the structure of funding, it is accepted that damage has been done across the board. That is why all schools have received direct funding, at a relatively low level in some cases, from the Engage programme this year. Effectively, it operates on two levels. Those schools with a lower-than-average number of pupils entitled to free school meals have received one tranche of funding, which enables additional hours of staffing to be bought in. Off the top of my head, it may be pitched at a particular number of days, depending on the size of the school. A higher level of funding is available to schools where the number of pupils entitled to free school meals is above average.

I appreciate that, ideally, this curve would have been smoothed. We needed something non-bureaucratic that could be implemented quickly. We could not have had a thousand different levels of funding across the board, but there will always be complications when schools fall just on one side of the line or the other. I am aware of that. We hope that, in general, that will enable that level of support.

One problem faced this year was that, as funding was made available to schools from the Engage and mental health programmes, there was, in some cases, a cruel irony in the fact that COVID both created the problem and acted as a barrier to the solution. For example, it may have been that, during this term, a school had wanted an additional teacher for a small bespoke group of pupils for face-to-face teaching in one classroom. With remote learning, obviously, the school was not in a position for that to go on to the same extent. Moving ahead, I will certainly be bidding for money for those elements, and the two are intertwined.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for his statement. As he will be aware, there were previous concerns about the transmission of COVID-19 in relation to travel to and from school. What actions has he taken to mitigate that risk, particularly with public transport?

Mr Weir: It is good to see the member on-screen, although he appears to be without his trademark bow tie today. Maybe that shows a casual level of work from home.

These things are sometimes difficult to enforce. However, there was a shift, aligned with public transport, part of which was to make face coverings compulsory on post-primary school transport. There has been concern about mixing because, even with a little flexibility, it is sometimes difficult to get the sheer volume of children on to buses. Measures were ready to run from January onwards, but they became slightly moot in the last couple of months because of remote learning. The EA is working with Translink and the PHA to provide a number of COVID marshals. They will do spot checks at bus stations and on buses to encourage children of an appropriate age to wear face coverings. It is about trying to push good behaviour. As with all issues, when you move outside the direct confines of the school, which tends to be a very safe, controlled environment, into scenarios beyond the school gate, it becomes more difficult. However, working alongside our Health colleagues, we are trying to make whatever interventions we can to be able to move that forward.

Mr Muir: Active travel is one of the best ways for children and young people to travel to and from school. What more is the Minister planning to do to encourage people to use that form of transport?

Mr Weir: We have had discussions with the Infrastructure Minister to try to encourage cycling or walking to school. That has particular pertinence beyond children being transported on buses. Children going directly into school removes some of the issues around dropping them off and, in particular, picking them up at the school gate. There will be encouragement, and that will be particularly pertinent as we move into the spring term. For example, from a practical point of view, walking or cycling to school becomes a more realistic prospect in April, May and June than when staring into a cold, wet October or November morning.

Mr Catney: Your statement mentioned the reasons why the notice period that you set for schools was missed on this occasion. Like many others here, I was contacted by principals who were looking to the BBC website for information. Can you guarantee that the notice period will be adhered to in future?

Mr Weir: I will try to give the maximum guarantee that I can. The problem is two-fold. First, I cannot guarantee when any papers are taken by the Executive. I understand the reasons why there was a desire for the wider decisions on schools to be taken in the context of the Executive review on 16 March, but the initial paper on restarting schools was submitted first to Health and then, on Friday or Saturday fortnight ago, to the task force. It was circulated to Executive colleagues a week and a half ago, and, eventually, it made it to the Executive agenda for initial discussion on Thursday and for final decisions on the Tuesday. I do not have direct control over that. I would prefer those decisions to be taken earlier, but you then face the choice of putting off a return to give greater notice or trying to ensure that we get our children back as quickly as possible.

It is frustrating for all of us that we often see stuff for the Executive or the Assembly making its way on to media

platforms. I am restricted in what I can do around any announcements and any direct communications until a decision is made public. I entirely understand the frustration amongst parents and particularly amongst teachers and staff who see information leaked in the media before it reaches them.

I will not point the finger at anybody in the House, but, back in December, a statement on examinations was due to be made to the House at noon or 1.00 pm. It was emailed to every Member at about 10.30 am. Within five minutes, and even though it was embargoed, it was in the media. I could not say anything about that. Unfortunately, we have all been in that position. We are all victims of that, and we live in an age in which people getting hold of a paper means that it can become news almost instantaneously. That is not helpful. It is difficult to get around a situation in which you have to make a public announcement but are required to have announced that to a large number of people beforehand.

Mr Catney: I have to agree with you, Minister. I realise how difficult the job of all the Ministers is.

Schools are at the centre of our communities. I think of little St Colman's, in Lambeg, in my constituency, which stayed open for the children of key workers. Minister, you intend to go to the Executive to look at schemes that will help children, come the summertime. Will you expand on that, bearing in mind that a lot of the care of the children will relate to mental health?

Mr Weir: I appreciate that the member wants to beat the drum for Lambeg. *[Laughter.]* There are a number of aspects to that. We ask what can be done directly in school, during term time, on the academic and the mental health sides of things. We should build on what was there last year. I want a range of summer schemes to be made available. I think that that will be a mixture. I hope that it can be a concoction. If a school is making itself available for some of its pupils and is getting funding for that, for one, two or three weeks, depending on what it is willing to volunteer for, it should be a mixture of academic catch-up and fun and summer activities. We have to make sure that we are not too harsh on our young people. It is about creating a mix. I will seek that as part of a package from the Executive. It is something that I am keen to prioritise as we move ahead, but it will require funding from the Executive.

Mr Dickson: Minister, on 1 February, you and the Health Minister jointly announced a vaccine programme for staff in special schools. Will you tell us how many of those staff have been vaccinated to date?

Mr Weir: Discussions with Health have been ongoing. As part of that, staff who have a particular relationship or connection with some clinically vulnerable children were included in that programme. The steps were that the children had to be identified and then the staff members who directly related to them. The number of staff who have been directly identified and are in the process of getting vaccinated is just under 700. They are now within the vaccine programme. The opportunity to book through that is left to each individual.

I do not think that there is centrally held data as to precisely who is at what stage. Off the top of my head, I think that it was made available to 686 members of staff. That is obviously in addition to what is happening

elsewhere. As the member is aware, anyone who is within a particular age group that the vaccine programme has reached, and that includes some of the special school staff, is able to book a vaccination separately. Therefore, there will be staff outside that number as well.

Mr Dickson: Minister, you recognise the disappointment, and indeed the fear and concern, amongst many of those staff. Although you said that between 600 and 700 staff have been included in the programme, the reality is that very few, if any, of them have had their inoculations so far. They are working in extremely difficult circumstances. Identifying that group has caused further concern for the staff who have not been so identified but feel that they are in similar, close proximity to children with special needs.

Mr Weir: I entirely recognise that. That is why my proposal to the Executive was to have all special school staff vaccinated. However, the Executive, as a whole, took the view that they wanted consensus with the Department of Health. Health was reluctant to go down a route focused purely on specific job-related criteria. What we have is as far as we could get it with Health. The only thing that could get past the Executive was a position that had the agreement of the Department of Health. Therefore, it did not go as far or as fast as I would have liked it to, but at least we are seeing progress.

Mr Carroll: I pay tribute to all education workers. The Minister has shown contempt for them by, once again, making a decision without giving them any real notice or time to prepare. Some schools have had only up to two working days' notice to make alterations.

The Minister said that schools are safe places. I wonder how they are more safe now than they were in December. How confident is he that reopening schools on that scale, with such a high proportion of education workers not having been vaccinated, will not lead to infection rates rising?

Mr Weir: I welcome the thoughts of the member. They were as positive towards me as they usually are. I have indicated that schools are a very safe environment. That is not something that simply I have said. Broad analysis from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies and other experts indicates that, within the school walls, there has tended to be a high level of control and safety. As has always been indicated, the issue with whether schools should be open is around some of the behavioural impacts. For example, if all primary-school children are at home, that, generally speaking, means that at least one parent has to be at home with them. That reduces the level of contact that that adult will have. It will mean that the number of journeys that take place will be reduced. Any interaction, such as on buses, will be reduced. That has always been part of the issue, and that has been highlighted consistently by the medical experts.

Although I want to see teachers being prioritised for vaccination, studies have shown that education staff, as a profession, are at no higher risk than any other staff, which is why the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation has gone down the particular route that it has in that regard. It is important, however, that we give support to our young people and staff. Everything that has been brought forward, including the mitigations that have been put in place, has been supported at the Executive by the Department of Health. As I said, it is not a Department

of Education solo run against medical advice. It is in line with medical advice. Everything carries a level of risk, but the Executive as a whole are very much of the view that we need to prioritise as much as possible our young people and their education. That is the right approach.

Mr Carroll: Thanks to the Minister for his answer, but he did not indicate how schools are more safe now than they were in December. If infections increase in schools when they reopen, will he act? What is the baseline for the number of new cases a day or a week at which he will possibly implement measures to close schools?

Mr Weir: I am constantly amazed by the member. Clearly, we will look at what the public health situation is. The Executive as a whole want to prioritise schools. If there are issues around infection rates, those are more likely to be pertinent to what other actions we can take and how fast we can move to open up other elements of the economy and wider society. My priority, and that of the Executive, is to support our young people, to keep them in school and to have face-to-face learning for their benefit. The rush that the member seems to be in to keep the proletariat ignorant strikes me as ill befitting, given the views of his party. The default position of trying to keep children out of school is not one that any of us should adopt.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): That concludes questions on the statement.

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.

Written Ministerial Statements

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Department of Health

Inquiry into Hyponatraemia Related Deaths (IHRD) Implementation Programme Update

Published at 9.00 am on 25 March 2021.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): When I took office in January of last year implementing the recommendations of Mr Justice O’Hara’s Report, following the Public Inquiry into Hyponatraemia Related Deaths (IHRD), was one of my major priorities. Despite the challenges presented to the Department during the suspension of the Assembly, and the absence of a Health Minister, I was pleased to note the progress that had been made on work arising from the IHRD Report and that some of the established workstreams were close to completing their tasks.

I wish to again put on record, on behalf of the entire health and social care system, profound apologies to the families of those young children who were badly let down not just by the care provided but subsequently.

Let me also place on record my gratitude to Mr Justice O’Hara for so ably shining a light where it needed to be shone.

The IHRD Report is an extremely significant piece of work with implications for all parts of our health and social care system. Work progressed in response by the IHRD Implementation Programme has brought together front-line staff, regulators, various experts, our partners in the community and voluntary sector, the Coroner’s Office and most importantly of all service users and carers, to make sure that the changes we make are truly robust and sustained.

There has unfortunately been a degree of misunderstanding in the public domain with regard to the implementation of the IHRD Report. Let me be clear that the report is a landmark document, and my strong view is that it is the foundation for lasting improvements in governance, safety and transparency within and across Northern Ireland’s health and social care system.

Unfortunately when the COVID-19 pandemic struck there was no option but to pause the IHRD Implementation Programme. This decision was necessary to allow staff in my Department and HSC Trusts to be re-directed to focus on COVID-critical work. It was also a decision taken with the safety and wellbeing of service users and carers as a priority.

While the temporary suspension of the IHRD Implementation Programme meant that much of the

work was paused, I am pleased to advise that some key elements were able to be progressed. These include Duty of Candour, Being Open Guidance, the HSC Board Member Handbook, Independent Medical Examiner (IME) Service, and Statement of Rights for those involved in a Serious Adverse Incident (SAI).

Today I am announcing that on the 12th April 2021 a public consultation opens on policy proposals for a Statutory Duty of Candour and Being Open Framework. This public consultation will run for a period of 16 weeks.

A Statutory Duty of Candour would create a legal responsibility for all healthcare organisations and individual staff to be honest when things go wrong. This duty would not just apply to being open and honest with patients, but also include the need to be open and honest within organisations when reporting adverse incidents or near misses that may have led to harm.

I can also advise that work on the HSC Board Member Handbook is almost complete, the Handbook will be available on the Department’s website next month. This Handbook is an invaluable resource for Board members, it will support members in their important leadership role, in seeking assurances about the safety and effectiveness of services.

A statement of “What you should expect if you are involved in a Serious Adverse Incident” has been developed collaboratively by service users, carers and HSC staff as members of the SAI Workstream of the IHRD Implementation Programme. The statement has also been presented at a number of HSC staff engagement events and an Involvement Workshop with the wider IHRD Service Users and Carers Liaison Group. This statement is to be passed to all HSC organisations for implementation over the coming months.

Another key element of the IHRD Implementation Programme that has progressed is the work to develop proposals for an Independent Medical Examiner (IME) Service in Northern Ireland. Prototypes to determine the most appropriate way to operate such a service and identify the implications for all those involved in operating the service, are actively progressing. Learning emerging from these will be used to develop firm proposals and options for an IME service, which will issue for wider consultation in due course.

As I have already indicated, the system’s response to his report has undoubtedly and regrettably been hampered by the absence of a Health Minister for a significant period and, subsequently, by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, I anticipate a significant acceleration of the implementation

of the IHRD recommendations when the Covid-related pressures on the Department and HSC system subside.

My Department accepts the recommendations of the O'Hara Report in their entirety. It is unfortunate that a distorted narrative has been propagated by some in this regard in recent times. For the benefit of any doubt, I reiterate that the Department of Health and the wider HSC system have at no time disputed the contents of the IHRD Report.

Some confusion appears to have arisen in relation to the criticism of individuals in the Public Inquiry Report. On this subject, it is important to acknowledge the cautions which Mr Justice O'Hara himself recorded.

He stated: "The Public Inquiry process is investigative and inquisitorial and seeks to determine what has happened in order to better identify what may be learned. Accordingly, I have found myself in a very different position to a judge sitting in a court of law. In identifying what has gone wrong I have inevitably criticised some individuals and organisations, but my findings are not binding and are not determinative of liability."

He further made clear: "I am conscious that the individuals who are criticised were not able to defend themselves as they might in adversarial proceedings and were circumscribed in their right to make representations. I am also aware that individuals who are criticised may attract adverse publicity affecting both reputation and career. Therefore where critical comment is made of an individual, it must be assessed in the context of the limitations of the process."

Given the limitations articulated by Mr Justice O'Hara, it is clearly not for the Department to offer a qualitative view on his criticisms of individuals. There are pathways in place – including Trust standards frameworks and independent regulatory processes – to produce findings that can be binding and determinative of liability. Such processes are independent of the Health Minister and the Department - and quite properly so.

At no stage has the Department sought to challenge the validity of Mr Justice O'Hara's criticisms. Relevant employers have taken them, similarly without challenge, as the starting point for consideration of the need, or otherwise, for further action against any individuals named in the Report.

In conclusion, I would also highlight comments from the IHRD Report in relation to improvements implemented subsequent to the timeframe that this public inquiry addressed. Mr Justice O'Hara stated that it was "clear that very considerable professional attention has been devoted to protecting children undergoing fluid therapy and significant progress has been made. However, there can be no room for complacency because total patient safety cannot be assured." While noting that the "Health Service environment has most definitely been transformed since the period under review", Mr Justice O'Hara emphasised that it remained "critical to keep building upon the very real progress made and to further undermine the remnant culture of clinical defensiveness".

Those are very apt comments. We must continue to strive for improvement, both in the practices and in the culture of our health and care system. The forthcoming public consultation on policy proposals for the Statutory Duty of Candour, which I am announcing today, will be an important part of that process.

Department of Health

Infected Blood Financial Support

Published on 25 March 2021.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): This statement provides an update on UK four nations' cooperation to achieve greater parity of financial support for those infected and/or affected by contaminated blood across the UK.

On taking up post as Health Minister in January 2020, I announced a Review of the Northern Ireland Infected Blood Payment Scheme. This work has continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and to date, I have introduced reforms which have brought NI infected beneficiaries into line with their counterparts in England and I have announced annual financial support to non-infected bereaved spouses and partners on the NI Scheme.

Alongside the NI Review, my Department has been working closely since April 2019 with the Cabinet Office and Health Departments in England, Scotland and Wales to explore how to achieve greater parity of support across the four UK infected blood schemes, recognising that the integrity of the schemes developed under devolution should be respected and ensuring that any reform would not leave a beneficiary worse off than their counterpart in another part of the UK.

In January 2020 the UK government reaffirmed its commitment to resolving the disparities in financial support for infected beneficiaries in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, as well as addressing broader issues of disparity, including support for non-infected bereaved spouses and partners.

Subject to funding from HM Treasury, I have agreed to implement a number of changes to the NI Infected Blood Payment Scheme, which are intended to achieve greater alignment in financial support across the UK schemes. The reforms are as follows:

- payments for non-infected bereaved spouses or partners will increase from 75% of the deceased beneficiary's annual payment to an automatic 100% of the deceased beneficiary's payment in the first year, with 75% payable in subsequent years. This is in line with the policy in Scotland and will be backdated to 1 April 2019;
- the introduction of enhanced support payments for eligible Hepatitis C Stage 1 beneficiaries, in line with rates paid in England and backdated to 1 April 2019 - subject to a model being developed in consultation with stakeholders;
- the £10,000 bereavement lump sum, which has been provided since the NI Scheme was established in 2017, will also now be payable to the Estate of the deceased in cases where there is no living spouse or partner, in line with the position in England and Wales. This will be backdated to 1 April 2017, meaning all eligible beneficiaries currently registered on the Scheme will receive the appropriate payment in arrears;
- the lump sum payment to a Hepatitis C Stage 1 beneficiary will increase from £20,000 to £50,000, with the additional £20,000 payable if a stage 1 beneficiary moves to stage 2. The total lump sum

payable for Hepatitis C beneficiaries remains at £70,000. This policy is in line with the position in Scotland and will be backdated to 1 April 2017, meaning that all eligible beneficiaries currently registered with the Scheme will receive this additional payment in arrears;

- the lump sum payment to a HIV beneficiary will increase from the current range of payments up to maximum of £80.5k (depending on circumstances) to an automatic £80.5k, backdated to 1 April 2017, meaning all eligible beneficiaries currently registered with the Scheme will receive any appropriate additional payment in arrears subject to the lump sum amount previously received.

The Health Ministers in England, Scotland and Wales have also agreed to reforms to similarly adapt their respective schemes.

Beneficiaries will continue to receive their current payments until the changes can be made.

Department of Finance

2020-21 Public Expenditure Allocations

Published on 25 March 2021.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I wish to update the Members on the further funding allocations that have been made since my previous Statement of 10 February.

The written Statements on 2 February and 10 February detailed the reduced requirements notified and allocations made at each of those points. Allocations announced since then and any reduced requirements notified at since 10 February are detailed in the tables to this statement.

Funding Available

At the conclusion of January Monitoring unallocated funding of £346.4 million Resource, £28.3 million Capital and £55.7 million Financial Transactions Capital remained. Ministers were asked to come forward with spending proposals to use this funding and the four sets of allocations since then are as a result of that work.

25 February Allocations

The Department of Finance received £20.0 million Resource DEL for the Local Restrictions Support Scheme and £0.5 million for support for soft play areas.

The Department for Infrastructure received £16.0 million Resource DEL in relation to a shortfall in the NI Water pension scheme. In addition £2.5 million Capital DEL was provided for the A6 Derry to Dungiven Flagship Project in view of the progress being made.

Significant investment by the Belfast Harbour Commissioners will be funded by borrowing, this requires Capital DEL budget cover and £10 million has been allocated to the Department for Infrastructure for this purpose.

25 March Allocations

The Department of Finance will receive £208.9 million, including £31 million to extend the Local Restrictions Support Scheme in view of the continued restrictions. The remaining funding will provide top up payments to businesses which received either the Small Business Grant or the Grant for Retail Hospitality Tourism and Leisure but which have been unable to access the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme or the Coronavirus Business Support Scheme.

I have also brought forward proposals for a one off grant for businesses with a large Net Annual Value and medium sized industrial businesses both sectors have not been able to access support to this point. The total cost of these proposals is estimated at £177.9 million Resource DEL

The Executive Office will receive £1.2 million to help address the impact of Covid on travel agents by providing much needed support.

The remaining £17.7 million of funding available for allocation has been allocated to the Department for Communities for Housing Executive maintenance.

Detail of these allocations is shown in the tables accompanying this statement.

Outcome

In making these allocations the Executive has ensured that all available Resource DEL funding has been allocated. Any spending proposal brought forward by a department to provide Covid support to individuals and businesses since the conclusion of January Monitoring has been met in full. £55.3 million Financial Transactions Capital remains unallocated and while we can carry forward some unspent funds to 2021-22 it is inevitable that again some of this funding will be lost. There remains a £0.4 million unallocated in Capital DEL as a result of a late surrender of £1.5m from DoJ.

Conclusion

It is now for us as individual Ministers to deliver on that and to ensure that those who need support get it and that this vital funding is spent in full by the end of the financial year, delivering on Covid support and the provision of public services.

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Table A Reduced Requirements – 25 February 2021

Table B Reduced Requirements – 25 March 2021

Table C Allocations – 25 February 2021

Table D Allocations – 25 March 2021

Table A: Reduced Requirements – 25 February

(£ millions)

Department	Description	Resource DEL	Capital DEL
DE	Covid Response and Restart costs	19.7	
TEO	HIA – Programme Delays	0.8	
	IT Costs		0.1
	Recruitment Delays	0.0	
	Victims Payment – Delay Contract Award	0.8	
Total TEO		1.6	0.1
Total Reduced Requirements		21.3	0.1

Total may not add due to roundings

Table B: Reduced Requirements – 25 March

(£ millions)

Department	Description	Resource DEL	Capital DEL
DE	Education Authority and CCEA Funding	4.4	
	Covid Restart Funding	3.6	
Total DE		8.0	
DoF	James House Refurbishment		1.1
	Laptop delivery and RPM Connect 2 delays		0.9
Total DoF			2.0
DoJ	Compensation Services	0.9	
	Covid Funding	1.1	
	Project Delays		5.2
	Reduced Costs due to impact of Covid	2.9	
Total DoJ		4.9	5.2
Dfl	Covid Bus, Coach and Taxi Support Schemes	1.5	
TEO	FTC Interest Receivable	0.1	
Total Reduced Requirements		14.5	7.2

Totals may not add due to rounding

Table C: Allocations – 25 February

(£ millions)

Department	Description	Resource DEL	Capital DEL	Financial Transactions Capital
DoF	Local Restrictions Support Scheme	20.0		
	Soft Play Areas	0.5		
Total DoF		20.5		
DoH	Bonus for Health Workers	25.0		
DfI	NI Water Pension Shortfall	16.0		
	A6 Derry to Dungiven		2.5	
	Belfast Harbour Commissioners borrowing		10.0	
Total DfI		16.0	12.5	
TEO	Capitalised Interest			0.1
Total Allocations		61.5	12.5	0.1

Total may not add due to roundings

Table D: Allocations – 25 March

(£ millions)

Department	Description	Resource DEL
DfC	NIHE	17.7
DoF	Local Restrictions Support Scheme	31.0
	Further Grant Support	177.9
Total DoF		208.9
TEO	Travel Agent Scheme	1.2
Total Allocations		227.8

Total may not add due to roundings

Department of Finance

Update on 2021-22 Final Budget

Published on 31 March 2021.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I had hoped to be provide a statement setting out a final Budget for 2021-22 today. Indeed I had hoped to do so at an earlier date.

Unfortunately despite my best endeavours the First Minister has not agreed to my Executive paper on the final Budget 2020-21 paper being tabled for Executive consideration.

Following the announcement of the draft Budget on 18 January there was a period of consultation that ended on 25 February 2021.

Following consideration of the response to that consultation I circulated a paper to my Executive colleagues on 15 March setting out my proposals for a final Budget 2021-22.

I have made a number of changes to those initial proposals to address issues raised by Executive colleagues. I fully anticipated that these relatively minor adjustments would be sufficient to achieve Executive agreement to the final Budget position.

However, although the paper has been agreed by the deputy First Minister, the First Minister has not agreed to the paper being tabled for Executive consideration.

I am of course extremely concerned that due to the decision not to allow this paper to be considered by the Executive I have, through no fault of my own, been placed in the position of breaching the requirement of the Section 64 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to lay a draft budget before the beginning of the financial year.

It is also of grave concern that the failure to agree a Budget before the start of the 2021-22 financial year will impact on departments' ability to plan effectively and will result in uncertainty for businesses and vulnerable people as proposed additional funding for Covid support measures is now delayed.

I will continue to work with Executive colleagues to agree a Budget for 2021-22 as quickly as possible.

Department of Finance

2021-22 Final Budget

Published at 5.00 pm on 1 April 2021.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): This statement updates members on the Executive's agreement to a final Budget for 2021-22.

Following the announcement of the draft Budget on 18 January there commenced a period of consultation that ended on 25 February 2021.

While such a short period of consultation was not ideal, it was necessary to ensure that a final Budget could be agreed in advance of the new financial year commencing on 01 April 2021.

Both the consultation responses and the departmental equality assessments informed the Executive's decisions on the final Budget outcome.

Since the draft Budget was published there has been a small degree of funding released following reassessment of central items which will be now be used to ensure the continuation of schemes under the Shared Future umbrella and to meet the budget requirements of independent bodies.

Since the draft Budget; additional funding for the Executive was announced in the Chancellor's Budget on 3 March, and there has also been a more recent announcement of further funding for Health in England that will provide Barnett consequentials.

In addition Treasury has agreed that some of the COVID funding provided in the later part of 2020-21 can be carried forward into 2021-22. This is on top of the usual Budget Exchange Scheme amounts.

Unfortunately, although this funding, like the anticipated funding mentioned in draft Budget, has been confirmed by Treasury, it has not been confirmed by the Secretary of State and therefore cannot be included in this final Budget.

However; it is imperative that decisions are made now on how this funding will be allocated to ensure there is no delay to the support that the Executive intends to provide.

As well as significant levels of Covid funding the Chancellor's Budget provided an additional £4.2 million of Resource DEL from Non-Covid measures. While this funding cannot be included in department Budgets outcomes the Executive has agreed that it will be allocated to the Bright Start School Age Grant Scheme which provides much needed support in disadvantaged areas; rural communities and the schools estate, as well as the Holiday Grant scheme for disabled children, until such times as future scheme provision has been considered.

It will also provide funding for the continuation of Public Service Route between Derry and London and for the provision of language translation services for departments.

The Executive had previously committed to funding Teachers' Pay and Safe Staffing through the in-year monitoring process. To provide certainty for these important issues it has been agreed that these costs will be met from the funding now confirmed for 2021-22.

For most departments the draft Budget outcome represents a flat cash settlement which will mean effective reductions once increased costs and demands on services are taken into account.

Choices will have to be made, public services will have to be prioritised.

COVID-19

Turning to COVID funding; the Executive had allocated the majority of COVID funding available at the draft Budget stage to the departments of Health, Education and the Economy, leaving some £126.9 million for allocation at final Budget stage.

In its final Budget the Executive has allocated all of that remaining funding to departments to address the pressures they have identified in relation to meeting the impacts of the pandemic. These allocations are set out in Table 3 in Annex A.

The Executive has also considered the allocation of funding made available since the draft Budget. Due to the requirement for written confirmation from the Secretary of State this cannot be included in final Budget. However; to allow departments to plan now, the Executive has agreed a number of allocations, which will be formalised in-year. These confirmed in-year allocations are shown in Table 4 in Annex A.

As set out in the draft Budget; in recognition of the impact that COVID-19 has had on jobs and households, we are freezing the regional rate for both domestic and non-domestic customers.

In addition; earlier this month, I announced a further rate relief package which will deliver additional support to almost 29,000 businesses here in the form of a rate free period for the next 12 months. This support will cost £230 million and will be funded for the additional Covid funding which has now been confirmed.

Other allocations from this funding include £9 million to tackle homelessness and £50 million to further support our Health Service which is at the forefront of our response. These allocations reflect the priority that the Executive place on protecting the vulnerable and supporting our frontline Health and Social Care staff who have been at the coalface of the fight against the virus.

To help with dealing with the economic damage wrought on our economy by COVID, we have allocated £275.8 million Resource and £11 million Capital to the Department for Economy to support the economic recovery strategy.

This is in addition to £12.5 million being made available for NI Water pressures and £6 million to DFC for supporting people costs. There is also £28.3 million of funding being made available for DE to meet pressures in relation to recovery and support and re-engagements for children and young people, and £12.3 million to DoJ for PSNI staffing.

The Executive has also set aside some £81 million for the extension of existing support schemes. Up to £4 million will also be provided to the Department for the Economy to extend the Large Tourism and Hospitality Scheme for the first two weeks of the financial year.

The remaining funding will be held for allocation early in the new financial year following a further assessment of health pressures.

Capital Budget

In terms of Capital funding, the draft Budget provided investment funding of £1.75 billion, including borrowing of £140 million.

The Executive has now agreed to borrow a further £30 million from its RRI borrowing facility to provide additional funding to NI Water due to the strategic nature of its pressures.

This brings the total departmental capital allocations to almost £1.8 billion. This will enable investment in our infrastructure whilst supporting the construction sector.

Conclusion

This Budget seeks to protect key public services in a very challenging financial context. I hope that this one-year Budget acts as a bridge to a multi-year budget which allows the Executive to properly reprioritise its spending and plan for the longer-term.

The confirmed in-year allocations; whilst not part of the formal Budget outcome, will allow departments to plan effectively and provide certainty to key priorities, vital public health services and schemes that will deliver economic and social recovery.

The Final Budget will be subject to Assembly debate and vote following Easter Recess.

Table 1: Departmental Budget Outcome

£million	Non Ring-fenced Resource DEL	Capital DEL (Net)	FT Capital
Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	553.8	95.5	
Communities	876.3	224.8	38.8
Economy	821.3	89.8	34.7
Education	2,345.1	158.3	
Finance	172.1	45.0	
Health	6,451.9	326.5	
Infrastructure	429.9	722.5	
Justice	1,125.3	96.4	
The Executive Office	120.5	15.3	
Food Standards Agency	11.7	0.1	
NI Assembly Commission	45.8	1.7	
NI Audit Office	8.6	4.5	
NI Authority for Utility Regulation	0.2	0.0	
NI Public Sector Ombudsman	3.6	0.1	
Public Prosecution Service	35.3	0.6	
Total Departmental Planned Spend	13,001.5	1,781.0	73.6

Totals may not add due to rounding

Table 2
Reconciliation of Departmental Planned Spend to Northern Ireland Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) controls

£million	Non Ring-fenced Resource DEL	Capital DEL (Net)	FT Capital
Total Departmental Planned Spend	13,001.5	1,781.0	73.6
Centrally Held Items:			
Delivering Social Change / Shared Future	7.7		
Air Passenger Duty	2.3		
RRI Interest Payments	45.5		
Executive City Deal Funding		5.8	
Tackling Paramilitary Activity	8.0		
Total Centrally Held Items	63.5	5.8	
Regional Rate Income	-580.1		
RRI Borrowing		-170.0	
RoI Funding (A5)		-6.0	
NI DEL	12,484.9	1,610.9	73.6
of which:			
COVID-19	538.2	3.6	
Farm Support Payments	315.6		
Fisheries Payments	3.1		

£million	Non Ring-fenced Resource DEL	Capital DEL (Net)	FT Capital
Security Funding	31.2	0.9	
EU Protocol - Equality Commission	0.8		
Fresh Start - Shared Education and Housing		28.4	

Totals may not add due to rounding

Table 3: COVID-19 Funding Allocated at Final Budget

£million

Department	Description	Amount
DAERA	COVID – Market Support for Agri-Food Sector	5.0
	COVID – Monitoring Wastewater for COVID-19	2.8
	COVID - Green Recovery	2.0
Total DAERA		9.8
DfC	Labour Market Interventions	26.9
	Benefit Delivery Response	24.9
Total DfC		51.8
DE	Asymptomatic Testing in special schools	0.9
	School Meals	2.1
	Schools' Delegated Budgets - allocations on a per pupil basis	10.8
	Transport	1.3
	Special schools -substitute cover	0.9
	SEN in Mainstream & Pupil Support	0.1
	Contract Cleaning – EA services	0.3
	Support Online Learning-C2K	0.7
	Maintaining Standards & Learning	0.1
	Education Through COVID	6.6
	School Holiday Food Payments / FSM direct payments additional staff	0.1
	Engage programme	5.5
	COVID-19 Childcare Sector Support (2021/22)	10.0
	Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Framework	5.0
Total DE		44.4
DoF	ESS PD building ventilation systems	0.3
	NISRA Covid opinion survey	0.2
	LPS Administration	1.3
Total DoF		1.8
DFI	NI Water	9.2
DoJ	PSNI – Social distancing, PPE and IT	1.9
	NIPS – Social distancing and PPE	1.9
	NICTS – Reduced Income, staffing to deal with backlog, and increased hygiene costs.	3.0
	Core and smaller bodies- Mainly social distancing and PPE	1.0
Total DoJ		7.7
PPS	Covid-19 Accommodation Cleaning and PPE Supplies	0.1

Department	Description	Amount
TEO	Covid-19 NI Hub running costs	0.1
	Public Information Campaign	2.0
Total TEO		2.1
Total		126.9

Totals may not add due to rounding

Table 4 – 2021-22 Confirmed In-Year Allocations not included in the Final Budget Outcome

£million

Department	Description	Amount
DfC	Homelessness	9.0
	Supporting People	6.0
	Translation Hub	0.2
Total DfC		15.2
DE	Teachers' Pay	35.0
	Brightstart	1.4
	Summer Scheme 2021 (schools-based)	4.0
	Youth Service Summer Programme 2021	5.0
	Engage II Programme (Sep21 - Mar22)	17.0
	Sure Start Programme	2.3
Total DE		64.7
DfE	High Street Voucher Scheme	145.0
	Economic Recovery	130.8
	CODA PSO	0.9
Total DfE		276.7
DoF	Rates Reliefs	230.0
DoH	Safe Staffing	20.0
	Covid Response – Regional Pathogen Whole Genome Sequencing	2.5
	Covid Response – Additional Workforce Appeal	2.5
	Covid Response – Asymptomatic Testing Programme	35.0
	Covid Response – Further policy developments	10.0
Total DoH		70.0
DfI	NI Water	12.5
DoJ	PSNI Staffing	12.3
TEO	Shared Future	6.0
Total		687.4

Totals may not add due to rounding

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 19 March 2021

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the progress to create a dedicated Programme for Government monitoring and reporting website, as agreed in New Decade, New Approach.
(AQW 4450/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): Good progress is being made on the development of dedicated Programme for Government (PfG) web pages which will be hosted on the NI Executive website. They will support the monitoring and reporting of Outcomes for the new PfG being brought forward by the Executive.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the recent Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey, which outlined sixteen racial groups for respondents but coded them into categories white and other.
(AQW 7455/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey collected information on the ethnic group of respondents, with 16 possible response options. In 2019, sample sizes for groups other than those answering 'White' were too small to obtain robust analyses. In line with best practice statistical analysis methodology, ensuring that small group sizes do not impact the quality of the analysis, these respondents were grouped into a single classification of 'Other ethnic group'.

Whilst the relatively small number of minority ethnic people here can limit how we present ethnicity for respondents in survey such as this, it is no reflection on the value of their contribution.

We very much value the role of our minority ethnic population in creating diverse and thriving communities. We remain committed to fully implementing our Racial Equality Strategy to tackle racial inequalities, eradicate racism and hate crime and promote good race relations, so our minority ethnic people continue to be valued members of our communities.

Mr Muir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when a written response to AQO 628/17-22 will be received.
(AQW 7494/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: AQW 628/17-22 was answered on 3 December 2020.

Mr Easton asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when a new Head of the Civil Service will be appointed.
(AQW 10056/17-22)

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.

The new recruitment campaign will be launched soon to enable an appointment to be made by summer, to align with the interim arrangements in place.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the annual financial contribution of Northern Ireland to the costs of (i) the North South Ministerial Council and its secretariat; and (ii) the British Irish Council and its secretariat.
(AQW 10165/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Joint Secretariat is jointly funded by the Northern Ireland Executive and Irish Government. The annual cost to the Executive for the 2019/20 financial year (the last full year for which accounts are available) was £599,167.

Contributions to the British Irish Council (BIC) Secretariat are shared by the 8 Member administrations, and in 2019/20 the Northern Ireland Executive's 9% share was £71,387. This amount included the Northern Ireland contribution to the Secretariat's running costs and the cost of funding a member of the NICS on assignment to the Secretariat.

Miss Woods asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQO 635/17-22 (i) when the consideration of options for Commissioner for Victims and Survivors post is due to conclude; and (ii) for an update on the appointment of a new Commissioner for Victims and Survivors.

(AQW 11598/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We have concluded the consideration of options for the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors post and have now instructed our officials to commence the process for the appointment of a Victims Commissioner. The CVS is regulated by the Commissioner for Public Appointments NI (CPANI) and, as such, the appointment process must comply with the Code of Practice for Ministerial Public Appointments.

Ms McLaughlin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why AQW 11979/17-22 has not been answered within the expiry of the timeframe stipulated by Standing Orders; and when it will be answered.

(AQW 13251/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: While we constantly strive to ensure that responses are provided in a timely fashion, we regret that this is not always possible on all occasions. We would again highlight the unique nature of our responsibilities, which require joint consideration and agreement on an appropriate response and which adds an additional element which has a significant bearing upon the timescales required.

Our department, in common with the others, has also experienced significant disruption as a result of Covid 19 which has impacted upon the timeliness of responses to questions because of the need to divert and dedicate staffing resources in response to this emergency.

AQW 11979/17-22 was answered on 28 January 2021.

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether their Department has considered the implications of the Dying with Dignity Bill in the Republic of Ireland on Northern Ireland.

(AQW 13685/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Department is aware of the Dying with Dignity Bill which is being taken forward as a Private Members Bill through the Oireachtas.

Officials will be monitoring the progress of this draft Bill and will be considering its implications as the position becomes clearer.

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what engagement their Department has had with counterparts in the Republic of Ireland regarding their Dying with Dignity Bill.

(AQW 13686/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Officials have advised Irish Government counterparts of our interest in the Bill and that they will be monitoring its progress.

The Irish Government has yet to adopt a position on the Bill and more substantive engagement will take place when this happens.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to list all the meetings of the North/South Implementation Bodies which are scheduled for 2021.

(AQW 13837/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: At the NSMC Plenary on 18 December 2020 the Council agreed that meetings should take place across the 12 NSMC Sectors during the period February 2021 to June 2021.

The NSMC Joint Secretariat is in the process of scheduling these meetings, which will include meetings to consider the work of the North/South Implementation Bodies, although final dates are not yet confirmed.

A meeting in the Inland Waterways sector took place on 3 February 2021.

Ms Sugden asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on any action they have taken to mitigate the issues arising from the implementation of Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.

(AQW 13982/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: While there are differing views across all parties in the Executive on the decision to leave the EU, we are committed to working together to achieve the best possible outcome for our businesses and citizens.

The Executive continues to consider and discuss regular updates on impacts arising from the end of the Transition Period and we are closely engaging with the UK Government at both Ministerial and official level to deal with issues as they arise.

On 3 February we met with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and European Commission Vice President Maroš Šefčovič to discuss the challenges that have arisen following the end of the Transition period, and to seek action to improve the situation.

At the meeting, it was agreed that the UK and EU will have further discussions to consider what can be done to address these challenges.

We are also continuing to attend regular meetings of the Exit Operations (XO) Cabinet Committee, where we have taken the opportunity to highlight the significant issues impacting on our businesses and citizens, and to press for solutions.

Ms McLaughlin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why the High Street Task Force, announced on 6 August 2020, met for the first time on 24 February 2021.

(AQW 15364/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The timescale for establishing the Task Force was longer than envisaged for two reasons. Firstly, the finite nature of staff resource, and the priority given to work relating to the Covid-19 pandemic, meant that there was limited capacity for the necessary policy development work.

Secondly, in keeping with the principles of co-design and delivery, it was necessary to invest time in engaging with stakeholders, and in gathering evidence on best practice elsewhere.

Mr McNulty asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will give an early indication on when they expect to raise the limits attending (i) wedding services; and (ii) wedding receptions.

(AQW 15390/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Under the current restrictions in place from 26 December until 1 April, a wedding or civil partnership ceremony in any venue is permitted for up to 25 people including the celebrant and children. Pre- and post-ceremony celebrations are not permitted.

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>

The Executive published the Pathway out of Restrictions on Tuesday 2nd March 2021 and it is available here- Coronavirus (COVID-19) regulations: Pathway out of restrictions | nidirect (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-pathway-out-restrictions>).

Future decisions on weddings, civil partnership ceremonies and receptions will be considered in the context of the process outlined in this document and with regard to a range of health, community and economic information.

Mr Stalford asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, following the announcement from the Prime Minister, on what date they are now considering removing all restrictions on life and the economy.

(AQW 15411/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway out of Restrictions' was published on 2 March and sets out the Executive's agreed approach for moving out of the current Coronavirus restrictions. Coronavirus (COVID-19) regulations: Pathway out of restrictions | nidirect (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-pathway-out-restrictions>).

As we have seen already, the course of the pandemic has been highly unpredictable and is likely to be so for some time yet. That is why we have not set dates for relaxing restrictions. We want to prevent businesses, communities and sectors investing in planning for opening dates that may need to be flexible.

Decisions on relaxations will be informed by health, community and economic factors, where the impact of each relaxation is considered before further easements are taken forward.

Mr McCrossan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail their Department's unspent budget for the 2020/21 financial year; and to what projects or services this unspent money was allocated.

(AQW 15632/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Department is not in a position to supply this information as the 2020/21 financial year does not end until 31 March 2021. We continue to closely monitor the final spend position with a view to maximising outturn within the funding envelope available.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail what funding has been given by their Department to the Centre for Cross Border Studies in each of the last three years.

(AQW 15656/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive Office has not paid any funding to the Centre for Cross Border Studies in each of the last three years.

Ms Armstrong asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Programme for Government Housing Outcome agreed during New Decade, New Approach; and when their Department will provide details confirming the indicators proposed to deliver this cross-cutting objective.
(AQW 15721/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Housing has been identified as key priority area within the Programme for Government draft Outcomes Framework which has been published for consultation. The provision of suitable housing for everyone features prominently in three of the nine wellbeing Outcomes.

The public consultation, which commenced on 25 January, is an important first step in the development process for the new Programme. The aim is to have an agreed Outcomes Framework with a suite of population Indicators by around the end of April, and a more complete Programme incorporating an agreed budget linked to policies and programmes ready by the summer.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether current provisions allowing the operation of churches, subject to risk assessment, are altered by the plan most recently adopted by the Executive.
(AQW 15836/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Following a meeting with Faith Leaders chaired by Junior Ministers on 7 January, a number of faith organisations agreed to move to online services on a voluntary basis and at a further meeting on 22 February, Faith Leaders were asked to continue with online services. The next review of restrictions by the Executive will take place on 16 March. The Executive published Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway out of Restrictions on Tuesday 2nd March 2021 and it is available here- Coronavirus (COVID19) regulations: Pathway out of restrictions | nidirect.

Mr Harvey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they plan to appoint a new Head of the Civil Service.
(AQO 1211/17-22)

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.

The new recruitment campaign will be launched soon to enable an appointment to be made by summer, to align with the interim arrangements in place.

Mr K Buchanan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the appointment process for the Head of the Civil Service.
(AQO 1209/17-22)

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.

The new recruitment campaign will be launched soon to enable an appointment to be made by summer, to align with the interim arrangements in place.

Ms Mullan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as per commitments in New Decade, New Approach, what consideration they have given to developing strategies to end sectarianism as part of the Programme for Government process.
(AQO 1340/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive is consulting on a new draft Programme for Government (PfG) Outcomes Framework. The public consultation, which commenced on 25 January, will run until 22 March and is an important first step in the PfG development process.

The Executive is committed to working in joined-up ways to put in place impactful strategies and actions to tackle our most intractable problems and to deliver real and lasting change in the things that matter most to people, such as ending sectarianism and tackling paramilitarism.

The aim is to have the Framework and associated Indicators agreed by around the end of April, and a more complete Programme including key priorities, strategies and actions ready before the summer.

Mr Beattie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on Programme for Government priorities.
(AQO 1338/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive is consulting on a new draft Programme for Government (PfG) Outcomes Framework. The public consultation, which commenced on 25 January, will run until 22 March and is an important first step in the PfG development process.

The aim is to have the Framework and associated Indicators agreed by around the end of April, and a more complete Programme including key priorities, strategies and actions ready before the summer.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what records are kept of (i) requests and directions of EU officials at our ports; and (ii) the response to these requests and directions.

(AQW 14598/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): EU officials are present at Northern Ireland points of entry on a rolling basis. Their role is to observe arrangements at these sites, both in terms of facilities and processes.

Their role does not include the direction of officers of competent authorities involved in sanitary and phytosanitary checks.

Where requests for consignment information have been made, appropriate information has been provided, and informal records (eg entries in day books and diaries, relevant emails) may be kept.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he intends to permit border post checks on the import of British sausages into Northern Ireland.

(AQW 14887/17-22)

Mr Poots: Under the terms of the EU Withdrawal Agreement, the Northern Ireland Protocol and domestic legislation, NI must continue to align with European Union (EU) sanitary and phyto-sanitary (SPS) rules, while Great Britain (GB) is treated as a non-EU (third) country.

The EU's Official Controls Regulation (OCR) details the controls and checks that must take place on goods and products that enter the EU SPS regulatory zone (which under the Northern Ireland Protocol, includes NI) from a third country (such as GB).

DAERA as a Central Competent Authority for the OCR is obliged to perform documentary, identity and physical checks on the EU's behalf on any SPS-related goods moved from GB including sausages. Documentary and identity checks will be completed on 100% of such consignments, with physical inspections completed on a risk basis. Currently less than 1% of retail consignments containing British sausages would be likely to receive physical inspections.

During the current "grace period" (until 30th June) agreed between the EU and UK government in December 2020, chilled sausages produced in GB can continue to come into NI subject to these checks. From 1st July all sausages will need to be frozen on import.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department have considered undertaking a review of licence fees for dog breeding establishments outlined under section 8 of The Welfare of Animals (Dog Breeding Establishments and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013.

(AQW 15085/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Welfare of Animals (Dog Breeding Establishments and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 authorises local councils to licence dog-breeding establishments. It further provides that the fees for licencing such establishments will be collected by the councils. My Department agreed the current fees structure with local councils in 2013, to permit this work to be progressed on a cost recovery basis.

In 2016, following my Department's review of the Welfare of Animals Act 2011, a recommendation was made that local councils and DAERA should work together to review the level of fees charged by councils for the service.

To date, however, my Department has not received any indication from the councils that the level of fees is either inadequate or requires early re-assessment. I therefore have no plans to initiate an immediate review, but can assure you that my officials will take this work forward with local councils, as an appropriate opportunity arises.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail what role his Department has in Operation Delphin.

(AQW 15436/17-22)

Mr Poots: Operation Delphin is a multi-agency collaboration, led by the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which aims to tackle illegal puppy smuggling across the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland.

A number of key animal welfare charities in the UK and in Ireland participate in its activities, including both the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

While my Department is not involved directly in Operation Delphin, I am fully supportive of its aims, and assure you that my officials remain available for assistance in future initiatives, where appropriate.

In order to advance actions against the illegal breeding and movement of pups into, and within Northern Ireland, my Department established its own multi-agency forum last year. The forum includes representatives from local councils, the Police Service of Northern Ireland and Harbour Police as well as my Department's Welfare Enforcement staff and Portal Inspection staff.

Combatting the illegal breeding and movement of pups is a key priority for my Department, and my officials will continue to work with key agencies, stakeholders and interested parties to advance initiatives or operations that can assist with this.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on (i) steps being taken to create a veterinary school within the Ulster University Coleraine campus; and (ii) any conversations he has had with the relevant stakeholders.

(AQW 15541/17-22)

Mr Poots: While there is an increasing acceptance that Northern Ireland requires a more assured supply of graduate veterinarians, especially for its agri-food industry, than is available from historical sources, there are a number of options for achieving this that merit further exploration.

Following my earlier invitation, Minister Gordon Lyons met with the Vice-Chancellors of the Ulster University and the Queen's University Belfast, and agreed with them to commission an independent analysis of the various options for better assuring the supply of veterinarians, including various models for the delivery of third level veterinary education, in Northern Ireland.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland-inspired changes requiring GB ear tags to be removed from cattle brought in from GB will be implemented.

(AQW 15554/17-22)

Mr Poots: The requirement to re-tag animals moved into Northern Ireland from Great Britain is an unnecessary barrier to trade within the United Kingdom single market as a result of the Northern Ireland Protocol. I have raised the evident implications of the Protocol with Ministerial counterparts since the end of the transition phase.

Minister Lyons, when in post, also wrote to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs requesting that this particular matter be raised with the European Commission directly, with a view to exploring a potential derogation for intra-UK movements.

I will continue to press for a satisfactory resolution to this matter.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 7116/17-22, what additional legal advice he has received should he fail to make the preparations for the new permanent border control posts at ports of entry required by the Withdrawal Agreement.

(AQW 15636/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department has now received legal advice regarding the building of permanent infrastructure at Northern Ireland (NI) Points of Entry (PoE). I have indicated that I will bring the matter of preparations at NI PoE to the Executive for consideration as soon as possible.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what is the cost to date of the preparations on the new permanent border control posts at ports of entry required by the Withdrawal Agreement.

(AQW 15637/17-22)

Mr Poots: Up to the end of January 2021, the cost of the preparations on the new permanent facilities at NI Seaports are estimated at £2 million. This includes cost associated with the programme team, site investigations, the building designs, planning fees and costs associated with development of the commercial agreements at each of the Northern Ireland seaports.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what legal advice he has sought should he fail to make the preparations for the new permanent border control posts at ports of entry required by the Withdrawal Agreement.

(AQW 15639/17-22)

Mr Poots: My officials sought legal advice regarding the building of permanent infrastructure at Northern Ireland (NI) Points of Entry (PoE). I have indicated that I will be bringing the matter of preparations at NI PoE's to the Executive for consideration as soon as possible.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) any costs to contractors that his Department may be liable for due to the halting of the construction of border posts at Northern Ireland ports; and (ii) who is contractually responsible for the decision to suspend construction.

(AQW 15709/17-22)

Mr Poots: DAERA officials, with the support of Department for Finance, Construction and Procurement Delivery, appointed contractors across each of the Northern Ireland Points of Entry to secure the full infrastructure build.

Under the contract, DAERA are the Client/Employer and are therefore contractually responsible for any decision to suspend construction work and any associated compensation cost.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the biosecurity measures in place to prevent livestock diseases, such as avian influenza, entering Northern Ireland.

(AQW 15729/17-22)

Mr Poots: Biosecurity measures range from the official controls in place across the entire food production and supply chain, to the education of industry through knowledge transfer and raising awareness via media channels. Some measures are statutory while many are industry-led in response to their recognition of the importance of effective biosecurity to safeguard their livestock and products.

Disease surveillance and horizon scanning plays an important role in ensuring that threats to animal health are detected early, and in allowing risks to be mitigated.

DAERA officials are members of several veterinary disease risk groups involved in horizon scanning for new and emerging diseases at a United Kingdom, European and International level. In December 2020, in the light of a heightened avian influenza alert status across Europe and the UK, my department moved quickly to establish controls to limit disease ingress into and / or spread within Northern Ireland.

My Department also implements statutory disease surveillance programmes including annual surveys for exotic livestock diseases e.g. Avian Influenza, Bluetongue, Brucellosis; post-import testing and isolation requirements for other diseases e.g. Bluetongue, Maedi-Visna; and the inspection, testing and traceability and provenance control regimes carried out by official veterinarians working in Northern Ireland's red and white meat processing plants.

Controls at NI ports and airports are also an important line of defence to prevent notifiable disease entry via imports of livestock or products of animal origin. DAERA officials screen these and detain illegal imports, again working closely with industry partners to educate and inform those travelling of the associated risks.

Training in the importance of biosecurity is provided within livestock training modules delivered by the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise, and within the Business Development Group programmes. The DAERA Biosecurity code and other guidance is widely available on the DAERA website and we routinely encourage all primary producers to familiarise themselves with this Code.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for his assessment of the benefits of TRACES import Module IT system for the movement of goods between GB and the north of Ireland; and (ii) what engagement he is having with the British Government to ensure they are using all available tools, including the TRACES import module IT system, in order to make it easier for the movement of goods.

(AQW 15734/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Official Controls Regulation (OCR) requires that Sanitary–Phyto Sanitary (or SPS) goods moving from Great Britain (GB) into Northern Ireland (NI) must be pre-notified by the creation of a Common Health Entry Document (CHED) on the TRACES-NT system. SPS goods must also travel with certificates including Export Health Certificates, Phytosanitary Certificates, Official Certificates (for High Risk Feed & Food Not of Animal Origin) and Certificates of Inspection (for Organics).

The TRACES Import Module IT system provides opportunities for digitisation of some elements of the end-to-end trade journey for such goods requiring health controls (SPS goods), including functionality to create digital official certificates and CHEDS in TRACES-NT, thereby negating the requirement for goods to be accompanied by hard-copy, "wet-signed" documentation.

In TRACES-NT, once a digital Health Certificate has been validated by a GB Certifying Officer/Vet, the NI Importer/haulier can create the Common Health Entry Document (or CHED) by using a "Clone as CHED" function whereby the CHED is automatically populated with the Health Certificate data.

This leads to a significant time saving for the Importer. Cloning the CHED from the Health Certificate also removes the risk of user input or transcription error and ensures that the data is correct. This in turn allows the data to be trusted throughout the process from GB Export to NI Import to checks and Customs clearance.

Digitisation also provides Portal Control Bodies with increased potential to automate much of the Documentary Check required under the OCR.

At present Defra in GB rely on their own national IT system instead of the TRACES-NT imports module to produce Export Health Certificates. The outcome is hard copy wet-signed certificates which can only be uploaded to TRACES-NT as scans, and cannot be recognised as digital official certificates.

This also means that the NI Control Bodies in our ports require considerable resource to carry out the documentary checks. Admin staff must carry out a higher level of checks to ensure that the data of the CHED matches that of the Health Certificate, and that action is taken if discrepancies are detected.

Officials have regular meetings at all levels with counterparts in DEFRA, and the use of TRACES Import Module as a solution for SPS trade is being examined. Compatibility of TRACES Import Module with existing DEFRA systems is being assessed, but as a consequence of the Protocol additional red tape, costs and burdens are being imposed upon business which is damaging to business and consumers.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps his Department has taken to inform poultry owners on the Avian Influenza outbreak.

(AQW 15768/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department works closely with a wide range of industry representatives on the measures needed to prevent the spread of Avian Influenza into and within Northern Ireland, both prior to its recent incursion and as the situation developed.

The recent outbreaks of the disease in poultry were the first in Northern Ireland since 1998, and are the first ever involving a highly pathogenic strain of the virus.

During the outbreak my officials facilitated weekly stakeholder meetings which provided regular updates on the Department's actions and sought feedback on our approach as the situation developed.

During December my Department organised two 'Protect Your Flock' webinars. These were held in close collaboration with our local poultry industry stakeholders. The first webinar was aimed at the backyard and hobby flock keeper with the second targeted at the commercial keeper. The webinars focused on the symptoms of Avian Influenza and the measures flock keepers could take to protect their birds.

A biosecurity checklist has also been developed to aid flock keepers in the review of their biosecurity arrangements. This is available on the DAERA website and has been shared widely with stakeholders.

The DAERA website and social media sites are continually being updated to reflect the most current situation. Using these channels we widely publicised media messages from both the Chief Veterinary Officer and myself, urging industry to take all possible biosecurity measures to protect their flocks. Veterinary officials also participated in a range of television and radio interviews emphasising the key messages to prevent the spread of Avian Influenza.

In addition, my Department delivers a text alert service for all bird keepers to receive immediate notifications of disease outbreaks or other important disease information. This enables bird keepers to take action to protect their flock at the earliest opportunity. Officials have recently been working closely with the Northern Ireland Feed Industry in the design and use of a label on poultry feed bags raising awareness of maintaining excellent biosecurity in keeping birds safe.

As such, my Department continues to deliver a sustained campaign across all available communication channels, in collaboration with industry, to inform and educate poultry owners and bird keepers on the most recent outbreaks in Northern Ireland.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what consideration has been given to the impact of any proposed oil exploration and fracking on local inland waterways and fisheries.

(AQW 15770/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department is not currently considering any planning proposal relating to oil exploration and fracking and the potential impact on local inland waterways and fisheries.

As a statutory consultee, my Department's Planning Response Team allocate planning applications to Inland Fisheries Branch for comment and advice in relation to its possible impact on Inland Fisheries. Under the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966 (as amended), Inland Fisheries Branch has a statutory remit for the conservation, protection, development and improvement of salmon and inland fisheries.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what discussions he has had with local councils regarding increasing penalties for illegal dumping.

(AQW 15772/17-22)

Mr Poots: Through the Clean Neighbourhoods & Environment Act (NI) 2011, district councils (DCs) may issue fixed penalty fines of up to £80 for litter offences or £2,500 for cases dealt with through the courts.

My Department is currently reviewing the fixed penalty fines available to DCs to penalise offenders. The outcome of the review will be included as part of the draft Environment Strategy for NI, which will be consulted on later in 2021. The Strategy will also consider new measures to tackle litter in the future.

Additionally, Section 5 of the Waste & Contaminated Land (Amendment) NI Act 2011 will, when commenced, provide DCs with powers to enforce Articles 4 and 5 of the Waste & Contaminated Land (NI) Order 1997. These powers will include the ability to issue fixed penalty notices up to £400 for illegal waste offences. Upon summary conviction penalties would include a maximum of £50,000 fine and/or six months imprisonment for Article 4 offences and £5000 for Article 5 offences.

I have not yet made a decision on the date of commencement as my officials are currently engaged in discussions with DCs regarding the legislative change, including agreement on a revised fly-tipping protocol which will provide clarity on the operational roles and responsibilities of the Department and DCs in addressing fly-tipping.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to the sale of Portavoe Reservoir, and the agreement that angling permit holders would have full access to fishing, why no angling has been allowed since the closure of the site.

(AQW 15792/17-22)

Mr Poots: Portavoe Reservoir was sold by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) into private ownership in June 2020.

Discussions have taken place between my officials and the new owners, and the new owners have confirmed that they wish the site to remain private and not open to the public.

DAERA are seeking legal advice regarding access rights for permit holders to fish at the site. Until this has been clarified permit holders have been advised that the site will remain closed for the foreseeable future.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail his plans to strengthen legislation around illegal dumping.

(AQW 15845/17-22)

Mr Poots: My officials are continuing to develop inter-agency working with regard to a Fly-tipping Protocol, which is in the process of being agreed with the local Councils in Northern Ireland. This aims to facilitate quick and efficient responses to smaller cases of reported illegal dumping. The protocol should consolidate responsibilities for both the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and the Councils and will help to maximise the effectiveness of our collective efforts in dealing with illegal dumping.

The ongoing work will further strengthen the powers which Councils have to deal with fly tipping. Section 5 of the Waste and Contaminated Land (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 provides District Councils with powers to enforce Articles 4 and 5 of the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 and also to issue fixed penalty notices in relation to Article 4 and 5 offences. It would be my intention to commence sections 4 and 5 of the 2011 Amendment Act once the proposed Fly-tipping Protocol has been agreed.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) whether he is aware of the concerns raised by egg importers and producers regarding the lack of information on the need to have the relevant documentation ready in advance of trading; and (ii) what engagement he is having with the Trader Support Service to highlight these concerns on behalf of businesses and to seek solutions.

(AQW 15851/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am aware that changes have recently been made to the Trader Support Service (TSS) system and to HMRC's CDS system. This is an issue that affects all types of movements – not just those of eggs.

My officials discussed these customs control processes in detail with HMRC and extensive and ongoing collaboration has taken place to ensure that the end-to-end process for moving goods from GB to NI suffers as little disruption as possible.

The change should allow traders to raise Single Frontier Declarations through TSS, but will require information to be entered in a specific & accurate manner to allow tariff validation. If the processes required to move goods (e.g. creation of a Common Health Entry Document on the TRACES-NT system) are not in place, it may not be possible to obtain the GMR number which is a pre-requisite for checking in to a ferry.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) what action he is taking to incentivise businesses wishing to work in the green economy; and (ii) what new money will be available in 2021/22 for such businesses and schemes.

(AQW 15897/17-22)

Mr Poots: DAERA is leading on the development of a multi-decade Green Growth Strategy and Climate Action Plan for Northern Ireland, on behalf of the Executive using a co-design approach. This Strategy will be our route map to climate action, green jobs and a clean environment. Our approach recognises the importance of working together and anchoring green growth in all our policies, strategies and programmes.

As part of our co-design process, DAERA will facilitate engagement with other Departments, Local Government and stakeholders from across the business and voluntary sectors. This engagement will commence shortly. It is therefore too early to detail any new incentives, levers or financial support which may be put in place to assist businesses in the transformation to a resilient, greener, low carbon and circular economy for Northern Ireland.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) the steps taken, and planned, to address coastal erosion and landslides in Northern Ireland as a result of climate change; and (ii) any conversations he has had with the National Trust in relation to the threat posed by such threats to the Giant's Causeway.

(AQW 15898/17-22)

Mr Poots: Previous Ministers have concluded that current Northern Ireland policy on coastal management, the Bateman Formula from 1967, is now outdated. In addition, the absence of specific legislation in Northern Ireland governing coastal change has resulted in a lack of data on the state of our coastline, and little understanding on how our coastline is changing.

Recognising that current policy is no longer considered effective, in 2015 a Coastal Forum was established and co-chaired by the then Ministers for the Department of Regional Development and the Department of the Environment to discuss coastal issues and seek to adopt a more strategic approach to coastal change.

Current membership of the Coastal Forum comprises DAERA, DfI, Chief Executives of coastal councils and the NI Director of the National Trust, with access to expert advice as required. Its remit is to address gaps in Northern Ireland coastal management evidence and policy. I have called a meeting with Minister Mallon of DfI for later this month to discuss future arrangements for the Coastal Forum.

An analysis of existing Northern Ireland coastal data commissioned by the previous DAERA and DfI Ministers, which was published in 2019, concluded that scientifically robust data was required for the entire Northern Ireland coast to provide a basis for effective management policies.

My officials have worked closely with DfI and Coastal Forum members to devise a comprehensive Work Programme which is being managed by a Working Group of the Coastal Forum. The priority objective is to address the significant gaps in our coastline data and provide a reliable evidence base for effective coastal management. The Working Group has also provided decision makers with a position paper outlining current policy and best practice for Northern Ireland in the absence of data on coastal change.

My Department has recently secured £400,000 funding to address the lack of coastal data and contracts have been let to undertake a comprehensive coastal survey covering the entire Northern Ireland coast in early 2021. Supporting research on wave climate affecting the Ards Peninsula is ongoing, funded by the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund. My Department is also seeking further funding for this work area.

The National Trust is a key stakeholder in coastal management, responsible for 22% of the Northern Ireland coastline. As the Coastal Forum is the agreed mechanism through which members work collaboratively in progressing coastal issues, the National Trust have direct and ongoing input into the decision making process. I have recently agreed to meet the NI Director of the National Trust to discuss the development of updated coastal policy for Northern Ireland.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) the source of the funding for (a) staffing; (b) physical port infrastructure for administering post-Brexit checks on goods; and (ii) whether he consulted the relevant bodies providing funding before suspending construction on infrastructure at Northern Ireland ports.

(AQW 15962/17-22)

Mr Poots: Her Majesty's Treasury agreed to provide additional funding to the Northern Ireland Executive in line with the commitments set out in The UK's Approach to the Northern Ireland Protocol, published on 20 May 2020.

My officials are currently engaging with the relevant officials in the Department of Finance and Her Majesty's Treasury as we seek to ensure funding is in place to implement this project.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) whether all independent appeals panel recommendations that were not accepted by his Department will now be reviewed; and (ii) whether their recommendations will now be accepted.

(AQW 15979/17-22)

Mr Poots: No decision has been taken on whether past Review of Decision cases, where the recommendation of the independent appeals panel was not accepted, will be reviewed. However it is what I am minded to do.

My officials will consider this matter as part of their work to make the Panel the final decision maker in Review of Decision cases.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the steps taken by his Department to (i) reduce; and (ii) protect communities from rural crime.

(AQW 15983/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- 1 The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) has primary responsibility for preventing and detecting rural crime in Northern Ireland. Rural crime covers a wide range of crime including theft of machinery, burglaries of isolated farms and livestock crime.
- 2 The PSNI issues regular updates on agriculture and rural crime statistics and trends. The latest report is available at Agricultural and Rural Crime in Northern Ireland Update to 31st December 2020 (psni.police.uk). This report shows a downward trend over the last decade and a reduction of 14.1% of reported crimes in 2020.
- 3 My Department has a key responsibility in relation to preventing and detecting livestock crime as the theft of animals or illegal movements of animals undermines our animal health controls and animal and food traceability.
- 4 The Department's Welfare & Enforcement Branch spearheads the Department's work in this area through collaboration with the PSNI and other agencies; providing training, advice and communications; and taking enforcement measures including livestock seizures and prosecutions.

- 5 The role of the Department in tackling rural crime includes:
- Founder member of the Rural Crime Partnership (RCP) which brings together representatives from key organisations, including the PSNI, the Department of Justice, Ulster Farmers' Union, NFU Mutual, Federation of Small Businesses and Young Farmers Clubs of Ulster. The primary purpose of the RCP is to contribute to the Programme for Government overall aim to reduce crime and harm and vulnerability caused by crime by acting as a regional strategic multi-sectoral and multi-agency group that facilitates collaboration and sharing of best practice to successfully address crime occurring in rural communities in Northern Ireland.
 - Shared responsibility for delivery of the detailed RCP Rural Crime Action Plan which has strands covering Prevent & Protect; Partnership Working; and Enforcement.
 - Working with the charity Crimestoppers to encourage reporting and ask the public to give information anonymously about rural crime across Northern Ireland.
 - Welfare & Enforcement Branch training of rural based Police Officers, through a Livestock Awareness Course, to upskill them to deal effectively with rural crime: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CA4NP4vNIos&sns=em>
 - Membership of the operational cross-border multi-agency Rural Crime Taskforce which includes the PSNI, an Garda Síochána, Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs, Revenue & Customs (RoI) and the Food Standards Agency. This taskforce targets, investigates and prosecutes serious rural crime, often with a cross border dimension including livestock theft and smuggling.
 - Enforcement activities to ensure compliance with our strict animal traceability regulations (Identification, Registration & Movement – IRM) through enforcement cattle identification inspections (CIIs); unidentified livestock seizures and destruction; animal DNA checks on farms and at abattoirs; and criminal investigations and prosecutions for breaches of IRM Regulations.
- 6 The Department also funds the charity Rural Support which provides both advice and support to rural communities through a number of measures including:
- A support line which regularly deals with cases where rural crime has impacted both financially and personally in relation to anxiety and mental distress.
 - Regularly working with the PSNI at mart events and agricultural shows in regards to raising awareness and encouraging trailer/equipment marking in particular.
 - Proactively delivering key messages around rural crime through its social media platforms and website.
 - Developing a new online farming resources hub (due for launch in the coming weeks) – supported by DAERA and in partnership with HSENI – which will have a section on rural crime and ways to minimise risk.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the benefits of local councils moving to kerbside recycling.

(AQW 15989/17-22)

Mr Poots: Kerbside recycling and collection requirements must be considered alongside collection requirements for all waste streams but the choice of particular service is ultimately one for local councils to make, taking account of factors such as the physical characteristics of collection areas, property types, access, rurality etc.

My emphasis for recycling is on increasing the quality and quantity of the resources that are collected and my Department are progressing a range of initiatives in this area, including the Household Waste Collaborative Change Programme and the recent discussion document "Future Recycling and Separate Collection of Waste of a Household Nature in Northern Ireland". These initiatives aim to realise the value of recycling to the local economy, delivering both environmental and economic benefits.

The Household Waste Recycling Collaborative Change Programme financially supports local councils to further increase recycling rates and improve the quality of recycling, and to date I have made £4.775m available for nine projects. A review of the Programme (HWRCCP) has recently been initiated to ensure maximum value for money is being achieved while also revisiting the timeframe for Programme delivery.

The aforementioned discussion document on recycling sought views on a series of proposals aimed at transforming the landscape of recycling here, including proposals relating to kerbside recycling services and the consistency of services offered throughout Northern Ireland. My officials are currently analysing responses to the consultation and a Summary of Responses will be published in due course.

I am committed to achieving the challenging circular economy package targets (an incremental increasing of recycling to 65% by 2035) and officials from my Department are continuing to engage with the Waste Resources and Action Programme (WRAP) to develop further policies and initiatives to increase recycling in Northern Ireland. These policy interventions will ensure a successful transition to a more circular economy while reaping the greatest environmental, economic and societal gains for our people.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when his Department will undertake further consultation with stakeholders on a future agriculture policy framework for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16005/17-22)

Mr Poots: We are at an advanced stage with the development of a draft policy framework portfolio which sets the direction for all future policies and projects. I hope to publish this framework in the coming months.

I am determined to work with our farmers and land managers, and our environmental stakeholders, to co-design a new approach that is focused on delivering outcomes.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will be outlining a pre-defined transition period between the current system of agricultural support and a new agricultural policy framework.

(AQW 16006/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am aiming to launch a new agricultural policy framework portfolio in the coming months. At that stage, I will provide clarity on how this will move forward.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how he will ensure that future farm payments help to address the climate emergency and work to protect and restore nature.

(AQW 16007/17-22)

Mr Poots: Developing an industry that is environmentally sustainable in terms of its impact on, and guardianship of, air quality, soil health, carbon footprint and biodiversity is one of the outcomes at the core of my vision for future agriculture in Northern Ireland.

I believe that farms are well placed to play a major role in delivering more of the environmental outcomes the people who live in Northern Ireland want and that we owe future generations.

I am determined to work with our farmers and land managers, and our environmental stakeholders, to co-design a new approach to agri-environment measures that is focused on delivering outcomes, and I believe that farmers should be properly rewarded for delivering these environmental outcomes and achieve a return on the environmental assets present on their farms.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department's consultation on a Northern Ireland peatland strategy will include information on (i) the location of existing peat extraction sites in Northern Ireland; and (ii) overall existing and projected extraction rates from approved sites.

(AQW 16008/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department is developing a Peatland Strategy for Northern Ireland, reflecting the commitments in the UK Peatland Strategy and New Decade, New Approach document. It will provide a framework for conserving our intact semi-natural peatlands and restoring degraded semi-natural peatlands.

A key action within the draft Strategy is to compile an asset register for our semi-natural peatlands which will quantify distribution, type, condition, current management practices, potential threats and restoration potential of semi-natural peatland.

The power to grant permission for large-scale peat extraction lies with Planning Authorities. The Department is a statutory consultee and provides advice to

Planning Authorities in relation to planning applications for peat extraction but does not hold information on the location or current and projected extraction rates from approved sites.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs following his decision to halt work on checking facilities at Warrenpoint, Larne and Belfast Port, to detail the legal and contractual implications of this decision on businesses awarded the contracts to deliver these facilities.

(AQW 16026/17-22)

Mr Poots: DAERA officials, with the support of Department for Finance, Construction and Procurement Delivery, appointed contractors across each of the Northern Ireland Points of Entry to secure the full infrastructure build.

Under the contract, DAERA are the Client/Employer and are therefore contractually responsible for any decision to suspend construction work. My officials are currently working through the legal and contractual implications of this decision.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) whether his Department has carried out any assessment of the issue highlighted in the recent Channel 4 Dispatches documentary on household waste collected for recycling being sent to incinerators and burned; and (ii) what action is being taken to remedy this problem.

(AQW 16161/17-22)

Mr Poots: The introduction of the Waste (Circular Economy) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, a transposition of the Circular Economy Package (CEP) into domestic legislation, has set the tone for what the future of recycling will look like in Northern Ireland and is supported by the proposals laid out in the recent consultation Future Recycling and Separate Collection of Waste of a Household Nature in Northern Ireland. The CEP is key to pushing resources

further up the waste hierarchy, away from landfill and incineration. It also states that waste separately collected for re-use or recycling may not be incinerated or landfilled.

The latest statistics indicate that 22% of all municipal waste arisings in Northern Ireland are incinerated and that of the 95,536 tonnes of recycling collected at the kerbside, around 11% of this is rejected and sent for energy recovery, (based on 2019-20 annual report, prior to the introduction of the CEP) This number is significantly lower than other parts of the UK, and my Department is working closely with councils and delivery partners to improve this further. In addition, councils are well aware of the benefits of reusing and recycling our resources over and above incineration or landfill.

I am continually striving to ensure that more action is taken to address consistency in collections and contamination within recycling streams. In order to improve the quality and quantity of our recycling and thereby enabling a transition to a low carbon, circular economy, I believe it is important that difficult or non-recyclable items are removed from recycling streams before they are collected. My department is addressing this through;

Working to make packaging better:

- a making it clear to recyclers which items can be accepted in recycling streams and which cannot. My Department are working with their counterparts across the UK and delivery partners, such as WRAP to address this problem and identify how to provide better consistency. Upcoming legislative drivers such as Extended Producer Responsibility and the Environment Bill will allow even further development in this area.

A better consistency of items collected:

- b this approach helps ensure that items collected are readily accepted by recycling processors and importantly, that there are end markets available for them. My officials are working on developing policy for the future of recycling and are considering how we can achieve better consistency in Northern Ireland.

A better understanding of what can be recycled:

- c my Department actively promotes moving resources up the waste hierarchy, encouraging prevention, reuse and recycling above incineration and landfill as a last resort. Behaviour change campaigns in association with WRAP appeal to householders to help them understand how to recycle and what the benefits are. In addition to this my Department works very closely with the National Communications Action Plan, which convenes local councils to encourage consistency in recycling and resource communications as well as identifying and addressing any areas that need greater focus.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when decisions will be made concerning grant applications under the Household Waste Recycling Collaborative Change Programme.

(AQW 16167/17-22)

Mr Poots: A review of the Household Waste Recycling Collaborative Change Programme (HWRCCP) has been initiated at my request and this will consider the value for money aspect of the Programme with a focus on the financial contribution that Councils make towards the capital costs of a project.

The review will also look at extending the timeframe for the Programme and the overall HWRCCP funding requirement.

Until the outcome of the review is known I cannot give any commitment regarding funding that may be offered to applications to the HWRCCP. However I can confirm that, going forward, my department will not be providing 100% of the capital costs for such projects.

Department for Communities

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the works required for the old Mace site at Kilcooley Square, Bangor.

(AQW 15373/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): The Housing Executive has advised that the large commercial unit at 1 Kilcooley Square was allocated to the Kilcooley Women's Centre as a community let due to there being no commercial interest in it. To date Kilcooley Women's Centre has been unable to take up occupation due to substantial damage to the unit.

The Housing Executive has prepared a schedule of works but is waiting for the results of an asbestos survey as well as a list of fire safety works. Once received these will be included on the scheduled list of works to be completed.

The Housing Executive will then seek approval from the Chief Executive's Business Committee for the overall costs to proceed with the repairs to the building.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities what actions her Department is taking to help migrants avoid homelessness post-pandemic in line with its, and the Housing Executive's, plan to tackle homelessness.

(AQW 15445/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Our future consideration of homelessness policy will build on lessons learned from how we dealt with the Covid-19 crisis. That will include the ongoing roll-out of the interdepartmental homelessness action plan, as well as our work in continuing to support the Housing Executive to deliver on its statutory responsibility for responding to homelessness.

In addition, the nature of longer term changes and collaboration and other issues where housing impacts on health and social care will be further explored as part of the ongoing work programme.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the impact that cash machines charges have on people on low income.

(AQW 15449/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The reduction in the number of free cash machines has a disproportionately detrimental impact on people on low income, particularly in rural areas where consumers may not have a choice on where to withdraw cash.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of wet pubs that have permanently closed since 23 March 2020, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 15544/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Under liquor licensing legislation, there is no differentiation between pubs which serve food and those that don't. Currently all pubs are required to close under COVID restrictions. My Department does not hold any information on those that may have permanently closed and is not aware of any organisation that does hold this information.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Communities (i) how many people are on the housing waiting list; (ii) how many of these people are living in housing stress; and (iii) what is the average waiting time for housing allocations, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 15559/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has provided the table below detailing all applicants, of those applicants those in housing stress, and the median number of months spent on the waiting list at the point of allocation, from 01/01/20 to 31/12/20 broken down by Parliamentary Constituency.

Parliamentary Constituency	All Applicants	Applicants in Housing Stress	No. of Allocations	Median Months on the Waiting List at the Point of Allocation
Belfast East	2023	1370	360	15.5
Belfast East/South*	401	264	45	11
Belfast North	4314	3235	651	15
Belfast South	2668	1964	267	14
Belfast South/Strangford*	122	101	<10	18
Belfast West	3727	2986	401	23
Belfast West/North*	128	87	16	19
Belfast West/South*	22	22	<10	17
East Antrim	1643	1131	265	12
East Derry	2327	1271	292	16
Fermanagh South Tyrone	1886	1248	253	14
Foyle	4314	3262	532	19
Lagan Valley	1968	1410	339	16
Mid Ulster	1209	695	161	12
Newry & Armagh	2228	1641	220	17.5
North Antrim	2101	1330	417	11
North Down	1821	1284	305	13
South Antrim	1603	1225	208	13
South Down	2010	1529	178	18
Strangford	1605	1112	326	10

Parliamentary Constituency	All Applicants	Applicants in Housing Stress	No. of Allocations	Median Months on the Waiting List at the Point of Allocation
Upper Bann	2823	1679	297	10
West Tyrone	1722	1072	203	15
	42665	29918	5746	14

The following Common Landlord Areas (CLAs) cross Parliamentary Constituency Boundaries:

NIHE 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

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities, in relation to the Ballybean Estate, to detail (i) the number of social housing units; (ii) the number of planned maintenance schemes; (iii) the quality standard by which these public sector homes are measured; (iv) whether all these dwellings meet the set standard.

(AQW 15566/17-22)

Ms Hargey:

- (i) The Housing Executive has 907 properties in Ballybeen.

My Department does not have information in relation to whether any of the Registered Housing Associations have any stock in Ballybeen.

- (ii) The following schemes are planned for the next two years for the Housing Executive's stock:

Scheme type	Scheme name	Dwellings	Year
External Cyclical Maintenance	Ballybeen 4 Storey	124	2021/22
External Cyclical Maintenance	Ballybeen 2	226	2021/22
External Cyclical Maintenance	Ballybeen 3	149	2021/22
Bathrooms	Banff/Claggan	80	2021/22
Capital Improvements	Morven/Islay	40	2022/23
Double Glazing	Ballybeen	433	2022/23
Bathroom/Kitchen/Rewire	Ballybeen	162	2022/23
Bathrooms	Ballybeen	137	2022/23

It should be noted that delivery of these schemes in the years indicated will be subject to a number of factors. My Department does not have information in relation to Registered Housing Associations' planned maintenance schemes.

- (iii) Following the DSD/Housing Executive Joint Asset Commission work in 2014/15 a new investment standard - the Commonly Adopted Standard (CAS) - was introduced for the Housing Executive's stock.

All Registered Housing Associations must confirm annually to the Regulator their compliance with the Decent Homes standard.

- (iv) The Housing Executive is currently undertaking an exercise to baseline its stock's compliance against the Commonly Adopted Standard and, therefore, at present it is not possible to state the level of compliance for Ballybeen. However, in relation to the previous Decent Homes Standard, Housing Executive data indicates that the current level of compliance in Ballybeen is 87%. Any current shortfalls in compliance against this will be addressed by the schemes set out in the table at point (ii).

The Regulator has not reported any instances of non-compliance with this standard for Registered Housing Associations.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities what the terms of reference were concerning the Stockman's Lane roundabout as a safe emergency evacuation route for the proposed Casement Park build.

(AQW 15594/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The primary evacuation route for the Casement Park stadium would be the Andersonstown Road. In the exceptional circumstances that the Andersonstown Road was not available, the Emergency Services' Multi Agency Response Plan considered Stockman's Lane roundabout as a safe emergency evacuation route. The Safety Technical Group (STG) sought expert advice to verify that the Stockman's Lane roundabout route was feasible in these circumstances. Following a procurement exercise, Aecom was appointed as the Movement Consultant to provide this specialist, expert advice.

On completion of their assessment in September 2017, Aecom presented its report which confirmed that, with suitable crowd and traffic management in place, Stockman's Lane roundabout could safely accommodate a full capacity stadium evacuation, plus local residents and emergency vehicles.

This report provided the STG with adequate assurance to agree that this element of the Casement Park Stadium Event Management Plan was satisfactory and that it would dovetail with the Emergency Services' Multi Agency Response Plan.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the adequacy of the Universal Credit system to deal with the increased financial pressures faced by individuals.

(AQW 15605/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Throughout this pandemic there has been unprecedented demand for financial help and support from those who have been unable to work, lost their job or been made redundant.

The Universal Credit system has demonstrated capacity to enable all claims to be processed and maintained to date.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities how her Department will be able to keep up with maintaining and processing Universal Credit claims given the recent rise in applications.

(AQW 15606/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department continually reviews the level of resources required. The processing and maintenance of Universal Credit claims will continue to be prioritised to ensure that people receive their payments when they are due.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the current or planned Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) maintenance schemes in each constituency for which financial contributions are being sought from owners or leaseholders of former NIHE properties; (ii) the level of compliance among owners and leaseholders; and (iii) for each scheme, (a) from how many leaseholders or owners payment has been sought; (b) the average amount of payment sought; and (c) the amount recouped.

(AQW 15634/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Due to the volume of detail required to answer AQW 15634/17-22, the information has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the number; and (ii) the nature of applications to the Access and Inclusion Programme submitted by Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council in 2020/21; and whether these applications were successful.

(AQW 15676/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council submitted 8 applications to the Programme, 7 of which were successful with a total allocation to the Council of £188,000. Details of the Council's applications are set out in the table below.

Venue	Project details	Grant awarded
Hazelbank Park, Newtownabbey	Installation of an accessible sensory garden.	£30,000
Clotworthy House, Antrim	Installation of an accessible sensory garden.	£30,000
Threemilewater Park, Newtownabbey	Improved Park access for people with disabilities.	£30,000
Accessibility Trails, Valley Park	New accessible trail to accommodate inclusive sports equipment.	£30,000
Mossley Mill, Newtownabbey	New automatic doors to improve accessibility.	£8,000
Valley Park West Linkage Trail	Improved park accessibility for people with mobility issues.	£30,000
Valley Park - O'Neill Road Connection Path	New accessible trail to accommodate inclusive sports equipment.	£30,000

Venue	Project details	Grant awarded
Rea's Wood, Antrim	Upgrade to path network – rejected as project did not meet programme objectives.	-

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities how many of the 408 telephone personal independence payment appeals were successful for the period July 2020 to 31 December 2020.

(AQW 15690/17-22)

Ms Hargey: During the period July 2020 to 31 December 2020 there were a total of 1,406 hearings across all benefit types of which 638 were classed as paper hearings and 768 were classed as oral hearings (242 face to face, 408 telephone and 118 video).

My Department currently only holds information on the number of successful appeals broken down by oral or paper hearing. During the period July 2020 to 31 December 2020, of the 768 oral hearings 590 were in respect of Personal Independence Payment appeals of which 212 were successful and 90 were unsuccessful with the remaining 288 accounted for as adjourned or withdrawn.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities to detail her Department's engagement with the Ministry of Defence and housing providers regarding the transfer of 36 properties in the Oakridge area of Lambeg.

(AQW 15696/17-22)

Ms Hargey: There have been no discussions between my Department and the Ministry of Defence regarding the transfer of these properties.

The former Ministry of Defence properties at Oakridge were released via the D1 process in September 2020. The Housing Executive acquired the properties and Clanmil Housing Association were subsequently appointed to take forward the development.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities when she will publish her plans for Housing Executive restructuring.

(AQW 15703/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I intend to bring a recommendation to the Executive before the end of this mandate

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities, in relation to her Department's payment performance for new claims of universal credit, how many recipients were included in the Department's survey which deemed that 96 per cent of claimants had been paid within the first 5 weeks.

(AQW 15704/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Performance on payments issued to people claiming Universal Credit is not obtained by a survey or a selection of people claiming Universal Credit. Information is extracted from the Universal Credit computer system and relates to every payment made in each new claim by the end of the first assessment period, i.e. 5 weeks.

Since the beginning of January until 19 February 2021, the payment performance for all new claims has been 96% paid in full by the end of their first assessment period (5 weeks).

This performance, despite the significant increase in people claiming Universal Credit since March 2020, has been consistently achieved each week during the last 12 months.

The latest published management information shows that there have been 146,100 new claims to Universal Credit made during the period 16 March 2020 to 7 March 2021. This can be found at:

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/management-information-dfc-covid-19-infographic>

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 14236/17-22, when legal action will be taken to ensure repair and maintenance of Kircubbin Harbour is completed.

(AQW 15722/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Under the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects (NI) Order 1995, my Department has no power to take punitive action against someone who has allowed a monument in their ownership to decay. It has discretionary powers to intervene and carry out work itself 'if it appears to the Department that any works are urgently necessary for the protection of a scheduled monument.' (Article 7).

At present, my Department does not intend to take on this responsibility as we believe that working with the owner and other interested parties is more likely to enable a more sustainable future for the harbour. Our primary role in relation to any potential implementation of future work is therefore in an advice and regulatory capacity around informing and consenting conservation works there.

I have instructed my officials to make fresh contact with relevant groups and individuals to see what progress could be made.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Communities why American Football Ireland and the Irish Athletic Boxing Association received approximately twice the amount of funding they had requested from SportNI's Sports Sustainability Fund, whilst National Ice Skating UK, the Ulster Hockey Union and NI Volleyball received half the requested amount.

(AQW 15800/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Sports Sustainability Fund, which is being administered by SportNI, closed for applications on 20 January. A total of 37 sport Governing Bodies submitted applications through the online portal on behalf of 460 affiliated clubs.

To ensure proper governance arrangements are observed, a detailed validation and verification process has been put in place by SportNI. This includes detailed checks on applications and associated spreadsheets.

In some cases, applicants made simple errors in transposing figures within their spreadsheets. SportNI worked with these applicants to ensure that errors were corrected.

As part of the assessment process Sport NI also looked at other supporting documentation including prior year accounts. In some cases, Sport NI requested further financial information to support the figures in the applications.

The validation and verification process has been reflected in the final approved awards resulting in different amounts for some sports Governing Bodies and clubs.

Further detailed information on the application and approval process can be viewed on Sport NI's website at Sports Sustainability Fund | Sport NI (<http://www.sportni.net/funding/our-funding-programmes/sports-sustainability-fund/>).

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 14955/17-22, to detail the steps taken by her Department to (i) reduce the number of (a) applicants; and (b) applicants in housing stress in East Londonderry; and (ii) increase the number of allocations to applicants.

(AQW 15816/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I have set out an ambitious and long-term plan to increase the supply of social and also affordable housing and to reduce housing stress. My plan includes:

- Changing the status of the landlord part of the Housing Executive so that it can borrow, invest in its homes and ultimately start building again;
- Bringing forward a consultation on the future of the Housing Executive House Sales Scheme, as soon as practicably possible in order to protect the current supply of social housing;
- Reintroducing ring-fencing of the new build Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) to prioritise areas of highest housing need.
- Introducing reform of the social housing allocations system;
- Ensuring the Housing Executive prioritises adaptations;
- Developing new ways to help people into home ownership and continuing to support shared ownership schemes, such as, Co-Ownership;
- Expanding the rental options available by introducing intermediate rent to provide an additional supply of good quality, well managed and maintained homes, which are affordable for lower income families;
- Working proactively to prioritise actions to improve our response to homelessness with a continued focus on prevention rather than management; and
- Developing a Housing Supply Strategy to provide a framework for addressing those whole system issues that impact on housing supply and the delivery of the right volume and types of homes to meet our changing housing need and demand.

In the shorter term the key action taken to reduce the numbers of Housing Applicants, including those in Housing Stress; and to increase the number of allocations, is to deliver new social housing through the Social Housing Development Programme.

In the East Derry Parliamentary constituency there have been 52 new social housing units completed to-date in 2020/21. These units are detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Social housing completions to-date in 2020/21 in East Derry Parliamentary Constituency

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Strategic Group	Units	Onsite Year
Choice	Beresford Avenue	Coleraine	New Build	General Needs	Urban	14	2019/20
Clanmil	13 Union Street	Coleraine	New Build	Active Elderly	Urban	18	2017/18
Habinteg	45 Girona Avenue	Portrush	New Build	General Needs	Urban	7	2018/19
Habinteg	45 Girona Avenue	Portrush	New Build	Wheelchair	Urban	3	2018/19

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Strategic Group	Units	Onsite Year
Rural	Site adjacent to 299 Foreglen Road	Foreglen	New Build	General Needs	Rural	3	2019/20
Triangle	21 Parklea	Portstewart	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	Urban	1	2016/17
Triangle	22 Ashdale	Coleraine	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	Urban	1	2016/17
Triangle	8-10 Upper Captain Street	Coleraine	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	Urban	5	2016/17

A further 132 new social housing units are under construction. These units are detailed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Social housing units under construction in East Derry Parliamentary Constituency

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Strategic Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Apex Housing	Hass Road Phase 3 (T)	Dungiven	New Build	General Needs	Rural	18	2020/21	2021/22
Apex Housing	Hass Road Phase 3 (T)	Dungiven	New Build	Wheelchair	Rural	4	2020/21	2021/22
Apex Housing	Hass Road Phase 3A (T)	Dungiven	New Build	Wheelchair	Rural	1	2020/21	2021/22
Ark	Railway Road	Coleraine	Off-the-Shelf	General Needs	Urban	12	2020/21	2021/22
Choice	The Hill, Portstewart	Portstewart	New Build	General Needs	Urban	9	2020/21	2022/23
Radius	(Site adjacent to 191) Coleraine Road	Portstewart	New Build	General Needs	Urban	57	2019/20	2021/22
Radius	(Site adjacent to 191) Coleraine Road	Portstewart	New Build	Active Elderly	Urban	12	2019/20	2021/22
Radius	(Site adjacent to 191) Coleraine Road	Portstewart	New Build	Wheelchair	Urban	6	2019/20	2021/22
Triangle	Portstewart Road	Coleraine	Off-the-Shelf	General Needs	Urban	6	2019/20	2020/21
Triangle	Harpurs Hill, Phase 2 (T)	Coleraine	New Build	General Needs	Urban	4	2020/21	2021/22
Triangle	Harpurs Hill, Phase 2 (T)	Coleraine	New Build	Wheelchair	Urban	3	2020/21	2021/22

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Strategic Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Strategic Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Apex Housing	Hass Road Phase 3 (T)	Dungiven	New Build	General Needs	Rural	18	2020/21	2021/22
Apex Housing	Hass Road Phase 3 (T)	Dungiven	New Build	Wheelchair	Rural	4	2020/21	2021/22
Apex Housing	Hass Road Phase 3A (T)	Dungiven	New Build	Wheelchair	Rural	1	2020/21	2021/22
Ark	Railway Road	Coleraine	Off-the-Shelf	General Needs	Urban	12	2020/21	2021/22
Choice	The Hill, Portstewart	Portstewart	New Build	General Needs	Urban	9	2020/21	2022/23
Radius	(Site adjacent to 191) Coleraine Road	Portstewart	New Build	General Needs	Urban	57	2019/20	2021/22
Radius	(Site adjacent to 191) Coleraine Road	Portstewart	New Build	Active Elderly	Urban	12	2019/20	2021/22
Radius	(Site adjacent to 191) Coleraine Road	Portstewart	New Build	Wheelchair	Urban	6	2019/20	2021/22
Triangle	Portstewart Road	Coleraine	Off-the-Shelf	General Needs	Urban	6	2019/20	2020/21
Triangle	Harpurs Hill, Phase 2 (T)	Coleraine	New Build	General Needs	Urban	4	2020/21	2021/22
Triangle	Harpurs Hill, Phase 2 (T)	Coleraine	New Build	Wheelchair	Urban	3	2020/21	2021/22

A total of 95 units are currently programmed to start as part of the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) 2020/21 – 2022/23. These units are detailed in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Social housing units programmed to start 2020/21 – 2022/23 in East Derry Parliamentary Constituency

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Strategic Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Choice	Keely Gardens (T)	Aghadowey	New Build	General Needs	Rural	4	2020/21	2021/22
Apex Housing	Coastguard Road	Coleraine	New Build	General Needs	Rural	6	2021/22	2022/23
Choice	Captain Street	Coleraine	New Build	General Needs	Urban	31	2021/22	2023/24
Choice	Captain Street	Coleraine	New Build	Wheelchair	Urban	4	2021/22	2023/24
Choice	Beresford Avenue	Coleraine	New Build	General Needs	Urban	50	2022/23	2024/25

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities to detail the total budget covering all her departmental responsibilities for the (i) 2017/18; (ii) 2018/19; and (iii) 2019/20 financial years.

(AQW 15840/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department's total Opening Budget for the financial years 2017/18, 2018/19 and 2019/20 is set out in the table below:

	DEL			AME (£'000)
	Resource (£'000)	Capital (£'000)	Total (£'000)	
2017/18	950,864	122,764	1,073,628	6,001,077
2018/19	903,070	179,267	1,082,337	6,149,016
2019/20	874,782	215,384	1,090,166	6,317,516

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 14912/17-22, whether the £1.82 million she announced in March 2020 for the independent advice sector has been spent this financial year; and on what was it spent.

(AQW 15853/17-22)

Ms Hargey: This financial year my Department allocated additional monies of just over £1.8 million to the Independent Advice Sector, specifically to assist people with benefit changes as part of welfare mitigations, supporting and protecting in the region of 50 front line jobs. This funding was distributed through Councils for front line advice and legal support; and to delivery partners for the provision of additional advice services including help with appeals and Tribunal representations.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities for an update on her Department's work on the development of the Sexual Orientation Strategy; and whether she will propose a ban on conversion therapy as part of this work.

(AQW 15865/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Work on the LGBTQI+ Strategy is being developed using a co-design approach, with meaningful involvement from those within the LGBT communities. The Sexual Orientation Expert Advisory Panel's Report, which makes recommendations to help inform the development of the Strategy, was published on 5 March 2021 and it includes recommendations regarding a ban on conversion therapy.

Subject to Executive approval, the draft Strategy, including agreed actions targeted at ending conversion therapy, will be issued for consultation later this year, with a view to publishing the final Strategy in December 2021.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 15195/17-22, what was the average reduction per claimant.

(AQW 15881/17-22)

Ms Hargey: During the month of January 2021, the average deduction per affected claim was £56.72.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Sexual Orientation Strategy, including (i) a ban on conversion therapy; and (ii) the formation and work of the (a) Expert Panel; (b) Co-Design Group; and (c) Cross Departmental Working Group.

(AQW 15894/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Sexual Orientation Expert Advisory Panel was appointed in October 2020 and was tasked with identifying the themes and key actions the Strategy should include and the gaps in provision that it should seek to address. The Panel's Report was published on 5 March 2021 and includes recommendations which will be considered in more detail during development of the Strategy. These recommendations include a ban on conversion therapy.

The Co-Design Group is made up of key stakeholders from the LGBT sector and is responsible for advising on the development of the Strategy and supporting action plan. The Group is co-chaired by a DfC official and a member voted for by the Group. The Cross-departmental Working Group, which is comprised of officials from appropriate Departments, is responsible for providing input and expertise to the development of the Strategy and associated action plan to ensure they are targeted, measurable and deliverable. Both Groups meet on a monthly basis to support the ongoing development of the Strategy.

The draft Strategy, including agreed actions targeted at ending conversion therapy, will be subject to public consultation and will be published in December 2021, subject to Executive agreement. More details can be found on my Department's website www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/sexual-orientation-strategy.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities for an update on work to progress legislation to ban Conversion Therapy, including the envisaged timescales.

(AQW 15937/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Ending conversion therapy is a cross-cutting matter, so my intention is for this to be taken forward through the Executive's Sexual Orientation Strategy.

The Sexual Orientation Expert Advisory Panel's Report, which makes recommendations to help inform the development of the Strategy, was published on 5 March 2021 and includes recommendations regarding a ban on conversion therapy. The Strategy is now being developed using a co-design approach, with meaningful involvement from those within the LGBT communities.

Subject to Executive approval, the draft Strategy, including agreed actions targeted at ending conversion therapy, will be issued for consultation later this year, with a view to publishing the final Strategy in December 2021.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities what measures she is taking to support disabled people who wish to get back to work.

(AQW 15959/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Condition Management Programme is a work-focused, rehabilitation programme, aimed at improving the employability of both unemployed people and those who are struggling to remain in work or who have recently gone off work sick due to a health condition or disability. The programme helps clients manage their own condition and firmly re-focus them on their potential to enter and remain in work.

My department currently provides match funding to 14 disability projects in the European Social Fund Programme 2014-2020. The objective of European Social Fund in relation to people with disabilities is enhance social inclusion by reducing unemployment by helping them progress towards, move into and sustain employment.

There are a number of other schemes currently in place which will assist eligible people, inclusive of those with disabilities, to move into employment including Workable (NI), Access to Work (NI), the Adviser Discretion Fund, Travel to Interview Scheme and the Work Experience Programme.

Work Coaches in the Jobs and Benefit offices continue to work with customers who wish to start or return to work through regular engagement. They provide support tailored to the individual and ensure the customer is made aware of specific training opportunities and provisions within their area. While there is currently no face to face interviews happening in the offices, support is still being offered via telephone.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Communities to detail the reasons for the delay in the publication of an Action Plan for cavity wall insulation by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; and when a plan will be published.

(AQW 15961/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive had intended to publish its Draft Cavity Wall Insulation Action Plan in the early autumn last year. However, this was delayed due to the fact that some further analysis of data was required along with further consideration of potential courses of action. The Draft Cavity Wall Insulation Action Plan was issued for consultation on 22nd December 2020. Responses to the consultation document are due by 31st March 2021 and the intention is to publish a final Action Plan later this year.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Communities, in relation to home energy efficiency and retrofitting, what input her Department has had in the work being undertaken by the Department for the Economy for an Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 15963/17-22)

Ms Hargey: A senior official represents my Department on the Energy Strategy Government Stakeholder Group. Housing officials continue to work with colleagues in the Department for the Economy's Energy Strategy team in the Energy Efficiency, Heat and Consumer Working Groups supporting the work of the Stakeholder Group. The outputs from the Working Groups will inform the options consultation on the Energy Strategy which is to be published by the end of March.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Communities how many Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties have poorly performing cavity wall insulation; and how many have had remedial and upgrade work carried out to address this since 2015.

(AQW 15965/17-22)

Ms Hargey: In 2019 the Housing Executive published their research report on Cavity Wall Insulation. The findings for the Housing Executive's stock were based on a sample survey of 825 properties, and it was found that 63% of these properties had cavity wall insulation installations that were non-compliant with modern industry standards because there were found to be voids or debris in the cavity.

Although the Housing Executive's data on the construction of all of its stock is not comprehensive, it is estimated that if this 63% is extrapolated it would represent some 44,600 of the Housing Executive's likely cavity wall constructed properties.

Since 2015 the Housing Executive has completed three schemes relating to cavity wall insulation:

Scheme No.	Scheme Name	Dwellings	Contract Start Date
24811000	Stirling Avenue, West Winds Cwi	13	15/08/2016
26811000	Cwi Whiterock	146	03/10/2016
23811003	Strand Ave Holywood Cwi	26	31/10/2016

A number of remedial works have been carried out through the Housing Executive's response maintenance service but it has not been possible to collate this information in the time available.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities (i) to outline her commitment to shared housing and shared neighbourhoods; and (ii) whether she will ensure that all strategic housing plans will meet the Executive's agreed commitment to the Good Relations Strategy.

(AQW 15967/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Shared Housing is an important part of the overall housing programme which my Department is committed to delivering. Fresh Start Funding of £16.9m has been invested in the Shared Housing programme in 20/21 and the programme has recently expanded taking the total number of Shared Neighbourhoods either currently being delivered or under development to forty nine. My Department has doubled its target for 20/21 from 200 shared units to 400. It is anticipated that this growth will continue in response to public appetite for shared neighbourhoods subject to the continued availability of funding which facilitates investment in Good Relations delivery.

I can confirm that my strategic housing plans will have regard to the Executive's agreed commitment to the Good Relations Strategy.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities how many homes owned by the Housing Executive will need to be retrofitted to meet carbon neutral targets.

(AQW 15970/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Housing Executive work is ongoing to determine the types and cost of retrofit measures that would be required for its different kinds of stock to achieve various SAP Band standards.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Communities what checks and audits were carried out on recently allocated applications for Sports Sustainability Funds to ensure the figures provided by organisations were authentic.

(AQW 15975/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Sports Sustainability Fund was developed by the Department and Sport NI following extensive engagement with sports governing bodies. The Fund is administered by Sport NI with the Department receiving regular progress reports.

In terms of specific checks, initially applicants had to submit their claims via the recognised governing body which enabled Sport NI to confirm the affiliation status of clubs.

Secondly, all applicants to the Fund were required to provide their last three years financial accounts along with their management accounts for the 20/21 Financial Year. This information was checked against the figures provided on individual application forms to confirm financial need.

Thirdly, a risk based approach has been adopted which includes verification and vouching processes at both pre and post payment stages.

Finally all Sports Sustainability Fund awards are approved in line with the Scheme of Delegation limits set for the Department and Sport NI.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) her intentions to change the current policy of licensing PSA-accredited British Acupuncture Council (BAcC) acupuncturists through the Miscellaneous Provisions Act, in line with England and Wales; and (ii) any concerns she has that BAcC acupuncturists have been unable to practice during the COVID lockdowns due to this categorisation.

(AQW 15982/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Anyone wishing to carry on the practice of acupuncture must be registered with their local council. The premises from which they operate must also be registered. Which body or organisation provided any accreditation or qualification held by a practitioner has no bearing on this requirement.

Acupuncturists, like any other close contact service, must comply with any relevant restrictions set out in The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020. Again, any accreditation or qualification held by a practitioner is not relevant in this regard.

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Communities given there has now been 12 months of restriction and remote learning, what consideration has she given to seeking funding for leisure providers to enhance their summer scheme offering to a wider programme of physical activity and social opportunities for children.

(AQW 15992/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Summer schemes are offered by a range of leisure providers including Councils, Sports Governing Bodies and community organisations.

My Department has provided over £28 million pounds to support the sports sector including Governing Bodies and clubs during the covid restrictions. This funding is aimed at sustaining the sector so that when the restrictions are eased the Governing Bodies and clubs will be in a strong position to provide opportunities, such as summer schemes, for young people to participate in sport and physical activity when restrictions allow.

In addition Sport NI, an Arms Length Body of the Department, has launched a National Lottery funded 'Project Re:Boot' programme. This includes three funding strands providing grants from £500 up to £25,000 to sports clubs/organisations. The programme has three strands:

- 1 Team –Up (closed to applications on 1st March 2021)
- 2 Activate – grants up to £5000; programme expected to open Spring 2021
- 3 Sport Local – small grants between £500-£1000; programme expected to open early Summer 2021.

This funding will enable clubs to reengage with members and to offer a full range of activities aimed at getting people active, socialised and involved in a covid safe environment. Further information on these programmes is available at:

<http://www.sportni.net/funding/supporting-sport-to-build-back-better/>

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities when she will make a decision on the future of the shops and maisonettes on Knocknagoney Avenue, Belfast.

(AQW 15999/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I can confirm that my Department is currently considering the business case and is awaiting a response from Housing Executive in relation to some final questions. It is not possible at this time to give a firm date as to when a decision will be made.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to detail the cost of benefit fraud to her Department in each of the last three years.

(AQW 16023/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department's Annual Report & Accounts includes information on the estimated levels of fraud and error in social security benefits. The table below sets out the most up to date information available from the published reports.

Estimated levels of loss due to Benefit Fraud

Year	Total Benefit Expenditure £million	Estimated Benefit Fraud £million	Estimated Benefit Fraud % of Benefit Expenditure
2017	5,897	55.1	0.9%
2018	6,109	56.2	0.9%
2019	6,355	65.2	1.0%

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 14786/17-22, to detail the works which will be completed at Glebe Park and Millbrook Gardens.

(AQW 16052/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The main items of work to be completed at Glebe Park and Millbrook Gardens are as follows:

- Cleaning down of roof tiles - 6029m² and slates – 688m²
- Clean out gutters – 579 No elevations
- Replacement decayed fascia / soffit and barge boards – 285m
- Remove and dispose of asbestos, replace with PVC – 285m
- Remove and dispose of asbestos, replace with timber – 73m
- Replacing defective windows – 22Nr (omitted from previous scheme or refused by previous tenant)
- Replacement front defective door-sets and / or fanlights / sidelights – 56 nr.
- Replacement rear defective door-sets and / or fanlights / sidelights – 53 nr.
- Power wash concrete path areas or where excess moss has gathered – 5,504m²
- Cut out and replace defective areas of concrete – 1,038m².

- Replacement 1675 high Vertical Boarded Fence and posts – 574m
- Replacement 1000-1200 high VBF and posts – 175m
- All existing previously painted surfaces to be prepared and re-decorated.
- Clean coloured render external walls Millbrook Gardens – 4,952m²
- Remove asbestos shed roofs and replace with profile metal sheet – 11m²
- Replace shed doors and frames – 47 Nr
- Replace garage door and frames – 14 Nr.

15 dwellings have been completed and handed over to date with the overall scheme due to complete by July 2021.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Communities what plans she has to attract further marquee sporting events to Northern Ireland; and how much funding has been set aside in her departmental budget for this purpose.

(AQW 16195/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Policy responsibility for events, including marquee sporting events, rests with the Department for Economy. As such, my Department has no budget set aside to attract sports events here.

My Department and Sport NI continues to work with, and provide support to, the Department for Economy and Tourism NI on attracting marquee sporting events.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities for an update to planned repairs to the Mourneside Walk in Sion Mills.

(AQW 16225/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The planned repairs to the Mourneside Walk in Sion Mills does not fall within the remit of my department.

Department of Education

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education whether he will review the adequacy of the arrangements for input by non-resident parents (who desire such) into educational choices affecting their children, including the choice of post-primary school.

(AQW 15552/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I have no plans at present to review the arrangements currently in operation.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the repayment of exam resit fees for students.

(AQW 15823/17-22)

Mr Weir: Following my decision on 16 December 2020 regarding entry fees, CCEA advised schools and colleges that a significant discounted rate of 75% would be applied to charges for summer 2020 entries. The invoices were issued in January 2021. Reduced charges were levied only for entries where a grade was awarded. This included resit and private candidates. CCEA did not charge a fee if an award was not made.

CCEA does not invoice students directly for exam entry fees and it receives no fees directly from students or parents. Therefore the issue of a refund in respect of CCEA does not arise. If individuals have made payments to examination centres, they may wish to take up the issue of a refund directly with the head of their centre.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to detail the COVID-19 testing system in place for schools.

(AQW 15827/17-22)

Mr Weir: Following testing pilots within 5 Special Schools, the timetable for full rollout of the testing programme within Special Schools has been restructured, due to issues in relation to the delivery of the test kits. Testing kits arrived with Special Schools on 8 March for familiarisation. The phased roll out of the wider testing programme commenced the week beginning 15 March 2021.

Within mainstream schools the Lateral Flow Device (LFD) tests are due to begin when post-primary schools return on 22 March 2021, all post-primary staff (including teaching and support staff) and older students in Years 12-14 in schools and in Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) centres, will be given the opportunity to test as part of this programme of regular testing.

Testing for schools' staff and pupils will be twice weekly 3 to 4 days apart using LFD tests. Older students in years 12-14 are included as prevalence of COVID-19 tends to be higher among this group.

Individuals who receive a positive result from an LFD test will have to isolate along with members of their households from the time of their positive LFD result until a confirmation PCR test is conducted, which will be required following a positive LFD test.

Expansion of testing to other staff in primary and pre-school will follow as soon as is practicable.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the vacant primary school site in Spamount, Castleberg.
(AQW 15903/17-22)

Mr Weir: This question relates to the former St Francis of Assisi Primary school, 45 Drumnabey Road, Spamount, Castleberg which closed on 31/08/2015.

This site is owned by the Parish Trustees and therefore the future use of the site is their responsibility.

Should you wish to discuss the matter further, please contact Father Pat Andrews (Patrick.Andrews1@btinternet.com).

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education for an update on the scale of school refurbishment required in North Down.
(AQW 15952/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has delivered circa £1m of maintenance works in the North Down constituency this financial year. There is £900k of maintenance works planned, subject to budget availability, for 2021/22.

You will also be aware that five School Enhancement Programme projects have been announced in the North Down constituency aimed at refurbishing or extending the existing school provision. These projects are at St Columbanus' College, Sullivan Upper School, Glenraig Integrated Primary School, Kilcooley Primary School and Clifton School.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education to detail how and when CCEA reviews the content of resources produced for use in school's curriculum in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16014/17-22)

Mr Weir: CCEA's curriculum resources are reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure it remains relevant across all areas of the curriculum.

CCEA updates its resources in line with the Department's requirements, feedback from teachers and in line with societal change or events. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of schools, CCEA reviewed a range of resources that were suitable for home learning and made them easily accessible through its "Supporting Learning Hub". This resource is refreshed on a regular basis.

The Department has provided funding to enable CCEA to take forward further development of its suite of resources in respect of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) which has included developing a hub as a repository for the resources which will support teaching and learning in schools.

CCEA has also developed a Wellbeing Hub to support schools in addressing the wellbeing of young people impacted by the current pandemic.

CCEA's also supports Irish-medium education through an Irish-medium Programme Board which reviews the provision of curriculum and assessment support materials for the Irish medium sector.

In addition, CCEA continually reviews support for teachers of and learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN). This includes an update of the Q-Skills Assessment Framework with updates to curriculum materials to support learners with severe learning difficulties.

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the level or manner of support needed to facilitate primary schools to host transfer tests for their P7 pupils post September 2021; and (ii) what this practically means for primary school Principals and their Boards of Governors.

(AQW 16064/17-22)

Mr Weir: I issued guidance in 2016 which set out a range of actions primary schools may take to facilitate entrance test arrangements. This included supplying support materials, carrying out any preparation for tests during core teaching hours, coaching in exam technique and providing a location for testing where mutually agreed with the test provider.

The decision to host tests in a primary school is however a matter for individual Boards of Governors and any change to the current arrangements will require discussion about the practical implications of this and the nature and amount of support schools might need. These issues would need to be assessed by each Board of Governors with advice from the Principal and in consultation with parents and the test providers.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education (i) what discussions has he had with school leaders, AQE and GL in relation the transfer test planned for the 2021/2022 academic year; and (ii) what efforts he is making to ensure current primary 6 children who plan to sit the transfer tests in 2021/2022 are not adversely impacted by the fact they will have had very limited face to face teaching in the 2020/2021 year.

(AQW 16125/17-22)

Mr Weir: Individuals and Support Organisations can apply for or renew a Blue Badge by filling in a hard copy application form or by applying online using the NIDirect website. The Blue Badge Unit within my Department has maintained this service throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education given his Departmental direction on the 5 March 2021 that youth service buildings should remain closed, whether early years providers hiring rooms from the EA Youth Service in youth service buildings can continue to open.

(AQW 16128/17-22)

Mr Weir: As set out in the Temporary Continuity Direction No 2 for Youth Services (www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/temporary-continuity-direction-provision-youth-services), youth service buildings should remain closed for all purposes other than the exemptions listed at para 2.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, given the Office of National Statistics has indicated that teachers have a higher probability of testing positive for COVID-19 than most other occupations, to detail the data that informed him that school staff are not at any greater risk than other groups of workers.

(AQW 16140/17-22)

Mr Weir: I would like to clarify that the analysis didn't indicate that 'teachers have a higher probability of testing positive for COVID-19 than most other occupations'. Out of the 24 other occupations, teaching and educational professionals had strong evidence of being higher than 6 occupations and limited evidence of being higher than 3 other occupations so overall an indication higher than 9/24 other occupations. This study also only relates to a small sample of schools in England.

With reference to previous data, ONS had previously published analysis (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/coronaviruscovid19infectionsurvey/pilot/6november2020#analysis-of-the-number-of-school-workers-key-workers-and-other-professions-in-england-who-had-covid-19>) on the number of school workers, key workers and other professions in England who had COVID-19 from 2 September 2020 to 16 October 2020. This analysis did not find statistical evidence of a difference in the positivity rate between primary and secondary school teachers, other key workers and other professions.

The conclusions of the ONS analysis published in November 2020 remain correct at the time of the assessment. The analysis in the recent article uses a different and longer period of time from 1 September 2020 to 7 January 2021, where there were many more cases within the community, a growing infection rate and the new UK variant was in circulation. There were also different interventions in place over the period of this latest analysis, which were not in place during September and the start of October 2020. The increased amount of data has allowed us to improve the methodology in this analysis.

The report from ONS also states that there are many factors associated with occupation that can affect the numbers of people testing positive for COVID-19 that are unrelated to the occupation that someone works in. For example, some occupations are more likely to be held by people of particular ages. Other occupations may be more common in particular regions of the country.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to outline the support his Department is providing to home educated students to enable them to achieve GCSE and A-Level qualifications this year.

(AQW 16141/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is the responsibility of parents who choose to educate their children outside the education system to identify an appropriate examinations centre that is accredited by the relevant awarding body to facilitate assessments for the qualifications they choose for their children. If they are unable to identify an appropriate centre they should contact the relevant awarding body directly.

CCEA has been instructed to ensure that all private candidates, including elective home educated candidates, receive a grade for the CCEA qualifications for which they have been entered and are due to cash-in in 2021. Parents of elective home educated learners should contact CCEA directly if they are unable to identify an appropriate centre willing to facilitate the awarding of these qualifications.

For all non-CCEA qualifications, parents of these learners should contact the relevant awarding organisation directly to ascertain the arrangements they are putting in place.

It would not be appropriate for my Department to intervene in these arrangements as the relationship is appropriately between the candidate, the examination centre and the awarding body.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education (i) whether he intends to extend the Engage Programme beyond its current contract end of 31 March 2021; and (ii) whether the funding required for an extension has been agreed with the Minister of Finance.

(AQW 16175/17-22)

Mr Weir: When I launched the programme in September 2020, I envisaged that it would continue for the full academic year, and would therefore continue from April to June this year.

Confirmation of the funding required for this is subject to the outcome of the budget process, including Executive agreement. My officials will write to schools to inform them as soon as the funding position is confirmed.

Whilst the investment in education to date has been welcomed by schools there is more to be done and over a longer period. I plan to bring forward proposals for a further year of the programme to Executive colleagues shortly. This will build on the work of the Engage Programme this year.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Education to detail the criteria to assess a school rebuild.
(AQW 16229/17-22)

Mr Weir: Before a new call for Major Capital Works is announced the Protocol for the Selection of Major Capital Works will first be reviewed and, if necessary, updated based on learning from the latest announcement and any new policy developments. This will be published in advance of the call to allow schools in conjunction with their managing authorities and sectoral bodies to consider their options and eligibility.

Once nominations are received from Managing Authorities, sectoral bodies and Voluntary Grammar Schools each application is assessed under the agreed Protocol developed for each call.

A list of qualifying schools, ranked in order of scoring from the protocol, is drawn up and a decision is made on the number of projects to be advanced, based on the available budget.

The protocol used for the most recent major capital works call is available to view on the Department's website and can be accessed via the following links:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/draft-protocol-for-fy1920-major-works-call-for-projects-june-2019.pdf>

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 15503/17-22, whether the legal and courts system forms part of the CCEA curriculum on the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 16313/17-22)

Mr Weir: CCEA produces resources for pupils and teachers which address the legal and justice system in Northern Ireland including how the courts system operates.

At Key Stages 3 and 4, resources focus on the development of understanding of democracy, justice and the impact of criminality. Pupils learn about democracy and the rule of law and develop an understanding of issues such as lawfulness, justice, the role of the Northern Ireland justice system and the risks and consequences of anti-social behaviour.

At Key Stage 4 and post-16 there are also a number of qualifications that provide pupils with the opportunity to develop their knowledge and understanding of the legal system in Northern Ireland.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Education for an update on the progress of the Bangor Central Integrated Primary School new build construction project.
(AQW 16317/17-22)

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 Muir asked the Minister of Education for an update on the progress of the Priory Integrated College, Holywood new build construction project.[R]
(AQW 16319/17-22)

Mr Weir: Priory Integrated College 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 600 pupils.

In February 2020 the EA successfully completed the appointment of an Integrated Consultant Team to carry out the design of the proposed Priory Integrated College. The business case was approved by the Department of Finance (DoF) in August 2020. This identified the preferred option as a new build school at a site on Redburn Road in Holywood.

The Integrated Consultant Team is now working on the early stages of the design process.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Education for an update on the progress of the Crawfordsburn Primary School new build construction project.
(AQW 16320/17-22)

Mr Weir: The major capital investment project to provide suitable accommodation for an 8 class base primary school for Crawfordsburn Primary School is progressing well.

The Integrated Consultancy Team (Design Team), Isherwood & Ellis LLP, appointed in October 2019, is currently finalising the RIBA Stage 3 (Developed Design) which is due for submission to my Department's technical advisors in April 2021.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education how he has encouraged and facilitated Integrated education.

(AQO 1736/17-22)

Mr Weir: It seems particularly appropriate to be answering this question during March - integrated education month. I take very seriously the statutory duty on my Department to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education and this manifests in a range of actions, funding support and policy adaptations.

My Department seeks to respond positively to parental demand for integrated provision across its policy areas, for example making positive adaptations to transport and temporary variation policies for the integrated sector. New guidance has been developed and published to support schools seeking to transform to integrated status. This provides clarity for schools in terms of what they need to consider at an informal stage, as well as the formal stages of transformation.

A range of bespoke, sector specific investment is provided. This includes annual funding support and ongoing business planning support to the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) to encourage and promote integrated education; support to transforming schools; and, significant capital investment via the Fresh Start Agreement.

My Department also requires its Arm's Length Bodies to support the delivery of this statutory duty, and to report back on actions taken during the business year. A Shared Education and Sectoral Support Team has been established in the Education Authority and works with NICIE to support schools.

I have considered and categorised the 39 recommendations from the Independent Review of Integrated Education. Eleven recommendations have been actioned or are in progress. I have agreed that a further eleven will not be taken forward at this time. Two are for NICIE to take forward as it is charged with the promotion of integrated education. And I have ensured that fifteen recommendations will be considered as part of the Independent Review of Education.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister of Education whether the Engage Programme will be extended beyond the end of March 2021.

(AQO 1737/17-22)

Mr Weir: Feedback on the first year of the Engage programme has been very positive. It provides schools with additional teaching resources so that they can support those pupils who are most in need with one-to-one, small group and team teaching support. This provides schools with the flexibility they need to address a range of issues bespoke to their context and learners.

When I launched the programme in September I envisaged that it would continue for the full academic year, and would therefore continue from April to June this year.

Confirmation of the funding required for this is subject to the outcome of the budget process, including Executive agreement. My officials will write to schools to inform them as soon as the funding position is confirmed.

Whilst the investment in education to date has been welcomed by schools there is more to be done and over a longer period. I plan to bring forward proposals a further year of the programme to Executive colleagues shortly. This will build on the work of the Engage Programme this year.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Education whether he will be in a position to bring forward proposals on a single education system before May 2022.

(AQO 1738/17-22)

Mr Weir: Future proposals on a single education system are dependent on the completion of the Independent Review of Education. The Terms of Reference for the Review set out an expected timescale for the work of 18 months, therefore proposals in advance of May 2022 are unlikely. On conclusion of the Review, my Department will seek to develop an action plan to deliver upon the Report. This will be subject to Executive agreement.

The Terms of Reference make clear that my Department will be willing to take early receipt of reports if the Panel is able to complete the work sooner than expected.

The Independent Review of Education is a complex and challenging task and therefore it is important that appropriate time is provided to the Panel.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education when the successful candidate for the Chair of the Independent Review of Education will be announced.

(AQO 1739/17-22)

Mr Weir: I hope to be able to announce the appointment of the Chair and the other members of the Independent Panel by the end of June 2021. This timeframe assumes that the ongoing recruitment process runs to the current timetable and that no unforeseen delays occurs.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education how he plans to support the transfer of children from primary to post-primary schools in the 2021/22 school year.

(AQO 1740/17-22)

Mr Weir: In order to support the transfer process and to ensure that parental preference for school sectors is maximised, I have already approved the allocation of an additional 361 Year 8 places for September 2021 admission. My Department will approve additional Year 8 places through the Temporary Variation process where they are required.

Furthermore, for the first time this year, parents of children applying to post-primary education have been able to apply online. Applications close tomorrow and parents will be notified of the outcome of their child's application in June.

My Department will continue to work closely with the Education Authority to ensure the placement of children during the admissions process is maximised and that parents of children who wish to appeal a school admission decision are able to do so in advance of the 2021/22 school year.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education when will he announce the next round of capital and school enhancement funding. (AQO 1741/17-22)

Mr Weir: I announced the final tranche of projects from the second call to the School Enhancement Programme (SEP2) on 5 May 2020. This brought the total number of SEP2 schemes announced to advance in design to 74.

While I am keen to continue to invest in the schools' estate through the School Enhancement Programme, a decision on the launch of a third call cannot be taken until there has been substantial progress in advancing the 74 schemes announced under the second call.

It is, however, my intention to consider a further call for major capital works projects before the end of the 2021/22 financial year. Planning and preparation for that call will commence in the near future.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education when COVID-19 testing will begin in special schools. (AQO 1742/17-22)

Mr Weir: Test kits were delivered to special schools on 8 March for familiarisation.

Testing pilots are continuing within five special schools and the rollout of wider testing on a phased basis will begin week commencing 15 March.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the roll-out of weekly COVID-19 testing in special schools. (AQO 1743/17-22)

Mr Weir: Test kits were delivered to special schools on 8 March for familiarisation.

Testing pilots are continuing within five special schools and the rollout of wider testing on a phased basis will begin week commencing 15 March.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Funding Scheme for Regional and Local Voluntary Youth Organisations. (AQO 1744/17-22)

Mr Weir: I can confirm that, with my agreement, the EA's New Funding Scheme for Regional and Local voluntary youth organisations will be operational from 1 April 2021.

The EA has completed the initial application process and all applicants have been notified of the outcome.

Work is ongoing to assess specifications released as part of a second application phase which includes a published date by which all applicants will be informed of the outcome.

Additional funding opportunities will continue to be provided by the EA based on the Regional Youth Development Plan and ongoing assessments of emerging need.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Education to outline his Department's assessment of the partial return of schools. (AQO 1745/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am strongly of the view that the current timing and arrangements for return of classroom based learning places pupils in Northern Ireland at a disadvantage to their counterparts in other jurisdictions. Reopening schools for all pupils is an Executive priority and I will continue to urge an early return to protect the education, health and wellbeing of our young people.

Department of Finance

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance whether his Department is conducting or co-ordinating a review of Northern Ireland Civil Service compliance with corporate information governance. (AQW 15514/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): There are a number of reviews ongoing in which my department plays a role but we are leading on a range of priority corporate governance guidance that reflects the findings of the RHI Inquiry.

Whilst responsibility for the production of corporate governance guidance rests with DoF, compliance with accountability and corporate governance standards lies with individual Accounting Officers and their departmental management teams.

External Audit and Internal Audit both have a critical role to play in assessing compliance when carrying out reviews, and their audit opinion provides Accounting Officers with important independent assessments of governance controls within those respective organisations.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Finance whether he has considered contacting the Stormont Hotel about the use of its car park to temporarily alleviate the Stormont Estate visitor car parking problems.

(AQW 15666/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Stormont Estate management team regularly monitors the availability of on-site parking for visitors to the Estate. In addition to the public car park near to the play park, overflow parking is available at the nearby Civil Service Sports Association at evenings and weekends. Further signage has been installed advising visitors of the availability of this facility and this has led to an increase in its use. I understand that space has remained available in the overflow parking facility throughout peak visiting times. No contact has been made with the Stormont Hotel.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Finance for an update on negotiations regarding the Civil Service pay increase for 2020/21.

(AQW 15877/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I refer the member to the answer for AQW 16017/17-22.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance to detail the risk assessed estimate of fraudulent claims paid out under each of his Department's COVID-19 support schemes.

(AQW 15879/17-22)

Mr Murphy: It is difficult to reliably assess an estimate of fraudulent claims as these are all new schemes, and limited comparators are available.

My Department has administered 2 schemes to date and these have differed in complexity, and therefore carry differing risks.

For administration of the £10,000 Small Business Grant Scheme, LPS worked with colleagues in the Department for the Economy to cross check applications against both the Hardship Relief Grant and the £25,000 Business Grant to ensure applicants did not receive more support than they were entitled to.

Lessons have been learnt from the administration of the Small Business Grants Scheme and applied to the current Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS). The Department's Internal Audit Unit has been involved in assisting with the review of Scheme controls.

All applicants to the LRSS must confirm that they understand that if any information provided in the application is found to be fraudulent or false, repayment of the funding will be required. They are also informed that fraudulent claims may be subject to legal recovery action.

Land & Property Services (LPS) put in place robust checks to validate eligibility and match information across all applications to ensure there was no duplication of payment. Thorough checks are applied to examine evidence of actual occupation and business type to determine eligibility. Approved applications are reviewed before top-up payments are issued. If this review raised any question as to eligibility, payments are suspended until further investigations are carried out.

Land & Property Services is working with colleagues in Invest NI to data match with applications to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme to ensure applicants do not benefit from both schemes.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance whether he has budgeted for a pay rise for civil servants in the 2021/22 financial year.

(AQW 15886/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As part of the Budget 2021-22 process, departments were asked to assume pay uplifts of at least 1% as well as any contractual entitlements they were aware of. Departmental pay assumptions were typically in the 1-2% range.

Therefore whilst departmental budgets should take account of pay rises, the overall budget position remains highly constrained and no specific allocations were made in respect of pay.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Finance whether the budget will cover the lost EU funding shortfall for Invest NI.

(AQW 15905/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Community Renewal Fund, which is seen as the pilot for the Shared Prosperity Fund and replacement for lost EU Structural Funds, was announced at the recent budget.

The allocation for the Community Renewal Fund is not additional money and falls far short of what we would have had access to through the EU Structural Fund Programmes. The prospectus for this programme is light on detail on how the fund will operate here and what detail there is sets out a competitive fund to be operated by Whitehall with sign off by British Ministers and no role for the Executive.

It is for the Economy Minister to set the level of funding for Invest NI from within the Executive agreed DfE budget allocation. However, as part of January Monitoring Round, I allocated additional resource of £42.5m to DfE for ESF and ERDF programmes which may help alleviate the initial impact of the decision the British Government has made with respect to these funds.

The Executive position remains that there should be full replacement of previous EU spending power and that any replacement schemes should respect our devolved competence. This is something I will continue to assert with the British government.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to detail the efforts being undertaken to combat fraud risks arising from COVID-19 Support Schemes (i) within his Department; and (ii) wider Northern Ireland Civil Service in context of his Departments role concerning Group Internal Audit and Fraud Investigation Internal Audit.

(AQW 15936/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

- (i) For the administration of the Small Business Support Grant Scheme, Land & Property Services (LPS) put in place robust checks to validate eligibility and match information across all applications to ensure there was no duplication of payment.

LPS also worked with colleagues in the Department for the Economy to cross check applications against both the Hardship Relief Grant and the £25,000 Business Grant to ensure applicants did not receive more support than they were entitled to.

For applications to the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS), thorough checks are applied to examine evidence of actual occupation and business type to determine eligibility. If on review any question as to eligibility is raised payments are suspended until further investigations are carried out.

Land & Property Services is working with colleagues in Invest NI to data match with applications to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme to ensure applicants do not benefit from both schemes.

All applicants to the LRSS must confirm that they understand that if any information provided in the application is found to be fraudulent or false, repayment of the funding will be required. They are also informed that fraudulent claims may be subject to legal action.

The Department is providing up to £10m urgent temporary financial support to Belfast International Airport (BIA) and Belfast City Airport (BCA). To mitigate the risks of fraud, the airports signed a contract which ensures support will be contingent on an 'open-book' policy. Compensation is capped on a monthly and overall basis, for which the airports must provide invoices to the Department for verification outlining evidence of designated costs and revenues as defined within the agreement. The final figures provided are to be agreed as accurate by auditors and the Department has powers to query invoices; withhold payments; and retrieve funding inappropriately paid. The Department can also cancel contracts at will or upon certain conditions including, for example, a return to profitability.

- (ii) While the Group Internal Audit and Fraud Investigation Service is located within the Department of Finance, it provides internal audit and fraud investigation services to all departments. In doing so it is accountable to the relevant department and has no reporting line to the Department of Finance in respect of matters within other departments. Departmental internal audit units have been working in close co-operation with departmental business areas on COVID 19 related financial assistance schemes. They have provided advice on these schemes both pre and post go-live including advising on the fraud risks to which departments may be exposed. In August 2020 the Northern Ireland Audit Office published a guide on COVID 19 related fraud risk which has been used to inform internal audit work in this area.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Finance what actions are being taken to decarbonise the public sector estate.

(AQW 15966/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department of Finance (DoF) is responsible for managing the Civil Service Office Estate, which equates to around 4% of the total Public Sector energy consumption here.

DoF aims, through its Office Estate Energy Efficiency and Carbon Reduction plans, to achieve cumulative energy savings and consequential reductions in carbon. These savings support and feed into the wider Energy Management Strategy and Action Plan to 2030 for Central Government introduced by the Department for Economy (DfE).

Further, new or refurbished DoF buildings undergo BRE Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) appraisal and the use of energy efficient installations has been incorporated into the Civil Service Accommodation Standards specification.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Finance for an update on Civil Service pay negotiations for 2020-21.

(AQW 15976/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I refer the member to the answer for AQW 16017/17-22.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of (i) the current banking sector in Northern Ireland; and (ii) public banking as an alternative model.

(AQW 16013/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The banking sector has an important role to play as a significant provider of financial services and employment locally. It is vital that it continues to play its part as we emerge from the pandemic and rebuild our economy and society. Therefore I have been concerned about recent announcements of branch closures and potential jobs losses. While I have no powers in this area, I have been meeting with the banks to call on them to ensure that all steps are taken to ensure access to banking services and to protect jobs.

However, the regulation of financial services is reserved, and any formal assessment of the banking sector would be a matter for Treasury and regulatory authorities in London. As such my department has not undertaken an assessment of Public Banking as an alternative model, but I am aware of ongoing discussions in the South regarding this matter. My Department will be monitoring these developments.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance what action he is taking to ensure that there is not a significant increase in evictions when the current moratorium on evictions for business tenants comes to an end.

(AQW 16016/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I refer the member to my answer to AQW 15935/17-22 of 12 March 2021 which details my actions in advance of the current moratorium ending.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether he has the power to alter the rate of corporation tax.

(AQW 16029/17-22)

Mr Murphy: No.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Finance whether he has received a bid for funding for the continuation of the Coronavirus Restrictions Business Support Scheme.

(AQW 16060/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department for the Economy has submitted a bid for the continuation of both the Coronavirus Restrictions Business Support Scheme and the Large Tourism and Hospitality Businesses Support Scheme into the new financial year covering this one extra day of 1st April. No further bids for CRBSS or LTHBSS have been received at this stage. It is my view that both LRSS and CRBSS should be continued for as long as businesses are legally required to close.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to detail the number of full-time equivalents for business units across the Department for Infrastructure using the same format as provided to the Committee for Infrastructure for the Roads Division in a letter on 4 March.

(AQW 16089/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The information provided to the Committee was prepared by DfI officials, using local knowledge and reflects business units that provide or directly support key frontline services in Roads Service.

The corporate organisation reporting structures for DfI on the HR system, HRConnect, does not align to the clerical approach used by DfI officials to provide the previous information.

The table below provides a breakdown of the number of full time equivalent staff in each DfI business group as at month ending February 2021.

DfI Business Areas	FTE
DfI, Deputy Secretary Planning, Safety & Transport Group	849.4
DfI, Deputy Secretary Planning, Safety & Transport Group	1.0
DfI, Director Safe & Accessible Travel Division	45.7
DfI, Director Transport Policy Division	33.5
DfI, DVA	702.2
DfI, RPD, Director of Regional Planning	35.6
DfI, SPD, Director of Strategic Planning Division	31.4
DfI, Deputy Secretary Resources, Governance and EU Group	269.4
DfI, Deputy Secretary Resources, Governance and EU Group	269.4

Dfl Business Areas	FTE
Dfl, Roads & Rivers	1,722.1
Dfl, Rivers	328.3
Dfl, Roads	1,393.9
Total	2,840.9

Source: HRConnect

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance when his Department will complete its investigations into overpayments from the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

(AQW 16094/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Land & Property Services (LPS) are still carrying out investigations into possible overpayments from the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

Based on advice from the Department of Health, there have been changes to the approach applied to some business types that result in cases previously identified as being ineligible for payment or overpaid may now qualify for the payments issued. LPS is carrying out a detailed review of all these cases to ensure that all business types have been properly classified correctly before accurate information on overpayments in the LRSS can be given.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance whether unsuccessful applicants to the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme and notified after the closing date for another scheme for which they are eligible can be automatically considered for that other scheme without being rejected as out of time.

(AQW 16096/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As you are aware LPS is currently administering the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS). Applicants who are unsuccessful to the LRSS are signposted to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CBRSS). Although the CBRSS had previously closed it has been reopened.

New applications to the CBRSS Part A, who are successful, will have a grant paid back to the date they were required to close or cease trading. New applications to CBRSS Part B will have a grant paid back to the date the business was impacted as a result of the Health Protection Regulations.

As the CBRSS is not administered by my Department, and the information required in the application process is different, those who are unsuccessful in their application to LRSS cannot be automatically considered for CBRSS. LPS has been working closely with Invest NI and sharing information for the administration of both schemes.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Finance whether there were Barnett Consequentials associated with the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme in England.

(AQW 16120/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There are no additional Barnett consequentials confirmed in 2020-21 for the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme in England.

For 2021-22, the Spending Review provided Barnett consequentials for English departmental-level changes and not for individual programmes. In that respect it is not possible to determine if individual programmes give rise to Barnett consequentials.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance what are the implications in relation to GDPR and data records management following the UK's departure from the European Union.

(AQW 16123/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The implications in relation to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and data records management following the UK'S departure from the European Union are likely to be minimal.

The Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) continues to apply and provisions of EU GDPR were incorporated into UK law at the end of the transition period. UK GDPR sits alongside the DPA 2018 with some amendments to work in a UK only context.

At present there is a time limited (no more than 6 months / 30th June 2021 and cannot be extended) 'bridging mechanism' agreed between the UK and EU. This allows personal data to continue to flow whilst awaiting an EU Data Adequacy decision for the UK to be finalised.

For the continuation of personal data flows between the UK and European Economic Area (EEA) during this period, the UK has to ensure it complies with the conditions previously agreed when setting up the bridging mechanism.

On 19 February 2021, the European Commission launched the procedure for the adoption of two adequacy decisions for transfers of personal data to the United Kingdom, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Law Enforcement Directive (LED) respectively.

For these adequacy decisions to come into effect they must be approved by the EU member states at the Council of the EU, once the European Data Protection Board (EDPB) gives an opinion.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance what representations he has made to HM Treasury against the exclusion, because of the EU Protocol, of pleasure boats in Northern Ireland from the UK concession that they can use red diesel.

(AQW 16151/17-22)

Mr Murphy: This issue has not been raised with me and therefore I have not made any representations to Treasury in this regard.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance in the event of continued closures due to COVID restrictions, whether the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme will be extended into the 2021-22 financial year.

(AQW 16251/17-22)

Mr Murphy: It is my intention to continue with the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme in tandem with progress made against the Executive's Pathway out of Restrictions document and the removal of restrictions on various categories of business, subject to the funds being available to the Executive to continue to provide this support.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Finance what discussions he has had with the Treasury to develop a fund for Northern Ireland leaseholders who may be required to fund remedial work due to unsafe cladding existing in their residential building.

(AQW 16254/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Treasury has confirmed that Devolved Administrations will receive Barnett Consequentials on the increased spend that arises from the tax announced by the British Government's Housing Secretary on 10 February 2021. However, it will be for the Devolved Administrations to consider the need for a levy similar to the one announced for England. Therefore, this is a matter for the Executive and discussions with the Treasury are not required.

Policy responsibility for aspects of building safety sits across a number of NICS Departments. The Executive has established a Cross-Departmental Group to consider the new building safety measures. I have brought a paper to the Executive seeking agreement that citizens here are afforded the same level of fire safety in all buildings, as in other devolved administration and asking for this work to be progressed.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance (i) what business types are included in the Executive's proposals for Rates Relief; (ii) what period the proposal extends to; (iii) whether the proposal includes businesses who currently receive industrial derating allowances, such as tyre retailers and fitters; and (iv) whether the proposal includes close contact services such as hairdressers, barbers, beauty and other health and wellbeing close contact services.

(AQW 16280/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

Businesses in the following sectors will pay no rates in 2021-22 for the second year running:

- (i) Airports (Belfast City, Belfast International and City of Derry); Childcare; Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure; Manufacturing; Newspaper production; and Retail premises (excluding larger food stores and off-licences).
- (ii) The rates support scheme will run from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022.
- (iii) Any manufacturing business that qualifies for industrial derating will have no rates liability for the forthcoming year. Tyre retailers and fitters do not qualify for industrial derating.
- (iv) Close contact services such as hairdressers, barbers, and beauty services which provide a retail service from retail premises, received 12 months rates support last year and will continue to receive rates support for the 2021-22 rating year.

Statutory Regulations will again be made to give effect to the Executive's proposals.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance what permanent structure or planting is planned for the Stormont Estate to mark the Northern Ireland Centenary.

(AQW 16293/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There are no plans for a permanent structure or planting on the Stormont Estate to mark the Centenary.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Finance to outline the Executive's financial commitment to the development of the A5 dual carriageway.

(AQO 1754/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive remains fully committed to the A5, as one of its Flagship Projects.

The Executive's 2020-21 Budget allocated £9.2 million to the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) for Phase 1a of the A5 scheme.

In the draft 2021-22 budget I have recently published, the Executive is proposing to allocate £6 million to the A5, based on the expenditure profile provided by the Department for Infrastructure.

It is anticipated this will be funded from the Irish Government following its commitment in the New Decade New Approach agreement.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance for an update on his plans to implement the recommendations contained in the Audit Office's Capacity and Capability in the Northern Ireland Civil Service report.

(AQO 1756/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The PAC is currently considering the Audit Office report and recommendations. It would be inappropriate to comment in detail until this process concludes.

However, my department, through the implementation of the Civil Service People Strategy, has continued to make progress on the issues identified by the Audit Office.

This includes work to reduce vacancies through recent large scale external recruitment exercises; new approaches to workforce and recruitment planning; new learning and development programmes including those to enhance commercial skills in the areas of contract and project management; and the introduction of a range of diversity initiatives.

The Civil Service fully recognises the need for fundamental change and will significantly build on this progress through its Civil Service Reform agenda in line with the commitment within New Decade, New Approach.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance in light of the Chancellor's recent decision on upcoming increases, to outline his future plans for Corporation Tax.

(AQO 1755/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have no powers available to me as Finance Minister currently to take any action on Corporation Tax. The 2016 Westminster legislation has never been commenced and the British Government's agreement to do so was conditional on the Executive budget being on a sustainable footing. This is a matter that the newly established Fiscal Council will now be able to consider and report on.

I also announced last week that I have established an independent Fiscal Commission to examine the tax varying powers available to the Executive. The Commission will report directly to me as Finance Minister by the end of the current mandate. This will enable my Department to provide an incoming Executive with up to date expert advice and enable it to take more informed decisions relating to the full range of fiscal powers.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Finance whether he will consider future targeted levels of rates relief for some business sectors recovering from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQO 1757/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The member will be aware that on Thursday 11 March I announced that I am providing a comprehensive business rates scheme for 2021-22 to ensure that some 29,000 businesses here will have a further rates free period. This £230 million package will provide continued support for businesses dealing with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Businesses in the following sectors will pay no rates in 2021-22 for the second year running: Airports (Belfast City, Belfast International and City of Derry); Childcare; Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure; Manufacturing; Newspaper production; and all Retail premises (excluding larger food stores and off-licences).

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the planned Fiscal Council and Fiscal Commission.

(AQO 1753/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As I announced in a written statement to the Assembly on Friday last week, both the Fiscal Council and the Fiscal Commission have now been established and their Terms of Reference and membership have been published on my department's website.

I will be meeting the two chairs, Robert Chote and Paul Johnson, later this week and look forward to hearing their plans for taking forward the important work of the Fiscal Council and Commission. Both have already indicated that they intend to have early engagement with stakeholders.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the implications of the UK Budget 2021 for Northern Ireland.

(AQO 1758/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As a result of the Chancellor's Budget the Executive will receive Barnett consequentials of £ 411.9 million Resource DEL. There has been no change to Capital DEL.

The resource consequentials have arisen mainly as a result of COVID-19 support.

Whilst COVID support funding is welcome the Budget makes no significant change to day to day spending for departments. .

The Chancellor announced that the Levelling Up fund and allocations from the £400 million New Deal fund, run by NIO. It is a matter of some concern that both of these schemes circumvent the Executive's role in the devolution process.

In addition to the public expenditure funding implications there were other measures announced, which have a wider impact on the North including alcohol, fuel and stamp duty and changes to Corporation Tax.

The Budget also confirmed a Corporation Tax exemption for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive – something I have long campaigned for.

Department of Health

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what efforts are being made to make clear face masks available throughout the Health and Social Care sector.

(AQW 7049/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I refer the member to my reply AQW 6738/17-22.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether he has submitted a bid to the Minister of Finance for the £600 million currently held centrally for allocation to Health.

(AQW 8744/17-22)

Mr Swann: I wrote to the Minister for Finance on 1 October 2020 seeking additional funding of £526.4 million revenue in 2020/21 against the £600m being held centrally for Health and I welcome the fact that this bid was met in full.

I also requested that if the £32.4 million of capital pressures could not be accommodated through slippage in the capital budget, if consideration could be given to switching this amount from the remaining amount of the £600m. The capital bid was subsequently met in October the monitoring round.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what involvement his Department has had in UK-wide talks regarding student travel over the Christmas period.

(AQW 9757/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has consistently, throughout this pandemic, worked with Government officials across the UK on matters relating to travel into and from Northern Ireland. This included discussions around student travel in the lead-up to Christmas.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health why ambulances are no longer taking people, who are physically unable to transport themselves to hospital, to outpatient appointments.

(AQW 11268/17-22)

Mr Swann: On 23 November 2020, the Patient Care Service, which normally provides this service, ceased to transport to a number of clinics.

The response to COVID-19, alongside annual winter pressures, has put the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) under significant pressure. In order to focus resources on high acuity, urgent and emergency workload, the decision was taken to reduce low acuity outpatient activity and transfer the associated Patient Care Service ambulances to accident and emergency support work.

There may be a very small number of patients for whom a Health Care Professional is aware of an essential medical requirement for non-emergency transport, for a critical appointment or procedure, and they can contact NIAS through the usual channels where they will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health what consideration has been given to COVID-19 testing at airports on people returning from travel abroad.

(AQW 12260/17-22)

Mr Swann: From 21 January 2021, international travellers intending to arrive in Northern Ireland have been required to present a negative Covid-19 test result before departure. My officials are considering what other testing measures may be required when direct international flights recommence into Northern Ireland.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health why larger numbers of vaccines for COVID-19 cannot be provided with a specific delivery date in advance so that proper planning and coordination can be done with primary care practices.

(AQW 12615/17-22)

Mr Swann: The vaccines are received via Public Health England before being stored in a distribution hub. From there the available vaccine is delivered, to Trust pharmacy sites or a GP practices.

The central limitation on the rollout of the vaccination programme has been, and continues to be, the availability of vaccine. The volume of vaccines delivered is subject to fluctuation and as such the Programme as a whole is subject to delivery variations.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health whether amounts of the Pfizer vaccine have been dumped by Health and Social Care Trusts because the numbers of people invited for vaccine at the end of shifts did not match up to the anticipated supply required with no standby list being contacted to avoid wastage.

(AQW 12617/17-22)

Mr Swann: On foot of careful strategic planning Wastage rates in the current vaccination programme are far below usual wastage rates in other vaccination programmes. Latest figures suggest a wastage rate of 0.5% which reflects the measures already in place.

As such, a standby list has not been required.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health for an update on the Phase 1 vaccination programme in North Down.

(AQW 12819/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is not possible to provide detailed information by constituency area.

Building on the success of the vaccination programme, a twin track approach was introduced – with both GP practices and the regional vaccination centres vaccinating members of the public from prioritised groups.

The vaccination programme has moved at pace. We are currently offering vaccinations to those over 50 years of age.

At date of writing, 692,264 doses of vaccine have been administered across Northern Ireland.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health whether any records will be kept relating to those who die within 28 days of receiving the COVID-19 vaccine.

(AQW 13040/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member will be aware that arrangements are in place to ensure there is a regional approach taken on the reporting of all suspected adverse reactions which might be connected to the Coronavirus Vaccines.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what consideration he understands is being given to vaccinating police and fire officers as a specific priority group.

(AQW 13315/17-22)

Mr Swann: May I begin by apologising for the delay in replying.

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, police and fire officers 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 Stalford asked the Minister of Health what procedures have been put in place for cancer treatment since the beginning of the pandemic.

(AQW 13344/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has much activity under way to stabilise and improve diagnosis, treatment and life chances of cancer patients here. Staff in HSC Trusts have worked hard to ensure that systemic anti-cancer therapies (SACT) and radiotherapy have been protected throughout the surge and these treatments have been offered as an alternative to surgery whenever possible.

In June of this year I established a Cancer Services Rebuilding Cell to oversee the resumption of cancer screening, diagnosis and treatment in clinically safe environments as quickly as possible, and to protect these services as much as possible throughout the pandemic, taking into account existing capacity constraints and the ongoing threat of COVID-19. I published a policy statement on 7 October 2020 setting out my Department's approach to Rebuilding and Stabilisation of Cancer Services, including stabilisation plans for oncology and haematology, and cancer services rebuild plans. Details are available on my Department's website.

As we continue to stabilise and rebuild services in these challenging circumstances it is important to note that all patients are treated according to clinical priority, as determined by specialist clinicians. One of my primary aims is to ensure the continued delivery of high quality cancer services, provided of course that it is safe to do so.

Presently, Trusts are keeping the position under daily review and are reinstating red flag surgery and reschedule patients as quickly as possible.

The Health and Social Care Board has established a new regional approach to prioritisation of surgery. This ensures that any available theatre capacity across Northern Ireland is allocated to those patients most in need - both during surge and in the future. This includes fully maximising all available in-house Health and Social Care and Independent Sector capacity.

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. That has included securing theatre capacity from local independent sector health providers. From April 2020 to February 2021 approximately 4,600 patients have been treated by local HSC consultants in the three local independent sector providers. Provision for continued access to the three independent hospitals had been made until 31 March 2021 and will continue beyond March, for the foreseeable future.

In addition to that, some capacity has been secured from Republic of Ireland private clinics. Discussions are ongoing with NHS England for in-house and independent sector capacity for Northern Ireland patients.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health when the mobile vaccination teams are expected to go into the community.
(AQW 13491/17-22)

Mr Swann: District Nurses/mobile teams working with GPs are now working their way through all housebound patients aged 65 and over and calling with any care home patients who were previously missed for whatever reason.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has any plans to reopen gyms that have put safety measures in place for their clients.
(AQW 14095/17-22)

Mr Swann: Regrettably, in light of the high rate of spread of the virus which causes COVID-19 in the lead-up to Christmas and subsequently, and the pressure this placed on vital health and social care services, the Executive decided that gyms must remain closed.

I appreciate that gyms are the preferred means of exercise for many people due to the social environment and support systems they provide. I also appreciate the thought, time and expense that some gym owners have given to putting additional safety measures in place.

Gyms are specifically referenced under "Sport and Leisure Activities" in the Executive's Pathway out of Restrictions.

The Coronavirus Regulations are subject to ongoing review, which considers both the current level of the pandemic and the impact the restrictions have on the people and economy of Northern Ireland, and it is the Executive's clear intention not to retain the restrictions for any longer than is absolutely necessary.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health to detail the current waiting time for an occupational therapist assessment for adaptations for people with disabilities, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.
(AQW 14257/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department does not hold this information centrally and was requested from the Public Health Agency (PHA). The PHA have advised that the detail required to address this AQW is not captured as part of the occupational therapy referral and assessment process.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has any plans to vaccinate household members of the clinically extremely vulnerable at the same time as those deemed vulnerable.
(AQW 14619/17-22)

Mr Swann: The main carer identified for those who are clinically extremely vulnerable will be vaccinated as part of priority group 6.

This priority group is currently being vaccinated and I note that as at 9th March 2021 55,240 individuals identified as carers have received a vaccine.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health when adults with learning disabilities living in Supported Living accommodation are expected to receive the COVID-19 vaccination.
(AQW 14624/17-22)

Mr Swann: Supported living facilities were a high priority in the Covid 19 vaccination programme. As a result, Trust vaccination teams have almost completed vaccination visits to supported living accommodation within their areas.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how his Department monitors financial contributions given to the private and independent care home sector to cover personal protective equipment, sick pay and other COVID-19-associated costs.
(AQW 14845/17-22)

Mr Swann: Do Not Resuscitate Orders

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 10872/17-22, how many local audits have been undertaken since the start of the pandemic to monitor adherence to policies and guidance in relation to do not resuscitate orders. (AQW 14879/17-22)

Mr Swann: Established clinical and professional guidance is available to support clinicians in decision-making and providing quality treatment and care for all patients towards the end of life. This includes the General Medical Council's 'Treatment and care towards the end of life: good practice in decision making' which outlines key principles and models to underpin decision-making, including decisions relating to cardiopulmonary resuscitation and The British Medical Association, Resuscitation Council and the Royal College of Nursing guidance 'Decisions relating to Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation'.

Policies to support decision-making in relation to cardiopulmonary resuscitation in Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland reflect the principles set out in this guidance and apply to all patients (whether with or without a learning disability or any other condition) with decisions made on an individual basis taking into account the relevant professional and legal requirements.

The response to AQW 10872/17-22 noted that arrangements for monitoring adherence to Trust policy and guidance on decision making relating to resuscitation may include local audits. Two Health and Social Care Trusts are currently progressing audits. Other arrangements also in place include regular meetings held by clinical teams to review patient deaths and reviews of DNACPR forms completed.

Blanket decisions about Do Not Attempt Resuscitation based solely on age, disability or a senior clinician's view of quality of life are discriminatory and unethical. All treatment decisions, including cardiopulmonary resuscitation, must be individual to each patient and follow the relevant professional and legal frameworks. This principle is clearly set out in the professional guidance and also in the regional Ethical Advice and Support Framework for Northern Ireland developed to assist and support clinical decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Health how many audits have been undertaken to monitor adherence to policies and guidance in relation to do not resuscitate orders in respect of people with (i) learning disabilities; and (ii) dementia, who have died with COVID-19. (AQW 14963/17-22)

Mr Swann: Established clinical and professional guidance is available to support clinicians in decision-making and providing quality treatment and care for all patients towards the end of life. This includes the General Medical Council's 'Treatment and care towards the end of life: good practice in decision making' which outlines key principles and models to underpin decision-making, including decisions relating to cardiopulmonary resuscitation and The British Medical Association, Resuscitation Council and the Royal College of Nursing guidance 'Decisions relating to Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation'.

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Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of complaints his Department has received since 1 February 2020 from members of the public who have been unable to access the GP and out of hours doctors by telephone. (AQW 14975/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have been advised by the Health and Social Care Board that, during the period from 1st February 2020 to 4th March 2021, the number of complaints received relating specifically to difficulty getting through to GP Practices and GP Out of Hours services by telephone is 6.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Health how many patients with mental health issues in each Health and Social Care Trust are awaiting (i) a routine appointment; and (ii) an urgent appointment. (AQW 15017/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of individuals awaiting (i) a routine appointment; and (ii) an urgent appointment with an Adult Mental Health Service in each Health and Social Care Trust is set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of individuals awaiting (i) a routine appointment; and (ii) an urgent appointment with an Adult Mental Health Service in each Health and Social Care Trust as of 31st January 2021.

HSC Trust	Routine Appointment	Urgent Appointment
Belfast ¹	994	49
Northern ²		640
South Eastern	385	31
Southern	1,419	50
Western ²		697

Source: Health and Social Care Trusts

- 1 BHSCT data is for the number of people waiting as of 25th February 2021.
- 2 NHSCT and WHSCT do not routinely collect information on whether Adult Mental Health Service appointments are routine or urgent.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether clinically extremely vulnerable people should only return to work when they have received two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine.

(AQW 15116/17-22)

Mr Swann: CEV people remain extremely vulnerable to the virus, and at this point, the advice remains to avoid the work place even if you have received a vaccination. It is also advised to continue to observe social distancing guidelines and self-isolate if you come in contact with someone with Covid-19. The vaccine is effective in fighting and providing protection against the virus, but does not fully eliminate your risk of infection or potential transmission.

We strongly encourage those who are CEV to work from home where possible. It was recommended to discuss with the employer to find an alternative role or change your working patterns temporarily to enable home working where possible.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to increase budget allocations to support autism spectrum disorder services.

(AQW 15236/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am aware of the importance of autism services, however the draft budget allocation for my Department means we are facing an extremely challenging financial position. We are currently considering a range of competing pressures as part of our budget allocation process which is not yet complete.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health what is the average prevalence of mental health issues in the population per 1000 in the year 2020/21 to date.

(AQW 15337/17-22)

Mr Swann: The information is not available as requested. Mental health is one of the disease registers in the Quality and Outcomes Framework (QOF), the purpose of which is to reward General Medical Service's contractors for the provision of quality care. The mental health register contains the number of people diagnosed with schizophrenia, bipolar affective disorder and other psychoses, and other patients on lithium therapy.

QOF disease prevalence data is published annually; the 2021 data is not yet available but will be published on 6th May 2021. As at 31st March 2020, the most recent data available, the prevalence of mental health per 1,000 registered patients was 9.25. Further information is available at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/prevalence-statistics>.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 12243/17-22, whether the policy of parental visitation of only one parent is compliant with article 9 of the UNICEF Convention on the Rights of the Child.

(AQW 15338/17-22)

Mr Swann: Article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that a child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will, except when competent authorities subject to judicial review determine, in accordance with applicable law and procedures, that such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child.

On 26 February 2021 my Department published the latest version of the visiting guidance for maternity services (available here: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/Covid-19-visiting-guidance>), which took effect from 1 March 2021, and reflected the move from regional Alert level 5 to Alert level 4. This means that for children who are hospital inpatients:

Neonatal unit: One of two nominated parents/caregivers can be accommodated at any given time

Paediatrics: Any child admitted can be accompanied by one of two nominated parents/caregivers at any given time for the duration of the stay

It is the view of the Department that this policy is compliant with Article 9, as the restriction of visiting is in the best interests of the child who is resident in the hospital setting, the hospital staff, and the general public on the basis of the ongoing risk to public health from Covid-19.

This restriction is “necessary” and ensures that paramount importance is given to the best interests of the child and whilst difficult for the child and family, is entirely justifiable from a public health perspective.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what measures his Department is taking to ensure the care partner scheme is implemented in all care homes.

(AQW 15380/17-22)

Mr Swann: Regional guidance sets out our clear expectation of care homes in relation to care partners. Where homes are seeking to implement visiting and care partner guidance, funding is available to them.

In addition, HSC Trusts have 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.

The RQIA will also assess the approach being used when undertaking inspections of residential and nursing homes, and consider compliance against the relevant care standards.

The HSCB has also been asked to explore changes to the regional contract, to make requirements clearer.

In January 2021, the Department also further extended its COVID-19 testing policy to make provision for testing to be accessible to care partners. Consequently, if a care home advises there is a requirement for a care partner to be tested for COVID-19, this will be undertaken through the regular care home testing programme.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health why, on the NI Direct webpage, the wording ‘testing for abnormalities’ rather than ‘screening for Down’s Syndrome’ is used.

(AQW 15404/17-22)

Mr Swann: The wording currently used reflects that the testing referred to relates to a number of distinct conditions, and is not specifically for Down’s syndrome.

Please note, my Department has raised the use of language in relation to Down’s syndrome in The Pregnancy Book and on the NI Direct Webpage with the Public Health Agency (PHA). PHA is working to re-write relevant guidance in this regard, and we anticipate that this will be updated soon.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health whether he will publish proposals on Reform of Adult Social Care before (i) commissioning a Trust Cost of Care report; and (ii) publishing updated care dependency models.

(AQW 15417/17-22)

Mr Swann: Although the ‘New Decade New Approach’ prioritises delivery of the reform of health and social care, funding to establish the ‘true cost of care’ was not subject to an allocation in the 2020/21 budget. My Department has previously worked with research colleagues from the Strategic Investment Board regarding the benefits of ‘systems modelling’ in the reform of adult social care. However, officials having been working closely with the HSC Board and plan to seek a further economic appraisal around the true cost of care in care homes.

In relation to Care Dependency Models, the Chief Nursing Officer is leading work on the framework for enhancing the clinical skills of the nursing and multi professional health care staff in care home settings, taking into consideration the Nursing Workforce requirements aligned with the Delivering Care Policy phase 8, for care homes.

Officials aim to submit proposals regarding the Reform of Adult Social Care for my consideration in the summer. Therefore, I expect these proposals to be published prior to any information resulting from the work ongoing in the areas above.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health (i) for his assessment of the efficacy of current travel rules; (ii) whether they are strong and clear enough for people to adhere to them; and (iii) to detail his plans to increase enforcement measures.

(AQW 15457/17-22)

Mr Swann: Current travel restrictions have been developed to prevent the further spread of COVID-19 in Northern Ireland. Those restrictions are continually under review, particularly in respect of international travel and the risk posed by variants of concern. Since their introduction in June 2020, the international travel regulations have been amended frequently and I will continue to do so where amendment is required to address emerging issues.

Guidance on the restrictions is kept up-to-date on NI Direct.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of inspections carried out by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority in each month since March 2020, broken-down by type of service inspected.

(AQW 15475/17-22)

Mr Swann: During the period 1 March 2020 to 28 February 2021, RQIA conducted 1,329 inspections of a range of health and social care services across Northern Ireland. The tables below detail the number of inspections conducted by RQIA on a monthly basis from March 2020 to February 2021.

Table 1: RQIA Inspections at Regulated Services

Month	Adult Placement Agency	Childrens Home	Day Care Setting	Domiciliary Care Agency	Independent Clinic	Independent Hospital	Private Dental Treatment	Independent Medical Agency	Nursing Home	Nursing Agency	Residential Care Home	Total
Mar-20	4	7	13	14	0	6	12	0	26	6	23	111
Apr-20	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	4	0	3	9
May-20	0	0	0	3	0	1	0	0	10	0	5	19
Jun-20	0	3	0	3	0	0	0	0	17	3	8	34
Jul-20	0	3	1	10	0	3	3	0	14	2	8	44
Aug-20	0	9	3	16	0	1	6	1	26	2	25	89
Sep-20	0	8	8	24	2	4	57	3	49	0	45	200
Oct-20	0	6	4	19	3	2	66	1	41	2	38	182
Nov-20	0	1	2	25	1	5	65	1	38	1	43	182
Dec-20	0	2	3	14	0	3	45	1	27	4	30	129
Jan-21	0	6	2	15	0	0	48	0	33	1	30	135
Feb-21	0	10	7	23	0	2	41	0	39	2	33	157
Total	4	56	43	167	6	27	343	7	324	23	291	1291

Table 2: RQIA Inspections at Other Services

Month	HM Prison	HSC Hospital	MHLD Facility	Young Adult Supported Accommodation	IR(ME)R*	Total
Mar-20	0	1	0	0	2	3
Apr-20	0	1	0	0	0	1
May-20	0	0	0	0	0	0
Jun-20	0	0	0	0	0	0
Jul-20	0	0	1	0	0	1
Aug-20	0	1	0	0	0	1
Sep-20	0	3	1	0	0	4
Oct-20	0	6	1	0	1	8
Nov-20	0	2	0	0	1	3
Dec-20	0	3	2	0	1	6
Jan-21	0	0	1	2	1	4
Feb-21	1	0	0	6	0	7
Total	1	17	6	8	6	38

* Inspections conducted in relation to Ionising Radiation (Medical Exposure) Regulations

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health for an update on the roll-out of the multidisciplinary team to support GPs in Mid Ulster.

(AQW 15491/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Primary Care Multi-disciplinary Teams (MDTs) model is currently in place or well developed in 5 of the 17 GP federations, across all HSC Trusts - Down, Derry, West Belfast, Causeway and Newry & District. I also recently approved a limited introduction of the model to the North Down and Ards area, commencing in February 2021.

I fully understand the frustration and disappointment of those GP Federations who have not yet begun rolling out the MDT model, and am committed to ensuring the MDT model is implemented in all GP practices as quickly as is practicable. In order to provide clarity on our plans for rollout, officials in both the HSCB and Department have recently commenced work to develop a 'road map' which sets out the future direction of the Programme.

As part of this work, the MDT Programme Directors wrote to leaders in all Trusts and GP Federations, including those in Mid Ulster, to ask them to submit proposals for the implementation of the MDT model in their particular areas. It is anticipated that responses will be submitted before the end of March 2021. The proposals will then be reviewed in light of strategic considerations and formed into a regional phased road map for rollout of MDTs across the remainder of Northern Ireland.

Further expansion of the MDT model will be dependent on the availability of resources, appropriate staffing and investment in GP accommodation.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health to detail any GP hubs planned for Mid Ulster, including the (i) location; (ii) estimated funding need; and (iii) current position on the capital build waiting list.

(AQW 15494/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Primary Care Infrastructure Development Strategic Implementation Plan (SIP) includes long-term plans for GP hubs in Cookstown and Magherafelt, although I am unable at this point to confirm the exact locations or estimated funding need.

My Department does not have a "capital build waiting list". Instead, the SIP is being implemented in tranches following a prioritisation exercise by Local Commissioning Groups in consultation with the Trusts and representatives of the GP community. The current tranche – Tranche 2 – does not include any hubs in the Mid Ulster Assembly constituency.

To provide some illustration on timescales and costs, the Dungannon hub in the neighbouring Assembly constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, but which is located within the Mid Ulster District Council area, is one of five projects that has been prioritised for development in Tranche 2 of the SIP. A business case is yet to be fully developed and therefore a site location has not been agreed, but it would be expected that the project would cost in the region of £25m.

The current projections – which are subject to change - are that the design works for the Dungannon hub will commence in 2026/27 and works will complete by 2029/30. Given the projected timescales for this project, a business case has not yet been developed and therefore a site location has not been agreed. Funding also cannot be confirmed as the Executive is working with single year budgets.

As construction of the hubs in Tranche 2 progress, a further prioritisation exercise will take place to identify the developments to be included in Tranche 3.

My ability to take forward new capital projects, including the primary care development proposals, will only be possible if significant additional capital resources are made available to my Department, and ideally, if multi-year budgets are in place which will assist with future planning.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health what plans his Department has, in conjunction with the Public Health Agency, to greater raise awareness of ovarian cancer and its symptoms.

(AQW 15546/17-22)

Mr Swann: The New Decade, New Approach Agreement (January 2020) outlined a commitment that the Executive would produce a new 10 year Northern Ireland Cancer Strategy. The Department fully endorsed the development of this strategy which will set the direction of travel for the next 10 years

Last year co-production work began on the development of the new 10 year Cancer Strategy for Northern Ireland. A steering group with policy makers, health representatives, those with lived experience and charities are actively working on its development. This cancer strategy will consider ways to improve support for patients along the whole cancer pathway, including improving awareness of the signs and symptoms of various types of cancer. Work to finalise the strategy has been fully resumed following a pause in development due to the impact of COVID-19.

The Public Health Agency's 'Be Cancer Aware' website, www.becancerawareni.info, which launched in 2015, provides information about cancer signs and symptoms, explains what to do if you are concerned, signposts individuals to recommended sources of support or further information, as well as encouraging anyone noticing signs or symptoms to contact their GP. This includes specific information on the signs and symptoms of ovarian cancer and its symptoms. A review of the information will take place when current COVID-19 pressures subside.

The Public Health Agency (PHA) printed and distributed a 'Target Ovarian Cancer' leaflet and poster to raise awareness of the signs and symptoms of ovarian cancer among women. Almost 100,000 leaflets and over 2,000 posters were distributed to all pharmacies and GP practices during January/February 2019. The distribution was supported by PR and social media activity.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for an update on the criteria used for the transformation of services.
(AQW 15575/17-22)

Mr Swann: Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together, is the strategic context through which all work is undertaken to transform and rebuild health and social services.

Work to transform services to date, and work to rebuild moving forward must support the delivery of the strategic aims of Delivering Together which are:

- Build capacity in communities and in prevention;
- Provide more support in primary care;
- Reform our community and hospital services; and
- Organise ourselves to deliver.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health how many extra contractual referrals have been made for children since 2015.
(AQW 15592/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below provides the number of approvals for Acute Extra Contract Referrals for children (18 and under) since 2015.

Year	ECR approvals for 18 years and under
2015-2016	205
2016-2017	268
2017-2018	216
2018-2019	243
2019-2020	230
2020-2021	142
Total	1,304

Figures exclude paediatric cardiology referrals under SLA contracts outside Northern Ireland and non-acute ECR referrals for children in long term treatment facilities outside Northern Ireland.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health when he or the Chief Nursing Officer last met the Patient Client Council Care Home Families Working Group to establish why a number of care homes have not yet adopted care partners.
(AQW 15651/17-22)

Mr Swann: Private Health Care Sector

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health to detail the spend by each Health and Social Care Trust on the independent and private health care sector in each of the last three years, broken down by procedure and treatment provided.
(AQW 15661/17-22)

Mr Swann: A breakdown of the expenditure by Health and Social Care Trust on the independent and private health care sector in each of the last three years is set out in the tables below.

Northern HSC Trust

Speciality	2017/18 £ '000	2018/19 £'000	2019/20 £'000
Breast Surgery	61	36	0
Dermatology	396	562	297
ENT	191	42	113
Endoscopy	171	44	105
General Surgery	227	142	307
Gynae	0	28	119
Neurology	4	0	0
Pain Management	42	0	0
Radiology	1,028	478	1,660

Speciality	2017/18 £'000	2018/19 £'000	2019/20 £'000
Total	2,120	1,332	2,601

Southern HSC Trust

Speciality	2017/18 £'000	2018/19 £'000	2019/20 £'000
Radiology	1,626	1,924	1,807
Trauma & Orthopaedics	572	1,523	136
Endoscopy	38	147	2
General Surgery	0	126	214
Gastroenterology	0	262	0
Total	2,236	3,982	2,159

South Eastern HSC Trust

Speciality	2017/18 £'000	2018/19 £'000	2019/20 £'000
Dermatology	428	531	959
Plastics	1,382	2,738	2,860
Endoscopy	0	893	1,464
General Surgery	21	130	0
Rheumatology	53	0	0
Neurology	4	0	0
Gynae	0	0	0
Urology	70	415	203
Radiology	0	0	254
Orthognathic	0	0	73
Total	1,958	4,707	5,813

Western HSC Trust

Speciality	2017/18 £'000	2018/19 £'000	2019/20 £'000
ENT		46	3
Orthopaedics	835	1,240	53
Endoscopy			117
General Surgery	332	113	4
Total	1,167	1,399	177

Belfast HSC Trust

Speciality	2017/18 £'000	2018/19 £'000	2019/20 £'000
Trauma & Orthopaedics	3,313	3,542	3,659
Imaging	3,454	2,795	2,712
Neurosciences	261	1,781	1,573
Ophthalmology	88	969	1,538
Cardiothoracic Surgery	359	708	1,068

Speciality	2017/18 £'000	2018/19 £'000	2019/20 £'000
Endoscopy	279	600	1,151
NI Reg Med Physics Agency	591	783	410
Cardiology	80	480	303
Clinical Psychology	308	372	88
Vascular Surgery	15	231	390
Breast Surgery	144	120	155
Urology	0	192	182
General Surgery	271	41	19
Medical Staff	6	33	127
Live Cancer Studies	73	42	15
Laboratories	45	45	35
Children's Hospital	2	0	38
Hematology and Cancer Services	0	35	0
Pulmonary Function	0	10	0
M&S Management	9	0	0
Outpatient Appointments	0	4	5
Anaesthetics	7	0	0
Gynae/Family Planning	6	0	0
Outpatients	0	0	0
Live Dementia Studies	0	0	0
ENT	0	0	3
Total	9,311	12,783	13,471

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health to detail the average waiting times for Speech and Language support in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 15662/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the average waiting time for speech and language therapists is not available, however waiting times are collated in bands and this information is detailed below.

Table 1. Number of persons waiting for an assessment by a speech and language therapist, by waiting time-bands, in each Health and Social Care Trust, as at 31 January 2021.

HSC Trust	0-3 weeks	3-6 weeks	6-9 weeks	9-13 weeks	Over 13 weeks
Belfast	234	94	152	64	102
Northern	158	109	169	150	886
South Eastern	173	114	168	264	634
Southern	152	108	215	189	408
Western	159	80	175	209	479

Source: Health and Social Care Board

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health how primary care services, including access to GP services, is accessible to undocumented or irregular migrants.

(AQW 15673/17-22)

Mr Swann: Eligibility to access publicly funded healthcare in Northern Ireland is based on ordinary residence.

A person will be ordinarily resident when that residence is lawful, voluntary and for a settled purpose as part of the regular order of life for the time being. Anyone who is ordinarily resident in Northern Ireland is eligible to access publicly funded healthcare.

A person who is not ordinarily resident is a visitor. Access to healthcare in Northern Ireland is provided to visitors with exemptions being regulated for under the Health and Personal Social Services Provision of Health Services to Persons Not Ordinarily Resident Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 ("the Regulations").

The Regulations provide that some services are always exempt from charge whilst some categories of visitor are exempt from charge.

The services which are always exempt from charge include accident and emergency services and detection and treatment of certain diseases. Since 7th March 2020 this includes COVID-19.

The categories of visitor which are exempt from charge include refugees and asylum seekers, including failed asylum seekers, victims, and suspected victims of human trafficking and those individuals who are determined to be exempt from charge on exceptional humanitarian grounds.

Under the Health and Personal Social Services (General Medical Services Contracts) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004, GP practices provide services to patients who are registered with them, to temporary residents or to patients where emergency or immediate necessary treatment is required.

Regarding persons accessing GP and other primary health care services, Northern Ireland, as with the rest of the UK, has a system whereby anyone can get an emergency appointment or immediately necessary treatment with a GP in the locality where they are staying. This also applies to those with no fixed address.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for an update on the Independent Living Fund, including (i) the current number of applicants; (ii) the total number of applicants to date; and (iii) planned changes to the scheme.
(AQW 15674/17-22)

Mr Swann: As at 22 February 2021, there are 2,579 recipients in total (Scotland and NI combined) in receipt of Independent Living Fund (ILF) awards; of these, there are 414 ILF recipients in Northern Ireland or 16% of the total number of recipients.

The current ILF scheme was closed to new applications in 2010. My officials, working closely with the ILFS Working Group NI and other key stakeholders have been developing advice for me on the feasibility of reopening the ILF to new applications in Northern Ireland. However, any such proposals would need to be considered against other priorities and in the context of an extremely challenging financial position.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health what support is available for healthcare students who are on unpaid placement and have not been included in the COVID-19 special recognition payment.
(AQW 15695/17-22)

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.

The Department has undertaken a wide range of measures, and significant investment, to ensure that students are able to progress in their pre-registration education and training in clinical placements despite the constraints resulting from COVID-19 protocols. For example, we have augmented our annual expenditure of £27.2m on facilitating clinical placements for medical students by £4m over 2020/21 alone.

In addition, a wide range of practical support has been provided to students. For medical students, this has included the following:

- allocation to the HSC Trust of their choice for placement where possible, with the potential to reduce unnecessary travel and rent costs;
- the offer of free accommodation while on placement with provision being extended as required;
- during GP placements, permission to remain in B&B accommodation at weekends to reduce travel; and
- Department funding for multiple sets of "scrubs".

In relation to dental students, my officials are working closely with Queen's University and other key stakeholders to identify funding and other key support which will be required during the next financial year.

All students at Queen's University Belfast are also able to apply for financial assistance from hardship and support funds, according to their individual circumstances.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 14643/17-22, to detail the process for booking a COVID-19 vaccine appointment for those who do not receive carers allowance but have an under-16 clinically extremely vulnerable patient in their household.
(AQW 15700/17-22)

Mr Swann: All main carers of someone who is under-16 and clinically extremely vulnerable in their household, whose welfare may be at risk if their main carer fell ill, are eligible for the COVID-19 vaccination. A person does not need to be in receipt of Carer's Allowance or Carer's Credit.

JCVI defined carers as: "those who are in receipt of carer's allowance, or those who are the main carer of an elderly or disabled person whose welfare may be at risk if the main carer falls ill".

All main carers who have still to book an appointment for vaccination are asked to contact their local Trust Carer Coordinator, who will take their contact details and pass to the vaccinating teams who will make contact to arrange an appointment.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health why surgeries in East Antrim have been informed that they will not be receiving COVID-19 vaccines this week; and when they will receive vaccines.

(AQW 15701/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) is responsible for allocating vaccine to each practice based on their patient profile and it is the HSCB which monitors the quantity of vaccine delivered to each practice.

The Member will be aware of the recent delivery to Northern Ireland of additional Astra Zeneca vaccine. Moving forward, GP practices will be supplied with adequate vaccine to permit them to deliver vaccination to the eligible cohorts at pace.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health whether he has considered opening a vaccination centre in Newry.

(AQW 15712/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member can be advised that fixed vaccination sites have been established by the various health trusts throughout Northern Ireland.

However there are no plans to open a mass vaccination centre in Newry. Southern Health and Social Care Trust are currently operating a vaccination centre at South Lakes leisure centre, Craigavon.

In tandem with the vaccination centres, GP practices have been working at pace to administer the vaccine, district nurses have been visiting the housebound.

Planning for community pharmacists to become involved in the vaccination programme is at an advanced stage.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Health to detail the current waiting times for access to mental health counselling services in South Down.

(AQW 15717/17-22)

Mr Swann: Waiting times to access counselling services in South Down is not available.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to detail the share of the Health and Social Care budget allocated by Trusts by means of contracts for services provided to the voluntary and community sector in (i) the 2016/17 financial year; and (ii) the 2020/21 financial year.

(AQW 15747/17-22)

Mr Swann: The share of the Health and Social Care budget allocated by Trusts by means of contracts for services provided to the voluntary and community sector in the 2016/17 financial year is set out in the table below; information for 2020/21 is not yet available.

HSC Trust	2016/17 £m	%
Belfast Health & Social Care Trust	17.8	1.45%
Northern Health & Social Care Trust	4.0	0.62%
South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust	17.6	3.10%
Southern Health & Social Care Trust	4.6	0.70%
Western Health & Social Care Trust	19.5	3.20%
NI Ambulance Service Health & Social Care Trust	0.6	0.82%

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on the implementation of the findings of the Hyponatraemia Inquiry.

(AQW 15748/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Inquiry into Hyponatraemia Related Deaths (IHRD) made 96 recommendations resulting in 120 individual actions. Prior to the pandemic, the IHRD workstreams had developed implementation plans for the majority of actions assigned to them. The IHRD implementation programme meetings were suspended in March 2020 to allow both

Departmental and Health and Social Care staff to be re-directed to focus on COVID-critical work, and this continues to be the case.

Some work has been able to progress such as the Statutory Duty of Candour, the Independent Medical Examiner, the HSC Board Member Handbook, Being Open Guidance and the SAI Statement of Rights.

In the current environment, I accept the original timeline for implementation to be impacted upon; however, 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 Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 12943/17-22, what consideration his Department is giving to a Dementia-Friendly Hospitals Charter, as is already in effect in some NHS Trusts, as part of the recovery plan after the completion of the vaccination programme.

(AQW 15749/17-22)

Mr Swann: Developing Dementia friendly environments across all health and social care facilities, business premises and in public spaces has been a key objective of the Health and Social Care system for some time.

A Dementia Service Improvement Lead with responsibility for the development of better dementia care in hospitals has been appointed in each of the 5 HSC Trusts. These staff have unfortunately had to be redeployed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, prior to the outbreak of the virus, Trusts were working to improve dementia care in hospitals through:

- The implementation of recommendations from the Dementia Care in NI Hospitals Audit;
- The implementation of John's Campaign which aims to extend the rights of people with a dementia to have family carers remain with them throughout their time in hospital; and
- The introduction of schemes that help clinicians identify people with a dementia on a ward and ensure that care plans are fully implemented and appropriately shared to ensure safe, effective and consistent care.

These issues will be picked up again as the Health and Social Care system recovers from Covid-19.

There have also been a number of other developments in relation to dementia. These include:

- The appointment of 44 Dementia Companions in total across all 5 HSC Trusts. These staff provide support to people with a dementia during their hospital stay. On a busy ward, Companions help create a dementia friendly environment, provide reassurance, practical and emotional support and stimulation thus reducing stress and behaviours which carers find difficult to understand; and
- A Dementia Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes (ECHO) which is a virtual communication system enabling participants (clinicians / professional staff) to link and share knowledge and best practice.

The HSCB Regional Dementia Lead, in collaboration with the Dementia Service Improvement Leads and Trust Leads, has developed a comprehensive Service Improvement Plan for dementia care in hospitals. The HSCB and Trusts have also developed a Post Covid-19 Service Recovery Plan.

The Dementia Service Improvement Leads (Hospitals) are already working on the Recovery Plan objectives and should return to their substantive post in the near future when they will be able to focus on the larger service improvement agenda.

As yet, there is not a standard evaluation or certification process for 'Dementia Friendly Status' for hospitals or areas within Northern Ireland,

but this is something we are seeking to develop.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what percentage of care home (i) residents; and (ii) staff have refused a COVID-19 vaccination.

(AQW 15753/17-22)

Mr Swann: The department does not hold this information.

We do however keep a record of those vaccinated and further details of vaccine deployment can be found on the NI Covid – 19 Vaccinations Dashboard located at:

NI Covid-19 Vaccinations Dashboard | COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Northern Ireland (hscni.net) (<https://covid-19.hscni.net/ni-covid-19-vaccinations-dashboard/>)

I can confirm at date of writing, 12,289 first doses have been deployed to care home residents and 11,409 second doses. In addition, 13,694 staff have received a first dose and 11,780 have received a second dose.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health (i) how many patients in each constituency are prescribed opioids; (ii) to list the opioids prescribed; and (iii) what is the average length of time patients in each constituency have been receiving opioid prescriptions.

(AQW 15756/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) It is not possible to provide information on the numbers of patients who have been prescribed opioids by constituency or Trust area as this information is not collected or collated in this format.
- (ii) Opioids prescribed within the HSC include: Abstral, Alfentanil, Buprenorphine, Butec, Buvidal, Cocaine Hydrochloride, Co-Codamol, Codeine, Co-Dydramol, Diamorphine, Dihydrocodine, Espranor, Fentanyl Citrate, Hydromorphone, Levobupivacaine, Longtec, Meptazinol, Methadone, Mezolar, Morphine Sulfate, Oramorph, Oxycodone Hydrochloride, Pentazocine Hydrochloride, Pethidine Hydrochloride, Pholcodeine, Remifentanil, Sevredol, Shortec, Suboxone, Tapentadol Hydrochloride, Targinact, Tramadol, Zomorph.
- (iii) It is not possible to detail the average length of time that patients in each constituency have been receiving opioid prescriptions. Individuals are prescribed opiate substitute treatment for various lengths of time and this is dependent on a number of factors including patient choice, planned detoxification, disengagement, transfer of treatment to other Trusts, and in some cases, death.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health how many women, since 2017, have been sent via the Extra Contractual Referral system to University College Hospital NHS England for the full removal of transobturator mesh implants.

(AQW 15787/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below provides the number of Extra Contractual Referrals approved to UCLH in respect of assessment and/or treatment related to mesh implants in each financial year since 2017/18. These referrals were approved to UCLH Clinical Director Professor Peebles and the UCLH Urogynaecology multidisciplinary team.

Year	Number of patients
2017/18	11
2018/19	<10
2019/20	<10
2020/21	0

It is not always clear at the point of ECR submission whether surgery/treatment will be required. Referral reasons will frequently be for assessment and appropriate treatment as decided by the specialist clinician to whom the patient is being referred in consultation with the local consultant.

The decision to refer, even where funding approval has been granted, will be a matter for the clinical decision of the referring consultant who may decide treatment outside N. Ireland is no longer appropriate.

The nature and timing of the treatment will depend on the patient's clinical circumstances and may not take place in the same financial year as the approval or may result in multiple treatments over a period of years.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health how many women from the north of Ireland were damaged from mesh implantation and were sent to University College Hospital surgeon, Jeremy Ockrim, to treat complications.

(AQW 15789/17-22)

Mr Swann: No women damaged from mesh implantation have been sent to University College Hospital surgeon Jeremy Ockrim to treat complications.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether he has investigated if the widespread use of mesh implants in our healthcare system is underpinned by any form of indemnity insurance provided by government to the manufacturer or provided by the manufacturer to government.

(AQW 15791/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Government does not indemnify medical device manufacturers against their liabilities in relation to their product. Manufacturers have a legal responsibility under medical devices regulations to ensure that their devices meet the safety, quality and performance requirements laid down in those regulations.

Healthcare providers should use medical devices for their intended purpose in line with the manufacturer's Instruction for Use and their professional training and competency. The manufacturer does not indemnify against wrongful practice by the healthcare provider in the use of their device.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Health when transport workers who work in close contact with members of the public, such as taxi drivers, bus drivers and driving instructors, will be included in the vaccination roll-out.

(AQW 15797/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am keenly aware of the contribution made by transport workers during the pandemic and the services they have continued to provide to the public are greatly appreciated.

The member will be aware that the vaccination programme will be rolled out in line with JCVI recommendations on priority groups. Beyond health and social care workers and care home employees, JCVI have not recommended the prioritisation of any other occupation group.

As such, the transport workers referred to above will generally be vaccinated in line with the age cohort of the population they belong to or based on their health or carer status.

It is hoped that vaccination will have been offered to the entire population by the end of Summer 2021.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what dental services for pregnant women have ceased due to COVID-19.
(AQW 15804/17-22)

Mr Swann: In light of the risk to public health due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the delivery of the majority of dental care across the UK was suspended in March 2020. Dental treatments involving Aerosol Generating Procedures (AGPs) resumed in Northern Ireland on 20 July 2020 however, enhanced infection prevention and control measures including additional Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) requirements and fallow time have limited the number of patients that can be seen each day. Currently, primary dental care activity levels are approximately 40% of those prior to the pandemic.

To ensure that this limited treatment capacity is targeted appropriately, guidance issued to all Northern Ireland General Dental Practitioners recommends that patients are seen on the basis of need and that patients requiring emergency and urgent care are given the highest priority. This may mean that some non-urgent dentistry, as determined by the dentist, will not be possible in the short term. This is the case for all patients, including those who are pregnant.

Dental practitioners will consider patients' dental health needs in the context of their general health when determining if a dental appointment is appropriate. This is a clinical decision for individual practitioners and their patients however, the General Dental Services have not been altered in any way to specifically reduce access to care for pregnant women during the pandemic.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how much Health and Social Care Trusts have paid to Totally Healthcare in the last five years.

(AQW 15805/17-22)

Mr Swann: South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust is the only Trust to have made payments to Totally Healthcare in the last five years, £506k was paid in 2019/20 in relation to engagement which commenced in quarter 4 of that year.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health when driving instructors, as a close contact service, will be included in the vaccination roll-out.

(AQW 15868/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member will be aware that the Northern Ireland Vaccination Programme will be rolled out in line with JCVI recommendations on priority groups.

Beyond health and social care workers and care home staff, JCVI have not recommended prioritisation of any other occupation group. In consequence, driving instructors will generally be vaccinated in line with the age cohort of the population they belong to. Those within that occupation group who are clinically vulnerable, carers etc will be vaccinated alongside those cohorts.

Ms Brogan asked the Minister of Health whether he has made contact with the families of those adversely affected by the underspend in Adult Learning Disability services in Western Health and Social Care Trust; and when he will agree a terms of reference for an independent investigation into the underspend in services.

(AQW 15870/17-22)

Mr Swann: Whilst COVID-19 has impacted on the capacity of my Department to progress important issues such as this, I however remain committed to considering how best to progress this matter at the earliest possible opportunity, informed by the views of the families affected. I expect to receive advice from officials on next steps in the near future.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 14643/17-22, why carers of clinically extremely vulnerable patients can no longer book an appointment for a vaccine online.

(AQW 15875/17-22)

Mr Swann: The open booking portal received over 50,000 bookings, and as all of the available slots were filled so quickly, online booking for this cohort has closed.

All main carers who have still to book an appointment for vaccination are asked to contact their local Trust Carer Coordinator, who will take their contact details and pass to the vaccinating teams who will make contact to arrange an appointment.

The Department of Health has worked closely with carers groups to get the main carers of clinically extremely vulnerable patients vaccinated.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQO 1215/17-22, whether he has received further clarity on capital budget availability to enable progress on the business case for improvements to Carrickmore Health Centre.
(AQW 15899/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have not received any further clarity and my response to AQO 1215/17-22 remains as the position.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health whether he intends to conduct a population health needs analysis as part of the recovery from COVID-19.
(AQW 15912/17-22)

Mr Swann: The usual starting point for reconfiguration of Health and Social Care services is a population health needs assessment and this will continue to be the case.

As you will also be aware, I have recently introduced the Health and Social Care Bill to the Assembly. As a first step in transforming how we plan services, the Bill will close the Health and Social Care Board and transfer strategic decision making back to my Department.

Building on this, I have recently approved a programme of work to develop a new way of planning and managing services; one based on integration and collaboration. Whilst still in its early stages, this new approach will seek to harness the strengths both within Health and Social Care and with partners beyond in planning services based on the needs of the local population.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health how his Department will promote direct engagement with local communities as part of any reconfiguration of health services as a result of the recovery from COVID-19.
(AQW 15914/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has been engaging with the Patient and Client Council on a number of programmes of work related to the rebuilding of Health and Social Care services. This involvement has included facilitating both engagement and co-production methodologies to ensure that the lived experience of service users and carers is represented.

Where rebuilding plans lead to significant change in the provision of services, these plans will be subject to public consultation in line with my Department's guidance 'Change or Withdrawal of Services – Guidance on Roles and Responsibilities' and statutory requirements for Personal and Public Involvement.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health what services and support are available to people who wish to detox from drugs in absence of inpatient beds in Belfast.
(AQW 15917/17-22)

Mr Swann: All patients in Belfast can benefit from the support of both statutory and community and voluntary services in detoxification (detox) from alcohol or other drugs. If more intense treatment is required, this can be facilitated through Belfast Health & Social Care Trust's day hospital facilities at Malone Place Day Treatment Unit.

For patients who require inpatient medically-assisted detox from drugs, this will be undertaken in any of the three Regional Inpatient Complex Detoxification and Stabilisation Units (based in Carrick 1 in Holywell Hospital, Ward 15 in Downshire Hospital, or Asha Unit in the Tyrone & Fermanagh Hospital). Referral and access to these beds is facilitated through Belfast Trust's Community Addictions Services.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Health whether students currently studying face to face in mainland UK will be able to travel home for Easter.
(AQW 15928/17-22)

Mr Swann: Under the current travel restrictions students studying face to face in other parts of the UK will be able to travel home for Easter. Those who are entering Northern Ireland from other parts of the Common Travel Area are asked to self-isolate if they are here for more than 24 hours. This is a Public Health requirement, rather than a legal obligation, and is designed to mitigate against the potential spread of COVID-19 variants which may be prevalent in other parts of the UK. Further information is available at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-travel-within-common-travel-area>

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health (i) how many medical negligence claims relating to the implantation of mesh implants where an Health and Social Care Trust and/or its employees are named as defendants have been received; (ii) how many of these claims were settled; and (iii) what were the settlement amounts.
(AQW 15945/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) 117 medical negligence claims have been received which relate to procedural use of mesh implants where a Health and Social Care Trust and/or its employees are named as defendants;
- (ii) & (iii) At this time none of these claims have been settled;

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health what are the legal costs incurred to date in the defence of medical negligence claims relating to mesh implants where the case (i) has been settled; and (ii) remains open.

(AQW 15946/17-22)

Mr Swann: Defence costs for individual cases are not available.

The Directorate of Legal Services operational costs are funded using a Service Level Agreement with HSC Trusts which charges on a block basis and hence costs are not attributable to individual cases.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health (i) what is the current availability of NHS registrations with dental practices; (ii) for his assessment of no NHS registrations being available in the Monkstown and Newtownabbey area; and (iii) what action he is taking to increase provision.

(AQW 15956/17-22)

Mr Swann: Routine dental care resumed on 20 July 2020 however, enhanced infection prevention and control measures including additional Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) requirements, fallow time and cleaning after Aerosol Generating Procedures (AGPs) limit the number of patients that can be seen each day.

To ensure that this limited treatment capacity is targeted appropriately, guidance issued to all Northern Ireland General Dental Practitioners recommends that patients are seen on the basis of need and that patients requiring emergency and urgent care are given the highest priority. This may mean that some non-urgent dentistry, as determined by the dentist, will not be possible in the short term.

Under normal circumstance a patient's registration with a Health Service dentist lapses 25 months after their last visit. Due to the limited number of patients that practices can currently treat each day, many registered patients will not be seen by their dentist for non-urgent treatment, such as check-ups, within 25 months of their last visit. To prevent patient registrations from lapsing, the Department have extended registration periods on a rolling 3 months basis since March 2020. Therefore, no patients have had their registration lapse since the start of the pandemic.

To support the sustainability of practices, in addition to providing funding for PPE, the Department established the General Dental Services Financial Support Scheme (FSS). The total level of FSS and net Item of Service (IoS) payments made between April 2020 and January 2021 is around £54.5 million (£40.7 million FSS) which represents a 35% increase compared with the net IoS payments made over this period in 2019-20. In addition, I recently approved a £1.5m non-recurrent grant scheme to assist dental practices improve ventilation within surgeries to increase patient throughput in line with the General Dental Services (GDS) Operational Guidance.

Neither my Department nor the Health and Social Care Board are aware of any specific issue affecting patient registrations in the Monkstown and Newtownabbey area beyond what has been outlined above.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of COVID-19 vaccines that have been dumped since the beginning of the vaccine roll-out.

(AQW 15980/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member will be aware our Trusts and GPs are managing their vaccination programmes very efficiently to minimise any wastage of the vaccine.

Due to this strategic planning Wastage rates in the current vaccination programme are far below usual wastage rates in other vaccination programmes. Latest figures suggest a wastage rate of 0.5% which reflects the measures already in place.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of (i) the anticipated one per cent pay rise offer for health workers; and (ii) the potential for strike action related to pay demands.

(AQW 15981/17-22)

Mr Swann: The pay round for 2021/22 has not yet been finalised. The one per cent referred to is included in the evidence submitted to the NHS Pay Review Body by the Department of Health and Social Care in England, which stated that any award above 1% will require re-prioritisation. This is not an offer of a pay award.

Any decision on a pay award for NI health workers will be taken after the pay review bodies make their recommendations. I do not intend to pre-empt those recommendations, nor speculate on the possibility of related industrial action. NHSPRB is expected to publish its report in May 2021.

Our pay award decisions can also only be taken in the context of a wider public sector pay policy set by the Department of Finance.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to offer more than a one per cent pay rise to nursing staff in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16012/17-22)

Mr Swann: The pay round for 2021/22 for nurses and other healthcare staff has not yet been finalised. The one per cent referred to is included in the evidence submitted to the NHS Pay Review Body by the Department of Health and Social Care in England, which stated that any award above 1% will require re-prioritisation. This is not an offer of a pay award.

Any decision on a pay award for NI health workers will be taken after the pay review bodies make their recommendations. I do not intend to pre-empt those recommendations. NHSPRB is expected to publish its report in May 2021.

Our pay award decisions can also only be taken in the context of a wider public sector pay policy set by the Department of Finance.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health for (i) his assessment of; and (ii) likely timescale for a salary increase for nurses.
(AQW 16018/17-22)

Mr Swann: The pay round for nurses and other HSC staff has not yet been finalised. The 1% referred to is included in the evidence submitted to the NHSPRB by DHSC, which stated that any award above 1% will require re-prioritisation. This is not an offer of a pay award.

Any decision on a pay award for NI health workers will be taken after the pay review bodies make their recommendations. I do not intend to pre-empt those recommendations. NHSPRB is expected to publish its report in May 2021.

Our pay award decisions can also only be taken in the context of a wider public sector pay policy set by the Department of Finance.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health to detail the annual cost of prescription fraud in each of the last three years.
(AQW 16020/17-22)

Mr Swann: Counter Fraud and Services (CFS) within the Business Services Organisation have advised that the costs of prescriptions are not routinely calculated as part of Fraud Investigations in relation to the public due to the relatively insignificant value.

CFS investigate these cases due to the risk of further fraudulent incidents, patient safety and/or the diversion of medication.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health what actions are being taken to provide healthcare workers with an income which recognises properly their roles and responsibilities.

(AQW 16056/17-22)

Mr Swann: Our health and social care workforce are employed within the HSC on Agenda for Change (AfC) terms and conditions, which matches roles and responsibilities to pay bands. The pay round for AfC staff has not yet been finalised. Any decision on a pay award for NI health workers will be taken after the pay review bodies make their recommendations. I do not intend to pre-empt those recommendations. NHSPRB is expected to publish its report in May 2021.

Our pay award decisions can also only be taken in the context of a wider public sector pay policy set by the Department of Finance.

Please be assured that both I and my Department remain committed to a fair pay settlement for all our healthcare staff going forward.

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Health what consideration his Department has given to utilising alternative health intervention schemes, such as those provided by leisure services across Belfast, to help ease the pressures of COVID-19, obesity and other health issues on the Health and Social Care Trusts.

(AQW 16063/17-22)

Mr Swann: In April 2020, the Public Health Agency (PHA) Health Improvement Division established a regional group to oversee recovery of health improvement services throughout the pandemic. The purpose was to provide services identified by PHA thematic-lead staff, based on experience, evidence of good practice and consultation with service providers, that could help mitigate against the impact of COVID-19 throughout our communities

This work will have helped to ease the pressures on Health & Social Care Trusts regarding COVID-19, obesity and other health issues.

A number of programmes associated with better physiological, psychological and psychosocial health have been developed and delivered throughout the pandemic. These include:

- Physical Activity Referral Programmes delivered in collaboration with 11 local councils
- Online physical activity resources for older people such as 'Move with Mary' and 'Good Vibrations'
- Early Years Obesity Programme
- 'Way to Health Pregnancy' delivered in collaboration with Health and Social Care Trusts.
- Promotion of better nutrition, via blogs, social media and webinars, food banks and food in schools programmes
- Online stress awareness sessions
- Stop smoking services

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, in light of the High Court ruling rejecting Professor Young's attempt to block professional investigative proceedings, for his assessment of whether Professor Young's position as the Chief Scientific Officer remains tenable.

(AQW 16070/17-22)

Mr Swann: As this relates to an ongoing legal/regulatory matter it would not be appropriate for me to comment. Such processes are independent of the Department.

Professor Young's position within the Department of Health remains unchanged.

I would; however, draw the Members attention to paragraph 3 of Mr Justice Holgate's ruling which states:

Likewise, although it will be necessary in this judgment to refer to findings which have been made by others, as well as to the allegations against the Claimant, it is not the Court's role in these proceedings to express any conclusions about the merits of those matters. This judgment should not be treated as if it does.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health when pharmacies will be able to administer vaccines as part of the roll-out programme.

(AQW 16072/17-22)

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 meeting the major public health challenge of our time, as soon as vaccine supplies permit.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health when he will introduce a statutory Duty of Candour.

(AQW 16073/17-22)

Mr Swann: As part of the Implementation Programme set up to progress the recommendations of the Inquiry into Hyponatraemia-Related Deaths, the Duty of Candour workstream and its Being Open subgroup developed a range of policy options to implement the recommendations, taking account of all the research, evidence and feedback from stakeholders. I have approved these policy options for a 16 week public consultation which should launch in April. Once the policy has been finalised post-consultation, legislation will be developed in order to implement the preferred approach.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health to detail the (i) winding down of the Health and Social Care Boards Governance arrangements with his Department and each Health and Social Care Trust; and (ii) relationship of the transfer of powers from the Health and Social Care Board to the Department and the Departments Management Board.

(AQW 16074/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) On the closure of the Health and Social Care Board and the transfer of responsibility for its functions to the Department:
- the HSCB's Board will be dissolved and scrutiny of the transferred functions will be managed through Departmental governance and audit arrangements. The term of office for the Chair and Non-executive Board members of the HSCB's Board will end in line with the closure date;
 - local commissioning groups will cease to exist but work is ongoing to ensure local input and intelligence into planning processes will continue;
 - the important work of a number of the committees of the HSCB is recognised and work is underway to ensure their continuation with the new operating model;
 - the Department's current sponsorship and governance arrangements for HSC Trusts will remain in place. The performance management function carried out by the HSCB will continue albeit as an integral part of the Department.
- (ii) Ultimately as Minister of Health accountability for the transferred functions will reside with me. Responsibility for the delivery of these functions will sit at departmental Deputy Secretary level. The Deputy Secretary, who will be directly accountable to the Permanent Secretary, will sit on the Department's Top Management Group and the Departmental Board and be subject to the appropriate level of scrutiny.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Health what his department is doing to mitigate the impact of Brexit on independent ambulance companies responsible for the cross-border movement of sick children.

(AQW 16098/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department has not been made aware of any impacts of EU Exit on independent ambulance companies. [As independent enterprises it would be the responsibility of the company to mitigate any impact of the UK leaving the EU.]

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Health whether he has made any offers to the Irish Government to assist in the rolling out of COVID-19 vaccinations to people across the island of Ireland.

(AQW 16126/17-22)

Mr Swann: Vaccine are supplied to the Northern Ireland Vaccination Programme by Public Health England. Northern Ireland receives its share of vaccines based on the Barnett formula.

To date, 634,019 persons have received a vaccine in Northern Ireland. All available vaccine supplied by Public Health England is deployed to vaccinate the eligible population of Northern Ireland as rapidly as possible.

As such, all resources currently available are deployed within Northern Ireland.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on future plans to enable General Practice to manage electronic prescribing systems.

(AQW 16147/17-22)

Mr Swann: Work has begun on a programme of work, led by the Health and Social Care Board to consider options for replacement of the current written prescription system with an electronic prescribing system. This aims to improve the patient experience by streamlining the entire prescribing and dispensing process. While this work is still at a relatively early stage, it is hoped that we may be in a position to possibly identify and procure a suitable IT solution to progress this programme of work during 2022 thus enabling the project to move into implementation during 2023 at the earliest.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health whether he has commenced the process to establish an office for an independent medical examiner to scrutinise deaths in hospitals that were not referred to the Coroner, as recommended in the O'Hara Report into the Hyponatremia Inquiry.

(AQW 16157/17-22)

Mr Swann: A process to establish an Independent Medical Examiner (IME) Office has commenced. To date, two prototypes have been undertaken to determine the most appropriate way for an IME service to operate. A third, and more extensive, prototype has been operating in two HSC Trusts since November 2020.

It is planned to expand this prototype further in the coming months to determine the full implications of such a system and will lead to the development of firm proposals for consultation.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of free prescriptions processed in each of the last three years.

(AQW 16182/17-22)

Mr Swann: Prescription charges were abolished in Northern Ireland on 1st April 2010. The number of prescription items processed in each of the last three calendar years is provided in the table overleaf.

Number of prescription items processed in each of the last 3 calendar years*

Year	Number of Prescription Items prescribed and dispensed*
2018	41,893,076
2019	42,538,093
2020	42,298,448

Source: Business Services Organisation

*The data provided only covers drugs dispensed in primary care; drugs prescribed and dispensed in hospital cannot be captured centrally due to the use of different hospital IT systems.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the remaining 10 month timeframe for the pharmaceutical industry to implement any changes to their supply chain prior to January 2022.

(AQW 16188/17-22)

Mr Swann: Some pharmaceutical industry colleagues have expressed concerns around the timeframe to implement the necessary changes to their supply chain prior to January 2022. In response to this the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove wrote to the European Commission to seek an extension to the current 12 month grace period (for compliance with the new importation requirements for medicines) until at least 1 January 2023. The letter from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster also requested a long-term approach to ensure no barriers of any kind to the movement of medicines into Northern Ireland.

My Departmental officials are engaging with DHSC on a work programme to help and support the pharmaceutical industry in their preparations to comply with the Protocol and to help ensure the availability of medicines for patients in NI.

DHSC plan to conduct an assurance survey of suppliers to understand the steps industry are taking to comply with the NI Protocol and highlight any areas or products of specific concern for supply and develop further mitigations, if necessary.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health for an update on his Department's feasibility study into the provision of bariatric treatment.

(AQW 16197/17-22)

Mr Swann: As a result of the need to respond to urgent demands arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, work taken forward by my Department to explore the feasibility of a bariatric surgery service has had to be temporarily paused. At this stage, our focus must be on rebuilding and restarting existing services. Work on the development of a bariatric surgery service will resume as soon as this is practically possible.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health how many staff have been trained to deliver the COVID-19 vaccine; and how many people are currently awaiting approval to become vaccinators.

(AQW 16239/17-22)

Mr Swann: HSC Trusts have made their own internal provision for staff to be trained to deliver the Covid-19 vaccine, however we are aware that over 1,300 staff have been trained.

In primary care HSCB required all GPs, nurses, pharmacists or other healthcare professionals giving the COVID-19 vaccination to undertake online training about COVID-19 vaccination, in addition to the core training for any vaccination which include managing emergencies the importance of cold chain, infection prevention and control etc.

Numbers of healthcare professionals trained in each practice were not requested and so HSCB cannot provide this detailed information.

In addition a workforce appeal was issued for healthcare professionals to come forward to support the Vaccination Programme. Some 1,395 individuals submitted application forms to assist as vaccinators during the programme and these individuals continue to be processed and trained to supplement and support the Trust and GP vaccination teams.

The PHA have contacted the 506 staff interviewed from the Workforce Appeal to check their availability over the next 20 weeks, with 170 willing to work at the Greater Belfast Centre at the SSE Arena, as well as interviewing 56 workforce appeal staff for administration posts.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health whether his Department will consider the provision of routine testing for group B strep for pregnant women.

(AQW 16252/17-22)

Mr Swann: The UK National Screening Committee has reviewed the evidence for screening for Group B streptococcus on a number of occasions, most recently in March 2017, and has concluded that a 'systematic population screening programme is not recommended'. Further research is due to start this year.

From 1 March 2021, all NI Trusts will move to using enriched culture medium (ECM) to test for GBS in pregnancy. Testing will be offered to women who had GBS detected in a previous pregnancy, at 35-37 weeks of pregnancy or 3-5 weeks prior to the anticipated delivery date, in line with current national guidance published by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in 2017.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether all staff within a GP practice are eligible for the £500 COVID-19 recognition payment.

(AQW 16259/17-22)

Mr Swann: The recently announced scheme for recognition payments will, subject to the meeting of certain eligibility criteria, extend to all health and care staff that have worked and contributed to delivering health and care services during the pandemic. This includes primary care independent contractors, including GPs and their staff who meet the eligibility requirements.

An FAQ on the special recognition payments, which includes details on eligibility criteria, has been published on my Department's website and is available at the following link;

- <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/hsc-staff-recognition-payment-faqs>

Officials in my Department are developing mechanisms to provide this payment to primary care independent contractors and their staff.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health what action has been taken to maintain fully accessible GP services at Bannview Medical Practice, Portadown.

(AQO 1763/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am aware of the clinical staffing issues in the Bannview GP Practice in Portadown Health Centre.

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 to the practices patients.

In the meantime GP support to the Practice is being provided by other local GP practices and the Federation GP Crisis Response Team.

The Practice remains open and patients should continue to contact the Practice as normal.

COVID-19 Vaccination Clinics continue to run and Childhood Vaccination and Smear Clinics are continuing as normal.

Pharmacy, first contact physiotherapy and access to mental health services continue to be provided and the Practice Administration team remains fully operational.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health for an update on any engagement with independent healthcare providers to reduce waiting lists, specifically around diagnosis and treatment.

(AQO 1767/17-22)

Mr Swann: Given the impact of COVID-19 on health service operating capacity, the HSC has secured theatre capacity during 2020/21 from the three local independent sector hospitals to treat the most urgent and time critical patients (i.e. those with confirmed or suspect cancer). These arrangements have allowed many hundreds of patients to be treated by HSC consultants in the private healthcare facilities - during the period 1 April 2020 to 14 February 2021, approximately 4,450 patients have had their procedures undertaken.

In addition, the HSC has secured capacity from a number of other IS healthcare providers both within Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland to provide assessments, diagnostics and treatments. Furthermore, a number of private healthcare providers are providing in-sourcing services whereby privately recruited teams of clinicians are providing services for HSC patients using available HSC infrastructure.

I have also established a regional approach to ensure that any available theatre capacity across Northern Ireland is allocated for those patients most in need of surgery as we come out of this surge. This approach will include seeking to fully maximise all available HSC and IS capacity.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Health how his Department will measure and evaluate the World Health Organisation's conditions for adjusting restrictions, as outlined in Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out Of Restrictions.

(AQO 1768/17-22)

Mr Swann: Work is ongoing within my Department with regards to how we will measure and evaluate the World Health Organisation's conditions for adjusting restrictions, as outlined in 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out Of Restrictions'.

My Department will monitor a range of indicators adapted from WHO guidance for our local context. The key questions that will be addressed by a suite of indicators and qualitative assessments are (1) is the epidemic controlled; (2) is the health system able to cope with a resurgence of cases that may arise after adjusting some measures; and (3) can the public health surveillance and contact tracing service identify most cases and their contacts in a timely way.

In order to ensure this is done safely, all decisions going forward will need to be carefully measured and evaluated; taking into account the numbers that have been vaccinated, as well as assessing the impact of lifting restrictions at each stage. Whilst we are all anxious to see life return to normal as soon as possible, we must tread carefully in order to protect our health service and those who are vulnerable to this virus.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Health when health and social care workers will receive the £500 staff recognition payment.

(AQO 1769/17-22)

Mr Swann: Payments will be processed as quickly as possible, however given the complexity of the task at hand, it will be the new financial year before payments are made. I cannot commit to any particular date at this stage.

Staff will be able to get up to date information from the FAQ published on the department's website, these questions will be updated as the scheme develops.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health for an update on Rebuilding Health and Social Care Services, with specific reference to post-viral and long covid conditions.

(AQO 1770/17-22)

Mr Swann: As we emerge from the severe COVID-19 surge, my focus is now turning to the rebuilding of services.

With respect to Post COVID-19 Syndrome, or 'long COVID', the National Institute for Care and Health Excellence published a rapid guideline on managing the long-term effects of COVID-19 in December 2020. This indicates that symptoms after acute COVID-19 are highly variable and wide ranging. This guideline has in turn informed work on the development of services for the assessment of people who continue to experience long-term health effects as a result of COVID-19 infection. The Health and Social Care Board have developed an initial proposal which my officials are currently considering.

On rebuilding more broadly, one of the key steps is to return critical care to its usual position. I have, therefore, agreed that the de-escalation of ICU and rebuild of elective care will follow a number of key principles, which will underpin Trust rebuild plans being developed for the three month period April – June 2021. The Belfast City Hospital Nightingale, will be prioritised for de-escalation to increase regional complex surgery capacity as quickly as possible, with initial focus being on the development of green pathways within the site.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Health to outline how he will address rising hospital waiting times as part of the health recovery from COVID-19.

(AQO 1771/17-22)

Mr Swann: I fully appreciate that every patient should be able to avail of the best treatment that the health service can provide, and in a timely manner. It is regrettable that any patient has to wait longer than is clinically appropriate and I fully understand the distress and anxiety that long waiting times cause, particularly when patients are suffering pain and discomfort, and I can assure you that waiting times for elective care remain a key priority for the health service in Northern Ireland.

There is no doubt that the pandemic has had a devastating impact on our hospital services, particularly elective care. As we emerge from the latest wave of the pandemic, the focus of our health service will continue to be on resetting all elective services in an environment that is safe for both staff and patients. The situation is extremely challenging. HSC Trusts are working with clinicians and the Health and Social Care Board to prioritise the care needs of patients who have been referred into the HSC and also to ensure that all available capacity is utilised as effectively and equitably as possible across the region.

The HSCB is also continuing to work with independent sector healthcare providers in order to increase the capacity available to the HSC to provide elective care in the coming months.

My Department is currently working alongside the HSC to develop a longer term approach to tackling our waiting lists on a sustainable basis. The approach will set out how we will restart elective activity as the process of de-escalation gets underway; how we will systematically reduce the backlog of patients waiting; and how we will redesign the service to enhance and protect elective capacity on a sustainable basis.

In the first instance, I have asked that the Nightingale should be prioritised for de-escalation to increase regional complex surgery capacity as quickly as possible. This should initially focus on the development of green pathways within the site. As the number of Covid-19 patients reduce further, the BCH will become a green site serving the region. I have also asked that all Trusts should seek to develop green pathways. The capacity to deliver these green pathways should be increased as more surge capacity is de-escalated and staff are able to return to their usual roles at the appropriate time.

As outlined in the Department's Rebuilding Health and Social Care Services: Strategic Framework, HSC Trusts are expected to prepare 3 monthly rebuilding plans setting out how routine activity will be restarted. Trusts are gradually increasing the provision of in-house theatre capacity which will help to equalize waiting times across the region.

Nevertheless, the scale of the gap between health service capacity and patient demand is continuing to increase. Without major sustained investment it will simply not be possible to return waiting times to an acceptable standard and to keep them there. I have made it clear that hospital waiting lists must be a major Executive priority in 2021 and beyond.

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister of Health whether safe staffing legislation will be introduced before May 2022.

(AQO 1772/17-22)

Mr Swann: Safe Staffing legislation is a commitment of the January 2020 Framework Agreement which resolved the Agenda for Change industrial dispute.

A working group, comprising officials from my Department and representatives from Trade Unions, including RCN, has been established and has met to consider the case for legislation. At this point, the scope, format (primary or secondary) and the scale of the legislation is not yet clear and therefore a timescale for its introduction cannot be confirmed.

Introducing legislation is not simply a matter of copying across from other jurisdictions, we each operate under a different legislative landscape. Introduction of any legislation will have to follow the appropriate processes of consultation and scrutiny.

Introduction of appropriate legislation is not a matter which should be rushed. Policy requires to be developed, consulted upon, finalised and agreed by the Executive, before a Bill may be drafted.

The drafting stage of any Bill usually requires a minimum of three months, and passage through the Chamber requires between six and nine months. Progress on passing a Bill is also highly dependent on sufficient scrutiny time for the Committee, and is impacted by other Bills which may be in front of the Committee. Any Bill, already drafted, would require to be laid in April this year to ensure its passage within the current mandate.

Please be assured that my Department is committed to developing, in partnership with trade union colleagues, employers and others, the case for safe staffing legislation to be introduced. Introduction of appropriate legislation is not a matter which should be rushed. Policy requires to be developed and agreed by the Executive, before a Bill may be drafted.

Please be assured that my Department is committed to developing, in partnership with trade union colleagues, employers and others, the case for safe staffing legislation to be introduced at the earliest legislative opportunity. Work will continue within my Department to ensure that a policy position is agreed, and a Bill prepared, for early consideration by the Chamber in the next mandate.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the GP out of hours service in Strabane.

(AQO 1773/17-22)

Mr Swann: The provision of the GP Out of Hours service in Strabane is the responsibility of Western Urgent Care.

The service provided by Western Urgent Care faces similar challenges to the other Out of Hours providers as a result of demand and difficulties in filling GP shifts.

Securing GPs to fill shifts is being exacerbated by the demands placed upon GPs during in-hours services, and the additional professional and personal demands placed on GPs by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Whilst the service has faced on-going difficulties in securing GPs to fill shifts it has continued to skill-mix the workforce to ensure that patients' urgent clinical needs can be met by the most appropriate healthcare professional.

The majority of patients who contact the Out of Hours Service do not need to be seen face-to-face by a GP, nor clinically triaged by a GP. Many patients can be safely and effectively clinically triaged by either a Nurse Advisor, Prescribing Pharmacist, Paramedic Practitioner or Nurse Practitioner.

Patients can receive clinical advice from a Nurse, have a prescription confirmed by a Pharmacist or be seen in their home by a Paramedic Practitioner. This means that the GPs and Nurse Practitioners will be available to see clinically urgent patients face-to-face, should it be necessary.

Western Urgent Care has developed its workforce to include these roles in order to ensure that the needs of patients can be met.

Due to the current Covid-19 situation Western Urgent Care has introduced a number of processes to deliver urgent care in alternative ways to patients, such as the use of video consultations and arranging for prescriptions to be sent to the patient's local pharmacy.

Patients who have an urgent clinical need will still be prioritised and offered a face-to-face appointment.

Where a base is not fully staffed and several patients need to be seen in that area, Western Urgent Care arrange for a clinician to travel from another base to attend and see these patients.

Alternatively, a patient can be offered an appointment at an alternative base or with the GP who is working the next shift in their local base.

The GP also undertakes any home visits needed for patients in the area before returning to their original base.

Western Urgent Care continues to work with GPs and the Health and Social Care Board to identify opportunities to develop the Out of Hours Service to meet the needs of patients.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Health, following the paper submitted to the Executive in April 2020, to outline the work his Department has undertaken to prepare for the commissioning of abortion services.

(AQO 1774/17-22)

Mr Swann: In April 2020 my Department invited the Executive to give its agreement to explore options to see whether it is possible to put in place some limited measure of access to a commissioned Early Medical Abortion service in Northern Ireland during the Covid-19 emergency. This proposal aimed to mitigate the travel restrictions preventing women from Northern Ireland accessing the abortion service available in England. The Executive did not agree to my Department's proposal. My Department resubmitted this proposal to the Executive in May 2020. As the Executive has not agreed to this proposal no further work has been taken forward by my Department.

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Health for an update on developing COVID-19-light sites for surgeries and other cancelled procedures.

(AQO 1775/17-22)

Mr Swann: Each winter, we see the impact of unscheduled pressures on planned services. The Covid-19 pandemic has further emphasised this. For infection control purposes there are clear benefits in separating elective care on either green sites or green pathways. There are also clear benefits to service delivery where planned care can be delivered in a controlled environment, separate from the more unpredictable unscheduled care.

As we emerge from the latest wave of the pandemic, the focus of our health service will continue to be on rebuilding all elective services in an environment that is safe for both staff and patients.

The Day Procedure Centre at Lagan Valley Hospital is continuing to operate effectively as a green site for high priority daycase procedures. It continues to provide much needed support to the region as we begin the process of rebuilding our elective services.

In terms of the Belfast City Hospital Nightingale, I have agreed that this is prioritised for de-escalation to increase regional complex surgery capacity as quickly as possible. This will initially focus on the development of green pathways within the site. As the number of Covid-19 patients reduce further, the Belfast City Hospital will become a green site serving the region.

As part of the rebuilding process I have asked all Trusts to develop green pathways. The capacity to deliver these green pathways should be increased as more surge capacity is de-escalated and staff are able to return to their usual roles at the appropriate time.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 5042/17-22 (i) what progress has been on made the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan; and (ii) whether the plan will contain proposals for a rail halt in Central Craigavon.

(AQW 15454/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): My officials are currently developing a new suite of transport plans, and the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) is the first in line for completion. It will set out future investment and improvement for our strategic transport networks, by road, rail and bus, and reflect my commitment to improving connectivity for the benefit of our economy and communities across all of the North. Officials are continuing to make progress and I intend to publish the draft RSTNTP for public consultation in late 2021, with a view to issuing the finalised Plan in spring 2022.

I recognise the potential which additional halts on our railway network could provide to areas such as Craigavon. I am keen to explore all options to enhance rail across our island and proposals for any new halts will be considered including within the RSTNTP, 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 the practicalities of expanding the network.

The public consultation on the RSTNTP will provide an opportunity for representations to be made, including the creation of additional rail halts.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 14607/17-22, AQW 14608/17-22 and AQW 14609/17-22, (i) whether she is aware that her officials have informed elected representatives that the consultation carried out was flawed; and (ii) whether she has accepted this consultation as an accurate and true reflection of the views of those residents who live in the area.

(AQW 15484/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am not aware of officials informing elected representatives that the consultation carried out was flawed although I am aware that elected representatives have stated that inaccurate information was provided to residents by objectors to the scheme.

The consultation process is most effective when residents form their opinions and provide responses on the basis of accurate information. However upon completion of a consultation exercise, any representation received from a resident must be accepted as reflecting the views of that resident and my officials must follow due process thereafter.

As you are aware DfI remains committed to introducing a local restricted residents' parking scheme but as there was a significant level of opposition from local people to the Bogside Residents' Parking Scheme, a reduced scheme for the Rossville Street area of Derry, for which there is local support, is currently being considered.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the A5 road scheme.

(AQW 15496/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Following a public inquiry held during February and March of 2020, my Department received an interim report from the Planning Appeals Commission in the latter part of last year. My officials have considered the issues raised and recommendations made in that report and have taken legal advice. I have been carefully considering all of the advice given and I hope to be in a position to make an announcement on the next steps for this important flagship project very soon.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the projected completion dates for the (i) Derry to Strabane; (ii) Strabane to Omagh; and (iii) Omagh to Aughnacloy sections of road as part of A5 Western Transport Corridor works.

(AQW 15586/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Following a public inquiry held during February and March of 2020, my Department received an interim report from the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) during the latter part of last year. My officials have given consideration to the issues raised and recommendations made in that report and have taken legal advice.

I have carefully considered all of the advice received and on 16 March I announced the publication of the PAC Interim Report. I have accepted the Commissioner's key recommendation regarding the preparation of and consultation on further documents on the important topics of flood risk and the consideration of alternatives to the proposed scheme. I also published the Department's formal response to all the recommendations made by the PAC in the form of an Interim Departmental Statement.

I also asked officials to prepare a further addendum to the Environmental Statement for consultation in early autumn 2021. I anticipate that this approach will lead to the re-opening of the Public Inquiry, as recommended by the Planning Appeals Commission, early next year. It will enable the Inquiry to consider further public representations made on the two key topics of flood risk and scheme alternatives and furnish the Department with its final report later in 2022 allowing a decision to be made on the next steps for this important, transformative scheme.

I would once again re-iterate my commitment to the A5WTC flagship project, which is of significant strategic importance to the region, helping to tackle regional imbalance, improving the economy, job prospects and prosperity, connecting communities and improving road safety.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the consultation on a 20mph limit as part of the Open Ormeau project will commence.
(AQW 15647/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department's work on the Open Ormeau Initiative has so far focussed on the relocation of 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 including any potential changes to speed limit. This is timetabled for this autumn.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 4456/17-22 whether a traffic management survey has been concluded.
(AQW 15664/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The criteria for a traffic calming assessment includes factors such as speed and volume of traffic, the most up to date three years personal injury collision statistics and environmental factors such as the proximity of public buildings and the nature of the road.

Due to the ongoing reduction in traffic movements, primarily associated with the current health crisis, a survey has not been carried out as it is considered the findings would not be reflective of the actual activity on the street/road. Our intention is to carry out the survey when traffic patterns have returned to more normal levels as this will ensure that decisions that are made are informed by information that better reflects the normal conditions in an area.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to improve road safety on the Hillsborough Road, Carryduff.
(AQW 15670/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I fully recognise the importance of road safety measures and am committed to exploring solutions that deliver better for communities and improve lives across the North.

The Department receives many requests for traffic calming and would very much like to be in a position to fulfil all valid requests. Unfortunately, due to challenging budget constraints, those areas requiring most urgent attention are given priority. For consistency and fairness, the current criteria through which such requests are assessed, includes factors such as speed and volume of traffic, the most up-to-date three years personal injury collision statistics and environmental factors, such as the proximity of public buildings and nature of the road which in this case is a local distributor road.

My officials from Roads Eastern Division are aware of a recent incident on the Hillsborough Road involving a single vehicle and 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.

My Department has also recently carried out an assessment of the road for the possible introduction of traffic calming measures and this indicated that a scheme at this location is currently placed 121st on the list of sites that have been assessed for traffic calming measures within the Roads Eastern Division area.

Given the number of other areas competing for inclusion within the Traffic Calming Programme that are deemed to be a greater priority, it is not possible to provide traffic calming measures at Hillsborough Road, Carryduff at this time.

If residents consider there is a persistent problem with speeding, or persons driving inappropriately in this area, they should report such incidents to the PSNI on their non-emergency number 101.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many accidents have occurred on the Saintfield Road, Belfast, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 15671/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that my Department does receive information from the PSNI on collisions involving personal injury to inform the planning and prioritisation of road improvement schemes.

It has been assumed your query relates to the section of the Saintfield Road between the Upper Knockbreda Road/Forestside junction and Carryduff Roundabout (excluding the two junctions). The information held by the Department, which includes data for the 3 years up until 31 March 2020, indicates the number of injury collisions as follows:

- 1 April 2017 – 31 March 2018 - 20
- 1 April 2018 – 31 March 2019 - 20
- 1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020 - 13

Should you require any further or more detailed information, I would suggest that you contact the PSNI FOI team at Lisnasharragh Police Station, Belfast.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 9728/17-22, for an update on when work will commence at Patton's Lane, Holywood.

(AQW 15684/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Environmental Improvement scheme planned for Patton's Lane in Holywood is being delivered in partnership with the Department for Communities. The scope of the works and the design principles were agreed at a meeting involving my officials and counterparts from the Department for Communities.

The proposed work at this location involves the provision of a new surface enhanced with natural stone and this will greatly improve the overall appearance of the area. More detailed investigation also identified the need for improvement of the existing drainage systems. My Department is now seeking to undertake the necessary design work with a view to having this scheme completed during the next financial year; however this will be subject to the availability of funding.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail plans of her Department's flood alleviation scheme recently commenced on Prince William Road, Lisburn.

(AQW 15697/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As you are aware I recently announced a new flood alleviation scheme along the Flushbridge Stream in the Prince William Road area of Lisburn. This £900,000 scheme, which commenced on 22 February 2021, consists of the installation of approximately 850 meters of 1,200mm diameter concrete culverts along with associated manhole and headwall installations to increase the capacity of the drainage network to convey river flows. The works are currently on schedule and are due to be completed in the autumn of this year.

The works will be programmed to minimise any inconvenience to the public and when completed will provide enhanced protection against flooding to approximately 100 properties in the Prince William Road area, including a local Primary School.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many electric vehicle charge points have been delivered in Northern Ireland through her Department's contribution of circa £450,000 towards the FASTER project.

(AQW 15698/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am pleased that my Department has been able to commit co-funding through the INTERREG VA Territorial Co-operation Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), to support the FASTER Project.

My Department will provide the funding to the SEUPB through the agreed drawdown process for the INTERREG Programme which is dependent on the timetable it has agreed with the project promoters.

The FASTER project is currently in the early stages of implementation, and no charging points have been installed to date. On completion of the project, my Department will have provided circa. £450,000 of match funding towards the installation of 73 electric vehicle rapid charging points across the programmes eligible area.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the outcome from the review of York Street junction up-grade plans, initiated in July 2020.

(AQW 15707/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I commissioned a short sharp review of the York Street Interchange scheme to ensure it is future-proofed and forward looking. I have now considered the outcome of the review and am currently considering the next steps make before making an announcement.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail all land disposals made by her Department in North Belfast since January 2020.

(AQW 15760/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has disposed of one area of land in North Belfast since January 2020, specifically an area measuring 0.0103 Hectares at 18 Clifton Street that was transferred to an adjacent land owner in March 2020.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the Carryduff Greenway project as it pertains to NI Water property.

(AQW 15763/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The proposed Carryduff Greenway scheme is a Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council project. I have encouraged all Councils to work with communities, landowners and other stakeholders in developing agreed proposals that can help deliver greenway projects and I would encourage all public bodies to engage constructively with Councils to deliver these schemes. It is a matter for the Council to engage with any landowners along the Carryduff Greenway route including, where appropriate, Northern Ireland Water

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Infrastructure what method is used when prioritising roads for defect repairs.

(AQW 15766/17-22)

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. This duty is fulfilled by complying with a set of Maintenance Standards for Safety which are designed to ensure a consistent service level across the network and safe highways for all road users.

To meet the requirements of the Maintenance Standards, my Department engages in a system of regular inspections of the road network. Inspection frequencies vary from daily inspection cycles for motorways to six monthly inspections for carriageways carrying low volumes of traffic. The standards also specify a range of response times for the repair of defects which depends on factors such as defect severity and the volume of traffic using 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. If it becomes apparent that the relevant response time cannot be met, then my Department has the option of installing signs to warn road users of the potential danger.

In 2020/21, as in the previous year, the highest priority road defects will continue to be fixed across the entire road network. As a result safety related defects greater than 50mm in depth are being repaired across all roads and, on high traffic roads in both urban and rural locations, defects greater than 20mm in depth are also being repaired.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Infrastructure what measures her Department takes when road repairs have been carried out to a poor standard by contractors.

(AQW 15767/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Utility companies are responsible for permanent reinstatement of roads to an agreed specification. While they usually engage contractors to carry out works on their behalf, the utility company is ultimately responsible for the reinstatement of the street. 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.

Where a utility company fails to reinstate to an acceptable standard, the reinstatement defects are notified to the utility company responsible for the repair or replacement. Where necessary, additional inspections are carried out by my officials, at the utility company's expense, to ensure the defects have been corrected.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail capital expenditure dedicated to roads in North Antrim during 2020/21.

(AQW 15783/17-22)

Ms Mallon: We do not hold the information requested by parliamentary constituency, however, a breakdown of the capital allocation for DfI Roads Northern Division is provided in the table below:

Northern Division Capital Budget 2020-21 Year

	£k
Local Transport & Safety Measures	2,867
Street Lighting	5,486
Structural Maintenance	19,336
Strategic Road Improvements	86,182
Total Capital Allocation	113,871

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there have been any reported accidents or injuries caused to users of the Comber Greenway, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 15839/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There have been no formal reports to my Department of collisions or injuries along the Comber Greenway in the last three years. However we have been made aware of a small number of accidents through correspondence or other contacts by elected representatives.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to alleviate flooding on Knockbracken Road, Belfast.

(AQW 15843/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My officials have investigated the localised surface water flooding which periodically occurs on Knockbracken Road, between Ballymaconaghy Road and Knockbracken Road South, during periods of prolonged heavy rainfall. I am advised that the road gullies at this location are piped to a manhole which discharges into an adjacent agricultural sheugh. A site inspection indicates this sheugh is poorly maintained and is deemed to be a major contributor to the drainage problems in the area.

In addition to making arrangements for the cleaning of the road gullies and high pressure jetting of any associated drainage outlets, my Department will also be writing to the relevant riparian land owner advising them of their maintenance responsibilities under the Drainage (Northern Ireland) Order 1993.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail revenue expenditure dedicated to roads in North Antrim during 2020/21. (AQW 15860/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not maintain a record of expenditure in the format required, however I can provide the member with resource allocation for 2020-21 in respect of DfI Roads Northern Division as detailed in the table below.

Northern Division Resource Budget 2020-21

	£k
Total Resource Allocation	10,839

DfI Road Northern Division is coterminous with District Council boundaries; Newtownabbey & Carrick, Mid & East Antrim and Causeway Coast & Glens.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to allocate more resources to enable swift processing of Bus Operator Financial Assistance Scheme Northern Ireland 2020 grant applications. (AQW 15861/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Officials have completed processing all the grant applications received under the Bus Operator (Coronavirus, Financial Assistance) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister for Infrastructure what roads in East Derry will benefit from the Road Recovery Fund, broken down by postcode. (AQW 15869/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not at this time hold information in relation to what schemes might be included in future Rural Roads programmes. While programmes are currently being developed, you will appreciate that they cannot be finalised until budgets for 2021/2022 have been confirmed. Programmes and schemes for the incoming year in East Derry will be included in the DfI Roads Spring Report which will in due course be presented to Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council and published online thereafter.

Roads in Causeway Coast and Glens West (an area that broadly aligns with East Derry) that have benefited from the Rural Roads Fund this year 2020/21, are listed below:

- U3570 Keady Park Clarehill, Aghadowey
- A2 Dunluce Road, Portrush
- A54 Agivey Road, Kilrea
- U3526 Woodland Park Kilrea
- U3377 Blackrock Road Kilrea
- U3310 Glen Road Garvagh
- Burnside /Prospect Road Portstewart
- B0070 Boleran Road, Garvagh
- Boleran Park, Garvagh
- U3032 Craigaboney Road, Portrush
- Ballyclough Road, Bushmills
- U2510 Crawford Square Limavady
- U2243 Straw Road, Dungiven
- C0096 Corbally Road, Portrush
- Terrydremont Rd, Limavady
- Carlaragh Road, Limavady
- U3366 Brone Road, Garvagh culvert
- C0529 Drumsurn Road @ Drumsurn Village
- C0529 Drumsurn Road at No 225
- C0529 Drumsurn Road at Drumgavenny bridge
- U3321 Artidillon Road, Articlave
- C0542 Lisnamuck Road, Coleraine
- B66 Ringsend Road , Limavady
- B0201 Windyhill Road Culvert, Coleraine
- U2239 Moys Road, Limavady
- U2248 Gortnahey Road, Dungiven
- U2219 Sheskin Road, Greysteel
- B0192 Drumrane Road 2, Limavady

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of implications the British Government's budget announcements has had on her Department. (AQW 15872/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Following the Chancellor's announcement on 3 March 2021, I have determined that there are no immediate direct impacts on my Department. However, the significant change to the Corporation Tax rate may be a concern for my Arm's Length Bodies from 2023 and this will require careful consideration.

I am also seriously concerned at the announcement that the Levelling-up Fund will be administered by the London Government, effectively by-passing locally elected, locally accountable Ministers here who are best placed to make local decisions on behalf of local people. I have met with a number of British Government Ministers and continue to stress my concern that investment is needed to deliver on our priorities set out in New Decade New Approach and that under our devolution settlement, the autonomy of the NI Executive must be respected.

While funding to address Covid pressures is available, at this stage I am not aware of pressures reported by other Departments; therefore, it is difficult to assess the scale of funding required.

My officials will continue to engage with the Department of Finance to assess any further issues that may arise.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department is revisiting the issue of support for taxi operators.
(AQW 15873/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I would refer the Member to my responses relating to AQW 13088/17-22 and AQW 15295/17-22.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of planning permissions being issued for new developments that involve the Newtownbreda wastewater treatment works, given it has insufficient capacity.
(AQW 15925/17-22)

Ms Mallon: It is the responsibility of the relevant planning authority to ensure that it processes and determines each planning application properly, within the legislative and policy context, and takes into account the individual circumstances of each case, which will include advice from relevant statutory consultees.

NI Water is one of the statutory consultees in the planning process and it exercises due diligence in the provision of evidence-based recommendations regarding planning applications, to the relevant planning authority. It is a matter for the planning authority whether to refuse or approve any planning application.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure what guidance has been issued to NI Water in relation to their assessment of planning applications where the wastewater treatment works has insufficient capacity.
(AQW 15926/17-22)

Ms Mallon: No specific guidance has been issued to NI Water, in relation to its assessment of planning applications and wastewater treatment capacity.

NI Water is a statutory consultee in the planning process and it exercises due diligence in the provision of evidence-based recommendations regarding planning applications to the relevant Planning Authority i.e. each of the eleven councils or my Department's Strategic Planning Directorate, as appropriate. NI Water uses a number of tools to ascertain wastewater capacity in an area, including Drainage Area Plan Model data, where available.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has any plans to redevelop or upgrade the area around the Kinnegar Lagoons and Tillysburn River near the Belfast Harbour Estate.
(AQW 15929/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Under the Living With Water Programme's (LWWP) Belfast Strategic Drainage Infrastructure Plan (Belfast SDIP), my Department is planning a number of drainage and wastewater related improvements around the Kinnegar Lagoons and Tillysburn River, near the Belfast Harbour Estate.

Detailed appraisals are underway to inform the scope of the capital projects and to enable consultation on the more detailed plans. However, at this stage, it is likely that the works will include:

- Replacement of Kinnegar wastewater treatment works, expected to commence around 2024. At this stage, it is intended that this will take place within the footprint of land owned by NI Water; and
- Work to sewerage networks to provide increased capacity, to reduce the risk of out of sewer flooding and address the pollution entering watercourses, the lagoons and the sea from a number of unsatisfactory intermittent discharges, from combined sewer overflows.

This investment will build on improvements already completed in the area in 2017, which resulted in a major programme of sewer laying, tunnelling work and the construction of a major pumping station. That Environmental Improvement Scheme was instrumental in protecting the local environment and reducing odours affecting residents in the area.

The pace at which this investment can proceed is dependent on the provision by the NI Executive of funding for the implementation of the LWWP's Belfast SDIP and the ongoing technical appraisals and business cases.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 8864/17-22, (i) whether she has received a briefing on options in relation to the draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP); (ii) whether she has any plans to adopt the BMAP in the current mandate.
(AQW 15930/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The draft plan and all representations received to it, together with the Planning Appeals Commission inquiry reports, continue to be material considerations to be weighted by the decision maker in the determination of planning applications. Draft BMAP also provides a more up to date evidence base for the creation of local development plans by councils.

My officials are continuing to develop briefing on options in relation to draft BMAP which will be provided to me soon.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will carry out cleaning of road sides and slip roads on the A1 from the Carnbane Junction to the Cloughogue Roundabout.

(AQW 15941/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has responsibility for the maintenance and cleaning of the A1 dual carriageway and slip roads, including the section from Carnbane Junction to the Cloughogue Roundabout. This work is carried out through the Design Build Finance and Operate Package 2 (DBFO P2) Contract.

Driven inspections are carried out daily to identify and remove objects that may cause a hazard to road users with weekly inspections carried out to identify those locations that may require sweeping and or cleaning. Newry and Mourne District Council is responsible for the clearing of litter along these stretches of road.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will advocate on behalf of driving instructors with the Minister of Health for clarity on when driving instructors will be included in the vaccination roll-out as a close contact service.

(AQW 15944/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The COVID-19 vaccination programme in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), an independent medical and scientific expert body which advises the UK government on prioritisation for all vaccines. The JCVI recommended that the primary purpose of the vaccination programme should be to prevent COVID-19 mortality and protect health and social care staff and systems. Its secondary focus should be to protect those at increased risk of hospitalisation or exposure and to maintain resilience in essential public services.

The Department of Health has published a vaccination phased plan document on their website (COVID-19 vaccination programme phased plan). There are no plans to prioritise those working in close contact services, such as driving instruction, for vaccination. It would not be appropriate to advocate for a variation from the agreed prioritisation plan, which has been recommended by JCVI.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for an update on the options paper for a pedestrian crossing at the McDonalds restaurant on the McKinsty Road; (ii) whether the options paper has been completed; and (iii) when will construction work commence.

(AQW 15948/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As you are aware my officials from Roads Eastern Division have commissioned a feasibility study on options to improve pedestrian facilities in the vicinity of the new McDonald's restaurant, at the McKinsty Road Roundabout, Derriaghy.

I can confirm that my officials in Eastern Division have received an initial report and the consultants are now working on more detailed options.

After the study has been completed and options considered, my Department will then be in a position to advise on possible improvement works and the likely timescales. It is currently expected the more detailed findings of this study will be available around the end of April 2021.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure before its closure, how many passengers were using the Donaghadee to Belfast railway line per annum.

(AQW 15949/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As the Donaghadee to Belfast railway line, which was operated by the former Belfast & County Down Railway company, closed in April 1950 my Department does not hold records on the passenger usage of this service.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure why a long-term lease for angling permit holders to fish Portavoe Reservoir was not part of the sale of the site.

(AQW 15950/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has advised that the sale of Portavoe Reservoir was in compliance with a High Court ruling granting pre-emption rights which required the reservoir to be sold to successors in title of the landowners from which it was acquired. The court ruling did not contain any provision allowing a long term lease for angling permit holders to fish Portavoe Reservoir and therefore it could not require such a lease as part of the sale.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 15526/17-22, (i) whether NI Water are aware of who made the unauthorised connection to the combined sewer network; (ii) what action do they propose to take against those involved; (iii) what are the estimated costs of any temporary remedial work already carried out; (iv) what is the estimated cost to fully terminate the connection; and (v) whether those involved be required to meet all costs incurred by NI Water in relation to this matter.

(AQW 15954/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has advised me that: (i) it is not currently aware of who made the connection to the sewer network, (ii) it will pass all relevant information to its Compliance and Legal teams if those involved can be identified. (iii) the estimated cost for the temporary repair carried out will be in the region of £2,000, (iv) the full cost for the sewer repair is expected to be

between £4,000-£5,000 and (v) following the completion of investigations, and remedial work, a rechargeable claim may be prepared for the NI Water Claims Team for further consideration.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the resurfacing of Springfield Road, Portavogie from the Anchor Car Park to Seaview Court will commence.

(AQW 15972/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As I am sure you will appreciate the demand for resurfacing far outweighs the available resource and therefore schemes have to be prioritised after due consideration of the many other roads in similar or worse condition.

The resurfacing programme for 2021/22 can only be finalised upon confirmation of the budget allocation to my department, with details subsequently presented to Ards and North Down District Council at the Spring/Autumn meetings, prior to general release.

Therefore I am currently unable to confirm if Springfield Road will be included within next financial year's resurfacing programme.

Ms Brogan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) what engagement she has had with Fermanagh and Omagh District Council to pursue parklets as an option for our hospitality industry; and (ii) for her assessment on what is needed to make parklets a reality.

(AQW 16019/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Officials from my Department sit on the Omagh and Enniskillen town centre recovery groups organised by Fermanagh and Omagh District Council. Both groups discussed pavement cafes and partial pedestrianisation of streets last year but there have been no specific requests or detailed applications made.

My Department is finalising guidance on parklets which will shortly be issued to Councils, and Business Improvement Districts, to set out the process to be used. This guidance will make clear that the success of parklets, or other similar interventions, requires full engagement in advance with all businesses and the wider community to ensure the support of all stakeholders for the interventions being proposed.

My officials will be happy to engage with Fermanagh and Omagh District Council on any proposals for parklets, or other interventions to assist the hospitalisty industry, which the Council wish to bring forward.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on prioritisation for driving tests.

(AQW 16066/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Driving instruction was stopped by the Executive from 26 December 2020, which meant that driving tests were also stopped from that date. They have been included by the Executive in phase two of the Covid Recovery Roadmap. In line with the Executive process, the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) is actively liaising with the Department of Health to facilitate a number of priority requests identified by employers, for key workers whose jobs are ancillary to medical, health or social care services or where there is threat to life, who are required to drive for the purposes of their work. It is for the relevant employers to contact the Agency directly to identify their staff that fall within these priority groups and the DVA will then endeavour to facilitate priority appointments for both theory and practical driving tests, where possible.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the current resource her Department has allocated to scrutinise the Local Area Plans for all local councils.

(AQW 16076/17-22)

Ms Mallon: To date, the Department have provided formal representations to the seven draft Plan Strategies that have been published. I am aware that early engagement takes place between DfI and local councils in this important work area and that good relations have been developed both formally and informally between the area plan teams

All business areas within DfI which includes Planning, Roads, Rivers, Transport Planning and Modelling Unit, and Water Drainage and Policy Division meet regularly as a steering group to discuss each stage of a council's LDP to ensure that the appropriate advice and information is relayed in respect of regional policy. With the exception of planning, these are not full time roles and work is prioritised as the plans are received from councils, by the Strategic Planning Division Plan Oversight Team.

The Department, in its statutory consultee capacity, have recently participated at the Belfast City Council Independent Examination (IE), and have now also caused the IE for Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, to be conducted by the Planning Appeals Commission later this year.

My department will continue to engage positively with local councils in their LDP preparation and assist them as they progress through this busy work programme.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of whether the current resource allocation within her Department allocation is sufficient to scrutinise the Local Area Plans for all local councils in the set time frame.

(AQW 16077/17-22)

Ms Mallon: It is anticipated the Local Development Plan work programme will be challenging for all stakeholders involved as a number of councils progress their plans at a similar pace. However progress will be monitored and continued engagement with individual councils will be important.

The Department regularly liaise with the Planning Appeals Commission regarding the upcoming LDP work programme and will continue to monitor and review the programme as plans are progressed.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the Roads Division (i) resource; and (ii) capital budget for 2020/21. **(AQW 16088/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: My Departments Roads resource and capital budgets for 2020-21 are as set out in the table below.

DfI Roads Budget 2020-21

	£m
Total Resource Allocation	181.4
Capital Allocation	230.4

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number of existing temporary promotions within the Department for Infrastructure that have lasted (i) under six months; (ii) six to twelve months; and (iii) over twelve months. **(AQW 16092/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: At 28 February 2021, my Department had a total of 159 Temporary Promotions in place. Of these:

- i 69 were in place for less than six months;
- ii. 25 for six to 12 months; and
- iii. 65 for over 12 months.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline Translink's policy on helping people who are visually impaired to use public transport. **(AQW 16105/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: My Department and Translink work closely with groups such as the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), Guide Dogs and the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC) to identify and address physical and non-physical barriers to public transport including for those who are blind and partially sighted. Translink has developed policies and procedures in conjunction with RNIB and IMTAC to ensure that passengers who experience sight loss difficulties can safely travel on public transport services whilst maintaining social distancing measures.

All train services provide audio visual in journey information and all Translink Metro including Glider vehicles provide audio visual next stop information. The technology behind this will be rolled out to Goldline and Urby services with further work being undertaken to extend this across the Ulsterbus network.

Guide dogs and other recognised assistance animals are all welcome on all public transport services and in stations. All bus drivers have been trained to provide all reasonable assistance to passengers who require it at a bus stop or on their journey and I can confirm that this requirement to provide assistance hasn't changed as a result of the current COVID-19 restrictions.

In addition, Translink's timetables are available in large print, braille and audio to assist with our public's needs and, to build on this, a number of changes are also being introduced to Translink's website to ensure compatibility with main screen-reading browsers and voice technologies such as Alexa.

My Department and Translink will continue to work with all stakeholder groups to understand their particular needs and ensure these needs are considered as part of any alterations to public transport services.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number of road defects identified since 1 January 2021, broken down by local council area. **(AQW 16109/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: Details of the number of carriageway, hard shoulder and layby surface defects (which includes potholes, cracking, depressions etc.) in each local council area that have been recorded and listed for repair, from 1 January 2021 to 11 March 2021, are set out in the table below:

Council Areas	Surface Defects Recorded 1st Jan - 11th Mar 2021
Antrim and Newtownabbey	2202
Ards and North Down	1437

Council Areas	Surface Defects Recorded 1st Jan - 11th Mar 2021
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	4140
Belfast	1788
Causeway Coast and Glens	2347
Derry City and Strabane	2418
Fermanagh and Omagh	3807
Lisburn and Castlereagh	2018
Mid and East Antrim	2292
Mid Ulster	3702
Newry, Mourne and Down	3647

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how her Department intends to improve the planning system with regards to sustainable development and addressing the climate threat.

(AQW 16110/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The overall objective of the planning system is to further sustainable development. The Regional Development Strategy 2035 (RDS) and the Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland (SPPS) provide the key guiding principles for planning in Northern Ireland and both recognise the need to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

My Department's planning officials continue to engage with a wide range of stakeholders; are involved in a number of forums to take forward relevant research; share best practice and ensure that the planning system continues to be fit for purpose and evolves to reflect key developments in respect of sustainable development and climate change.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Review of Old Mineral Permissions.

(AQW 16111/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have asked officials in my Department to prepare a briefing paper regarding the review of old mineral planning permissions (ROMPs). This will require an up to date assessment of the operational effectiveness of the legislation, as well as further engagement with stakeholders to consider the practical impacts of ROMPs, including the resourcing implications for planning authorities and operators. Once this paper is complete, I intend to look at all options and will decide on the best course of action to take as soon as is reasonably practicable.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has considered any road safety risks by not allowing self-service jet wash services for cars to operate, including drivers having clean and clear windows, maintaining functioning lights and reducing the risk of hazards from mud on wheels.

(AQW 16115/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Executive has decided that many businesses and services should remain closed in order to reduce the spread of Covid 19. The Department for Infrastructure (Dfi) has regularly and will continue to issue advice to the Northern Ireland public around the importance of vehicle maintenance.

There would clearly be a road safety risk should a driver not maintain their vehicle properly. Through press releases that I have issued and my Department's social media channels and the road safety social media channels on 'Share the Road to Zero', messages have been issued reminding vehicle owner's that it is their responsibility to make sure their vehicle is in a roadworthy condition to be used on a public road.

My Department reminds road users that the Highway Code NI advises to stay safe and keep your vehicle in good working order during the winter. More recently, my Department has extended this advice during the pandemic as many MOT services have been unavailable due to Covid-19 restrictions.

Advice reminds owners they should continue to carry out basic checks such as, amongst others, regularly checking tyre pressures and tread depths, fluid levels, looking out for brake wear and ensuring that all lights are working and ensuring windows and mirrors are clean and clear. DVA have also made several videos demonstrating maintenance advice, again shared on our social media channels. Many messages also signpost readers to the vehicle maintenance advice available within Annex 6 of the Highway Code NI and on nidirect.

Furthermore, the PSNI and insurers expect drivers and riders to comply with their legal obligation to keep their vehicle in a roadworthy condition if they are using it on the road.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 15580/17-22, whether her Department remains of the view contained in the Draft Partial Regulatory Impact Assessment conducted in respect of the Review of Old Minerals

Permissions that the majority of quarries operating in Northern Ireland when Planning Service was formed in 1973 did not have specific planning permission and operated under permitted development rights granted under the Planning (Interim General Development) Order (NI) 1944.

(AQW 16163/17-22)

Ms Mallon: It remains the case that quarrying before 1973 operated under planning permission granted by virtue of the Planning (Interim General Development) Order (NI) 1944.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether her Department charges demolition permission fees for existing buildings in Northern Ireland; and (ii) to detail the level of fees.

(AQW 16165/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There is no provision under The Planning (Fees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 for the payment of fees in relation to the demolition of an existing building.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will carry out a traffic assessment for potential traffic calming on Clontigora Road through Killean, Newry.

(AQW 16168/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department recognises the importance of road safety measures and is committed to exploring solutions that deliver better for communities and improve lives across the North. I can confirm that an assessment of the Clontigora Road has been completed. This road is a through route where the National Speed limit applies and therefore provision of road humps would not be appropriate at this location.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will repair urgently the potholes on (i) Upper Seafin Road; and (ii) Carrivekeeney Road, Newry.

(AQW 16169/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Carrivekeeney Road is a rural low trafficked road on which routine safety inspections are carried out every six months and you will be aware from earlier written correspondence that my Department has developed plans to improve the road drainage and carry out resurfacing of Carrivekeeney Road early in the new financial year, subject to the availability of funding.

In the meantime, my Department will continue to carry out routine safety inspections of Carrivekeeney Road when any actionable defects will be recorded and actioned for repair.

Similarly Upper Seafin Road is a rural low trafficked road which is inspected on a six monthly basis. It was most recently inspected in early March 2021 when a number of defects which exceeded the current intervention criteria were identified. A works order for repairs has been raised and it is anticipated the work will be completed shortly.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on whether the Driver and Vehicle Agency intends to offer online theory tests.

(AQW 16191/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As advised in my answer to AQW10733/17-22, driving theory tests are currently delivered here via a network of six theory test centres; Ballymena, Belfast, Derry, Newry, Omagh and Portadown. Test centre staff are required to verify the identity of the candidate and their entitlement to take their test. Candidates are subject to a number of security checks to prevent prohibited items from entering the test room, and test sessions are invigilated in order to prevent misconduct. These requirements are designed to detect and prevent fraud, which has the potential to impact upon the integrity of the test.

The administration and delivery of the driving theory test is currently facilitated by a joint Authority contract with the Driver & Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) based in Great Britain. The Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) has been working in partnership with the DVSA on the replacement for the current theory test service contract. As part of that work the possibility of delivering the driving theory test via an online facility has been fully explored and assessed. Those explorations provided evidence that technology is not yet at the stage to provide the necessary assurance that security requirements could be met, and, as the integrity of the test must be protected against fraud and impersonation, this approach is not currently possible. However work will continue to enable a move to online tests in the future when the technology has developed.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether permitted development rights were increased to include the demolition of vacant commercial buildings for redevelopment into residential units in Northern Ireland, as was introduced in 2020 in the UK.

(AQW 16247/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that permitted development rights in the North have not been changed to include the demolition of vacant commercial buildings for redevelopment into residential units.

I am aware of the changes to permitted development rights in England and the controversy that their planning relaxations have raised around the possible damaging effects on local democracy and community engagement, the quality and size of the new homes to be created, residential amenity and the potential impact on the historic and natural environment.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a list of potential (i) local transport; and (ii) safety measures in North Down currently under consideration by her Department.
(AQW 16248/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As advised in recent correspondence, Local Transport and Safety Measures (LTSM) programmes are only finalised after budgets for the year have been confirmed. This seeks to ensure the limited funding available for works of this nature is targeted towards the highest priority schemes where the need is greatest.

Details of the work programmes are initially presented to Council in a report and then published. For ease of reference, the latest 2020/21 Roads Report for Ards and North Down Borough Council can be viewed via the following link: <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/annual-report-ards-and-north-down-borough-council-20202021>

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a list of requested road resurfacing projects in North Down.
(AQW 16250/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Information held by my Department is based on Council area rather than Constituency and the list of roads within the Ards and North Down Area for which resurfacing has been requested also includes some schemes identified by departmental officials. Capacity to deliver these schemes is dependent upon the availability of funding for capital resurfacing. It should be noted that the following list of schemes is not in a priority order and will change over time as schemes are delivered, road conditions change and other worthwhile schemes are identified:

- | | |
|---|---|
| ■ Kinnegar Drive (incl. Footways), Holywood; | ■ Elmwood Drive, Bangor; |
| ■ Ballyvester Grove, Bangor (including parking bay); | ■ Hawthorne Court, Bangor; |
| ■ Newtownards Road (crossover point North of ASISSI), Bangor; | ■ Woodlands, Holywood; |
| ■ Shandon Park West, Bangor; | ■ Rutherglen Gardens, Bangor; |
| ■ Bexley Parks, Bangor; | ■ Sinclair Road, Bangor; |
| ■ Moore Drive, Helen's Bay; | ■ Hawthorne Drive, Bangor; |
| ■ Riverside Road, Bangor; | ■ Henderson Avenue, Bangor; |
| ■ Sandhurst Park, Bangor; | ■ Fernbank Road, Bangor (Rodney Pk to Fernbank Rd) |
| ■ Silverstream Estate, Bangor; | ■ Golf Road, Kelen's Bay |
| ■ Clifton Road, Bangor; | ■ Grange Road, Bangor |
| ■ Croft Street, Bangor; | ■ Moyne Road, Conlig |
| ■ Richmond Crescent, Bangor; | ■ Grove Hill Gardens, Bangor (F & C/way) |
| ■ Ardmillan Grove, Bangor; | ■ Summerhill Gardens, Bangor (F & Cway) |
| ■ Ardmillan Park, Bangor; | ■ Greenway, Conlig |
| ■ Ardmillan Gardens, Bangor; | ■ Rathgill Parade, Bangor |
| ■ Ardmore Park, Holywood; | ■ Lyndhurst Crescent, Bangor |
| ■ The Green, Conlig; | ■ Beechwood Gardens, Bangor |
| ■ Hillside Gardens, Bangor; | ■ Beechwood Avenue, Bangor |
| ■ Towerview Avenue, Bangor; | ■ Troutbeck Avenue, Bangor; |
| ■ Ardlee Avenue, Holywood; | ■ Station Road, Crawfordsburn; |
| ■ Church Drive, Bangor (N'ards Rd to end); | ■ Southwell Road, Bangor; |
| ■ Kilbourne Park, Bangor; | ■ Beechfield Park, Conlig |
| ■ Chippendale Estate, Bangor; | ■ Beechfield Avenue, Conlig; |
| ■ Clanmorris Avenue, Bangor; | ■ Beechfield Drive, Conlig; |
| ■ Marlborough Avenue, Bangor; | ■ Tower Road, Conlig; |
| ■ Main Street, Conlig; | ■ Downshire Road, Bangor (Maxwell Road to Coastal Path); |
| ■ Carrowdore Gardens, Bangor; | ■ Downshire Road, Bangor (Maxwell Road to Princetown Road); |
| ■ Manse Road, Bangor; | ■ Bangor Road, Holywood; |
| ■ Fernmore Park, Bangor; | ■ Balloo Drive turning circle, Bangor; |
| ■ Fernmore Avenue, Bangor; | ■ Ballymacormick Road, Bangor; |
| ■ Linden Gardens, Bangor; | ■ Brunswick Park, Bangor; |
| ■ Linden Park, Bangor; | |
| ■ Castle Park Avenue, Bangor at Valentine Road; | |

- Spenser Street, Holywood;
- The Meadow, Groomsport;
- Glencraig Park, Holywood;
- The Hill, Groomsport (remaining sections);
- Willowbrook Park and Rise, Bangor;
- Willowbrook Road, Bangor;
- High Donaghadee Road r'bout approach inc, HFS, Bangor;
- Ava Street, Bangor;
- Meadow Grove, Crawfordsburn;
- Meadow Park North, Crawfordsburn;
- Meadow Park, Crawfordsburn;
- Farnham Park, Bangor;
- Clandeboye Road, Bangor at Football ground;
- High Street, Holywood;
- Park Drive, Bangor;
- Elmwood Drive, Bangor;
- Church Avenue, Holywood;
- Dickson Park, Ballygowan;
- Crawfordsburn Road, Bangor;
- Alanwood Park, Bangor;
- Donaghadee Road, Bangor;
- Grange Crescent, Bangor;
- Killinchy Road R'about to Ballydrain Road, Comber;
- William Street, Donaghadee;
- Killinchy Road Ballydrain Road to Drumhirk Road, Comber;
- Comber Road, Ballygowan
- Belfast Road, Comber
- Wellington Gardens, Bangor;
- Wellington Drive, Bangor;
- Wellington Park, Bangor;
- Chippendale Vale, Bangor;
- Wandsworth Area, Bangor;
- Clandeboye Place, Bangor;
- Cleland Park North, Bangor (Bitmac sections);
- Cleland Park South, Bangor (Bitmac sections);
- Primrose Street, Bangor (Primrose Av to Southwell Rd section);
- Silverbirch Grove, Bangor;
- Somerset Avenue, Bangor;
- Groomsport Road, Bangor (Windmill Road to Roundabout);
- Ashbury Grove, Bangor;
- Hazeldene Gardens, Bangor; and
- Stanley Road, Bangor.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail her Department's plans for (i) road resurfacing schemes in Newry and Armagh for 2021/22; (ii) surface dressing schemes in Newry and Armagh for 2021/22; and (iii) any minor works schemes in Newry and Armagh in 2021/22.

(AQW 16352/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can assure the Member that I want to do more to improve the condition of the road network for all road users however I am constrained by the level of funding available to me and will continue to stress to my Executive colleagues the need for investment in roads infrastructure to help address regional imbalance, help communities and improve safety. The 2021-22 budget process launched by the Department of Finance is expected to conclude in March 2021, when the Finance Minister announces the Departmental budgets in the Assembly. As part of that process, I have included a bid of £120.0m for capital structural maintenance which I hope the Finance Minister will support and recommend to the Executive.

I can confirm that a provisional list of schemes is being developed across all programmes for delivery during the 2021-22 financial year, however these programmes cannot be finalised until my Department's 2021-22 budget allocations are confirmed. Once agreed programmes will be included in the Spring Council reports which will, in due course, be presented to Newry, Mourne and Down (NMD) and Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon (ABC) District Councils before being made publically available online.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans her Department has to increase provision of e-car charge points (i) across Northern Ireland; (ii) within urban residential areas; and (iii) within areas of parking restraint.

(AQW 16395/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The electric vehicle public charge point network is owned by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and is operated on a commercial basis. It is responsible for the operation, maintenance and development of the network. I would also confirm, that ESB currently does not charge e-car drivers for the use of its public charge points in Northern Ireland. There are currently 320 22kWh (Fast) charge points at 160 locations and a further 17 50kWh DC (Rapid) public charge points in the North. 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. Whilst the market is open to other commercial operators who would wish to provide charging infrastructure, to date, ESB is the only public network provider in the North.

My officials are currently considering the future requirements in terms of public charge point infrastructure across Northern Ireland including, within urban residential areas and within areas of parking restraint. Officials 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 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.

Funding opportunities for the installation of charge point infrastructure in GB-NI are provided by the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV). My Department has been engaging with OZEV and with the Energy Saving Trust (EST), who administer the On-street Residential Charge Point scheme (ORCS), in particular, with reference to councils in the North. The EST held a workshop last year with local councils about the scheme and has indicated its intention to hold further events to support councils in the North interested in applying to the ORCS scheme in the next financial year. My Department has also engaged with a number of local councils in relation to the need for more electric vehicle charge points, including more recently with regard to ORCS. I appreciate that not everyone can install a charge point as this requires either a garage or a driveway at their home. Therefore, the installation of on-street residential charge points, in urban residential areas, is essential going forward. My officials will continue to make themselves available to local councils to provide assistance, advice and guidance in respect of electric vehicle related matters.

I have 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 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. As part of this work my Department, is in the process of commissioning research to consider future demand for charge points in Northern Ireland. 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.

I remain committed to working in partnership with Executive colleagues and others across our islands to help deliver a change in the way we travel that also helps us to tackle the climate crisis.

Department of Justice

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice whether a template for written submissions to the Troubles-related Victims Disablement Payment has been distributed to victims groups for feedback.
(AQW 15618/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Officials have been engaging regularly with a number of organisations representing victims and survivors of the Troubles to inform implementation of Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme including WAVE Trauma Centre, Relatives for Justice, South East Fermanagh Foundation (SEFF), The Ely Centre, Commission for Victims and Survivors and the Victims and Survivors Service.

Draft application forms for the Scheme have been shared with the organisations on a number of occasions which has generated helpful feedback. The Victims' Payments Board is responsible for final approval of application forms for the Scheme.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Justice why her Department is intent on reopening the security gates at Flax Street and Crumlin Road without an open and transparent consultation with the Woodvale community around the issue.
(AQW 15652/17-22)

Mrs Long: A consultation exercise undertaken by an independent consultant (that was completed in March 2020) contained a section seeking views from Woodvale residents about the proposed replacement of the Flax Street security barriers with an automated gate. The new gates will remain a designated DoJ-owned interface security structure 'for the preservation of the peace or the maintenance of order'.

As part of the Department's endeavours to address concerns raised by residents and locally elected representatives, the new gates will be automated, operated by the PSNI and covered by CCTV in order to ameliorate any residual risks. The new gates offer the potential to improve the visual amenity of the area, increase access to services, reduce congestion, enable access and egress for the emergency services and to create passive surveillance - improving the wider community safety of the area.

In February, my Department wrote to almost 1000 households in the Woodvale and Ardoyne areas to advise them of the proposals for the Flax Street barriers.

The Executive is committed to reducing or removing interface barriers. I believe that the proposed replacement of the existing interface security barriers on Flax Street is a positive and a proportionate step in the context of the multi-million pound investment that is occurring either side of the existing security barriers at Flax Street through both housing-led and retail-led investment.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice to detail journeys provided by PSNI close protection security for her travel during the 2019/20 financial year.
(AQW 15794/17-22)

Mrs Long: For security reasons I do not disclose details of my travel.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice whether her Department contribute financially to the close protection security measures supplied by the PSNI for her travel arrangements.

(AQW 15795/17-22)

Mrs Long: Close protection security measures are funded from the PSNI's budget.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Justice to detail the areas of responsibility that fall within her Department's remit in relation to the PSNI.

(AQW 15807/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department of Justice is responsible for the strategic policy, legislative and resourcing framework within which policing operates. It is the sponsor department for the PSNI. It sets long-term objectives for the policing of Northern Ireland which must be taken into account by the Policing Board in setting its own objectives for policing. The Department is the principal legislative authority for policing-related matters in Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Justice has personal responsibility for approving the appointment of the Chief Constable and other senior officers on the recommendation of the Policing Board and for the commissioning of inspections.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Justice whether she is aware that Twaddell, Ardoyne, Shankill Communities in Transit representatives are calling for a full and open consultation in the Woodvale area in relation to any potential opening of the security gate at Flax Street.

(AQW 15834/17-22)

Mrs Long: A consultation exercise undertaken by an independent consultant (that was completed in March 2020) contained a section seeking views from Woodvale residents about the proposed replacement of the Flax Street security barriers with an automated gate. The new gates will remain a designated DoJ-owned interface security structure 'for the preservation of the peace or the maintenance of order'.

The Department has not received any call by representatives of the Twaddell, Ardoyne, Shankill Communities in Transition (TASCIT) group for a further consultation exercise.

The Executive is committed to reducing or removing interface barriers. I believe that the proposed replacement of the existing interface security barriers on Flax Street is a positive and a proportionate step in the context of the multi-million pound investment that is occurring either side of the existing security barriers at Flax Street through both housing-led and retail-led regeneration.

The opening times of the gates have yet to be finalised, but they are likely to follow the times of other similar interface vehicular and pedestrian access gates operating at other locations across Belfast.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Justice whether she intends to introduce legislation to expand culpability to those in a position of power who engage in sexual activity with a child.

(AQW 16050/17-22)

Mrs Long: I am fully committed to increasing the protection available for our young people in this important area. I, therefore, intend to strengthen the law by bringing forward specific provision to widen the scope of the current abuse of trust offence by way of amendment to the forthcoming Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill in the course of its passage in the Assembly later this year.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the Troubles-related incident Victims Payment Scheme.

(AQW 16051/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department advanced the work necessary for the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme to open for applications in line with the target date of March 2021. That includes: development of an IT system to accept on-line applications; engagement with organisations who will provide supporting evidence; recruitment of administrative staff; and engagement of Capita to design a medical assessment service to assess the level of permanent disablement for applicants, where relevant. The Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission also completed the appointment of members to the Victims' Payments Board.

Opening the Scheme was envisaged to be a two stage process, with design of the medical assessment service continuing in parallel with applicants preparing their documentation. However, following consultation with the main groups representing victims and survivors of the Troubles, Mr Justice McAlinden, President of the Victims' Payments Board, has indicated their preference for guidance on the medical assessment service to be available to applicants in advance of the scheme opening for applications, allowing a single stage process.

The President has been engaging with Capita around the timeframe for development of the medical assessment guidance and also plans further discussion with the main groups representing victims and survivors. It will be a matter for the President and the Victims' Payments Board to confirm when the scheme will open for applications.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of whether the current resource allocation within the Planning Appeals Commission is sufficient to scrutinise the local area plans for all Councils in the set time frame.

(AQW 16080/17-22)

Mrs Long: NICTS, in consultation with the Chief Commissioner, has prepared a detailed business case for additional Senior Commissioner and administrative resources to support the Planning Appeals Commission in delivering their statutory obligations within Section 10(4) of the Planning Act (NI) 2011. These powers were given effect through the introduction of the Planning (Local Development Plan) Regulations (NI) 2015.

The additional resources to support the independent examination of the councils' Local Development Plans are now incorporated within NICTS funding proposals for the full period of the business case from 2020/2021 to 2023/2024.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Justice whether she is developing a strategy to combat racist hate crimes following the publication of statistics showing an increase in racist incidents and crimes in some districts.

(AQW 16173/17-22)

Mrs Long: Racism, as with all kinds of intolerance, is a blight on our society that needs to be addressed by all those within it. The Department of Justice (DoJ) is committed to playing its part in delivering a safer community for all, including victims of race hate crimes, and in partnership with others in Government and beyond.

Work is already ongoing within my Department to combat racist hate crimes, as part of wider hate crime actions, and to support victims of all crime, including race hate, through the Victims and Witnesses Strategy. However, it is clear that there needs to be an important emphasis on preventative actions, focused on societal attitudes and community cohesion. This preventative approach includes building relationships and support within communities to develop more cohesive communities, which can challenge attitudes to behaviours that may lead to race hate crimes and prevent them happening in the first place.

DoJ officials are therefore in discussion with The Executive Office, which has responsibility for the Racial Equality Strategy and T:BUC Strategy aimed at improving good relations, to discuss opportunities to connect and strengthen this work with community safety commitments.

DoJ has also commenced cross departmental conversations on tackling enabling factors of hate outside the criminal justice system (following a Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland strategic recommendation) which requires a delivery commitment from others. This work is aimed at identifying other relevant Departmental strategies and actions which can be utilised to address underlying factors of (race) hate crime, and strengthen a strategic and cohesive approach, including on societal factors and raise public awareness.

When prevention has not worked, improving the effectiveness of the criminal justice system is considered necessary as a robust response to enforcement. Implementing Judge Marrinan's review of hate crime legislation will play a significant role here. My officials are currently analysing the recommendations and developing a Departmental response to the Review with a view to introducing legislation in the next mandate.

It is my intention to work with others to ensure communities are integrated within society, and negative attitudes and behaviours are tackled, including how good relations work can be broadened to create cohesive communities.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of Orange Halls that have been subjected to vandalism in each of the last five years.

(AQW 16230/17-22)

Mrs Long: Information on offences reported to the police and associated statistics, including those on the number of Orange Halls that have been subjected to vandalism in each of the last five years, 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.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Justice when she intends to produce a strategy to combat violence against women and girls.

(AQW 16353/17-22)

Mrs Long: I fully recognise the very specific experience that women and girls face within society, particularly their experiences of both direct and indirect violence. It is an issue that is extremely important to me and one I have prioritised during my time as Justice Minister.

This has included an ambitious agenda of activity and new laws to protect those most at risk of violence including, but not limited to, the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act, a Stalking Bill and changes to implement recommendations from the Gillen Review on Serious Sexual Offences.

Whilst many of these measures ensure protections are available to all victims, they will disproportionately benefit women and girls due to the gendered nature of many of these offences, and will ensure that we are in a better place at the end of this mandate.

In terms of a violence against women and girls strategy, I am supportive of such a strategy being developed. You will be aware that there is already a cross-departmental strategy in place, on which my Department leads alongside the Department of Health, that covers some of the key justice issues in this space. The Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse strategy is aimed at tackling domestic and sexual violence for all victims, regardless of gender or sexual orientation etc. in line with Section 75 requirements and reflecting that 30% of domestic abuse victims are males and 40% of domestic homicides are male.

However, violence against women and girls, and any work to meaningfully change their experience, is much broader than domestic and sexual violence. We must recognise that violence can come in many forms: physical violence, but also “indirect” violence, such as emotional or psychological violence, or harassment. Issues of gender inequality and societal attitudes are key to changing the lived experience for women.

Any steps to address this are not solely, or even primarily, for Justice. Any strategy to address violence against women and girls, to be effective and holistic, requires societal and cultural change from the roots up as early as possible. We need to change behaviours, ensuring that there is meaningful change upstream, on preventative initiatives, and a commitment to changing societal attitudes through more targeted education and relationship awareness. Any such approach cannot be simply about responding once offences have been committed, or ensuring that appropriate criminal justice responses are in place – though this is of course an important part of it.

As such, I see this as a cross-cutting issue that requires Executive leadership, cross-departmental co-operation and support to deliver effectively. I have, therefore, tabled an Executive paper on this matter to determine a way forward.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Justice whether she plans to bring forward legislation to amend Clause 28 of the Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 to include those in a position of trust in areas of sport and religion.
(AQW 16431/17-22)

Mrs Long: I intend to widen the scope of the current position of trust legislation, which I plan to achieve through an amendment to the Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill during the course of its passage in the Assembly later this year.

At this early stage, whilst I cannot be specific on the precise detail of what will be included in my proposal, I can confirm that my Department will continue to work with key partners who are experts in this area, including NSPCC and those representing the interests of faith groups and sports organisations. This will help ensure that an inclusive and workable solution can be achieved.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of (i) the media ban imposed on the Soldier F Bloody Sunday murder hearing; and (ii) whether this move infringes on journalists’ role as defenders of the principle of open justice as per *Scott v Scott* [1913] AC 417.
(AQW 16448/17-22)

Mrs Long: The granting of an anonymity order is a judicial decision following submissions to the court in each case. The longstanding principle of judicial independence precludes me from commenting on judicial decisions.

An anonymity order may be granted for defendants, victims or witnesses and normally prohibits the naming of an individual but does not prohibit the reporting of the proceedings.

Open justice is a key principle of the justice system and of society, however a court may, in the interests of justice, deem it necessary to depart from this principle.

Department for the Economy

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy when AQW 10167/17-22 will be answered.
(AQW 11590/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): AQW 10167/17-22 was answered on 11h December 2020.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for the Economy given that Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) people have been advised by the Chief Medical Officer that they should not attend work, what financial support will be made available to self-employed people who are CEV or live with someone who is.
(AQW 12649/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: On 3 December 2020, I launched the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme (NSESS), which was specifically targeted at those who started trading in 2019/20 and were originally excluded from the UK government’s Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS).

Whilst the NSESS was open to applications from those who are Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV), other avenues of support are available to those contracting COVID-19 and/or needing to self-isolate.

The Department for Communities (DfC) put in place a series of changes to ensure that the social security system is more flexible, to relieve hardship and to ensure people most in need get the help and support they require. In addition, DfC's 'Discretionary Support Scheme' was enhanced in March 2020 and provides a non-repayable Discretionary Support Self-Isolation grant where a person or a member of their immediate family is diagnosed with COVID-19 or is advised to self-isolate in accordance with guidance published by the Public Health Agency.

The DfC 'Make the Call' service also 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 and 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.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy how much has been spent to date on developing the High Street Voucher Scheme; and what it has been spent on.

(AQW 13642/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In preparation of the scheme being implemented my Department retained £2m for administrative and development costs. To date approximately £50k has been spent on developmental costs associated with initial procurement and project management costs.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 12779/17-22, whether the payments to remaining applicants includes those under Part B of the Scheme.

(AQW 13974/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Payments to remaining applicants are in the process of being made and include those who applied under Part B of the COVID Restrictions Business Support Scheme.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister for the Economy, in light of announcements from Motability UK, whether Northern Ireland dealerships will be allowed to offer showroom viewings to customers purchasing motability vehicles under the scheme.

(AQW 14520/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is not within the remit of my Department. It is for the Department for Health to answer.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy when AQW 13559/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 14727/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The response to AQW 13559/17-22 was issued on 1 March 2021. Pursuant to this, on 11 March, the Executive announced a Covid support scheme for travel agents experiencing difficulties as a result of the pandemic. The new scheme which will be delivered by The Executive Office, includes a flat payment of £10k to travel agency businesses operating from commercial premises, or £3.5k payment to self-employed travel agents working from home. The scheme will be launched on 19 March 2021 and will be open until 26 March 2021.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy what her Department is doing to ensure the 18,000 premises that 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, and particularly those in rural areas, will also be provided with next generation access broadband services.

(AQW 14970/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Project Stratum target intervention area was revised following the receipt of updated broadband coverage data from suppliers during the procurement process. This related mainly to a national data refresh exercise undertaken by a major supplier, which resulted in just over 18,000 premises being de-scoped from the target intervention area. The new data received indicated that these premises were already able to access services of 30 Megabits per second or greater, or would be able to do so within the period of the Project Stratum Open Market Review, ending in January 2022.

If there are premises for which the data held by my Department is found to be incorrect, my officials will explore the possibility of bringing those premises into the Project Stratum intervention area. However, this would be subject to the necessary funding being available to cover the cost of those additional premises, and to value for money considerations.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the legal status of live music performances; (ii) the current rules and guidance on music performances; and (iii) the current financial support available for self-employed musicians.

(AQW 15127/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is not within the remit of my Department. This is for the Department for Health to answer.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has carried out any work to ascertain the number of people dismissed who have been unable to attend work due to shielding requirements.

(AQW 15199/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department does not collect or hold information on individual cases of dismissal. There is no requirement for employers to notify the Department of an individual dismissal, nor the reason for that dismissal.

In these challenging times I would encourage employers to treat all staff fairly and respect employee's rights. They should give due consideration to available options such as home working where possible, their Company Sick Pay Scheme if they have one, Statutory Sick Pay and the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme – now extended to 30 September 2021 - when trying to assist those who have been advised to shield.

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 Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what engagement she has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer in regards to the need for an extension to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme past the current end date of 30 April 2021.

(AQW 15208/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Whilst the Department for Finance leads on engagement with Treasury, I wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 26 February 2021 in regards to the need for an extension to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme past the current end date of 30 April 2021.

I also wrote to him on the same subject last summer, requesting an extension to a previous deadline.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will review her recently published Economic Recovery Action Plan to ensure actions to maximise the benefits of Northern Ireland's dual market access to the UK Market, and EU Single Market for goods form part of the plan.

(AQW 15385/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: 'Investment, Trade and Exports' is one of the four key themes of my Economic Recovery Action Plan. This sets out that Northern Ireland is a great place to work and do business in. My Department, along with Invest NI, has never stopped promoting that message around the globe.

I have always been clear that my first priority is addressing the frictions relating to new requirements under the Protocol for moving goods from GB to NI, inputs which our businesses so depend on, including for exports.

I will continue to engage to resolve these issues for businesses so that we can continue to demonstrate that NI is an exceptional place to invest in, and to support our businesses to ensure they can grow their exports to their key

markets within the UK, EU and beyond. This is a key part of my Economic Recovery Action Plan, and one I intend to continue to build on.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for the Economy what provisions have been made to ensure that financial aid has been provided for dry cleaners.

(AQW 15530/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: To date, my Department has provided over £390 million of lifeline support to over 30,000 businesses and individuals, and is currently delivering millions of pounds to thousands more. Dry Cleaners who pay business rates on their premises will have been entitled to apply for the business support grants that were made available from April 2020, through the Department for the Economy. 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. Therefore, dry cleaners who are in the supply chain of a business required to close under the health regulations, have been able to apply for financial support through this particular scheme.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the impact of the reported 25 per cent departmental staff vacancy rate on the delivery of COVID-19 support; and (ii) what actions her Department is taking to address this issue.

(AQW 15708/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Officials across my Department are balancing the day to day activities alongside priority work areas including the Covid-19 pandemic response, EU Exit and putting place plans for economic recovery and our vision for the future.

Despite having a relatively high vacancy rate, the Department, in conjunction with Invest NI which delivers a number of schemes, has developed and delivered significant support to the economy at speed and under difficult and pressurised circumstances. The delivery of support in response to the Covid-19 pandemic remains a priority for the Department and the allocation of staffing resources reflect that priority.

Officials working on the support schemes are also having to respond to the extensive volume of correspondence received by my Department which includes machinery of government requests, putting further pressure on delivery teams and impacting on the time spent on scheme delivery.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the tourism potential of Newtownstewart.
(AQW 15735/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Prior to COVID 19, my Department had been working on a draft Tourism strategy to continue sustainable tourism growth to 2030. This aimed to continue the success of the last decade and build a sustainable tourism economy encouraging our visitors to stay longer, spend more and experience more of what Northern Ireland has to offer.

COVID-19 has brought severe challenges for the tourism industry in Northern Ireland. In response, I established the Tourism Recovery Steering Group and John McGrillen, CEO, Tourism NI, chairs the Tourism Recovery Working Group, which have industry representation right across the various segments of the tourism sector. The Steering Group identified a set of key priorities, all of which have been delivered by Tourism NI in partnership with tourism stakeholders and providers right across Northern Ireland including in the Derry & Strabane area.

Notwithstanding the impact of COVID-19, a key objective will continue to be to give visitors reasons to travel more widely within Northern Ireland and experience more of what it has to offer, beyond Belfast and Causeway alone. Like many other tourism destinations, regional dispersal is both a significant challenge and a significant opportunity for Northern Ireland.

Titanic Belfast and the Giant's Causeway have been transformational in increasing Northern Ireland's appeal and driving up visitor numbers. The goal is to build out further from these and create compelling multi-day experiences that entice more people to visit, and experience more of what we have to offer right across Northern Ireland.

To deliver on this objective a new tourism brand, 'Northern Ireland – Embrace a Giant Spirit', was launched by Tourism NI in November 2019. Research conducted by Tourism NI suggests that this new brand, has the potential to increase by 30% the number of people who may be interested in visiting Northern Ireland.

If areas across Northern Ireland, including Newtownstewart and the wider Derry & Strabane area, are to be successful in securing these additional visitors they need to have clear and compelling reasons for visitors to travel to those areas.

Tourism NI is currently working with experience providers across Northern Ireland, to develop their products and services so they can meet the expectations of both domestic and international visitors. This includes those in the Derry & Strabane and wider Sperrins areas.

Tourism NI has a close working relationship with each of the eleven local authorities across Northern Ireland. To exploit the potential of the new Embrace a Giant Spirit brand and support regional dispersal, Tourism NI has worked with the local authorities across NI to appoint a tourism brand ambassador within each region. Tourism NI now hosts bi-monthly meetings with all local authority brand ambassadors, and meets regularly with individual local authorities to identify and work with tourism experiences which are best placed to meet those expectations and create compelling reasons for visitors to travel across Northern Ireland.

Tourism NI delivers tourism initiatives across Northern Ireland to support the development of tourism and the marketing of Northern Ireland as a tourist destination to domestic visitors and visitors from the Republic of Ireland. These initiatives are open to all tourism businesses and Tourism NI monitors the uptake of these opportunities by businesses across Northern Ireland.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for the Economy whether freeport status for ports in Northern Ireland would alleviate any of the administrative burdens for GB-NI trade caused by the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.
(AQW 15742/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: You will be aware that Freeports is a UK Government policy which is being led locally by the Finance Minister. I am keen to work with my Executive colleagues to realise the potential opportunities and benefits associated with Freeports in NI and ensure they can be shaped to deliver additional trade, investment and jobs. I am particularly interested in how we could shape a local Freeport, and the incentives associated with it, to drive innovation across our services sectors as part of our economic recovery. Given that Northern Ireland would need to operate within the parameters of the Protocol, the full potential of Freeport status may not be able to be realised for goods, although a services focussed Freeport may have significant benefits

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy what plans she has to support (i) households; (ii) community and voluntary groups; and (iii) local councils in implementing energy efficiency measures, providing cost and carbon savings, as part of her Economic Recovery Action Plan .
(AQW 15777/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: On 25th February I published my Economic Recovery Action Plan, which sets out a range of decisive actions to kick-start economic recovery as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Plan recognises that economic recovery must be sustainable, environmentally responsible and tackle climate change.

In terms of energy efficiency, the Plan sets out two key actions under the 'Building a Greener Economy' pillar: to support businesses by reopening Invest NI's Covid-19 Energy Efficiency capital grant scheme to further applications; and to develop proposals for an Energy Efficiency Home Retrofit Scheme to support investment in the energy efficiency of our housing stock.

In parallel, I will also launch a new Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland by the end of 2021, of which energy efficiency will be a key theme. An options consultation on the new Energy Strategy, to launch by end March, will seek stakeholder views on a range of energy efficiency proposals that will help drive energy efficiency improvements across our building stock, helping to realise carbon, energy and cost savings and bringing benefits to both domestic and non-domestic consumers.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy whether funding provided for the Turing Scheme will be less than that provided by Erasmus+.

(AQW 15808/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Northern Ireland organisations secured funding of approximately £8million per annum from all elements of the previous Erasmus+ programme 2014-20. The overall funding available for the first year of the Turing Scheme UK will be around £100 million. As with the Erasmus+ programme, under the Turing Scheme organisations from across the UK will bid for the available funding on a competitive basis.

The Turing Scheme is focused on supporting periods of educational mobility abroad for students, with around two thirds of the Scheme's total funding in the first year allocated to Higher Education student mobilities, with further funding available for Further Education / Vocational Education and Training student mobilities and School pupil mobilities.

Unlike Erasmus+, the scope of the Turing scheme will not however provide funding for the youth or adult education sectors in its first year, nor will it provide funding for staff mobilities or the strategic partnerships projects that supported organisations to work together on projects to improve their provision for learners and share innovative practices. The Turing Scheme also will not provide any funding provision for inward student mobilities to Northern Ireland.

Officials will continue to engage closely with the UK Government on the Turing Scheme, including making the case for increasing the scope of the Scheme and increasing funding levels in future years, with a view to ensuring that it can best meet the needs of Northern Ireland.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the incentives for educational institutions around the world to host students under the UK Turing Scheme; and (ii) whether other countries will be invited to participate in a formal manner.

(AQW 15809/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- i) the incentives for educational institutions around the world to host students under the UK Turing Scheme Five of the top ten destinations for UK university students who undertake a mobility are outside the EU. Against this background the Turing Scheme aims to have a global reach in order to ensure that students from all backgrounds will have the opportunity to take part in periods of mobility in the EU and beyond. The Scheme's global focus also aims to allow new relationships to be established with academic institutions across the world, with the institutions in other countries also benefiting from receiving enthusiastic participants from Northern Ireland institutions, who will be able to offer different perspectives, whilst also contributing financially to the economy.
- (ii) whether other countries will be invited to participate in a formal manner. The Turing Scheme is entirely demand-led and all countries which are safe to travel to are therefore eligible to participate. There are no specific priority countries or any weighting towards particular countries. It will be up to institutions to forge their own international partnerships. The Delivery Partner for the Scheme will however work with and engage education ministries across the globe in order to promote the scheme.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for the Economy, given the current restrictions on opening of businesses and premises, for her assessment of the practice of allowing three working days to collect additional supporting evidence and lodge an appeal against a decision on eligibility to the Coronavirus Restrictions Business Support Scheme.

(AQW 15829/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: When CRBSS was launched, information on the appeals process was published, including details on how it would operate across the two elements of the scheme – Part A and Part B. To date, Invest NI, which is operating the scheme on behalf of my Department, has not received any negative feedback on the time-periods that apply to administering the appeals process.

The appeals process is the final step in what is often an extended assessment process. Applicants will have been given a number of opportunities to provide outstanding information, essentially exhausting all potential avenues before an application might reach the appeal stage. In many cases, Invest NI will have corresponded with applicants 10-12 times across the process to help them identify and provide all the information required to base a final decision. This ensures applicants have the best opportunity to evidence their eligibility for the scheme.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) who her Department consulted with in formulating the economic recovery action plan; and (ii) whether the plan has been fully costed.

(AQW 15855/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Since the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic my Department has been in close contact with stakeholders regarding the actions required to support businesses and citizens. My Department has been in continuous contact with Trade Bodies, Councils, ALBs, my Economic Advisory Group and others in order to gather information on the impacts of both Covid-19 and EU Exit on the Northern Ireland Economy and have used their input to develop my Economic Recovery Action Plan. As you will be aware my Action Plan was published on 25 February 2021. This however is not the end of the conversation. The Covid-19 pandemic is a unique and dynamic situation and as such my Department will continue to engage with stakeholders on the actions required throughout the recovery process. The Action Plan has been fully costed and its successful delivery will require an additional £290 million in 2021-22.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of (i) the implications for Northern Ireland of the Chancellor's approval of the Freeport East Hydrogen Hub; (ii) whether this makes the development of a hydrogen hub in Northern Ireland more or less likely; and (iii) which locations in Northern Ireland are best suited for a hydrogen hub.

(AQW 15863/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) Approval of the Freeport East Hydrogen Hub under the Freeport development model has no direct implications for Northern Ireland.
- (ii) I have already outlined my ambition to develop the hydrogen economy in Northern Ireland. Approval of the Freeport East Hydrogen Hub is not linked to hydrogen development in Northern Ireland so the potential for Northern Ireland based hydrogen hubs are unaffected.
- (iii) The links which can form a hydrogen hub (generation / storage / refuelling / academia / advanced engineering) are not dictated by geographical location but rather proximity to existing hydrogen generation opportunities, potential sources of hydrogen demand and space for safe storage. Collaborative working between central and local government, the private sector, academia and education providers will ultimately determine the location of any hydrogen hubs.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for her assessment of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Technology Brief report on carbon capture, use and storage, which concludes that progress towards the net zero carbon emissions target requires faster progress towards carbon capture and storage; and (ii) to advise what action her Department is taking to accelerate progress to the creation of a significant carbon capture and storage sector in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 15864/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) The technology brief is broadly consistent with the advice provided by the Climate Change Committee, which suggests that carbon capture, utilisation and storage (CCUS) will be part of the overall solution to meeting Net Zero emissions across the UK. The brief also highlights that the technologies are still some way off being commercially viable and that countries need to work together across borders to improve cost efficiencies for large infrastructure projects. It concludes that the private sector should lead the structural change necessary with appropriate support from government.
- (ii) Action is being taken at a UK level to progress CCUS deployment, and my department is part of the UK Industrial Decarbonisation work programme which is developing supporting policies and business models for CCUS technologies. Officials are engaged with the BEIS Industrial Decarbonisation team with links to the HyNET carbon sequestration project. Future Northern Ireland policy relating to CCUS technologies will be informed by the forthcoming Energy Strategy Options Consultation.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the risk assessed estimate of fraudulent claims paid out under her Department's COVID-19-related support schemes, broken down by scheme.

(AQW 15878/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department for the Economy continues to develop its understanding of the potential scope of claims that could be considered fraudulent. The process will ultimately require a case by case consideration before such a determination can be made. Our initial risk assessment activity suggests the greatest risk is around the 10k Small Business Support Grant scheme so work is focusing on this scheme first, followed by the 25k Retail, Tourism, Hospitality and Leisure and Micro Business Hardship Fund Schemes. Attention will turn to the remaining Covid Grant Schemes after these reviews are complete.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy, given the Chancellor's announcement that the furlough scheme will be extended to October 2021, whether she plans for the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme: Parts A and B to continue to be extended to that date.

(AQW 15888/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Earlier this month, I announced the extension of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) to cover the new period of Covid restrictions. Additional payments will continue for successful applicants to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) Parts A and B, for the period that the restrictions currently continue to apply, up to and including 31 March 2021.

I am of the view that it is only fair to continue payments beyond that date to businesses impacted by Covid restrictions. However, these will be matters which will be brought to the Executive for a collective decision.

It should be noted that, following the recent budget announcements by the Chancellor, that two further Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) grant payments will be made to cover the respective periods February to April 2021 and May to September 2021.

This is relevant given that the majority (around 87% of CRBSS applicants) are self-employed, and therefore many will be eligible for SEISS.

My focus moving forward will be on re-opening the economy, as I firmly believe that the best way to support all of our local businesses, employers and high streets, is to make a full and safe return to trading as soon as possible.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy whether she can confirm that the £500 Covid Disruption Payment to students will be paid via Student Finance NI.

(AQW 15889/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Covid Disruption Payment is for full-time students at Northern Ireland publicly funded Higher Education Institutions and full-time Higher Education students at the Further Education Colleges.

The funding agreed in the financial year ending 31 March 2021 is for Northern Ireland institutions to support their students. The institutions are administering the payment scheme, including undertaking any validation and certification requirements, and arranging for the payments to issue to students. While initially it was thought that the Higher Education institutions would issue the payments themselves, it appears this process would have taken too long. As such, both Queen's and Ulster universities have considered using existing payment mechanisms which they had already established with Student Finance NI, and I understand that the universities are using these pre-existing facilities to issue the payments to their respective students.

It is important to note that this is not a central distribution facility that is delegated to, and operated by Student Finance NI for all students – the Department's Regulations do not delegate such a function. Instead, they are bespoke, pre-existing facilities which allow NI universities to issue funds to their own students.

The same process cannot be used for NI students outside Northern Ireland. Under the legislation being used to facilitate the scheme prior to 31 March 2021, the Department does not have the legal basis to issue funding to universities in Great Britain for them to administer the scheme, nor to the Student Loans Company (SLC) for them to make the payments in Great Britain.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for the Economy when the recommendations from the consultation and risk assessment on facilitating Final Hearings in Industrial Tribunals will be implemented.

(AQW 15892/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The work required to re-open Killymeal House is at an advanced stage. Officials are currently considering the issues raised during the consultation process and these are being addressed on an ongoing basis.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department intends to extend the Skills Intervention Programme beyond 31 March 2021, to assist people whose employment has been impacted by the pandemic.

(AQW 15906/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I introduced the Skills Interventions Programme (SIP) as an immediate response to the impact of pandemic. It aimed to provide places on training courses, at all levels for those whose jobs had been affected, whether through redundancy, furlough, or those who were self-employed. I am pleased to say that the investment of £6.2 million provided 5,000 fully funded places on these training courses. The training is in areas where there is the highest demand for skills and opened up opportunities for people to reconnect to the job market. Looking to the future, we need to address not only the short term challenges arising as a consequence of COVID-19, but also the long term weaknesses within our economy. I recently announced an Economic Recovery Action Plan, which forms the basis for my Department's approach to building our economy post-COVID and developing the skills of Northern Ireland's workforce is a key pillar within it. One element of the Plan is to establish a flexible skills fund, which will offer new opportunities for individuals to upskill and reskill to meet evolving business needs. The fund will focus on growth sectors of our economy. I believe this intervention is vital, not only to boost the economy as a whole, but also to improve individual's ability to either re-connect with the labour market, or progress in their chosen career; this will be particularly crucial in our postCOVID world. It will also be fundamental to the delivery of the longer

term goals within the new Skills Strategy. The measures set out in the Recovery Plan are contingent on adequate funding. I very much welcome the recent announcement by the Northern Ireland Office to allocate £15 million over the next three years to enhance skills. This will be targeted at key growth sectors, which will support businesses to expand into new markets and develop new products within a rapidly changing world market. Clearly, however, given the scale of the challenge we face in rebuilding Northern Ireland's economy, this will only go a short way towards addressing our skills needs. I am continuing to work with Executive colleagues to emphasise the need for this support to be provided.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for the Economy whether she is aware of the 3rd party cap on commission on local take away delivery drivers income, that results in 20 per cent commission being deducted from their earnings; and whether she will consider putting a cap on the percentage of deductions as they have in Germany at 9 per cent of commission.

(AQW 15918/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I have no immediate plans to introduce a cap on the percentage of deductions on commission. The rise of the "gig economy" and use of digital platforms have raised a number of important matters, many of which interact closely with employment status. Employment status 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.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for the Economy what her Department can do to ensure that take away delivery drivers can access hire and reward insurance.

(AQW 15919/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is not within the remit of my Department. Financial services, including insurance are reserved matters under schedule 3 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of people employed by (i) Queen's University Belfast; and (ii) Ulster University, broken down by community background.

(AQW 15922/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: While my Department provides funding and sets the strategic direction for the higher education sector, universities are autonomous institutions. Therefore, my Department does not hold information regarding the number of staff employed by Queen's University or Ulster University, nor their respective students' unions.

However, the Higher Education Statistics Agency publishes staff numbers by provider. You can find this at the following link: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/staff/working-in-he>

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the total number of academic staff in (i) Queen's University Belfast; and (ii) Ulster University, broken down by community background.

(AQW 15923/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: While my Department provides funding and sets the strategic direction for the higher education sector, universities are autonomous institutions. Therefore, my Department does not hold information regarding the number of staff employed by Queen's University or Ulster University, nor their respective students' unions.

However, the Higher Education Statistics Agency publishes staff numbers by provider. You can find this at the following link: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/staff/working-in-he>

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of people employed by (i) Queen's University Belfast Students' Union; and (ii) Ulster University Students' Union, broken down by community background.

(AQW 15924/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: While my Department provides funding and sets the strategic direction for the higher education sector, universities are autonomous institutions. Therefore, my Department does not hold information regarding the number of staff employed by Queen's University or Ulster University, nor their respective students' unions.

However, the Higher Education Statistics Agency publishes staff numbers by provider. You can find this at the following link: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/staff/working-in-he>

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) why students have been informed that their £500 Covid-19 Disruption Payment is being registered with Student Finance NI; and (ii) to detail the role Student Finance NI has in the distribution of the payment.

(AQW 15943/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Covid Disruption Payment is for full-time students at Northern Ireland publicly funded Higher Education Institutions and full-time Higher Education students at the Further Education Colleges.

The funding agreed in the financial year ending 31 March 2021 is for Northern Ireland institutions to support their students. The institutions are administering the payment scheme, including undertaking any validation and certification requirements, and arranging for the payments to issue to students. While initially it was thought that the Higher Education institutions would issue the payments themselves, it appears this process would have taken too long. As such, both Queen's and Ulster universities have considered using existing payment mechanisms which they had already established with Student Finance NI, and I understand that the universities are using these pre-existing facilities to issue the payments to their respective students.

It is important to note that this is not a central distribution facility that is delegated to, and operated by Student Finance NI for all students – the Department's Regulations do not delegate such a function. Instead, they are bespoke, pre-existing facilities which allow NI universities to issue funds to their own students.

The same process cannot be used for NI students outside Northern Ireland. Under the legislation being used to facilitate the scheme prior to 31 March 2021, the Department does not have the legal basis to issue funding to universities in Great Britain for them to administer the scheme, nor to the Student Loans Company (SLC) for them to make the payments in Great Britain.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy to outline any plans she has to promote women in apprenticeships.
(AQW 15951/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am committed to diversity and inclusion in our economy and to ensuring that apprenticeships plays a major role in this objective, across all sectors and at all levels are available to everyone, irrespective of gender.

The most recent statistics show that just over 30% of participants on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme are female. This increases to 38% in the most recent statistics for Higher Level Apprenticeships. The levels of female participation in apprenticeship provision is complex and links into the progression pathways that are chosen and also reflects traditional gender balance in various occupations. The gender balance reflects employment in various occupational areas and is outside the control of the Department's apprenticeship programmes. However, my Department is taking a range of actions to help improve our gender balance overall and in apprenticeships.

Female underrepresentation is not limited to apprenticeships, particularly in sectors such as engineering and manufacturing. That is why I am very supportive of the NI Women in Science and Engineering Hub which was launched last October and which will help to sign post prospective applicants to apprenticeship programmes.

A key reform in our apprenticeship system is the introduction of Sectoral Partnerships, that bring together stakeholders to ensure apprenticeship pathways and content reflect the changing needs of our economy. Sectoral Partnerships have a crucial role in establishing new apprenticeship pathways as we seek to recover for the Covid-19 pandemic and to create new non-traditional pathways that will facilitate improvements in gender balance.

My Department's Apprenticeship Challenge Fund is providing grant support to a range of projects which are looking to identify and address barriers to apprenticeships, including gender. As an example, one of the projects is looking at encouraging more females into the male dominated transport and automotive sectors by creating introductory taster sessions to allow females to sample different tasks in workshops.

I am also committed to removing the age eligibility criteria in the ApprenticeshipsNI programme to make more apprenticeships available to those aged 25 and above. This will provide more options for women looking to retrain and reskill and will benefit sectors such as Health and Social Care which struggle to recruit sufficient numbers of apprentices.

Northern Ireland Apprenticeship Week 26-30 April 2021 also offers the opportunity for apprenticeships to be showcased to everyone. Events for this year are still being finalised however events which specifically targeted women during the 2020 week were Northern Regional College's Female Only Information Sessions, where female engineering role models shared their career journey and experiences; and Bring IT On Girls Events in Derry/Londonderry and Dungannon hosted by female IT professionals.

One of the highlights of this year's Apprenticeship Week will be the Apprentice of the Year Awards and it is very pleasing to note that 46% of nominees were female. And I am pleased to say that one of the joint award winners of last year's Northern Ireland 'Higher Level Apprenticeship' Award was a female from an engineering firm.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for the Economy should restrictions on the businesses affected be extended past 1 April 2021, whether the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme Parts A and B will continue into the 2021/22 financial year.
(AQW 15974/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Earlier this month, I announced the extension of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) to cover the new period of Covid restrictions. Additional payments will continue for successful applicants to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) Parts A and B, for the period that the restrictions currently continue to apply, up to and including 31 March 2021.

I am of the view that it is only fair to continue payments beyond that date to businesses impacted by Covid restrictions. However, these will be matters which will be brought to the Executive for a collective decision.

It should be noted that, following the recent budget announcements by the Chancellor, that two further Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) grant payments will be made to cover the respective periods February to April 2021 and May to September 2021.

This is relevant given that the majority (around 87% of CRBSS applicants) are self-employed, and therefore many will be eligible for SEISS.

My focus moving forward will be on re-opening the economy, as I firmly believe that the best way to support all of our local businesses, employers and high streets, is to make a full and safe return to trading as soon as possible.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for the Economy (i) has her Department carried out an assessment of the administrative, financial and regulatory impact of leaving the European Union on small and medium enterprises; (ii) what impact has been identified; and (iii) how her Department plans to mitigate these impacts.

(AQW 15985/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- i) A full impact assessment would be the responsibility of UK Government as international trade matters are reserved. The Department has carried out studies on the impact on the economy of leaving the European Union under a number of scenarios. As these have generally relied on modelling it would not be possible to disaggregate the impact on small and medium enterprises. Challenges vary by sector however the majority of enterprises in NI are micro, small or medium enterprises. By the nature of their size it will generally be more of a challenge for these companies to manage the new trading arrangements and the associated costs compared to larger companies.
- (ii) No impact specific to micro, small and medium enterprises has been identified. Impacts will vary between businesses depending on their size and sector, depending on exposure to risks and whether they trade in goods or services. From ongoing engagement with businesses of all sizes we are aware of a range of issues that NI businesses are facing. A large part of the impact has been focused on friction to the movement of goods from GB to NI. This includes the additional customs burdens placed on businesses, a lack of preparedness from GB suppliers, late communication of guidance and a wide range of other issues.
- (iii) Mitigating the full impact of the Protocol is a matter for the UK Government. My Department, Invest NI and InterTradeIreland have continued to provide support to businesses for the changes they face. However, this support will not compensate businesses for new costs which will have a long term impact. I continue to engage with the UK Government to press for a resolution to these challenges, particularly with frictions to goods moving between GB and NI.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for the Economy to outline (i) the support provided to further education students in Northern Ireland, aside from the provision of digital devices and mobile data; (ii) the rationale for providing higher education students with a £500 Covid Disruption Payment, but not extending this same support to further education students who have experienced the same pandemic; and (iii) how the £500 figure was established.

(AQW 16025/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In response to (i), prior to securing £2.9 million for the provision of digital devices and the one-off discretionary £60 payment to eligible further education students for mobile data, in the current financial year my Department secured additional funding of £4.8 million which is being used to provide additional IT equipment to allow continued access from home for both college staff and students and to help address digital poverty, including providing almost 1200 SIM cards.

Furthermore, my Department has worked with the colleges to increase the flexibility of their policies in relation to student support, to make them more accessible. This has included paying childcare retainer fees during the initial lockdown; FE grants and Hardship Fund have been updated to facilitate claimants participating in distance learning with an extension to the closing date for grant applications; Free School Meals and holiday payments for all eligible

school age FE students have been made directly into households; increases to the Dependant Student rate, which provides eligible FE students with an additional £15 per week; and making part-time and repeat students eligible to apply to Hardship Funds.

My Department is represented on a cross-departmental working group, established to support the development of a Mental Health Strategy for those struggling with mental health issues, including FE students.

All FE colleges continue to have in place a range of learner support arrangements aimed at promoting the health and wellbeing and ensuring safeguarding of all learners by providing them with access to appropriate guidance and support.

A range of college staff are qualified to identify, provide support for and direct learners, who are considered to be at risk, to the appropriate help and advice. This work has been stepped up in response to COVID-19 to ensure support is available for learners in this period of challenge.

In response to (ii), the Covid Disruption Payment is for full-time students at Northern Ireland publicly funded Higher Education Institutions and full-time Higher Education students at the Further Education Colleges. As my Department put the above support measures in place for further education students, it was deemed not necessary for FE students to be included in the Covid Disruption payment scheme.

In response to (iii), I proposed the figure of £500 in recognition of, and to help mitigate, the disruption suffered by students to their studies due to the impact of Covid-19.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy to outline why the £500 Covid Disruption Payment will not be available to further education students.

(AQW 16027/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I recently secured an additional £37.7m from the Executive to fund a financial support package for higher education (HE). 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. The Covid Disruption Payment is for full-time UK and EU students at Northern Ireland publicly funded HE Institutions and full-time HE students at the FE colleges, in recognition of the disruption suffered by students to their studies due to the impact of Covid-19. Students on FE courses at local colleges are being supported through a range of other mechanisms. The Department secured additional funding of £7.7 million, of which £4.8 million is being used to provide additional Information Technology (IT) equipment, to allow continued access from home for both college staff and students and to help address digital poverty including providing almost 1200 SIM cards. The remaining £2.9 million is for an additional 500 devices and a one-off payment of £60 to eligible full-time and part-time FE students to help with data costs. Furthermore, the Department has worked with the colleges to increase the flexibility of their policies in relation to student support, to make them more accessible. This has included paying childcare retainer fees during the initial lockdown; FE grants and Hardship Fund have been updated to facilitate claimants participating in distance learning with an extension to the closing date for grant applications; Free School Meals and holiday payments for all eligible school age FE students have been made directly into households; increases to the Dependant Student rate, which provides eligible FE students with an additional £15 per week; and making part-time and repeat students eligible to apply to Hardship Funds.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy to outline what financial measures are available to further education students to help navigate the financial effects of COVID-19.

(AQW 16028/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has provided a range of interventions to support FE students throughout the Covid-19 pandemic including adaptations to existing financial support programmes to encourage continued participation in FE courses. This included FE Grants; FE Hardship Fund; Care to Learn childcare scheme; Home to College Transport; Free School Meals / Clothing Allowance; and Additional Support Fund for those with a disability. The combined value of these support arrangements totals £13 million per annum.

Further, my Department has worked with the colleges to increase the flexibility of their policies in relation to these student support programmes to make them more accessible, including paying childcare retainer fees during the initial lockdown. FE grants and Hardship Fund have been updated to facilitate claimants participating in distance learning with an extension to the closing date for grant applications; Free School Meals and holiday payments for all eligible school age further education students have been made directly into households; increases to the Dependant Student rate, which provides eligible FE students with an additional £15 per week; and making part-time and repeat students eligible to apply to Hardship Funds.

Additional funding of £7.7 million was secured, of which £4.8 million was used to provide IT equipment to allow continued access from home for both college staff and students to help address digital poverty, including the providing almost 1,200 data SIM cards. The remaining £2.9 million was used to provide an additional 500 devices and a one-off discretionary payment of £60 to eligible full time and part time FE students to help with data costs.

As part of the additional £37.7 million financial support package I recently secured from the Executive, full-time higher education (HE) students at FE colleges will also receive a one-off discretionary £500 payment, in recognition of the disruption suffered by HE students to their studies due to the impact of Covid-19.

Payments are currently being progressed by the FE colleges.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy how many applicants are still waiting for payment from the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme.

(AQW 16030/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As at 11th March 2021, 7,360 applicants had submitted applications through both elements of the CRBSS. To date, 5,413 applicants (c74% of the total submitted) have received payment(s) to a total value of £50.3m. 924 applicants (c13%) have been rejected as ineligible, and 1,093 applicants (c15%) are still being assessed to ascertain their final eligibility. In addition, Invest NI is also working through top-up payments, reflecting the changes and extensions to the Health Protection Regulations, meaning that some applicants who have already been paid above, will be due further payments up until 31 March 2021. You will be aware that payments through the CRBSS were unfortunately delayed while my officials worked with counterparts in the Land and Property Service (LPS) to ensure the correct allocation of funding across the CRBSS and Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS). This work is now drawing to a conclusion. I am confident that my officials will close out all remaining queries to allow all payments up until 31 March 2021, to be completed by this date.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) how she intends to address the issues facing students in further education who have a practical or placement element to their courses that they haven't been able to fulfil because of the pandemic; (ii) what are the implications for assessments in these courses; and (iii) how will this impact on their future employment prospects.

(AQW 16038/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has established an Advisory and Oversight Group (AOG) to ensure that appropriate plans are developed and implemented by providers so that educational provision and related activity in the Further Education (FE) sector and Non-Statutory Contractors (NSC) can safely resume for both staff and learners at the earliest opportunity. The AOG developed the Framework for Safe Resumption of On-Site Education and Related Activity which provides guidance to the FE sector and NSCs based on relevant and most up to date medical and scientific advice. During periods of additional Covid-19 restrictions FE colleges have been mandated to deliver distance learning to the maximum extent possible, with face-to-face learning taking place when it is a necessary and unavoidable part of the course. The FE colleges and NSCs continue to be required to comply with the Covid-19 restrictions put in place by the Northern Ireland Executive. The Executive's 'Pathway out of Restrictions' which was published on 2 March 2021, has provided the FE sector with the approach that will be taken as we move forward over the next few months and the sector must comply with this. In the second phase there will be a partial return to practical face-to-face learning for FE learners, apprentices and Training for Success (TfS) participants. This will enable those learners to undertake skills training and associated assessment activities to enable them to successfully complete their programmes. There will be no change to FE delivery in the third phase but, by the end of stage four increased face-to-face teaching will be permitted for FE learners, apprentices and TfS participants. Finally, by the end of stage five FE colleges and NSCs will move to a full return to face-to-face learning. The dates for moving to the different stages will depend on Executive decisions based on evidence and data. Those qualifications that have a practical or placement element are primarily used to signal occupational or professional competency or act as a licence to practise. Results can only be awarded when assessments have taken place given the critical importance of learners practically demonstrating skills/competency prior to entering the workplace to protect public health and safety. Some Assessments will be taken with adaptations, where this is possible. Some assessments may need to be delayed until such times as they can be taken safely, to comply with public health guidance. Awarding organisations will provide clear and timely guidance to learning centres on the operational requirements for the alternative assessment and awarding arrangements, including timing on when centres need to submit information, the records that they should maintain and the nature of any centrebased quality assurance. It is acknowledged therefore that students undertaking licence to practice and competency skills based programmes will need to return on-site for the opportunity to undertake skills training and associated assessment activities if they are to successfully complete their programme and progress to employment or further education or training. We will take into consideration the need for practical work and assessments that are required to be completed in advance of any changes to the current restrictions and will continue to work closely with the regulator and delivery partners to maximise the number of learners who are able to receive an award this year and progress to further study, training or employment .

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the number of employers that have expressed a desire to take on new apprentices during the 2021/22 financial year; (ii) how this figure compares to the previous five years; and (iii) the steps her Department is taking to encourage more employers to engage with apprenticeships schemes.

(AQW 16048/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) & (ii) My Department does not hold the information requested. An Employer Skills survey published by Westminster's Department for Education in June 2020 states that 6% of employers in NI currently offer apprenticeships, while a further 6% of employers in NI have previously offered apprenticeships but have none currently. Of the Northern Ireland employers who responded to the survey, 29% stated that they intend to offer apprenticeships in the future, while 13% said they didn't know if they would offer apprenticeships in future. Of those NI employers who currently offer apprenticeships, 90% intend to continue offering apprenticeships in the future. It is important to note however that this survey was conducted in 2019 and therefore predates the Covid19 pandemic. I am not aware of any similar surveys that have been conducted more recently.
- (iii) My Department's Apprenticeship Recovery Package was launched on 11th September 2020. The package consists of three separate elements:
- New Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive – This scheme offers up to £3,000 to employers for each new apprenticeship opportunity created and applies equally for new apprentices and those who have been made redundant by other employers;
 - Return Retain Result (RRR) –Up to £3,700 per apprentice is available to employers who return apprentices from furlough and retain their employment through to the 31st March 2021 and on to successful completion of their apprenticeship; and
 - The Apprenticeship Challenge Fund – A one off grant scheme to promote the development and testing of new and innovative models of apprenticeship recruitment and delivery

The launch of these schemes has been supported by an advertising campaign across TV, radio, outdoor billboards and a variety of social media platforms. Officials have also been working with training providers to ensure that employers are made aware of the support available and to encourage them to utilise the support available to protect existing and create new apprenticeship opportunities It is important to note that unlike other skills and training interventions,

apprenticeships are demand led and directly linked to jobs and skills needs within the economy. Despite this package of support it is clear that the need to support apprentices, employers and training providers remains. Last month I launched an Economic Recovery Action Plan which sets out a range of decisive actions to kick-start economic recovery under four pillars, one of which is 'Supporting a Highly Skilled & Agile Workforce'. A number of planned actions include extension of the Apprenticeship Recruitment Initiative, making apprenticeships available to more people and sectors by amending age-related eligibility criteria and the introduction of Public Sector Apprenticeships. In addition my Department is currently working with stakeholders across five Regional Working Groups to develop a programme of activity for Northern Ireland Apprenticeship Week 2021. This event will run from 26 to 30 April 2021 and provides an opportunity for the general public, including future apprentices and their influencers (parents, guardians, teachers etc), and employers to discover the benefits apprenticeships bring to businesses, individuals and our economy. Finally, through our Sectoral Partnerships we are reviewing and developing the content of apprenticeship frameworks to ensure that they meet the evolving needs of employers.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the discussions she has had and intends to have with Ulster University to ensure that the further and higher education sectors continue to play a key role in the response to COVID-19, raising skills levels and increasing productivity of the future workforce, and examining ways to ensure greater alignment between study and the needs of the economy, specifically in relation to the Coleraine campus.

(AQW 16049/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I met with the Vice Chancellor of the University, Paul Bartholomew on 3rd February 2021 to discuss the University's strategic plans for all of its campuses and have requested sight of same. While enrolments and qualifications in STEM subjects have increased over the last decade, I am aware of the need to ensure that the supply of graduates is better aligned with the needs of the local economy. The Northern Ireland Skills Barometer indicates that higher education skills at level 6 and above are, in general, only marginally undersupplied when compared with the overall quantum required by the labour market. However, there are significant imbalances across individual subject areas, with some of the largest undersupply predicted in STEM subjects. Northern Ireland's universities are aware of this undersupply, and have taken measures in recent years to rebalance their provision, with the result that enrolments and qualifications in STEM subjects have been increasing over the past number of years. In 2012/13, 22% of students at Northern Ireland's higher education institutions were studying a narrow STEM related subject, with 45% studying a broad STEM related subject. By 2018/19, these figures had increased to 25.9% and 55.5% respectively. My Department is engaged in a number of initiatives to encourage this alignment, including: the provision of information to prospective students; the development of degree level apprenticeships; and funding short-term courses in priority economic sectors.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for the Economy what support is available for premises that will not be connected to Project Stratum infrastructure.

(AQW 16081/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Project Stratum was developed to improve access to broadband services for those premises unable to access speeds of 30 Mbps or greater. Following an Open Market Review exercise and a public consultation, a target intervention area of approximately 79,000 was identified. My Department's aim has always been to bring a solution to as many of these premises as possible. However, with the funding available, it was not possible to address all premises in the target intervention area, and 3% are currently out of scope of the project. My Department is seeking to address these premises. Discussions have already been advanced with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and, now with Fibrus Networks appointed as the contractor, we are working to identify the solutions and costs to bring those premises into this intervention. The outcome of this work will be shared at the earliest opportunity. If there are other premises that have not been included in the target intervention area for which the data held by my Department is found to be incorrect, my officials will examine the eligibility of those premises and explore the possibility of bringing them into the Project Stratum intervention area, where appropriate. However, this would be subject to the necessary funding being available to cover the cost of those additional premises, and to value for money considerations.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for the Economy whether motorhome dealers in Northern Ireland are liable to pay tariffs on motorhomes purchased from EU countries that arrive in Northern Ireland via Great Britain.

(AQW 16142/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: No declarations are required or tariffs payable on goods that move directly between the EU and Northern Ireland. If goods are moved via Great Britain then they would need to be declared on entry to Great Britain. Depending on the origin of the goods they may be able to claim preferential treatment under the terms of the Trade and Co-operation Agreement and no tariff would be liable. Moving the goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland will require a customs declaration and safety and security declaration. A tariff, assessed via a supplementary declaration, may become liable dependent on the origin of the goods and whether they are considered 'at risk' dependent on their final destination. Businesses can apply to the UK Trader Scheme which would allow them to declare goods not at risk. The goods could be moved under transit provisions from the EU to Northern Ireland via Great Britain and there is guidance on transit movements here: Bring goods into or through the UK using common and Union transit. There is also general information for moving goods into and out of Northern Ireland here: Trading and moving goods in and out of Northern Ireland.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for the Economy what administrative changes have occurred since 1 January 2021, under the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, for the process of trade in motorhomes between the European Union and Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16143/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There have been no changes to the trade of any goods directly between the European Union and Northern Ireland as a result of the Protocol.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy whether enhanced energy efficiency labelling for electrical appliances coming into effect in Great Britain also applies in Northern Ireland and, if not, why not.

(AQW 16153/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Energy labelling is a reserved policy area, and falls within the remit of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Under the Northern Ireland - Ireland Protocol, Northern Ireland is required to follow EU regulations in relation to energy labelling and eco-design. Enhanced energy labelling requirements for certain electrical appliances were introduced in Great Britain from 1 March 2021. These enhancements reflect the previously agreed EU position on energy labelling, and therefore also apply to Northern Ireland through retained EU legislation.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy to confirm whether a UK national undertaking a full time thesis only PhD at a Northern Ireland university meets the criteria for eligibility for the £500 Covid Disruption Payment.

(AQW 16171/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As you will be aware, 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, and the institutions themselves will make an assessment of the eligibility of their students. Thesis only students are often treated by the institutions as being part-time. After a PhD student completes their 3 years of full-time study, and all of their research work is complete, they are eligible to go 'thesis only' for one year, to allow them time to finish writing up their PhD. Such students often therefore move off 'full-time' status and on to 'thesis only' status. Consequently, in such circumstances, thesis only students would not be eligible for the payment.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the religious breakdown of students attending Stranmillis University College, Belfast.

(AQW 16183/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Information regarding the religious background of NI domiciled students enrolled at Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College is available in Table 2 of the publication linked below:

<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/higher-education-ad-hoc-tables>

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the religious breakdown of students attending St Marys College, Belfast.

(AQW 16185/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Information regarding the religious background of NI domiciled students enrolled at Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College is available in Table 2 of the publication linked below:

<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/higher-education-ad-hoc-tables>

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of students that leave Northern Ireland to attend universities in other parts of the United Kingdom, broken down by religion, in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 16186/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Information on religious background is not collected for NI domiciled students studying at institutions in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the decision by Ulster University to use demographic targeted device messaging across advertisements on social media platforms and websites as part of its efforts to mitigate potential St Patrick's Day events or activities that contravene public health advice.

(AQW 16266/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Ulster University is an autonomous institution and, as such, is responsible for its own policies and procedures relating to the behaviour of its students. The potential antisocial behaviour of students over St Patrick's Day, or indeed at any other time, is a matter for the University to resolve along with the relevant authorities, including the PSNI and Belfast City Council. While my Department does not have any regulatory authority in this matter, I welcome the various steps which

have been taken by the local universities in an attempt to avoid a repeat of the disturbances experienced in previous years, particularly by residents in the Holylands area.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of whether students undertaking thesis-only PhDs who have been told by their university that the study is regarded as full-time meet the criteria for eligibility for the £500 Covid Disruption Payment.

(AQW 16404/17-22)

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 agreed funding is for Northern Ireland institutions to support their students, and the institutions themselves will make an assessment of their students' eligibility. This also applies to 'thesis only' PhD students.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 26 March 2021

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Carroll asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress has been made toward the implementation of a redress scheme for victims and survivors of historical abuse, in particular, regarding moves toward making payments to victims, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.
(AQW 2714/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The Historical Institutional Abuse (HIA) Redress Board became fully operational and the application process opened to victims and survivors on 31 March 2020. This accords with the publicly announced timescales.

As of 23 February 2021 the Redress Board has received 1,120 applications. Panels have made determinations totalling £10.5m.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why a department has not yet been nominated to handle administration of the Troubles-related incident Victims Payment Scheme.
(AQW 4275/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: On the 24 August 2020, The Executive Office designated the Department of Justice as the Department to exercise the administrative functions of the Victims' Payments Board on the Board's behalf under para 2(1) of Schedule 1 to the Victims' Payments Regulations 2020.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their commitment contained within New Decade, New Approach to reform the Petition of Concern.
(AQW 4409/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Assembly is responsible for the amendments required to Standing Orders to implement the reform, while as an excepted matter, any primary legislation required will be for the Secretary of State to take forward.

Mr Nesbitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in regard to the commitment in New Decade, New Approach, Annex E, paragraph 5.27 stating the Ad-Hoc Committee will be assisted in its work by a Panel of five experts appointed jointly by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, to outline (i) the process for appointing the Panel members; (ii) how the process was decided upon; (iii) whether any third parties were involved in co-designing the process; (iv) what criteria will be applied to decide who is appointed to the Panel; (v) what advertising and communications platforms were used to alert interested parties to the appointment process; and (vi) what the remuneration package will be, including per diem fees and expenses.
(AQW 4677/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The New Decade, New Approach document, stated that a Panel of Experts to assist the Ad-Hoc Committee would be selected by the First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly.

The selection process was developed by officials taking account of the expertise required to provide the research and assistance to the Ad Hoc Committee and the timeline for the work. In respect of the process, there was consultation with officials in the office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments and the Ad-Hoc Committee on the Bill of Rights.

Panel members will be paid £500 per day or £250 per half-day plus any necessarily incurred expenses in line with standard NICS allowances.

The Committee raised concerns regarding the cost of the Panel of Experts, following consideration by the Party Leaders' Forum, a decision was made to reduce the panel to 3 experts.

Ministers are currently considering the establishment of the panel of experts, unfortunately, it has not been possible to bring this work forward as expeditiously as initially planned.

Miss Woods asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) for an update on the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025; and (ii) what measures the Executive has taken to account for the disproportionate effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities.

(AQW 4709/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:

- (i) Good progress has been made in implementing the key actions in the Strategy, specifically:
- The structures to support delivery, including the Racial Equality Sub-Group and Racial Equality Champions in each Department, are now in place. The necessary ground work is being done to allow for development of a joint work programme and approach.
 - A review of the Race Relations (NI) Order and relevant aspects of other legislation was carried out in 2020 and work is now underway to prepare options to enhance the legislation.
 - Research into ethnic monitoring, which also includes the potential for amendments to our Fair Employment legislation, has been completed and we are considering the draft report to inform future proposals. This work aims to support the establishment of an improved evidence base, where possible, to enable identification of the extent of racial inequalities here.
 - A review of the delivery model for the Minority Ethnic Development Fund (MEDF), a key element of our policy for racial equality and good race relations is now complete. We commenced implementation through launching the application process earlier for the 2021/22 funding and are working to implement the remaining recommendations this year.
 - Work with the Department of Education (DE) to identify ways to tackle racist bullying in schools is underway. This is supported by the sub group who are also engaging with the PSNI to agree actions to increase identification and monitoring of race hate crime.
 - Work is also concluding to finalise a draft Refugee Integration Strategy for all refugees and asylum seekers, which we hope to consult on shortly.
 - The Racial Equality Indicators Baseline Report was published in November 2018 and presents data measuring the progress of the Racial Equality Strategy. We are pleased that the report shows headway made in a number of areas, but appreciate that there is more to do and we remain committed to fully implementing the remaining actions in the strategy. We also look forward to receiving the next report in the near future.
- (ii) Public Health England (PHE) has published a number of reports examining disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19. The reports examine important factors including ethnicity, and modelling shows that a large proportion of the difference in the risk of COVID-19 mortality between ethnic groups can be explained by demographic, geographical and socioeconomic factors. These reports have been considered, along with local information and intelligence, and have informed the response locally.

For example, Public Health Agency (PHA) is working in partnership with key stakeholders through the Regional Traveller Forum and Regional Minority Ethnic and Migrants Advisory Group to disseminate key public health messages through a range of partners. In addition, the PHA has reoriented a range of the services it commissions to target and support Minority Ethnic and Migrant communities here, including using bi-lingual workers to support individuals requiring testing, self-isolating and supported contact tracing as required.

Mr Beattie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of (i) whether a two week open competition to select and appoint a new Attorney General is in line with good practice for senior appointments; and (ii) whether a competition running for four weeks would have a negative effect on the functioning of Government.

(AQW 4840/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The process to select and appoint a new Attorney General is currently being developed. This process will follow the principles around public appointments and will be an open competition.

In order to ensure the continuity of the role and functions of the office of Attorney General, we have agreed that Ms Brenda King, First Legislative Counsel, should discharge the functions of Attorney General in the interim period. We announced this in the Assembly on 16 June. This arrangement will ensure continuity in maintaining the responsibilities and statutory functions of the Attorney General.

Mr T Buchanan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the deputy First Minister's attendance at the funeral of Bobby Storey on 30 June 2020.

(AQW 5369/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The deputy First Minister attended the funeral in her capacity as Sinn Fein Vice President.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what work has been undertaken by their Department's Racial Equality Champion since the publication of the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025.

(AQW 5388/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Racial Equality Champion in TEO is also the head of the Division which includes the Racial Equality Unit. In this dual role the TEO Champion oversees delivery of all aspects of the Racial Equality Strategy, working with Champions across all the other departments.

Since 2015 the TEO Racial Equality Champion has undertaken work on:

- establishing and meeting with the Racial Equality Subgroup to ensure the voice of minority ethnic communities informs work on racial equality;
- appointing and maintaining a network of Racial Equality Champions in all departments;
- issues relating to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD);
- the review of race equality legislation here;
- strategic oversight of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme;
- supporting asylum seekers and refugees and representing TEO on the Westminster-based Home Office group on Dispersal;
- representing TEO on the board of the Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership and working on issues relating to migration and the management of the National Asylum Support Services (NASS) contracts;
- arranging training for TEO staff to raise awareness of racial equality issues; and
- organising information sessions for minority ethnic communities in partnership with the Department of Finance as part of NICS recruitment.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) whether a report has been agreed upon by the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition; and (ii) if so, when it will be published.

(AQW 5549/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Commission provided its final report on 17 July 2020. A working group has been set up, involving Junior Ministers, advisers and officials, to map out a way forward for Executive consideration in relation to the report, including decisions around its publication.

Ms Sheerin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) for the dates of all COVID-19 media press conferences held; and (ii) to list all Ministers who participated on each date.

(AQW 5568/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:

No	Date	Minister
1	12-Mar-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister, Minister of Health, Minister of Education, Minister of Finance, Minister for Communities, Minister for Infrastructure, Junior Minister (dFM)
2	14-Mar-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
3	18-Mar-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
4	19-Mar-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister, Minister of Health, Minister of Education
5	20-Mar-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister, Minister for the Economy, Minister for Communities
6	23-Mar-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
7	24-Mar-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
8	25-Mar-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister, Minister of Health
9	26-Mar-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
10	27-Mar-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister, Minister of Finance, Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
11	30-Mar-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
12	31-Mar-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
13	01-Apr-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
14	02-Apr-20	Minister for Economy, Minister of Finance
15	03-Apr-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister, Minister of Health, Minister of Finance
16	06-Apr-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
17	07-Apr-20	Minister of Health
18	08-Apr-20	Minister for Communities, Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

No	Date	Minister
19	09-Apr-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
20	15-Apr-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
21	16-Apr-20	Minister of Health
22	17-Apr-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister, Minister of Education, Minister for Infrastructure
23	20-Apr-20	Minister of Health
24	21-Apr-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
25	22-Apr-20	Minister of Health
26	23-Apr-20	Minister for the Economy, Minister of Finance
27	24-Apr-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
28	27-Apr-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
29	28-Apr-20	Minister of Health
30	29-Apr-20	Minister for Communities, Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
31	30-Apr-20	Minister of Health
32	01-May-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
33	04-May-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
34	05-May-20	Minister of Health
35	06-May-20	Minister of Finance, Minister of Education
36	07-May-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
37	11-May-20	Junior Minister (FM), Junior Minister (dFM)
38	12-May-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
39	13-May-20	Minister of Health
40	14-May-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
41	15-May-20	Minister for the Economy
42	18-May-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
43	19-May-20	Minister of Health, Minister of Finance
44	20-May-20	Minister for Communities
45	21-May-20	Minister of Education
46	22-May-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
47	26-May-20	Minister of Health
48	27-May-20	Minister for Infrastructure
49	28-May-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
50	29-May-20	Minister for the Economy
51	01-Jun-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
52	02-Jun-20	Minister of Health
53	03-Jun-20	Minister for the Economy
54	04-Jun-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister, Minister of Health
55	08-Jun-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
56	09-Jun-20	Minister of Health
57	11-Jun-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
58	15-Jun-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
59	18-Jun-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister

No	Date	Minister
60	22-Jun-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
61	23-Jun-20	Minister of Health
62	25-Jun-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
63	29-Jun-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
64	30-Jun-20	Minister of Health
65	17-Aug-20	Minister of Education
66	18-Aug-20	Minister of Health
67	20-Aug-20	Minister of Health
68	25-Aug-20	Minister of Health
69	27-Aug-20	Minister of Health
70	02-Sep-20	Minister of Health
71	08-Sep-20	Minister for the Economy
72	09-Sep-20	Minister of Health
73	10-Sep-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
74	16-Sep-20	Minister of Health
75	21-Sep-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
76	23-Sep-20	Minister of Health
77	24-Sep-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister, Minister of Finance
78	30-Sep-20	Minister of Health
79	01-Oct-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
80	07-Oct-20	Minister of Health
81	08-Oct-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
82	14-Oct-20	Minister of Health
83	15-Oct-20	First Minister, Finance Minister
84	21-Oct-20	Minister of Health
85	22-Oct-20	First Minister, Minister of Finance, Minister for the Economy
86	28-Oct-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
87	05-Nov-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
88	18-Nov-20	Minister of Health
89	25-Nov-20	Minister of Health
90	26-Nov-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
91	02-Dec-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister, Minister of Health
92	09-Dec-20	Minister of Health
93	10-Dec-20	First Minister, deputy First Minister
94	16-Dec-20	Minister of Health
95	12-Jan-21	First Minister, deputy First Minister
96	13-Jan-21	Minister of Health
97	14-Jan-21	First Minister, deputy First Minister
98	20-Jan-21	Minister of Health
99	21-Jan-21	First Minister, deputy First Minister
100	27-Jan-21	Minister of Health

No	Date	Minister
101	28-Jan-21	First Minister, deputy First Minister
102	03-Feb-21	Minister of Health
103	04-Feb-21	First Minister, Minister of Finance
104	10-Feb-21	Minister of Health
105	11-Feb-21	First Minister, Minister of Finance
106	18-Feb-21	First Minister, Minister of Finance
107	24-Feb-21	Minister of Health
108	25-Feb-21	First Minister, deputy First Minister

Mr O'Toole asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on Brexit and the implementation of the Protocol following the meeting of the Specialised Committee on the Protocol on 16 July.

(AQW 5830/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Specialised Committee met for the second time on 16 July 2020, and subsequently on 9 October, 5 November, and 17 December. The first meeting of 2021 took place on 23 February. Dr Andrew McCormick, Director General for International Relations, was invited on behalf of the Northern Ireland Executive. At the meetings in 2020 the UK and the EU exchanged updates on the implementation of the Protocol and discussed the preparatory work for future decisions to be taken by the Joint Committee.

The preparatory work led to the Joint Committee Decisions taken by the Joint Committee on 17 December on "at risk" goods, agriculture and fisheries subsidies, and EU supervision. It also resulted in the UK unilateral declaration on export declarations to simplify process for business moving goods from NI to GB and the EU unilateral declarations to allow a grace period of six months on the import of chilled meat products, a grace period of three months on official certification and a grace period of one year on human and veterinary medicines.

The meeting of the Specialised Committee on 23 February 2021 discussed the issues raised in the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster's letter of 2 February and European Commission Vice President Šefčovič's letter of 10 February relating to the implementation of the Protocol and outstanding issues.

Mr Beattie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of official visits the deputy First Minister has made in her role as Minister, broken down by (i) month; and (ii) constituency, since January 2020.

(AQW 6838/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Between January 2020 and 1 February 2021, the deputy First Minister made 14 visits to Assembly constituencies in her official capacity, as detailed below:

14/01/2020	Ulster Hospital	East Belfast
17/01/2020	Chinese Consulate General reception	North Down
11/02/2020	Holy Trinity Primary School	West Belfast
19/02/2020	Coca Cola Hellenic Bottling Company	Lagan Valley
26/02/2020	Titanic Hotel	East Belfast
28/02/2020	Mid South West	Mid Ulster
05/03/2020	Sensee Jobs	South Belfast
04/08/2020	Viberoptix	Mid Ulster
04/08/2020	Retail NI	Mid Ulster
09/09/2020	Mid South West	Mid Ulster
30/09/2020	Hillsborough Castle	Lagan Valley
11/12/2020	PHA Contact Tracing Centre	North Antrim
16/12/2020	NSMC Institutional Meeting	Newry & Armagh
16/12/2020	Southern Area Hospice	Newry & Armagh

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when AQW 1976/17-22 will be answered.
(AQW 6853/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: AQW 1976/17-22 was answered on 26 February 2021.

Mr Muir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the Ministerial Code will be updated to reflect the passing of the Executive Committee Functions Act.
(AQW 7574/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We intend to seek the agreement of the Executive Committee in the near future to amendments to the Ministerial Code to reflect the changes in the law introduced by the Executive Committee (Functions) Act 2020. Once agreement has been obtained, we will seek the scheduling of a debate on a motion for the approval of the Assembly.

Mrs D Kelly asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, (i) what programmes have been funded through the Communities in Transition Programme; (ii) what amounts have been awarded to each programme; and (iii) what outcomes have been achieved through each of these programmes, over the last three years.
(AQW 9294/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive Office has lead responsibility for delivery of the Communities in Transition Project.

Following a publicly advertised and open tender process initiated by the TEO Communities in Transition team, a series of individual interventions have been commissioned through the Project. Please see Annex A attached for full details of these contracts and their values.

In terms of the programme outcomes, it is too early to report on this definitively as the majority of CIT projects commenced in February/March of 2020 and will require some time to demonstrate impact. However, early progress has been encouraging with numbers in terms of uptake and participation being strong across all areas with over 380 organisations currently taking part and over 550 individual participants.

A mid-term review has been completed and presented to Ministers, who have accepted all the recommendations contained within the review.

Target Area	Project Theme	Tender Stage	Lead Delivery Partner	Project Value	Project Duration
Carrickfergus/Larne	Community Development	AWARDED	Intercomm Ireland	£ 161,500.00	March '21
Carrickfergus/Larne	Health & Wellbeing	AWARDED	Extern	£ 191,370.10	March '21
Carrickfergus/Larne	Community Safety	AWARDED	Intercomm Ireland	£ 128,500.00	March '21
Carrickfergus/Larne	Arts & Culture	AWARDED	Intercomm Ireland	£ 155,100.00	March '21
Derry/Londonderry	Health & Wellbeing	AWARDED	Old Library Trust	£ 434,750.00	March '21
Derry/Londonderry	Employability & Skills	AWARDED	Extern	£ 800,717.66	June '21
Derry/Londonderry	Arts & Culture	AWARDED	Gasyard Wall Feile	£ 196,033.36	March '21
Lurgan/Craigavon	Community Development	AWARDED	Bryson / TIDES Training	£ 162,500.00	March '21
Lurgan/Craigavon	Health & Wellbeing	AWARDED	Copius Consulting	£ 118,100.00	March '21
Lurgan/Craigavon	Community Safety	AWARDED	Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI)	£ 129,750.00	March '21
Lurgan/Craigavon	Ex-Prisoner Support	AWARDED	Copius Consulting	£ 26,800.00	March '21
Lurgan/Craigavon	Area Regeneration	AWARDED	Copius Consulting	£ 44,150.00	March '21

Target Area	Project Theme	Tender Stage	Lead Delivery Partner	Project Value	Project Duration
North Down	Community Development	AWARDED	Bryson / TIDES Training	£ 160,740.00	March '21
North Down	Health & Wellbeing	AWARDED	My uHub	£ 150,200.00	March '21
North Down	Community Safety	AWARDED	NI Alternatives	£ 129,000.00	March '21
North Down	Raising Aspirations of Young People	AWARDED	NI Alternatives	£ 52,000.00	March '21
East Belfast	Community Development	AWARDED	NICVA / EBCDA	£ 278,475.00	March '21
East Belfast	Health & Wellbeing	AWARDED	EBCDA / ASCERT / ASSIST	£ 193,000.00	March '21
East Belfast	Arts & Culture	AWARDED	Ballymac	£ 197,000.00	March '21
North Belfast	Community Development	AWARDED	Ashton Community Trust	£ 281,975.00	March '21
North Belfast	Health & Wellbeing	AWARDED	Ashton Community Trust	£ 192,197.29	March '21
North Belfast	Community Safety	AWARDED	Ashton Community Trust	£ 157,950.00	March '21
North Belfast	Area Regeneration	AWARDED	Ashton Community Trust	£ 43,464.00	March '21
West Belfast	Health & Wellbeing	AWARDED	Blackie River Community Groups	£ 752,400.00	March '21
West Belfast	Community Safety & Area Regeneration	AWARDED	Falls Community Council	£ 402,000.00	March '21
Shankill	Community Development	AWARDED	Greater Shankill Partnership Board	£ 298,441.00	March '21
Shankill	Health & Wellbeing	AWARDED	Extern	£ 172,150.16	March '21
Shankill	Community Safety	AWARDED	NI Alternatives	£ 128,830.00	March '21
Shankill	Arts & Culture	AWARDED	Greater Shankill Partnership Board	£ 146,599.20	March '21
REGIONAL	Restorative Practice	AWARDED	CRJI & NI Alternatives	£ 1,417,000.00	18 months - expires Sept '21
			Total	£ 7,702,692.77	

Mr O'Toole asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the BBC's paused investment in Belfast was raised in the meeting with the BBC Director-General and head of BBC NI.

(AQW 10722/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: This was an introductory meeting with the new Director-General of the BBC.

It has been agreed that there will be further engagement with the Director General and the Head of BBC NI where the Corporation's local investment plans and its commitment to make programmes and services more reflective of its audiences will be discussed.

Ms Armstrong asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 9773/17-22, to detail how the societal impacts have been measured as to how successful they have been at building a United Community.

(AQW 10847/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The impact of the work carried out through the T:BUC Strategy is captured at a population level through the annual Good Relations Indicator Report.

The indicators were developed alongside the T:BUC Strategy to monitor progress towards the four strategic priorities outlined in the Strategy and data is mostly collected through the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey. It is important to note that many factors impact the indicators at a population level and any change in the statistics cannot directly be attributed to a specific intervention.

Each specific intervention is of course also subject to ongoing monitoring against the agreed outputs and outcomes, and are subject to evaluation.

The latest report can be found at: Good Relations Indicators annual update 2019 | The Executive Office (executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk)

Ms S Bradley asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) for an update on work within their Department to help with the prevention of loneliness; and (ii) whether their Department would be supportive of the development of a preventing loneliness strategy.

(AQW 11113/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: As we advised in our answer to AQW 5246/17-22, we welcome the joint statement made by the Minister for Health and the Minister for Communities on 6 December about tackling loneliness and the work underway or planned by their departments. The Junior Ministers also met with representatives from the Red Cross on 20 January to discuss its report 'Lonely and left behind – tackling loneliness at a time of crisis.'

We want to explore further how the Executive can build on this work, and relevant initiatives being taken forward by other departments, in the development of a comprehensive strategy, and the Junior Ministers are committed to raising the issue within the Executive Working Group on 'Mental Health, Resilience and Suicide Prevention' in order to highlight the need for cross-government action.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the negative impact of the Irish Sea border on the Northern Ireland economy, what discussions the Executive has had on the matter; and what action is planned.

(AQW 13041/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive continues to consider and discuss regular updates on impacts arising from the end of the Transition Period alongside detailed analysis of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement.

We have taken a multifaceted approach to dealing with matters associated with the end of the transition period so that we can respond effectively to any issues as we become aware of them.

We are closely engaging with the UK Government at both Ministerial and official level to deal with the impacts that our businesses and citizens are currently facing.

This engagement has included Ministerial attendance at regular meetings of the Exit Operations (XO) Cabinet Committee, where we have taken the opportunity to highlight the significant issues impacting on our businesses and citizens, and press for solutions. We have represented our concerns regarding issues, such as VAT on second hand cars and tariffs on steel being imported from the rest of the world, for which temporary mitigations are being put in place, while long-term solutions are sought.

We continue to work with the UK Government to urgently find a solution to groupage and provide guidance for our businesses on Rules of Origin.

We have also been engaging closely with the Irish government on relevant issues of concern, particularly on delays on the Holyhead-Dublin route.

Our C3 arrangements remain in effect, with the NI HUB maintaining a partial stand up. This ensures that we maintain our links into the wider Civil Contingencies effort in real time, and can address issues in an expedient manner.

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what support is available for the travel agency industry.

(AQW 13269/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive agreed to provide a financial support scheme to help vulnerable but viable travel agents, including self-employed homeworkers. The scheme will provide support for the costs of re-opening or keeping a business operational; re-connecting with employees and customers and adapting customer marketing; and financial planning. It will provide a flat payment of £10,000 per premises to travel agency businesses operating from commercial premises, or a £3,500 single payment to self-employed travel agents working from home.

The scheme will be open for applications from 19 – 26 March 2021 (inclusive).

Mr Dickson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether he will establish a COVID-19 business support scheme for travel agents and tour operators.

(AQW 13495/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive agreed to provide a financial support scheme to help vulnerable but viable travel agents, including self-employed homeworkers. The scheme will provide support for the costs of re-opening or keeping a business operational; re-connecting with employees and customers and adapting customer marketing; and financial planning. It will provide a flat payment of £10,000 per premises to travel agency businesses operating from commercial premises, or a £3,500 single payment to self-employed travel agents working from home.

The scheme will be open for applications from 19 – 26 March 2021 (inclusive).

Mr McNulty asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work completed in their Department to create an Office of Cultural Expression, which was to be established under New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 13895/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We are committed to the development and implementation of the rights, language and identity proposals contained in New Decade, New Approach.

This includes arrangements to progress the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Amendment No.1) Bill which provides for the creation of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression.

Officials are undertaking the necessary preparatory work to legislate for this Bill and we intend to progress the legislation during this mandate and to create the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression as quickly as possible thereafter.

We will of course keep the Assembly updated on progress.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they intend to take forward the recommendation of the Committee for Finance in its report on the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, in respect of the need to bring the operation of and provision for the office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments up to international standards.

(AQW 14422/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Committee for Finance report in respect of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill has not been formally referred to the Executive Office, however, we have now noted the recommendation and this will receive further consideration in due course.

Mr McNulty asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland, including (i) its ability to conduct free, fair and independent elections; and (ii) its ability to independently maintain an up-to-date electoral register.

(AQW 14950/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Electoral Office, as an excepted matter, is outside the official responsibilities of the Executive Office.

Mr McCrossan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the future use of the former Maze prison site.

(AQW 15990/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The First Minister and Junior Minister Kearney met with the Board of the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation on 10 February 2021 to discuss the Board's Strategy. We recognise the potential of the site and hope to find a resolution that will see its regeneration taken forward.

Ms Bradshaw asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail, as of 1 March 2021, how many interim payments have been made by the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board.

(AQW 16144/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: As at 1 March 2021, Historical Institutional Abuse (HIA) Redress Board panels have made 72 Section 14 Initial Payment Orders pending full determination by a panel. The current status of the applications is set out in the table below.

Status of Applications where s14 Initial Payment Order made

Status	Number
Fully Determined by a panel	21
Initial Payment made pending full determination by a panel	45
Awaiting BACS details from applicant	6

Status	Number
Total	72

Mr Sheehan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the impact of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill on the Withdrawal Agreement and the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.

(AQO 746/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: It is important that the Executive fully consider the implications of the Internal Market Act both on the Withdrawal Agreement and Protocol and our devolved competencies.

That work will be ongoing as the Internal Market Act is implemented over the coming year and we will continue to engage with London, the Devolved Administrations and the European Union, including through the Joint Committee and the Joint Ministerial Committee (European Negotiations) as necessary.

In seeking the best possible outcome for our people and businesses the Executive has been clear that there must be unfettered east-west access for our businesses.

Mr Muir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their planned engagement and communications activity surrounding the eventual easing of COVID-19 restrictions.

(AQO 1603/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Thanks to the public's adherence to the measures currently in place, we have made good progress in reducing transmission of the virus and suppressing the Covid-19 epidemic.

We are very aware of the damaging impacts that this virus is having on people's lives, and the need to give people some hope.

The Executive has published a pathway for exiting the current restrictions in a very cautious and gradual way. This will be guided by the prevailing public health situation and the medical and scientific advice as well as an assessment of the wider impacts for people, for society and for the economy.

We appreciate that people are seeking certainty on what that will look like, but we want to be upfront and make everyone aware that our approach will not be driven by dates, but by evidence.

So, while there are no certainties, we have given people an indication of how we hope to move forward and the sequencing of how restrictions could be lifted when the time is right to do so.

The ongoing programme of engagement across departments with key sectors will be crucial in supporting this work, including with the retail and hospitality sectors, faith leaders, the PSNI, local government and sporting organisations.

In addition, the Executive's public information campaign will continue to run across multiple platforms.

Mr Buckley asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the flexibilities the European Union could provide to assist local businesses.

(AQO 1608/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: While for the most part our local businesses were well prepared for the end of the Transition Period, both businesses and consumers here have faced a range of issues since the beginning of January, as many GB based businesses were unprepared for the new requirements.

We raised this issue on several occasions with the Westminster Government, and we welcome the measures they have put in place to increase the preparedness of businesses in England, Scotland and Wales.

Alongside the efforts to increase businesses readiness, we have been working to identify, assess and seek to resolve operational issues associated with the end of the transition period as they arise.

While we have differing views on the decision to leave the EU, and on the Protocol, we are committed to working together to achieve the best possible outcome for our local businesses.

We have met with Michael Gove, and the European Commission Vice President, Maroš Šefčovič, to outline the challenges we are facing, and we welcome their commitment to find solutions and their joint engagement with our business groups and civic society.

Ms Kimmins asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions have taken place with the Irish government in respect of their New Decade, New Approach commitments, specifically in relation to providing €500 million investment over the next five years.

(AQO 1090/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We discussed New Decade, New Approach commitments at the NSMC Plenary meeting on 31 July. We agreed that commitments would be progressed through the various NSMC sectors, or bi-

laterally between Ministers as appropriate, and we know that Executive colleagues have already had discussions on these issues.

A senior officials' group to oversee delivery of commitments has also been established and met on 9 November.

In relation to the €500m fund which has been established by the Irish Government, our officials are engaging with their counterparts to explore how this fund will operate and what the Irish Government's priorities are in relation to this.

Mr McCrossan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the Inter-Departmental Working Group's report on Mother and Baby Homes, Magdalene Laundries and Historical Clerical Child Abuse will be published.

(AQO 1440/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The findings of the recent report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes were truly shocking. We must continue to hear the experiences of the women and children in these institutions and respond to their needs.

The Inter-Departmental Working Group was established by the Executive to take forward work on historic Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries, and on historical clerical child abuse which fell outside the terms of reference of the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry. The Department of Health leads the work on Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries while the Executive Office leads the work on historical clerical child abuse.

Research into historical Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries here was commissioned by the IDWG and undertaken jointly by Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University.

On Tuesday 26 January, the Executive agreed to publish the research report and to proceed with an independent investigation which will be co-designed with survivors. A statement was made to the Assembly advising of the publication of the report and outlining the agreed way forward.

The Chair of the IDWG has established a Reference Group of victims and survivors and their representatives. Their views, and the views of victims and survivors more widely, will continue to be central to this work as it progresses.

The Terms of Reference for a research project on historical clerical child abuse are currently being finalised with a view to commissioning the research in the Spring.

Mr G Kelly asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the impact of the British Government's delay in legislating for the legacy aspects of the Stormont House Agreement as committed to in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQO 1523/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We have no joint view on this matter.

Ms Armstrong asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the implementation of the Racial Equality Strategy 2015 - 2025.

(AQO 1697/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We want this to be a truly shared, equal and safe society for all our people, regardless of race or ethnicity. We therefore remain committed to the full implementation of the Racial Equality Strategy.

Progress has been made on a number of the key actions. For example, we have completed a review of the Minority Ethnic Development Fund (MEDF) to ensure it best supports local groups to promote good relations between people of different ethnic backgrounds. As a first step to implementing the recommendations the Fund was launched earlier this year and applicants have been notified of the outcome.

We have reviewed the Race Relations Order and are now preparing options for enhancing the legislation. The Racial Equality Subgroup has been engaged in this work to inform final options which we intend to consult this year.

Alongside this, the research into the feasibility of introducing ethnic monitoring has completed and we are now in receipt of the final report. This will require extensive engagement with departments and agencies to consider how best to take forward the recommendations and early engagement has commenced.

We will also shortly be consulting on a draft Refugee Integration Strategy.

We are under no illusion about the size of the challenge involved in tackling racial inequalities and it will require all of society to play their part. We will therefore continue to work with our Ministerial colleagues and stakeholders to drive this forward.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs pursuant to AQW 8075/17-22, what progress has been made regarding his Department's intention to introduce a bill to the Assembly in 2021 to deal with ruinous and dilapidated buildings and neglected sites.

(AQW 15453/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Due to staff being moved to other priority work areas and ongoing vacancies it has not yet been possible to finalise the substantial economic appraisal which must be completed before the Bill can be introduced in the Assembly.

I am hopeful that the Bill can be progressed during the remainder of the current Assembly mandate and will keep the situation under review.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what discussions he has had with Executive colleagues and others (i) before; and (ii) after his unilateral decision to halt work on the new permanent border control posts required by the Withdrawal Agreement.

(AQW 15638/17-22)

Mr Poots: On 26 February 2021 former Minister Lyons instructed DAERA officials to halt works in relation to the permanent infrastructure facilities at the Northern Ireland Points of Entry.

I have previously confirmed that I will be bringing the matter to the Executive for consideration as soon as possible.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what work his Department is doing to ensure farmers in border counties will not be disadvantaged financially as a result of Brexit.

(AQW 15939/17-22)

Mr Poots: Leaving the EU provides for an unprecedented level of regional discretion and flexibility with regard to future agricultural support in Northern Ireland.

My ultimate aim is to ensure that we take full advantage of the opportunities presented to us now that we have exited the EU, to develop a sustainable agriculture industry in which all farmers are supported on an equitable basis. To that end, my Department will be developing support schemes that provide opportunities for all of Northern Ireland's farmers, no matter where they farm, to become more efficient and to maximise the sustainable returns they can achieve to improve resilience of the farming industry for the future.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for the addresses of all current peat extraction sites.

(AQW 16004/17-22)

Mr Poots: The power to grant permission for large-scale peat extraction lies with Planning Authorities. My Department is a statutory consultee and provides advice to Planning Authorities in relation to planning applications for peat extraction but does not hold information on the location of peat extraction sites.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for an update on a clean air bill for Northern Ireland; and (ii) what measures he is considering for implementation in the short, medium and long term.

(AQW 16131/17-22)

Mr Poots: Work is now well underway within my Department in developing Northern Ireland's first Clean Air Strategy; however, I have not committed to developing a clean air bill/act.

I recently ran 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 sought views on a wide variety of matters relating to air quality. It did not set out policy options or indicate a particular policy position at this stage.

To ensure the best air quality outcomes are achieved, a two-staged approach has been adopted:

- 1 A 12 week public consultation on the Discussion Document. This has now concluded. The Discussion Document is a lengthy document that discusses evidence, existing policies and poses questions to promote discussion; and
- 2 Draft the Clean Air Strategy. This will be based on analysis of stakeholder views and Ministerial policy direction. This will be a shorter document, and will be subject to a further public consultation and Executive approval.

Following the period of public discussion, responses received are being reviewed, options considered and a range of proposals formulated. Once I have considered the options and decided on a policy direction, officials will begin to draft the first Clean Air Strategy for Northern Ireland. This will be a more focused and shorter document than the Discussion Document and will contain specific proposals relating to policy and other measures which can improve air quality. This draft Clean Air Strategy will be subject to an additional public consultation and due to the cross-cutting nature of the policy area, Executive approval will also be sought at that time.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of air quality in Northern Ireland, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 16132/17-22)

Mr Poots: The management of air quality in Northern Ireland is based on the requirements of European Union (EU) Air Quality Directives, and on the 2007 UK Air Quality Strategy. These requirements are incorporated (or 'transposed') into Northern Ireland's own legislation by statutory measures, forming the basis of a strong framework for managing air quality.

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.

My Department's air quality report contains a full analysis of pollutant levels, across all monitoring stations in local council districts and is available at: <https://www.airqualityni.co.uk/documents/technical-reports/0369%20DAERA%20Air%20Pollution%20Report%202019-Issue2-print-optimised.pdf>

Current, real-time pollution levels are available from each district council via our website at: <https://www.airqualityni.co.uk/>

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether embodied carbon emissions are measured by his Department in the Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Inventory.
(AQW 16166/17-22)

Mr Poots: Embodied carbon emissions are not included in the Northern Ireland Greenhouse Gas Inventory. The Northern Ireland GHG Inventory estimates the emissions produced by sources within the geographical territory of Northern Ireland and it doesn't include estimates of the emissions associated with imported goods and services.

In the UK, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) publishes consumption-based emissions calculated by the University of Leeds. DAERA officials are collaborating with the University to explore the development of a similar approach for Northern Ireland.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) whether his Department has a role to restock our waterways for fishing; and (ii) if so, whether he will arrange the restocking of the Albert Basin and Camlough Lake, Newry.
(AQW 16170/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department has no obligation under the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966 to stock waterways for fishing purposes, regardless of whether they are public or private fisheries. However, my Department does manage and stock the DAERA Public Angling Estate's (PAE) put and take game fisheries. Only in exceptional circumstances will DAERA provide fish stock for waters outside the PAE.

My Department has a supervisory role in authorising fish movements, such as fish restocking. It also assists NIEA to investigate fish kill pollution events, providing advice on whether restocking in those circumstances is appropriate.

Both the Albert Basin and Camlough Lake fall outside the DAERA jurisdiction and are under the remit of the Loughs Agency.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will work with Executive colleagues to establish a public inquiry to address and consider the marine construction licence, discharge consent and Utility Regulator consents together with regards to the proposed Islandmagee Caverns Gas Storage Project.
(AQW 16203/17-22)

Mr Poots: I expect to be presented with a portfolio of documents within the near future on the determination of an application for a marine construction licence for the Islandmagee Gas Storage project. The documents will also consider reviews of an existing abstraction licence and discharge consent both of which were issued in 2014. I understand that the project requires consents from a number of other consenting authorities. Obtaining these consents would be a matter for the developer to progress with the appropriate consenting authorities.

I also expect to be advised on the option of Executive referral and of the option of holding a public inquiry under section 70 of the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009.

My decision will be informed by information that will be presented by officials. I am cognisant of my responsibility to determine the marine licence application and review of the extant abstraction licence and discharge consent in a fair and impartial manner. I am also mindful that I serve all the people of Northern Ireland. Therefore, I am unable to comment or add to speculation on the outcome of a decision I will be making until I have been presented with and considered all relevant information.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, with regards to the proposed Islandmagee Caverns Gas Storage Project, for an update on whether he plans to bring the marine construction licence to the Executive Committee for consideration as it is a cross-cutting matter.
(AQW 16206/17-22)

Mr Poots: I expect to be presented with a portfolio of documents within the near future to assist me in determining the application for a marine construction licence for the Islandmagee Gas Storage project.

I have been advised that the briefing will include advice on whether this is a cross cutting issue and on the need for Executive referral. I trust you can appreciate that I am keeping an open mind on the matter and unable comment further until I have had sight of the documents.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the threats posed to Northern Ireland's coastal areas by climate change.

(AQW 16218/17-22)

Mr Poots: Climate change has been identified as one of the main pressures affecting the UK coastal environments. In the coming decades it is anticipated that potential economic, societal and environmental risks caused by climate change on coastal areas will significantly increase.

The Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership (MCCIP) 2020 Report Card made future projections of sea level rise around the UK. For Belfast, the central estimate sea level projection for the year 2100 ranges from 0.26 – 0.58 metres, depending on the emissions scenario.

Sea levels along the Northern Irish coast are predicted to rise, as are the frequency and intensity of extreme storm events. In combination these impacts will have a direct physical impact on our coastal areas, allowing higher energy waves to reach our coastline, with greater potential for coastal erosion and increased risk of flooding. The frequency and magnitude of coastal change in Northern Ireland will undoubtedly be greater in the future than in the recent past or present and coastal assets will be subjected to enhanced rates of erosion, inundation and weathering or decay.

To better understand the threats, my Department is progressing actions identified in the Climate Change Risk Assessment (CCRA) 2017 and the subsequent Northern Ireland Climate Change Adaptation Programme 2019-24. Research has been commissioned from the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) to assess the impacts of future climate change scenarios on the coastal habitats of Northern Ireland. This will include identification of the risks to coastal assets, such as Marine Protected Areas, infrastructure and heritage. By integrating the best available evidence this project will identify practical ways to develop adaptation measures to accommodate a range of climate change scenarios.

My officials are contributing to the development of the third Climate Change Risk Assessment evidence report which is due to be published in summer 2021; this will contain further projections for sea level rise and impact at the coast.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs pursuant to AQW 8275/17-22, (i) when his Department last reviewed Redburn Country Park for Japanese Knotweed; and (ii) whether any further action has been taken by his Department since September 2020.

(AQW 16244/17-22)

Mr Poots: Japanese knotweed has been confirmed as occurring within the historical Walled Garden area at Redburn Country Park. It is not known to occur in any other areas within the Park. The park is subject to regular inspection by my officials in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

The growth in this area has been subject to control for a number of years via the application of a systemic herbicide which was most recently undertaken on 17th September 2020 by my officials. A further application of a systemic herbicide is due to be undertaken in April of this year. This application of systemic herbicide will likely be necessary for the next 3 to 4 years in order to eradicate the issue.

During the course of the ongoing control programme my officials became concerned that despite fencing and local signage having been put in place to restrict local access, some members of the public were still ignoring this and crossing the control area, which appeared to have been spreading the knotweed further and setting back the control efforts. In response to this, the existing cordoning off of the area has now been enhanced with a section of ibex fencing to further restrict public access in the immediate area.

My officials will continue to monitor and control as necessary until no further regrowth occurs.

Department for Communities

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Communities whether the £500 COVID-19 special recognition payment to Health and Social Care workers will be determined as income for claimants of Universal Credit and other means-tested benefits.

(AQW 15635/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I am fully supportive of the payment of COVID-19 related support grants to workers in recognition of the difficulties they have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am committed to assisting my Ministerial colleagues and encourage early engagement with me and my Department when a COVID-19 support grant is proposed. This enables my officials to consider whether the proposed support grant can be disregarded under current benefit

legislation and if not, work to see if a solution is possible, so that the support grant does not have a negative impact on a person's benefit.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister for Communities whether she is committed to resolving the Finlock Guttering issue in the Ballysillan area of North Belfast, prior to the Autumn and Winter of 2021; and for a timeframe for the completion of these works.

(AQW 15653/17-22)

Ms Hargey: This is a matter for the Housing Executive. The Housing Executive has advised that it is trying to explore all options and is committed to resolving the Finlock Guttering issue in the Ballysillan area, but it is unable to provide a timeframe for the completion of these works.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the need to press ahead and address the properties affected by the Finlock Guttering in Silverstream, North Belfast, given the health and safety issues faced by Housing Executive tenants.

(AQW 15654/17-22)

Ms Hargey: This is a matter for the Housing Executive.

The Housing Executive has advised that it is trying to explore all options and is committed to resolving the Finlock Guttering issue in the Ballysillan area, but it is unable to provide a timeframe for the completion of these works.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities how many of 242 physical personal independence payment appeals were successful for the period July 2020 to 31 December 2020.

(AQW 15689/17-22)

Ms Hargey: During the period July 2020 to 31 December 2020 there were a total of 1,406 hearings across all benefit types of which 638 were classed as paper hearings and 768 were classed as oral hearings (242 face to face, 408 telephone and 118 video).

My Department currently only holds information on the number of successful appeals broken down by oral or paper hearing. During the period July 2020 to 31 December 2020, of the 768 oral hearings, 590 were in respect of Personal Independence Payment appeals of which 212 were successful and 90 were unsuccessful with the remaining 288 accounted for as adjourned or withdrawn.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities how many of the 118 video personal independence payment appeals were successful for the period July 2020 to 31 December 2020.

(AQW 15691/17-22)

Ms Hargey: During the period July 2020 to 31 December 2020 there were a total of 1,406 hearings across all benefit types of which 638 were classed as paper hearings and 768 were classed as oral hearings (242 face to face, 408 telephone and 118 video).

My Department currently only holds information on the number of successful appeals broken down by oral or paper hearing. During the period July 2020 to 31 December 2020, of the 768 oral hearings 590 were in respect of Personal Independence Payment appeals of which 212 were successful and 90 were unsuccessful with the remaining 288 accounted for as adjourned or withdrawn.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities how many of the 638 paper personal independence payment appeals were successful for the period July 2020 to 31 December 2020.

(AQW 15692/17-22)

Ms Hargey: There were a total of 638 paper hearings for the period July 2020 to 31 December 2020, of which 577 were in respect of Personal Independence Payment appeals. Of the 577 Personal Independence Payment appeals, 235 were successful, 169 were unsuccessful and 173 were either adjourned or withdrawn.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities (i) how the Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings process works within her Department; and (ii) whether a ring-fenced or maximum budget exists for this process.

(AQW 15775/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Details on how the SPED scheme operates is published on the Housing Executive's website at the following link:

https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Community/hate_harassment_toolkit

The budgets for both SPED acquisitions and sales are agreed with the Department at the start of the financial year and are initially net budget neutral.

The budgets are reviewed during the year and any pressures or easements on the SPED budgets are managed through the Monitoring Rounds.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the comparative funding of £1.2 million for Irish language and £660,000 for Ulster Scots.

(AQW 15801/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Funds were awarded against an assessment of need which was conducted in partnership with the Department's delivery partners informed by a wider analysis of the impact of the pandemic on the sector.

Latest figures indicate a projected spend of £1.35m within the Irish language sector and £1.48m to support Ulster-Scots language, culture and heritage.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities when sign language legislation will be brought before the Assembly.

(AQW 15841/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I remain committed to the introduction of legislation built on the principles of equality and social inclusion in ensuring that the Deaf community here have the same rights and opportunities as those in the hearing community and are able to access services in their own language.

I have directed officials to consider timescales and options for progressing work towards the introduction of a Bill.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Communities whether she will ensure that the Local Development Plan process with local government will be included in her plans for Housing Transformation.

(AQW 15915/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My programme of housing transformation involves issues, such as, infrastructure, finance, planning, innovation, and skills. Its success therefore depends not just on collaboration across departments but necessitates partnership working with all sectors. Local government is a key partner in this work, given its responsibilities for planning, its wider Community Planning and Local Development Planning remits, and its role in regulating Houses in Multiple Occupation.

To date, I have ensured there is ongoing input from local government through the inclusion of local government representation on project boards and working groups, including those for the Housing Supply Strategy and the development of new intermediate rent products. Local government is also represented on my Department's Housing Panel, which provides an expert reference source and challenge function for housing policy and strategy development. My housing officials also engage with local government representatives on an ongoing basis about specific policy issues. This includes work to help local government operationalise Local Development Plan policies in respect of affordable housing.

Local government representatives, including those with responsibilities for Local Development Planning will also have the opportunity to input to the development of my housing transformation programme through formal periods of consultation and engagement. This includes the Call for Evidence for the Housing Supply Strategy, which I will launch over the coming weeks. This represents best practice in co-production, as it allows key stakeholders, delivery partners and the public at large an early opportunity provide any evidence they have that either supports or challenges our initial policy thinking.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Communities how many properties, identified as having poor cavity wall insulation in the SERC Report 2014 and the BBA Report 2019, have had remedial and upgrade work carried out.

(AQW 15964/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The report produced by South Eastern Regional College and the Housing Executive pointed to problems that were arising in some housing stock due to the age of properties and the quality of the cavity wall insulation (CWI). Remedial work was carried out under response maintenance to three of the properties identified in the March 2014 SERC report. The SERC report precipitated the commissioning of the BBA report and as such, unless required for structural reasons, the preparation of further Cavity Wall Insulation schemes was deferred until such time as this investigation had been completed and considered.

Following on from the findings of the BBA report, the Housing Executive has published for public and industry consultation a Draft Cavity Wall Action Plan that sets out its proposals for addressing the BBA's report's findings and recommendations in respect of its housing stock.

This consultation document was issued on 22nd December 2021 and responses to it are due by 31st March 2021. The intention is to publish a final Action Plan later this year.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities (i) whether the boiler replacement scheme will include gas and oil boilers; and (ii) when the scheme will be extended to support home owners in rural areas not able to access gas for home heating.

(AQW 15969/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Boiler Replacement Scheme is a grant based scheme funded by the Department and administered by the Housing Executive.

If an applicant meets these criteria the boiler can be changed from a gas, LPG or oil fired boiler to a high efficiency gas, oil or wood pellet fired boiler.

For further information and advice on the scheme please see the link below to the Housing Executive's website The Housing Executive - Boiler Replacement Scheme (nihe.gov.uk) (<https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Housing-Help/Affordable-Warmth-Boiler-Replacement/Boiler-replacement-Scheme>)

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Communities what support she will provide to those in receipt of pensions and benefits that use Post Office card accounts, which will be closing this year, and don't have a bank account.

(AQW 15978/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As some customers may have difficulty with changing their method of payment and need assistance in choosing an account that is right for their circumstances, the following support services are available:

A free telephone advice service (0800 085 7133) offers all POca users the opportunity to ask questions and seek support in choosing an account that meets their needs.

DfC's 'Make the Call Wraparound' service which can be accessed at 0800 232 1271 or makethecall@dfcni.gov.uk, can assist customers when considering change of payment method.

Free independent advice is available through Advice NI (0808 802 0020 or www.adviceni.net/money-talks) and Money Advice Service on (0800 138 7777 or www.moneyadvice.service.org.uk).

For those customers who are unable to access or manage a mainstream account, my Department will continue to offer a payment exception service.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities to list (i) the resources produced by Libraries NI in connection with the centenary of the formation of Northern Ireland; (ii) the online lectures or talks on the formation of Northern Ireland produced by LibrariesNI, including who delivered the same; and (iii) a breakdown of the cost of the resources and lectures and talks.

(AQW 15997/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Libraries NI is in the process of producing a booklist to reflect the wide range of resources held.

Details of associated online lectures or talks produced by Libraries NI are tabled below.

Date	Speaker	Title	Delivery	Cost
04/02/2021	Cormac Moore	Birth of the Border: the impact of Partition in Ireland	Heritage from Home talk - Online by Zoom	£150.00
15/02/2021	Donál McAnallen	Game of two halves: sport and partition in Ulster 1921-39	Heritage from Home talk - Online by Zoom	£150.00
12/01/2021 -16/02/2021	The Junction, Ethical and Shared Remembering Project	The Road to Partition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ State Security and State Religion ■ The Partition of Irish Unionism ■ The Partition of Irish Nationalism ■ The Boundary Commission: An Exercise in Futility ■ What Will We Do with The Future? 	6-week online training programme (6 sessions) in partnership with the Junction, based on Methodist Minister Dr Johnston McMaster's book, Partition: What Did It Do for Us?	No cost

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities what percentage of Housing Executive rent received goes back into the maintenance budget.

(AQW 16021/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The table below shows the percentage of Housing Executive rental income invested in stock maintenance for the period 2017/18 to 2019/20. Maintenance includes planned, cyclical and response maintenance.

Financial Year	Rental Income	Maintenance Programme Expenditure	% of Rental Income spent on Maintenance
	£k	£k	
2017/18	298,495	126,687	42%
2018/19	295,832	143,334	48%

Financial Year	Rental Income	Maintenance Programme Expenditure	% of Rental Income spent on Maintenance
2019/20	296,041	134,601	45%

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities how many people applied to the Co-Ownership scheme in the 2020-21 financial year.

(AQW 16022/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The latest available figures show that as of 28th February 2021 Co-Ownership received 2,734 applications in the 2020-21 financial year, surpassing the total of 2,259 during the last financial year.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the current waiting lists for social homes in Newtownstewart; and (ii) the current plans for additional new-build social homes.

(AQW 16053/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has provided the following table detailing the Waiting List figures for Newtownstewart at December 2020.

Position at December 2020	All Applicants	Applicants in Housing stress	Annual Allocations to Applicants
Newtownstewart	63	36	18

The Housing Executive has advised that the five-year Housing Need Projection for the period 2020-2025 for Newtownstewart does not project any requirement for new social housing. There are no new social housing schemes currently under construction in Newtownstewart; and there are no schemes currently programmed to start as part of the Social Housing Development Programme.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the sufficiency of the current resource allocation to scrutinise the Local Area Plans for councils in the set time frame.

(AQW 16078/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Local Area Plans for councils are the responsibility of the Department for Infrastructure.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities to detail the current resource her Department has allocated to scrutinise the Local Area Plans for councils.

(AQW 16079/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Local Area Plans for councils are the responsibility of the Department for Infrastructure.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities (i) when an uplift was last applied to the Housing Executive Schedule of Rates for Grant Aided Works; and for her assessment of the percentage difference between actual contract prices for carrying out adaptations under the Disabled Facilities Grant and the Schedule of Rates for such works.

(AQW 16085/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has advised that its Schedule of Rates for grant-aid work was updated in March 2020.

Legislation states that the Housing Executive ‘...must determine the amount of expenses which in its opinion are proper to be incurred in the execution of the eligible works.’ To do so its Grants Offices use a standard Schedule of Rates for construction works which reflect fair market rates. These rates are reviewed and, where necessary, rates adjusted should market forces dictate.

The Housing Executive regularly sources feedback from its Grants offices on this matter and since the current Schedule of Rates was put in place it has advised that there have been relatively few issues raised.

The Housing Executive has advised that it is not possible for it to provide an accurate percentage difference between the approved costs (plus VAT) for eligible works and the applicant’s contractor’s final cost (plus VAT). Whilst the Housing Executive records these figures it has stated that a like for like comparison is not possible for a number of reasons including:

- The Housing Executive cannot confirm the rate of VAT which a contractor has claimed is the same as they have allowed;
- An applicant may have requested their contractor to use a higher specification than is allowed through the Schedule of Rates;
- Where a contractor charges less than the Housing Executive’s approved costs, the Housing Executive will reduce the level of grant-aid to what is actually paid.

On this basis the Housing Executive is unable to provide an assessment of the percentage difference between actual contract prices for carrying out adaptations under the Disabled Facilities Grant and the Housing Executive's Schedule of Rates for these works.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the impact of the reduction of £20 per week, or £80 per Assessment period from Universal Credit claimants from 1 October 2021 as outlined in the Chancellor's Budget.
(AQW 16086/17-22)

Ms Hargey: This uplift has provided critical financial support for the increased number of people now claiming Universal Credit and people need to know that they can continue to rely on such support.

While the uplift has been extended to the end of September 2021, I want to see it retained permanently and I will continue to urge Thérèse Coffey, Secretary of State, Department for Work and Pensions to do so.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities what progress has been made to extend the leasehold period for Housing Executive properties purchased by tenants to bring it into line with the rest of the UK; and what mitigation measures have been considered by her Department.

(AQW 16087/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has advised 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 required to implement the leasehold extension proposals. This work is at an early stage and, as soon as it is agreed, a commencement date will be communicated to individual leaseholders.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities how many people are considered to be homeless and sleeping on the street.
(AQW 16107/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As this question is specific to homelessness which falls within my Departments remit I have been asked by the Minister for Health to respond.

The Housing Executive has statutory responsibility for responding to Homelessness and has recently published data which can be found at <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Rough-Sleeping/2020-rough-sleeping-snapshot-statistics.aspx>.

The Housing Executive identified a total of 18 people sleeping on the street in an exercise carried out in November 2020.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Communities (i) for her assessment of winter sports facilities and support in Northern Ireland; (ii) whether she plans to improve provision; and (iii) whether curling is included in the plans, given the absence of any dedicated facilities on the island of Ireland.

(AQW 16196/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Sport NI, an arms-length body of my Department, advise that although there is only a small number of winter sports facilities, they believe the existing provision is proportionate to the demand.

The Craigavon Golf & Ski Centre and the Dundonald Ice Bowl are publicly operated facilities and cater for a range of ice sports. I understand that Lisburn and Castlereagh Council are considering options for the redevelopment of the Dundonald Ice Bowl and that an initial sports specific consultation took place regarding Curling, but that due to the number of hours requested and the ice preparation time to facilitate Curling, it was not considered to be feasible within the new proposed facilities.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities why GAA inter-county teams are not classified as elite athletes during the current lockdown and in Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out Of Restrictions.

(AQW 16207/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I can advise that GAA inter-county players are considered to be elite athletes.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities to detail the average time for overpayments to be repaid to tenants in each social housing provider.

(AQW 16232/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has advised that it does not hold information relating to tenant refunds for overpaid rent or rates charges. However its policy is to process refunds as quickly as possible and this normally takes no more than 2 to 3 weeks.

The Department does not hold this information in relation to Registered Housing Associations.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities to list the social housing developments scheduled for the next three years, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 16233/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Given the large volume of information contained within the response, I will arrange for the answer to this question to be placed in the Assembly library.

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Communities how families in North Antrim have been affected by the two-child limit in relation to eligibility for Universal Credit, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 16298/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The information requested is not currently available at this level. Universal Credit officials continue to work to develop and enhance all of the statistical information available.

From 1 February 2019, Universal Credit accepts new claims from families regardless of how many children there are. At August 2020, I can confirm that there were in total 2,730 households impacted by the two child policy.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities what is the current level of the Housing Executive debt.

(AQW 16334/17-22)

Ms Hargey: At 31 December 2020, Housing Executive debt was £285 million. This is comprised of £171 million of principal debt and £114 million of interest debt.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 5610/17-22, whether the cost has been reimbursed to the public.

(AQW 16378/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The cost has been reimbursed in full.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Communities how her Department plans to financially support sports clubs that have been disproportionately affected over the last 12 months.

(AQW 16393/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department and Sport NI have delivered £2.2m through the Sports Hardship Fund to help over 900 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.

In addition, Covid Safe PPE Packs containing items such as hand sanitisers, masks and signage material, total value £800,000, have been distributed to 1136 sports clubs.

The £25M Sports Sustainability Fund, which is being administered by Sport NI, will provide critical funding to 37 sports governing bodies and 460 affiliated sports clubs. Sport NI commenced payments to the sector on 25 February and will complete the payment process shortly.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities to detail how the Historic Environment Division within her Department makes decisions on the removal of historic structures and buildings.

(AQW 16397/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Historic Environment Division (HED) maintains inventories of surveyed and recorded heritage assets in the Historic Environment Record (HERoNI). These records are used to inform advice which HED provides as a consultee, and decision making within the Department. These records are updated and augmented as new information comes to light about heritage assets.

As a statutory consultee, HED provides advice to planning authorities on development proposals that could potentially affect heritage assets, or impact on their setting. The advice HED provides aligns with strategic policy objectives toward conserving, protecting and where possible enhancing the historic environment. Where insufficient information exists to enable HED to provide informed advice, they may recommend that surveys are commissioned to record the asset more accurately and help better understand its significance. The final decisions on planning applications rest with planning authorities. Sometimes, as a result of planning decisions, archaeological remains may have to be removed. HED regulates this archaeological activity through a licensing system, and the resulting reports are included in HERoNI, so that information about the site is preserved through record, and made available for future research.

Development or works involving demolition or changes to a Listed Building or Scheduled Monument must obtain consent. Listed Building Consent (LBC) applications are determined by planning authorities, informed by advice from HED as a statutory consultee. HED, on behalf of the Department, decides directly on changes to scheduled monuments through a separate process of Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC). A central consideration in these consent processes is the conservation of the asset and the maintenance of its significance and integrity. Occasionally there may be circumstances of over-riding concern, including major health and safety matters, whereby under the legislative provisions an owner may provide written notice to the Department of intent to remove or change a scheduled monument or a part of it. In such cases HED will work with owners to seek solutions which involve the minimum intervention necessary to address concerns, whilst retaining the significance of the asset.

In relation to work affecting State Care monuments, as with scheduled monuments, HED bases decisions on proposed changes around an understanding of the significance of the asset.

Owners of all types of heritage assets, including non-designated heritage assets, may approach HED for advice around change or removal. In cases where an owner wishes to remove a non-designated heritage asset in circumstances that lie outside the remit of planning controls or the controls of the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects (NI) Order 1995, the decision on removal will rest with the owner.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities what is delaying the delivery of the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme.
(AQW 16408/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department has been working to refresh and re-engage with the programme to provide a robust evidence base on the challenges, strategic priorities and needs of soccer at all levels.

Following this work I will present recommendations to Executive colleagues on the future implementation of the Programme.

Department of Education

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of children, from nursery upwards, with special educational needs who have applied for, but not been allocated, a place at the special school closest to them; (ii) the reasons for this; (iii) the mechanism by which places at special schools are allocated; (iv) the transport arrangements in place for those pupils who have not been allocated places at their closest special school; and (v) any other support that exists for parents of these pupils.

(AQW 15818/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):

- (i) The Education Authority (EA) was able to secure places for all children who required placement however, 28 children at nursery level were not able to be placed at the closest special school. The EA did not keep a record of those children at primary or post primary who were unable to be placed at their closest special school.
- (ii) Issues around placements were a consequence of cumulative pressures over a number of years.
- (iii) The mechanism by which places at special schools are allocated, is governed by the statutory framework within the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 and the Education (Special Educational Needs) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005. Parental preference must also be considered pursuant to Article 44 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. The EA works in cooperation with schools and parents and makes every effort to ensure that children are placed in the school of parental preference, subject to statutory considerations.
- (iv) All children are subject to the EA's Transport Policy. The EA provides transport to the vast majority of children who are attending a special school setting including some children who have not been allocated places at their closest special school. The EA has a statutory duty to transport children where transport has been named on their Statement of Special Educational Needs, whether the school is the closest special school or not.
- (v) The EA also provides a range of other support for parents including allocating a named Special Educational Needs (SEN) Link Officer to families; providing Pupil Support Services for a range of special educational and medical needs and the SEN Early Years' Service and the SEN Inclusion Service.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, given that many parents were anticipating that the Surestart developmental programme for 2–3-year-olds would re-commence when nursery and years 1-3 returned (i) when will this vital service to re-open; and (ii) to detail the science surrounding the decision to prevent the reopening of Surestart in line with other pre-school provision.

(AQW 16136/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Sure Start programme, which is administered by the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) on behalf of the Department of Education, is distinct from pre-school, nursery and primary provision as it provides holistic support to parents and families in addition to children aged 0-3 years. I have therefore sought specific advice from the Department of Health regarding restart of the programme and they have identified a number of mitigations which would need to be put in place.

Having confirmed that these will be implemented, I am keen to present options to the Executive on the phased restart of certain Sure Start services as soon as possible. As a first step, I wish to see the restart of provision at which children only will attend – to mitigate the risk of COVID spread due to adults gathering. The Sure Start Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds is predicated on parents attending with their children, and can be adjusted on a temporary basis, so that restart for children in the first instance, can take place.

It is important to note that Sure Start has continued to support children and families in areas of greatest disadvantage throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, through various alternative means. My Department has required that focus is maintained on supporting vulnerable children, including on a face-to-face basis, keeping within public health guidance. However, I

appreciate the limitations of these temporary arrangements for many parents and children who rely on this vital support. It is therefore my objective to resume the full range of Sure Start services as soon as it is safe to do so.

My Department and HSCB have been keeping Sure Start project managers up-to-date on developments and current guidance throughout the pandemic and will continue to do so.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education (i) how he plans to support the transfer of children from primary to post-primary in the 2021/22 school year; and (ii) how does he intend to exercise his duty of care towards these children by ensuring that any tests administered by post-primary schools to facilitate academic selection take into account the significant effects of COVID-19 on their educational progress.

(AQW 16139/17-22)

Mr Weir: In order to support the transfer process and to ensure that parental preference for school sectors is maximised, I have already approved the allocation of an additional 361 Year 8 places for September 2021 admission. My Department will approve additional Year 8 places through the Temporary Variation process where they are required.

Furthermore, for the first time this year, parents of children applying to post-primary education have been able to apply online. Applications have now closed and parents will be notified of the outcome of their child's application in June.

My Department will continue to work closely with the Education Authority to ensure the placement of children during the admissions process is maximised and that parents of children who wish to appeal a school admission decision are able to do so in advance of the 2021/22 school year.

In relation to testing, to date neither the Association for Quality Education Ltd nor the Post Primary Transfer Consortium have announced dates for the transfer tests in the new school year. However, I understand both organisations are consulting with their member schools about their approach to the tests.

My Department will be liaising with both providers to highlight the importance of engaging 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.

Undoubtedly, face to face learning is the best approach for all of our children and young people and I welcome the decision by the Executive to return all primary school pupils to the classroom from 22 March. However, our schools have been significantly better prepared and equipped to deliver remote learning than perhaps they were last March. My Department issued guidance on remote learning which provides advice to schools as they consider how to tailor and adapt delivery of the curriculum for all year groups including those children who are currently in Year 6.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Education what steps his Department is taking to ensure that emotional wellbeing for young people has a greater emphasis in the school curriculum.

(AQW 16180/17-22)

Mr Weir: Emotional wellbeing is already an integral part of the Northern Ireland curriculum and is covered under Personal Development and Mutual Understanding and Learning for Life and Work. Legislation sets out the minimum curriculum content which all children should receive.

Teachers have the flexibility to decide which topics and approaches best suit the needs of their pupils and which reflect, for example, the current public health situation as pupils return to school. I do not, therefore, see the need to introduce greater legal prescription specifically in relation to emotional wellbeing in the curriculum at present.

My Department has provided earmarked funding to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment ("CCEA") to support the production of wellbeing and mental health resources and guidance materials. In August 2020 CCEA launched an online wellbeing and mental health hub to support and promote these issues and to facilitate easy access to resources. This approach is designed to enhance the teaching of wellbeing and mental health in schools by providing teachers with the resources and support to increase their competence and confidence in this area.

CCEA is also working collaboratively with the Department of Health and a range of key stakeholders to support the development and implementation of the Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education whether he will provide guidance to Sure Start Partnerships on how they should safely restart their services under Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out Of Restrictions.

(AQW 16208/17-22)

Mr Weir: The NI Executive's 'Pathway out of Restrictions' approach sets out that by the end of phase two (Cautious First Steps) there will be a resumption of the Sure Start programme.

Sure Start is administered by the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) on behalf of the Department of Education. During the COVID-19 pandemic Sure Start projects have put in place alternative forms of targeted support and continue to prioritise support to vulnerable children. The Department has advised HSCB that support to vulnerable children, including those attending the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds, can be provided on a face-to-face basis where need is identified and in line with public health advice. HSCB has communicated this guidance to Sure Start Managers for dissemination to Sure Start staff.

However, I appreciate the limitations of these temporary arrangements for many parents and children who rely on this vital support. Therefore, in line with the 'Pathway out of Restrictions' approach, I have been seeking to present a proposal to the Executive on the phased re-start of Sure Start services. My recommendations in this regard are currently with the Executive's COVID-19 Taskforce for consideration, taking account of health advice and wider recovery priorities. To minimise risk, restart will initially involve attendance by children only.

The Department and HSCB have ensured throughout COVID that Sure Start projects have access to up-to-date Education and Health guidance on the management of COVID-19 risk. The Department and HSCB will continue to ensure that Sure Start projects avail of current guidance and will provide advice regarding particular risk mitigation actions which the Executive requires to be in place to safely enable Sure Start services to resume.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 15536/17-22, what the contracts that contain social clauses are delivering in terms of benefits to local communities.
(AQW 16214/17-22)

Mr Weir:

Construction Buy Social and Social Clauses

Minor Works

While Minor Works projects generally fall under the threshold for Buy Social requirements in relation to long term unemployment and work experience there are still substantial sustainability requirements included in all contracts. A summary of requirements included for Contractors are as follows:

Economic

- All tender opportunities are published to local supply chain;
- Completion of fair payment report in relation to payments to supply chain.

Social

- Declaration of equality in workplace;
- Human rights declaration;
- Project specific Buildsafe-NI action plan to be submitted monthly.

Environmental

- Project specific Site Waste Management plan to be submitted monthly;
- 10% of materials to be from recycled source;
- All projects required to be registered with the Considerate Constructors Scheme.

Major Works

Economic

- All tenders opportunities are published to local supply chain;
- Completion of fair payment report in relation to payments to supply chain.

Social

- Declaration of equality in workplace;
- Human rights declaration;
- Project specific Buildsafe-NI action plan to be submitted monthly.

Environmental

- Project specific Site Waste Management plan to be submitted monthly;
- 10% of materials to be from recycled source.
- All projects required to be registered with the Considerate Constructors Scheme.

During the major construction projects the Contractor must complete a Sustainability Report on a monthly basis to confirm its sustainability requirements. These reports include such information as:

- Social, economic and environmental requirements e.g. Recruitment and Training Plan for the Project;
- Opportunities for Trainees;
- Opportunities for Skilled / Experienced Workers; and,
- Employment opportunities for the Unemployed.

The table below gives examples of specific requirements in selected projects:

Title	How are the Buy Social Clauses being delivered in the local community?
[1492698- SC2] - Ballycastle Shared Campus (Services)	WORK PLACEMENT AND TRAINING - Three (12) person weeks of work experience, or employment opportunities for the unemployed. - One x 40 week student employment placement opportunities for student(s) on a University or College of Further and Higher Education. Schools construction careers day.
[1812870- SC2] - SEP2 Greenhaw Primary School- Derry- Ref MA19-20111510 - Appointment of Integrated Consultant Team	WORK PLACEMENT AND TRAINING - Three (12) person weeks of work experience, or employment opportunities for the unemployed. - One x 40 week student employment placement opportunities for student(s) on a University or College of Further and Higher Education. - Schools construction careers day.
[1882443- SC2] - Islandmagee Primary School - Appointment of Integrated Consultant Team - Ref MA16-001BA	WORK PLACEMENT AND TRAINING - Three (12) person weeks of work experience, or employment opportunities for the unemployed. - One x 40 week student employment placement opportunities for student(s) on a University or College of Further and Higher Education. - Schools construction careers day.
[2168583- SC2] - King's Park Primary School and Nursery Unit - Appointment of Integrated Consultants Team - Ref MA17-000013AR	WORK PLACEMENT AND TRAINING - Three (12) person weeks of work experience, or employment opportunities for the unemployed. - One x 40 week student employment placement opportunities for student(s) on a University or College of Further and Higher Education. - Schools construction careers day.
[1952858- SC2] - Abbey Community College- Newtownabbey Ref MA14-000004BA - Appointment of Integrated Consultant Team	WORK PLACEMENT AND TRAINING - Three (12) person weeks of work experience, or employment opportunities for the unemployed. - One x 40 week student employment placement opportunities for student(s) on a University or College of Further and Higher Education. - Schools construction careers day.
[2180515- SC2] - New Iveagh Primary School - Appointment of Integrated Consultants Team - Ref MA17-000022AR	WORK PLACEMENT AND TRAINING - Three (12) person weeks of work experience, or employment opportunities for the unemployed. - One x 40 week student employment placement opportunities for student(s) on a University or College of Further and Higher Education. - Schools construction careers day.
[2345375- SC2] - SEP2 T2 - Kilronan PS- Magherafelt- Ref MA19-30113420 - Appointment of Integrated Consultant Team	WORK PLACEMENT AND TRAINING - Three (12) person weeks of work experience, or employment opportunities for the unemployed. - One x 40 week student employment placement opportunities for student(s) on a University or College of Further and Higher Education. - Schools construction careers day.
[2349540- SC2] - Parkhall Integrated College Sixth Form Centre- Antrim - Ref MA18-30113427 - Appointment of Integrated Consultant Team	WORK PLACEMENT AND TRAINING - Three (12) person weeks of work experience, or employment opportunities for the unemployed. - One x 40 week student employment placement opportunities for student(s) on a University or College of Further and Higher Education. - Schools construction careers day.
[2345693- SC2] - SEP2 T2 - Lisanally School- Armagh- Ref MA19-50113608 - Appointment of Integrated Consultant Team	WORK PLACEMENT AND TRAINING - Three (12) person weeks of work experience, or employment opportunities for the unemployed. - One x 40 week student employment placement opportunities for student(s) on a University or College of Further and Higher Education. - Schools construction careers day.
[2350884- SC2] - SEP2 T2 - The Thompson PS- Ballyclare- Co Antrim- Ref MA19-30113593 - Appointment of Integrated Consultant Team	WORK PLACEMENT AND TRAINING - Three (12) person weeks of work experience, or employment opportunities for the unemployed. - One x 40 week student employment placement opportunities for student(s) on a University or College of Further and Higher Education. - Schools construction careers day.
[2345655- SC2] - SEP2 T2 - Dungannon Primary School- Dungannon- Ref MA19-50113599 - Appointment of Integrated Consultant Team	WORK PLACEMENT AND TRAINING - Three (12) person weeks of work experience, or employment opportunities for the unemployed. - One x 40 week student employment placement opportunities for student(s) on a University or College of Further and Higher Education. - Schools construction careers day.

Title	How are the Buy Social Clauses being delivered in the local community?
[2345611- SC2] - SEP2 T2 - Antrim Primary School- Antrim- Ref MA19-30113594 - Appointment of Integrated Consultant Team	WORK PLACEMENT AND TRAINING - Three (12) person weeks of work experience, or employment opportunities for the unemployed. - One x 40 week student employment placement opportunities for student(s) on a University or College of Further and Higher Education. - Schools construction careers day.
[2351022- SC2] - SEP2 T2 - Fairview PS- Ballyclare- Co Antrim- Ref MA19-30113598 - Appointment of Integrated Consultant Team	WORK PLACEMENT AND TRAINING - Three (12) person weeks of work experience, or employment opportunities for the unemployed. - One x 40 week student employment placement opportunities for student(s) on a University or College of Further and Higher Education. - Schools construction careers day.
[2127867- SC2] - Cullybackey College- Cullybackey- Co. Antrim	WORK PLACEMENT AND TRAINING - Three (12) person weeks of work experience, or employment opportunities for the unemployed. - One x 40 week student employment placement opportunities for student(s) on a University or College of Further and Higher Education. - Schools construction careers day.
[1982128- SC2] - Glenwood Primary School- Belfast - Appointment of Integrated Consultant Team - Ref MA14-0000A423	WORK PLACEMENT AND TRAINING - Three (12) person weeks of work experience, or employment opportunities for the unemployed. - One x 40 week student employment placement opportunities for student(s) on a University or College of Further and Higher Education. - Schools construction careers day.
[2857337- SC2] - Moy Shared Campus- Ref MA17-000023AR - Appointment of Integrated Consultant Team (RESUBMISSION)	WORK PLACEMENT AND TRAINING - Three (12) person weeks of work experience, or employment opportunities for the unemployed. - One x 40 week student employment placement opportunities for student(s) on a University or College of Further and Higher Education. - Schools construction careers day.
[1924036- SC2] - New Lismore Comprehensive School- Craigavon - Reference A1901	WORK PLACEMENT AND TRAINING - 52 person-weeks of paid employment opportunities to be provided for 'new entrant trainees' for each £1m of contract value (and pro rata) that have an apprenticeship, trainee or employment contract. UNPAID WORK EXPERIENCE PLACEMENTS 2 weeks per £1m in contract value up to a maximum 37 weeks of unwaged placement opportunities. - Schools construction careers day.
[2742317- SC2] - Appointment of Integrated Supply Team for Elmgrove Primary School and Nursery - Reference 101/0255/4B - TENDER	WORK PLACEMENT AND TRAINING - 52 person-weeks of paid employment opportunities to be provided for 'new entrant trainees' for each £1m of contract value (and pro rata) that have an apprenticeship, trainee or employment contract. UNPAID WORK EXPERIENCE PLACEMENTS 2 weeks per £1m in contract value up to a maximum 37 weeks of unwaged placement opportunities. - Schools construction careers day.
[2261944- SC2] - Limavady Shared Education Campus - Appointment of Integrated Supply Team - Ref MA17-0000D400	WORK PLACEMENT AND TRAINING - 52 person-weeks of paid employment opportunities to be provided for 'new entrant trainees' for each £1m of contract value (and pro rata) that have an apprenticeship, trainee or employment contract. UNPAID WORK EXPERIENCE PLACEMENTS 2 weeks per £1m in contract value up to a maximum 37 weeks of unwaged placement opportunities. - Schools construction careers day.

Supplies and Services

In accordance with PGN 01/13 social clauses or initiatives are included where appropriate in service contracts.

During the last year EA Commercial Procurement Service (EACPS) have been working with SIB to agree social clauses for inclusion in Supplies contacts where relevant. A number of these have been agreed and feature in contracts currently being evaluated and awarded and those that will be tendered and awarded throughout the rest of this year.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education what provision has been made for home schooled pupils to obtain grades for GCSEs and A Level examinations this year in the absence of examinations.

(AQW 16216/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is the responsibility of parents who choose to educate their children outside the education system to identify an appropriate examinations centre that is accredited by the relevant awarding body to facilitate assessments for the qualifications they choose for their children. If they are unable to identify an appropriate centre they should contact the relevant awarding body directly.

CCEA has been instructed to ensure that all private candidates, including elective home educated candidates, receive a grade for the CCEA qualifications for which they have been entered and are due to cash-in in 2021. Parents of elective home educated learners should contact CCEA directly if they are unable to identify an appropriate centre willing to facilitate the awarding of these qualifications.

For all non-CCEA qualifications, parents of these learners should contact the relevant awarding organisation directly to ascertain the arrangements they are putting in place.

It would not be appropriate for my Department to intervene in these arrangements as the relationship is appropriately between the candidate, the examination centre and the awarding body.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Strule Shared Education Campus, Omagh.
(AQW 16223/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department is continuing to work closely with the six school principals and their teams to build on the culture of sharing in Omagh, albeit within a challenging environment as schools continue to recover and adapt to ongoing disruption due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

As you are aware, the procurement competition for the final phase of construction, which is to build five post primary schools and shared facilities, was suspended in February 2018 due to procurement issues. Following this suspension, the Department reviewed and assessed a range of procurement options. The Department has closed the current competition, and subject to final Ministerial approval, is working to progress to the next stage in the procurement as soon as possible with a revised strategy.

The Strule site has been cleared and constructed to formation level, in preparation for moving to the next stage of construction. Liaison is ongoing with Fermanagh and Omagh District Council in relation to the Department's planning application for the proposed development works on Gortin Road and Mountjoy Road.

Work is currently ongoing to reconfirm the previously agreed Memorandum of Agreement with the Education Authority and trustee bodies of the schools moving to the Strule Campus. This document sets out the proposed arrangements for the occupation, governance and management of the Campus, in particular the shared facilities and delivery of the educational benefits.

Given the scale of the investment the educational benefits are vital to the success of the campus. A long term Benefits Realisation Plan has been agreed with the schools. A project plan and business case detailing the work required to realise the educational benefits and pilot various shared education initiatives prior to go-live is currently under development by the Education Authority which is managing the development of the educational model for the campus.

The Vacated Sites Working Group is considering how best to plan for and manage the future use and/or disposal of the existing sites following relocation to the Campus and will contribute to Fermanagh and Omagh District Council's Local Development Plan and the Omagh Opportunity Sites Taskforce.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Education what provision is in place to facilitate home educated students who do not have an allocated exam centre and need to be assessed for grades in their GCSE exams.
(AQW 16261/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is the responsibility of parents who choose to educate their children outside the education system to identify an appropriate examinations centre that is accredited by the relevant awarding body to facilitate assessments for the qualifications they choose for their children. If they are unable to identify an appropriate centre they should contact the relevant awarding body directly.

CCEA has been instructed to ensure that all private candidates, including elective home educated candidates, receive a grade for the CCEA qualifications for which they have been entered and are due to cash-in in 2021. Parents of elective home educated learners should contact CCEA directly if they are unable to identify an appropriate centre willing to facilitate the awarding of these qualifications.

For all non-CCEA qualifications, parents of these learners should contact the relevant awarding organisation directly to ascertain the arrangements they are putting in place.

It would not be appropriate for my Department to intervene in these arrangements as the relationship is appropriately between the candidate, the examination centre and the awarding body.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Education to detail the pathway in place for home educated students to book and pay for GCSE assessments.
(AQW 16262/17-22)

Mr Weir: Entries for assessments for qualifications must be made through an accredited examination centre.

It is the responsibility of parents who choose to educate their children outside the education system to identify an appropriate examinations centre that is accredited by the relevant awarding body to facilitate assessments for the qualifications they

choose for their children. Where a parent is unable identifying an appropriate examination centre they should contact the relevant awarding body directly.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education whether the monies allocated by his Department for the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) implementation of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 during the current financial year needs to be spent before the 31 March 2021.
(AQW 16276/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has allocated additional funding totalling £7.5m directly to schools to support them as they prepare for implementation of the new SEN Framework. These additional funds cover the period between January-March 2021. With the exception of the End of Year Flexibility Schemes for schools (and further education colleges via the Department for the Economy), individual Departments cannot carry resource or capital underspends forward.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education what support his Department is providing to enable home educated students to achieve GCSE and A-Level qualifications this year.
(AQW 16289/17-22)

Mr Weir: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 16141/17-22.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education in the light of the significant proportion of the 6 pre-school areas of learning missed by many of our pre-school children, whether he will offer flexibility to the parents of pre-school children seeking to repeat the pre-school year in 2021.
(AQW 16290/17-22)

Mr Weir: Compulsory school age is determined by reference to the date a child reaches the age of four. A child of compulsory school age is not entitled to a funded pre-school place unless he or she has a statement of special educational needs.

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.

Children in their pre-school year have engaged with curricular content both remotely and face-to-face during the Autumn Term, and have now returned to face-face learning. All children will have progressed with their learning and many will have succeeded in developing the expected knowledge, skills and understanding. A one size fits all approach to flexible school starting age or repeating a year is not, therefore, educationally appropriate.

Undoubtedly, face-to-face to learning is the optimal approach, however but it is not the case that children have received no educational provision during the period of school closures to most children.

Pre-school education settings were required to provide remote learning to all children that were unable to attend during periods of lockdown. To support this, guidance and resources have been made available for pre-school settings and the parents of pre-school pupils. This includes support through the Getting Ready to Learn Programme which supports pre-school settings to engage with parents to facilitate them becoming more involved in their children's learning and development. The Education Authority also established a Supporting Learning webpage with resources for practitioners and parents, which include pre-school specific resources.

The Foundation Stage curriculum provided in Year 1 has been specifically designed to take account of the very young age children start school. Learning through play is an important element and is designed to build on children's earlier learning experiences by providing an appropriate learning programme that develops their disposition to learn and introduces them to more formal learning in a way and at a pace that takes account of their age and level of development.

Schools will know that it is important to understand where pupils are in regard to their learning after the period of remote education and at the outset of the 2021/22 academic year. 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.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Education for an update on the progress of the St Patrick's Primary School, Hollywood new build construction project
(AQW 16318/17-22)

Mr Weir: St Patrick's Primary School, Hollywood, has not been announced for major capital investment, therefore, there are no plans for a new build construction project being advanced for this school at this time.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to detail the status of each of the 22 New School Build Projects announced by then Minister of Education John O'Dowd on 22 January 2013, including the amount spent on each project to date.
(AQW 16348/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have arranged for information regarding the status of the 22 New School Build Projects announced on 22 January 2013, including the amount spent on each project to date to be placed in the Assembly Library.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education (i) why the remuneration for the Independent Chair and Panel members for the Integrated Review of Education is significantly below that offered and provided to the panel who completed the Systems, Not Structures: Changing Health and Social Care review; and (ii) to confirm what criteria he used to determine the remuneration now offered.

(AQW 16354/17-22)

Mr Weir: The level of remuneration provided to the members of the “Systems, Not Structures: Changing Health and Social Care” review panel is a matter for the Department of Health.

In determining the remuneration to be offered to the Independent Review of Education panel members, consideration was given to the costs associated with similar review panels and boards. This included the panel led by Professor Bengoa, comparable board-level roles in Northern Ireland and Great Britain and daily rates for senior civil servants and non-executive board members. Ultimately, I determined that rates should be the same as those provided to members of the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Education to detail the financial allocations to each school through the Engage Programme, in the last 12 months.

(AQW 16372/17-22)

Mr Weir: The funding allocation to each school for the Engage programme was published on my Department’s website in September 2020 at the address below. This funding is for the period September 2020 to March 2021. I envisage providing further funding for the 2021/22 financial year, subject to Executive approval and the availability of funding.

Link to DE website: www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/engage-programme-school-allocations-sept-2020-mar-2021

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Education how many schools employ a literacy support teacher; and how his Department ensures equality of opportunity and access to literacy support in all schools.

(AQW 16373/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department does not hold information on the employment of literacy support teachers by schools who will employ a range of strategies to support the development of literacy skills.

The Education Authority’s (EA) Literacy Service supports schools in providing peripatetic literacy support to pupils who experience a literacy difficulty. The Service employs a team of approximately 117 full-time equivalent staff, the vast majority of whom are teachers. The Service provides a broad continuum of support ranging from capacity building and training to online resources and guidance for parents including the use of assistive technology. Advice and guidance are based on the assessed needs of the pupil which may include access to small groups or direct interventions. Referral to the Literacy Service is based on an assessment by the EA’s Psychology Service using regionally applied provisional criteria.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Education whether the Education Authority accept a diagnosis of Autism from reports that have come from private consultants.

(AQW 16382/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) will accept a diagnosis from a private practitioner if it is ratified by the Health & Social Care Trust (HSCT).

The HSCT is best placed to decide whether any diagnosis outside the Trust has been carried out according to the recognised best practice for assessment and, therefore, EA takes its lead from a HSCT ratification of an autism assessment.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education whether there is any provision for parents who may wish to continue with remote learning and home schooling for a period because of anxieties around health vulnerabilities.

(AQW 16428/17-22)

Mr Weir: My main priority has always been to protect our children’s education, mental health and well-being. I believe that this can best be achieved through face-to-face learning and social engagement in schools.

No matter how well managed or provided, removal of face to face learning and its replacement with remote learning impacts on children’s educational experience, with a disproportionate impact on disadvantaged groups and vulnerable children.

As the Executive have made the decision for schools to reopen, the implication of that is, that if a child should not return and unless anxiety is confirmed by the pupils GP then that absence should be recorded as unauthorised.

A small number of children will be advised by their clinical team not to attend school. Where a child has been medically advised by a consultant not to attend school, parents should consult with their school Principal and, as required, the Education Authority regarding education provision for these pupils. As per public health advice, all other pupils should attend school.

Additionally, if an individual child or a small number of pupils across a year group have to self-isolate for a designated period due to COVID-19, parents should talk directly to their school about provision of education materials. In the event of a school

closure, or that a class or group of pupils need to self-isolate, schools should have contingency plans in place for the delivery of remote learning.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail all proposals the Education Authority is working on to increase pupil safety outside primary schools in West Tyrone.

(AQW 16445/17-22)

Mr Weir: Road safety policy, enforcement and responsibility for traffic management issues beyond the school boundary is outside the remit of my Department. This is a matter for the Department for Infrastructure. Under the 1986 Education & Libraries Order there is however provision for the Education Authority to establish a scheme (with the approval of my Department) to assist in the prevention of accidents.

To that effect the Education Authority (EA) currently employs a network of School Crossing Patrols (SCPs) to provide additional safety measures for pupils walking to and from school.

SCPs are not a statutory function of the Education Authority and as such it is not obliged to provide this service. The management and operation of SCPs are guided by Road Safety GB's 'School Crossing Patrol Service Guidelines' and the introduction or retention of a SCP is subject to an assessment by the EA to determine whether the location meets the minimum the threshold for the operation of a SCP.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Education what is the rationale for only Year 12 students and above being allowed to enter for CCEA GCSE qualifications in 2021.

(AQW 16464/17-22)

Mr Weir: Decisions about awarding CCEA qualifications through the alternative arrangements in place for 2021 were taken on the basis of the necessity of the award to facilitate progression.

Students in Year 12 and above need to be awarded their qualifications in order to progress to the next stage of their education or into training or employment. Students in Year 11 and below do not need to cash-in qualifications to progress to studies in Year 12.

There are two exceptions where Year 11 students will be permitted to enter for and be awarded CCEA GCSE qualifications this year, as these qualifications are required to facilitate progression to extended education opportunities in Key Stage 4. These are:

- CCEA GCSE Mathematics where the student will be entered for CCEA GCSE Further Maths in 2022 - CCEA GCSE Mathematics is a pre-requisite for CCEA GCSE Further Maths; and
- early entries for CCEA GCSE Irish in Irish-medium schools and units or where the learner intends extending their learning through CCEA GCSE Gaeilge.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Education what engagement has he had with the Ulster College of Music around the notification they have received from CCEA that their students below Year 12 may not be entered for the GCSE qualification that they have been working towards this year.

(AQW 16465/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have not engaged with the Ulster College of Music around notification they have received from the CCEA regarding GCSE qualifications.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Education to outline any plans he has to introduce programmes focused on talking to young men about male privilege and male violence against women.

(AQW 16472/17-22)

Mr Weir: Within the NI Curriculum, the topics of consent and domestic and sexual violence and abuse are addressed through Personal Development and Mutual Understanding in primary schools, and Learning for Life and Work in post-primary schools. Within these areas of learning, pupils learn how to identify the characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships, recognise how power and gender inequality can negatively affect relationships, and the importance of treating others in a relationship with fairness, dignity and respect. Although the Curriculum does not specifically address male privilege, there is provision for pupils and teachers to raise and discuss issues and negative attitudes associated with this.

Whilst I have no plans to introduce programmes relating to these topics, I can advise that my Department is contributing to the "Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy" being led by the Department of Health and the Department of Justice and that officials are progressing actions in relation to education and awareness, including the areas of Relationships and Sexuality Education and Preventative Education.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Education (i) what steps his Department is taking to ensure that school staff receive training on male domestic violence against women; and (ii) what assessment he has made of the potential merits of making such training mandatory.

(AQW 16473/17-22)

Mr Weir: I can advise that my Department provides funding of £60,000 per annum for the 'Social Guardians' and 'Training for Trainers' elements of the Helping Hands Programme, developed by Women's Aid Federation NI. The aim of this programme is to increase teachers' confidence, competence and capability to teach about sensitive topics, in this case domestic abuse, and respond appropriately to issues and concerns raised by pupils.

This training is currently voluntary and is well supported by schools and at this stage there are no plans to make it mandatory.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQT 1101/17-22, to detail (i) what discussions he has had with the Minister of Justice; and (ii) any agreed work that will be taken forward by officials.

(AQW 16479/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department is working closely with the Department of Justice to take forward recommendations made by Sir John Gillen in his 2019 report into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland.

I can confirm that I met with the Minister of Justice on 11 March to discuss the implementation of the recommendations in relation to education and awareness and the interconnection between our respective Departments. Our discussion focused on issues including the iMatter Programme resources, provision for the CCEA's Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) Hub and ongoing work on teacher training on the issue.

Under the current legislative position, imposing direct curriculum changes on any subject would require a change in primary legislation. However, as part of the meeting we agreed to establish a sub-group to consider the minimum content for the curriculum and will work together to facilitate the implementation of the Gillen recommendations, including consideration of matters crucial to education and awareness, such as consent and breaking the cycles of domestic violence.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to detail the Education Authority's ongoing proposals to increase pupil safety outside primary schools in Newry and Armagh, broken down by school.

(AQW 16510/17-22)

Mr Weir: Road safety policy, enforcement and responsibility for traffic management issues beyond the school boundary is outside the remit of my Department. This is a matter for the Department for Infrastructure. Under the 1986 Education & Libraries Order there is however provision for the Education Authority to establish a scheme (with the approval of my Department) to assist in the prevention of accidents.

To that effect the Education Authority (EA) currently employs a network of School Crossing Patrols (SCPs) to provide additional safety measures for pupils walking to and from school.

SCPs' responsibility is to assist pedestrians to cross the road safely at an assigned location. They do not have a wider responsibility in respect of road safety or enforcement.

The management and operation of SCPs are guided by Road Safety GB's 'School Crossing Patrol Service Guidelines' and the introduction or retention of a SCP is subject to an assessment by the Authority to determine whether the location meets the minimum the threshold for the operation of a SCP.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education whether he will amend the exemptions listed at para 2. of Temporary Continuity Direction No 2 for Youth Services, to include pre-school and early years groups.

(AQW 16516/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is not my intention to create unnecessary barriers to those pre-school and early years groups that routinely operate from Education Authority (EA) managed facilities. I will therefore consider variations to the exemptions contained within the Temporary Continuity Direction for Youth Services to improve access where it is deemed necessary and service providers commit to applying required operational and safety measures.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 16014/17-22, to detail his Department's requirements for the development of CCEA resources on Relationships and Sexuality Education.

(AQW 16568/17-22)

Mr Weir: In 2018 the Department commissioned CCEA to review its RSE resources to ensure that they were relevant and up to date. I have also supported the production of new resources and guidance materials, in the following key areas: consent; contraception; healthy relationships; internet safety; social media and its effects on relationships and self-esteem; LGBTQ+ matters and domestic and sexual violence and abuse.

In 2019 CCEA launched an online RSE Hub which provides a central repository for teachers and pupils to age appropriate information and value-based guidance which reflect the range of views in relation to the topic of RSE. This approach is aimed at enhancing the teaching of RSE in schools by providing teachers with resources and support to increase their competence and confidence in teaching this complex area.

This year I provided further funding to CCEA to support the development of resources for schools which reflect issues relating to menstrual health and wellbeing and teen parenting and also to modify existing resources and tailor them for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN). New resources will be subject to key stakeholder consultation before being placed on the RSE Hub.

CCEA is also developing a programme of Teacher professional learning for Relationships and Sexuality Education and a non-statutory progression framework which will set out what should be taught at each Key Stage in schools.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education given the return of children to schools, whether consideration is being given to the restarting of Sure Start services for families.

(AQW 16650/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Sure Start programme which is administered by the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) on behalf of the Department of Education provides a range of support services to children and families, attended both separately and jointly. During the COVID-19 pandemic Sure Start projects have put in place alternative forms of targeted support and continue to prioritise support to vulnerable children. The Department has advised HSCB that support to vulnerable children, including those attending the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds, can be provided on a face-to-face basis where need is identified and in line with public health advice.

However, I appreciate the limitations of these temporary arrangements for many parents and children who rely on this vital support. Therefore, in line with the 'Pathway out of Restrictions' approach, which sets out that by the end of phase two (Cautious First Steps) there will be a resumption of the Sure Start programme,

I have been seeking to present a proposal to the Executive on the phased re-start of Sure Start services. My recommendations in this regard are currently with the Executive's COVID-19 Taskforce for consideration. They will take account of health advice and wider recovery priorities. To minimise risk, restart will initially involve attendance by children only.

Having received some initial advice from DoH regarding measures to mitigate risk of COVID spread on restart of Sure Start, my Department has been liaising with the HSCB on preparatory actions in advance of an Executive decision. The Department and HSCB will continue to ensure that Sure Start projects avail of current education and health guidance and that risk mitigations stipulated by the Executive are in place before resumption of Sure Start services.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education when her Department will determine the numbers of students that can avail of PGCE courses in 2021-22.

(AQW 16654/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education confirmed the Initial Teacher Education intake numbers for the 2021/22 academic year to the four Higher Education Institutions in Northern Ireland, for both Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) and Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses, on 23 March 2021.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister of Education as the staggered return to school for some year groups progresses, whether he intends to make additional staffing resources available to ensure the continued provision of supervised learning for the children of key workers

(AQW 16688/17-22)

Mr Weir: Financial resources are currently in place for schools to avail of additional staff to continue the existing level of provision for key worker and vulnerable children, which will remain unchanged through the staggered phases until the return to schools on 12 April, (subject to Executive agreement), in line with the Executive's Pathway to Recovery.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education to detail the plans his Department has to ensure that students who are in Elective Home Education can access an exam centre in Northern Ireland where they can gain support in getting assessed grades.

(AQW 16702/17-22)

Mr Weir: I refer the Member to my response to her previous query on this matter, AQW 15502/ 17-22, and in particular the arrangements for those taking CCEA qualifications.

I understand that the Joint Council for Qualifications is due to publish, by the end of this month, a list of exam centres in England willing to facilitate private candidates taking qualifications with Ofqual-regulated English awarding organisations, including whether they will facilitate remote assessments. This may assist parents to identify an appropriate exam centre for qualifications regulated by Ofqual, but it remains the responsibility of the parent to make arrangements with an appropriate centre.

It should be noted, however, that iGCSEs are not regulated by Ofqual and are also not accredited by CCEA for teaching in schools in Northern Ireland.

Department of Finance

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the Changing Places facility in Castlederg.

(AQW 15737/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The Department of Finance is not involved in the installation of a Changing Places Toilet (CPT) in Castlederg but I am pleased to learn that Derry City and Strabane District Council is working to improve accessibility in the Member's constituency.

I am advised that there are six existing CPT facilities in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area, which provide hygienic, safe and accessible public conveniences. In addition, the council has secured funding to install a further CPT in Derg Valley leisure complex and is committed to progressing this project early in the 2021/22 financial year.

I am very sympathetic to the dignity issues arising from the limited provision of CPTs and will continue to support an equitable and accessible built environment for everyone.

More needs to be done and my Department is considering the establishment of a fund to support and encourage anyone carrying out retrospective building work to introduce this type of facility. My Department is also actively working to prepare proposals for consultation on the mandatory provision of CPTs. This is being taken forward as a matter of urgency with the technical sub-committee of our Building Regulations Advisory Committee to facilitate the necessary changes to Technical Guidance to make CPTs a requirement in certain buildings that meet the specified criteria.

Further, my Department is installing a CPT facility on the Stormont Estate near to the children's playpark, which will be fully accessible to the public.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Finance what steps are being taken to move the government estate towards net-zero.
(AQW 15769/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department of Finance (DoF) is responsible for managing the Civil Service Office Estate, which equates to around 4% of the total Public Sector energy consumption here.

DoF aims, through its Office Estate Energy Efficiency and Carbon Reduction plans, to achieve culminative energy savings and consequential reductions in carbon. These savings support and feed into the wider Energy Management Strategy and Action Plan to 2030 for Central Government introduced by the Department for Economy (DfE)

By implementing Connect 2 regional hubs, footfall in regional locations should increase, thereby reducing commuting frequencies and distances. This, in turn, should lead to reductions in carbon emissions, helping to improve the sustainability of how we work and protect the environment.

Further to this, new or refurbished DoF buildings undergo BRE Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) appraisal and the use of energy efficient installations has been incorporated into the Civil Service Accommodation Standards specification.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Finance to what provisions of the Stormont House Agreement does the expenditure on page 22 line 19 of the Budget Bill relate.

(AQW 16041/17-22)

Mr Murphy: You refer to the ambit of the Department of Justice (DoJ). They have advised that the provisions of the Stormont House Agreement (and the Fresh Start Stormont Agreement and Implement Plan) include additional security funding for the PSNI; funding for the DoJ element of the Executive Action Plan on Tackling Paramilitary Activity and funding for the DoJ element of the Executive Shared Future Programme. The structure of the ambit and how budgets are ultimately used are matters for Departments, therefore DoJ are best placed to answer any further questions in relation to their Departmental ambit.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister of Finance what negotiations have taken place, or are planned, regarding a 2020-21 pay award for civil servants.

(AQW 16043/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There has been an ongoing programme of actions taken by my Department in this regard. DoF officials held meetings with recognised trade unions in August, prior to the publication of the pay policy in September which, in turn, allowed formal negotiations to begin in October. I myself have met all the recognised trades unions as part of this process.

The Executive agreed a paper in respect of the pay award on 16 March which will allow an offer to be made to recognised trade unions very soon. Staff due to receive an increase under the terms of any pay award will receive any arrears backdated to 1 August 2020.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Finance what negotiations have taken place with Unions since 9 December 2020 concerning a pay award for the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

(AQW 16067/17-22)

Mr Murphy: DoF officials met unions on 10 and 11 December and I met industrial trade unions on 6 January to discuss Civil Service pay for 2020. The Executive agreed a paper in respect of the pay award on 16 March which will allow an offer to be made to recognised trade unions very soon. Staff due to receive an increase under the terms of any pay award will receive any arrears backdated to 1 August 2020.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Finance what actions he has taken since 1 August 2020 concerning a pay award for the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

(AQW 16068/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There has been an ongoing programme of actions taken by my Department in this regard. DoF officials held meetings with recognised trade unions in August, prior to the publication of the pay policy in September which, in turn, allowed formal negotiations to begin in October. I myself have met all the recognised trades unions as part of this process.

Throughout these discussions, I have been fully briefed by officials. I have been considering how to strike a balance between rewarding staff, best use of public funds and the most challenging financial position for many years. The Executive agreed a paper in respect of the pay award on 16 March which will allow an offer to be made to recognised trade unions very soon. Staff due to receive an increase under the terms of any pay award will receive any arrears backdated to 1 August 2020.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Finance what assurances he can give that any pay settlement concerning the Northern Ireland Civil Service that is fair and takes account of its contribution during the pandemic will be reached by the end of the 2020-21 financial year.

(AQW 16069/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In considering the pay award, I aim to strike the difficult balance between recognising civil service colleagues for their work, while managing public money in the face of the most challenging economic position for many years.

The Executive agreed a paper in respect of the pay award on 16 March which will allow an offer to be made to recognised trade unions very soon. Staff due to receive an increase under the terms of any pay award will receive any arrears backdated to 1 August 2020.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Finance whether he has made an initial remit for his Department to commence negotiations with trade unions on a pay award for the Northern Ireland Civil Service; and when he anticipates the award will be settled.

(AQW 16084/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive agreed a paper in respect of the pay award on 16 March which will allow an offer to be made to recognised trade unions very soon. Staff due to receive an increase under the terms of any pay award will receive any arrears backdated to 1 August 2020.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to detail the number of Department for Infrastructure staff, broken down by age bracket.

(AQW 16090/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The number of staff in the Department for Infrastructure by age bands at month ending February 2021 is set out in the table below

Age Band	Number
24 & under	18
25 - 34	230
35 - 49	1,168
50 - 55	652
56 - 60	572
61 - 65	270
66 & over	63
Total	2,973

Source: HRConnect

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to detail the number of temporary promotions in the Department for Infrastructure, for each of the last five years.

(AQW 16091/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The number of temporary promotions in the Department for Infrastructure, for each of the last five years is set out in the table below.

Period Ending	Number
February 2021	159

Period Ending	Number
February 2020	136
February 2019	171
February 2018	159
February 2017	168

Source: HR Connect

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Finance whether any underspend of the Fresh Start Agreement money is planned to be allocated to Shared Housing in the 2021-22 financial year.

(AQW 16127/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Draft Budget 2021-22 announced in January 2020 provided £16.9 million of Fresh Start funding to the Department for Communities for Housing for All Shared Social Housing.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Finance to outline the impact of the increased number of visitors on the grounds and wildlife in the Stormont Estate.

(AQW 16159/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There has been little impact of the increased number of visitors to the grounds of the Stormont Estate apart from an increase in litter and the degradation of some grass areas adjacent to paths.

There is no evidence to suggest that the wildlife has been adversely impacted by increased visitor numbers however the Stormont Estate team will keep this under observation.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Finance when he will engage in negotiations with Northern Ireland Civil Service staff and representatives to ensure an agreement on a pay award is reached soon.

(AQW 16205/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I refer the member to the answer for AQW 16084/17-22.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance what steps his Department is taking to ascertain that the person or business applying for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme is the same person named on the rates bill for the business.

(AQW 16220/17-22)

Mr Murphy: For every application to the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme, Land & Property Services checks the rate account to confirm that the applicant is the rated occupier of the property.

If there is a discrepancy, LPS carries out investigations to determine if the applicant is an eligible occupier.

If the rate account is in a landlord's name, or LPS records show the property as being vacant, the applicant is asked for a lease or rental agreement and LPS carries out internet searches to verify that the business is occupying the property.

In the case of shared space applications, the eligible business is unlikely to be the named ratepayer. Before an award is made, it is necessary for that business to prove they are occupying a defined separate area and operate as a completely separate business. LPS also use internet searches in this scenario to determine that the business does operate from the premises.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance to detail the amount of money spent in the last year by public sector bodies on equipment to enable staff to work from home.

(AQW 16221/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Between March 2020 and March 2021 the Department of Finance has spent £5,065,368 to facilitate working from home for civil servants and those arm's length bodies who are supported by Digital Shared Services (DSS).

The cost is in support of increased internet bandwidth (£50,000), IT equipment (£4,310,113) and software (£705,255).

It is not possible for the Department of Finance to break these figures down by each Department as some of these costs are shared infrastructure across DSS customers and some equipment has been purchased for stock to meet future requests.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Finance how the recently felled trees from Stormont Estate are being disposed of; and whether there are any plans to replace the trees.

(AQW 16228/17-22)

Mr Murphy: A woodland management plan was commissioned in April 2016 with the objective of providing a framework to achieve the long term sustainable management of the woodlands within the Stormont Estate. The plan covers a 15 year period with recommended work being taken forward in stages, including the recent tree felling work.

The contract to undertake this included both the felling and the removal of all timber from the site. The area is currently being prepared to facilitate restocking with native broadleaves.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Finance what action is being taken to maintain water levels in the ponds across the Stormont Estate to ensure the preservation of habitat for protection species during this year's spawning season; and to detail the current Biodiversity plan for Stormont Estate.

(AQW 16234/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There are two main wetland areas on the Stormont Estate, which are among our most important undisturbed areas and support a wide range of fauna. They are connected by a major drain, a section of which is partly culverted under the Prince of Wales Avenue. The on-site team ensures that the smaller water channels in the wetlands areas are regularly cleared and maintained. Maintenance of the drain, for flood control purposes, is the responsibility of Rivers Agency who regularly visit the Estate.

There are two installed water features within the grounds of the Estate, a fountain and a small pool surrounding the Reconciliation Statue. Due to ongoing leaks, the water supply to both these features was isolated some time ago.

In 2019, my Department commissioned a study to carry out a comprehensive habitat and associated flora survey of the Estate and make recommendations on how to maintain and enhance these areas for biodiversity, in line with the local Biodiversity Strategy. The findings of these biodiversity surveys were used to draw up a 10-year Stormont Estate Conservation Management Plan for the period 2019 to 2029.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Finance why hospitality businesses paying domestic rates have not been able to avail of a rates holiday; and whether he will consider extending the rates holiday to such businesses.

(AQW 16274/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I introduced the business rates holiday to provide relief for business ratepayers, including those in the hospitality sector, to assist them in managing the impact of the pandemic. Small hospitality businesses that operate from domestic premises are not commercially rated and, therefore, are cannot avail of business rate reliefs; hospitality businesses which pay business rates are eligible. I have no plans to extend this relief.

In recognition of the financial pressures being faced by domestic ratepayers at this difficult time, I introduced a freeze on the domestic Regional Rate for the 2020/21 rating year, and I have announced my plan to freeze the Regional Rate again for 2021/22.

My Department also provides a range of support measures for those who may be struggling to pay their domestic rates. Details of the support available is provided at:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/information-and-services/guide-rates/help-paying-your-rates>

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance (i) whether his Department has a strategic plan for the management of land, property and assets under its control; (ii) whether he has any plans to dispose of any land, property and assets under the control of his Department in order to raise finance; and (iii) whether he has had any engagement with local government and the Department for Communities about unlocking areas for regeneration and development through the strategic sale or disposal of lands, property and assets under his Department's control.

(AQW 16277/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

- (i) Yes, my Department has a strategic plan for the management of land, property and assets under its control. My officials have developed an approach to investment that aligns with the Executive's Asset Management Strategy.
- (ii) My Department has recently disposed of Northland House and an asset on Corporation Street. Downpatrick SSO is for sale, Cookstown SSO is being prepared for disposal and my Department has further plans to decommission Dundonald House. My officials are constantly reviewing the plan taking into consideration current market conditions as well as Central government's requirement for office space post Covid.
- (iii) My officials have been working closely with local government and the Department for Communities in order to unlock and maximise value to the public purse.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance whether he plans to instruct officials in his Department to re-engage with trade unions acting on behalf of Northern Ireland Civil Service staff to ensure an agreement on a fair pay award that accounts for their contribution throughout the pandemic.

(AQW 16291/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive agreed a paper in respect of the pay award on 16 March 2021 which will allow an offer to be made to recognised trade unions very soon. Staff due to receive an increase under the terms of any pay award will receive any arrears backdated to 1 August 2020.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Finance whether his Department has considered introducing (i) embodied carbon regulation; and (ii) passive house standards within Building Regulations in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 16316/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department has outlined to the Finance Committee and to DfE officials working on the Executive's Energy Strategy an ambitious 5 phase programme of uplifts to the building regulations that is currently under consideration.

Phase 2 of this programme proposes consultation on a Discussion Document to help gather evidence and inform developments on embodied carbon and longer-term improvements, commensurate with developments in other administrations.

It is anticipated that uplifts to Building Regulations introduced after 2025 would include low carbon heating and very high fabric standards, with levels of insulation comparable with passive house standards.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance what consideration he has given to widening the eligibility for the rates relief scheme to include other sectors of the economy; and the associated costings of doing so.
(AQW 16357/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The business rate relief measures which I announced on 11 March are informed by updated expert research from the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre. This research recognised that whereas most sectors of the economy have been impacted by the ongoing crisis, some have been impacted more significantly than others. This work assisted the Executive in its decision on the scale and targeting of rate relief for the coming year, recognising the need to prioritise this support to where the need is greatest, given the considerable cost of doing so. The additional business rate relief in 2020-21 has cost £288m. It is projected that the additional rate relief in 2021-22 will cost a further £230m.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance to detail the estimated the cost of paying the entirety of the contributions that the employers of furloughed workers are obliged to pay, such as National Insurance and pensions contributions.
(AQW 16359/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department does not have access to the taxpayer data required to make such an estimate. This would be a matter for HMRC which administers the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and holds this information.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance whether his Department will offer financial support for businesses that were not registered for rates and did not qualify for the initial £10,000 or £25,000 business support grants, but have since been registered for rates.
(AQW 16367/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I can confirm that businesses which registered for rates after the £10,000 and £25,000 business support grant schemes closed on 20th May 2020 will be eligible for a payment under the newly announced top up scheme, providing all other eligibility criteria are met.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Finance what plans she has to regulate companies that require Freeholders' Estate and Service Charges fees.
(AQW 16389/17-22)

Mr Murphy: During the previous mandate, my Department undertook preliminary work in the context of developing legislation around shared property managers, including registration of such companies and codes of conduct. However, a lack of consensus on aspects of the detail of such legislation, coupled with limitations on available resources, has meant that it has not been progressed further to date.

Subject to competing resources and Executive priorities, officials within the Department intend to liaise again with other colleagues in Government with a view to establishing agreement upon which firm policy proposals can be finalised. Although there is insufficient time left in the course of this mandate to develop and finalise a Bill and take it through the various stages in the Assembly, further work is planned that will permit an incoming Executive to consider this issue next year.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance whether GAA and sports social clubs who have been unable to avail of his Department's Localised Restrictions Support Scheme are eligible for the £5,000 payment announced on 15 March 2021 if they have already received the £10,000 Business Support Grant in 2020.
(AQW 16427/17-22)

Mr Murphy: GAA and sports social clubs which received the £10,000 grant, and which have not received funding from the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme or the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme, will be eligible for this payment.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Finance to detail the amount of Fresh Start funding allocated for (i) shared housing; (ii) integrated education; and (iii) shared education, in 2021/22.

(AQW 16436/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Fresh Start allocations in the draft Budget 2021-22 are £16.9 million Capital DEL to the Department for Communities for Shared Housing, and £11.5 million to the Department of Education (DE) for Shared Education.

The funding for DE is for both shared and integrated education and precise disaggregation would be for the Education Minister to provide.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance whether all development proposals within the Stormont estate are subject to planning permission.

(AQW 16457/17-22)

Mr Murphy: All development on the Stormont Estate is taken forward in accordance with the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance what guidance or protocol exists in respect of the erection of commemorative structures or plantings within the Stormont estate.

(AQW 16458/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department's policy on commemorative structures or planting on the grounds of the Stormont Estate is to approve only those requests which commemorate international events such as World Aids Day or International Labour Day.

A copy of the relevant policy document is attached.

POLICY ON REQUESTS FOR THE PLANTING OF MEMORIAL TREES, PROVISION OF BENCHES, PLAQUES OR OTHER FURNITURE FROM EXTERNAL PARTIES

- 1 The Department of Finance has overall responsibility for the management and grounds maintenance of the 400+ acre Stormont Estate. This is managed by the Stormont Estate Management Unit (SEMU), a branch within ESS Properties Division. There are almost five miles of Woodland walks on the Estate and these are widely used by both staff and visitors. The Estate is of course a popular tourist destination, with large numbers of tour coaches and sightseeing buses coming onto the Estate during the summer months. The 'Mo Mowlam Play Park' attracts thousands of weekly visitors and the Estate also plays host to events ranging in size from large events to smaller charitable fund raising events.
- 2 The Stormont Estate is one of the most important examples of urban woodland in Northern Ireland and is managed in a way that ensures its biodiversity is maintained in a sustainable manner. The Stormont Estate Management Unit (SEMU) plants only native species. Indeed, the oak trees on the estate are considered to be some of the best examples growing in Northern Ireland.
- 3 In order to protect the Estate, permission for tree planting will only be given in the 'non-formal' areas of the estate. To permit planting in the formal areas would detract from the historical planting scheme. In any case, SEMU could only accept trees which had a proven traceability and have the necessary paperwork to comply with the latest guidance from DAERA. Guidance can, from time to time, be amended by DAERA if outbreaks of a specific disease occur. The most recent example of this being Ash Dieback. As such, only trees supplied by SEMU will be used in any tree planting scheme and will be a variety in keeping with those already on the Estate.
- 4 Approval for tree plantings will be only be given to commemorate international events such as World Aids Day or International Labour Day rather than individual memorials. It is also SEMU policy to refuse permission for the installation of memorial plaques, benches or similar structures, however, ribbons can be attached to the trees, for example, on World Aids Day. A four week time restriction will be allowed to prevent large numbers of ribbons around the Estate, particularly as they degrade over time.
- 5 Tree planting or the placement of any other memorial in memory of an individual will not be approved as to approve such requests could generate further similar requests and make it difficult to maintain a consistent approach in terms of the original design of both the woodland and the formal gardens.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance, in relation to the £50,000 COVID grant announced on 15 March 2021 for premises with NAV over £51,000, why, if it is linked to NAV, is it not available in respect of every such premises operated by a business.

(AQW 16459/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The proposal endorsed by the Executive was that businesses with multiple premises will not receive a separate grant for each premises. The scheme was broadly aligned with the policy of the £10,000 Small Business Support Grant and the £25,000 Retail, Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Grant schemes to ensure consistency of treatment for businesses eligible for each of these grants. However, I am considering what might be done around this issue within the funding envelope available to me.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Finance how the recently felled trees within the Stormont Estate are disposed of; and what his Department's policy is on the clearance of timber.

(AQW 16462/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The contract to undertake the recent tree felling on the Stormont Estate included both the felling and the removal of all timber from the site.

A woodland management plan was commissioned in April 2016 with the objective of providing a framework to achieve the long term sustainable management of the woodlands within the Stormont Estate. The plan covers a 15 year period with recommended work being taken forward in stages, including this recent tree felling work.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether off-licences are eligible for the £10,000 and £5,000 COVID-19 support schemes announced on the 15 March 2021.

(AQW 16482/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The scheme is open to all businesses which have been unable to access the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) or Coronavirus Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) Part B.

Off-licences which received either the £10,000 or £25,000 grants in 2020 are eligible for this scheme, providing they meet all other qualifying criteria.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance how much COVID-19 funding available to spend in 2021-22 (i) has been allocated; and (ii) is yet to be allocated.

(AQW 16483/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The draft Budget allocated £411.3 million Resource DEL to departments and set aside £126.9 million of Resource DEL COVID-19 for further allocation.

In addition, some £238.1 million is available from agreed carryforward from 2020-21 including £75 million of Capital and £14 million of FTC.

The chancellor's March Budget also made £407.7 million available in COVID related consequentials in 2021-22,

The recent announcement of additional funding for NHS England is expected to provide further Barnett allocations of around £220 million in 2021-22 although the precise quantum has yet to be confirmed.

The Executive will consider this funding as part of Final Budget.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether applicants for the £50,000 COVID-19 support scheme for large businesses announced on the 15 March 2021 will have to demonstrate financial hardship suffered as a result of COVID-19.

(AQW 16485/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The scheme, which has been approved by all Executive Ministers, is targeted at those business occupying premises with a Net Annual Value over £51,000 which were not able to access grant funding during the first lockdown and were eligible for the 12 months rates holiday in 2020/2021. These business are in sectors which the Ulster University EPC analysis in May 2020 indicated were most severely impacted by the pandemic and were in greatest need of support. The sectoral analysis has been confirmed as being correct in a further update for the Department of Finance in February 2021.

It is not intended that individual businesses will be required to demonstrate financial hardship suffered as a result of Covid-19 in order to qualify for this scheme.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether all applications and payments for the COVID-19 support schemes announced on the 15 March 2021 will have to be paid and processed prior to the end of the month in order to utilise funds at risk of surrender to HM Treasury if not spent during 2020/21.

(AQW 16486/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The legislation for the new schemes, which will be in place before the end of this financial year, will be drafted to reflect that the entitlement of the payments are in respect of the 2020/21 year.

This will allow the payments to be accrued in the current financial year and ensure that the funding does not have to be surrendered to the British Treasury.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Finance what rate relief support is available for dog kennel facilities.

(AQW 16498/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Almost all dog kennel businesses here qualify for rate relief support from my Department's long standing Small Business Rate Relief scheme, which automatically applies a minimum of 20% and a maximum of 50% rate relief to rate bills of small businesses here with Net Annual Values (NAV) up to £15,000. Additionally in the current rating year all dog kennel businesses here have also been provided with a 4 month (33%) relief on business rates, with SBRR being applied on the remaining 8 months liability.

Many dog kennel businesses will also have received the £10,000 Small Business Support Grant in 2020 and will now automatically receive a further £5,000 support from the top up grant support scheme which my Department is currently bringing forward.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance (i) for an update on the pay negotiations with the Northern Ireland Civil Service; (ii) to detail the reasons for the delay in the awarding of a pay award; (iii) to detail the conversations he has had with NIPSA regarding this issue; and (iv) to detail the most recent pay rise offer he has made to Civil Service employees.
(AQW 16521/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Formal negotiations with recognised Trades Unions in relation to the Civil Service 2020 pay award are underway. Most recently, my officials met unions on 19 March. I also met unions on 22 March and further meetings will be scheduled over coming weeks. I am unable to provide any detail while negotiations are ongoing, however we will keep staff informed of progress through pay bulletins, which will be published on the Civil Service pay website.

However, the Executive has agreed a pay offer and although it is not possible to provide a timeline, I hope that discussions on this issue can be brought to a conclusion in the very near future. Staff due to receive an increase under the terms of any pay award will receive any arrears backdated to 1 August 2020.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance to detail the total level of COVID-19 related expenditure from his Department since 1 March 2020; and to provide an overview of each scheme or policy funded under this heading.
(AQW 16536/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department has received a total budget of £428.9m in relation to COVID-19 related schemes since 1 March 2020. Actual spend will be available once the Department's 2020-21 resource accounts have been audited. This budget relates to the following schemes:

The Department is providing support to Belfast International and Belfast City airports of up to £10m. This is to compensate for losses incurred as a result of covid-19 impacts over the period September 2020 to March 2021.

Local Restrictions Support Scheme – A financial assistance scheme introduced in October 2020 to provide grants to businesses required to close or severely curtail the services they provide by the Health Protection Regulations introduced by the Executive to contain the spread of the virus. As of 23 March 2020, The Department has spent £237.8 million through the scheme. The total expenditure this financial year is expected to reach £241 million.

On 15 March 2021, I announced three further schemes of financial assistance for business worth £178 million.

The first is a scheme which will provide a one-off grant of £50,000 for certain businesses which occupy premises with a Net Annual Value over £51,000 and are which are eligible for the 12 months rates holiday. These businesses were not able to access grant funding during the first lockdown. Examples of the kinds of business that will benefit are shops, car showrooms, garden centres, gyms and fitness suites, equestrian centres, and caravan parks. It is estimated that approximately 1,125 businesses will benefit and the cost of this scheme is estimated at up to £56.3 million.

The second scheme will provide a one-off grant of £25,000 to industrial businesses operating from premises with a total Net Annual Value between £15,001 and £51,000. Again, these business did not receive any financial support during 2020. Approximately 1,100 businesses will benefit and the cost of the scheme is estimated at £27.9 million.

The third scheme will make an additional payment to businesses which received the either the £10,000 Small Business Grant or £25,000 Grant for Retail, Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure in the first lockdown, but which have been unable to access financial support over the autumn or winter from one of the Executive's current support schemes. Although these businesses have been permitted to continue trading during the most recent phase of restrictions, many have experienced very significant reductions in their trade and revenues. Those who received the £10,000 grant last year will receive a further payment of £5,000, while those who received the £25,000 grant will receive a further payment of £10,000. It is estimated that almost 17,500 businesses will be eligible for this payment with costs estimated at £93.7m.

No expenditure has been incurred on these schemes to date.

Business Rates Relief – A package of measures, including a four months rates holiday to all businesses in Northern Ireland and full year rate holiday to business requiring additional support, was announced by the Executive in May 2020. The targeted rates support was developed with independent analysis from the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, and designed to see the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic pay no rates for the full financial year up until 31 March 2021. Those sectors are Retail, Hospitality, Leisure & Tourism, and our three airports. The Executive subsequently extended the full year rate holiday to manufacturing and newspapers. This additional funding does not go through the Department's budget but will be used to offset the loss of income from rates that is used to fund public services delivered by central and local government. The cost of the relief package for the year is £290.8m.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to outline his plans for the future of his Department's office estate.
(AQW 16571/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department is responsible for the Reform of Property Management (RPM) Programme which was established to deliver the NI Executive's Asset Management Strategy objectives. These objectives are to: (1) reduce the net

costs of service delivery through the efficient use of public assets; and, (2) promote effective asset management processes that unlock value.

The Department's plans for the office estate are outlined as follows:

- 1) continue to rationalise the central government office estate;
- 2) continue to modernise the central government estate;
- 3) to promote and implement new ways of working that reduce reliance on the central government office estate and build resilience to deliver public services in the future.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Finance whether his Department is planning to introduce legislation proposals to protect freeholders against service charges and other fees and charges.

(AQW 16600/17-22)

Mr Murphy: During the previous mandate, my Department undertook preliminary work in the context of developing legislation around shared property managers, including registration of such companies and codes of conduct. However, a lack of consensus on aspects of the detail of such legislation, coupled with limitations on available resources, has meant that it has not been progressed further to date.

Subject to competing resources and Executive priorities, officials within the Department intend to liaise again with other colleagues in Government with a view to establishing agreement upon which firm policy proposals can be finalised. Although there is insufficient time left in the course of this mandate to develop and finalise a Bill and take it through the various stages in the Assembly, further work is planned that will permit an incoming Executive to consider this issue next year.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Finance why businesses that occupy a portion of a building are only paid under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme at the lower rate of £800, regardless of their Net Annual Value of the property.

(AQW 16615/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) provides financial support to all businesses that operate from commercial premises and which must cease to operate or are restricted in the service they can provide by the Health Regulations.

At the inception of LRSS it was recognised that for certain periods the Health Regulations would require an independent business, such as a café, operating entirely within the premises of a separate larger business to cease trading, although the main business could keep trading at that time. An additional provision was therefore put in place in order to help provide financial support in such circumstances where a separate business was not the rateable occupier and would otherwise have been unsupported.

Under rating law, if a property is not actually capable of separate beneficial occupation it cannot have a separate entry in the Valuation List with its own NAV. Because those businesses operating from within larger premises do not have an NAV on which to base the grant amount, the LRSS Regulations have provided that such businesses will be supported and paid at £800 per week. If the main business is also restricted it may also be paid at the appropriate rate for the NAV of the premises.

Department of Health

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to provide details of his Department's plans to increase COVID-19 testing in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 6675/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Testing capacity in Northern Ireland has increased significantly since the beginning of the pandemic and is delivered through two routes.

Firstly, in HSC Trust laboratories and through local testing partners as part of our NI Scientific Advisory Consortium. This is known as Pillar 1 testing.

Secondly, through participation in the National Testing Programme managed by the Department of Health and Social care in London. This is known as Pillar 2 testing and currently includes: five drive-through fixed testing sites; seven walk through test sites seven operational Mobile Testing Units, which are deployed in towns and villages across Northern Ireland in response to local need; and also Home and Satellite Test kit options.

Testing is available in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area at the fixed testing sites located at the St Angelo Airfield in Enniskillen and at the LYCRA Company Car Park site, as well as the walk through sites at the Magee Ulster University campus and in Lisanelly Avenue, Omagh.

Further details can be found at:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/testing-covid-19>

The distribution of testing capacity across Northern Ireland is kept under active review.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health what steps are being taken to ensure dentists are no worse off financially as a result of COVID-19 in relation to the NHS portion of their business; and what financial guarantees have been offered until the end of the financial year.

(AQW 6810/17-22)

Mr Swann: To support the sustainability of practices through this difficult time the Department established the General Dental Services Financial Support Scheme (FSS), which provides an additional payment to eligible General Dental Practitioners (GDPs) each month based on the average gross (including patient contribution) monthly Item Of Service (IoS) payments received by a GDP in 2019-20.

During 2020/21, a FSS payment has been made in each month. From April to December 2020, the total level of FSS and net IoS payments made was around £49 million (£37 million FSS). The Business Services Organisation, who has responsibility for making these payments, will publish the total payments made to dental services in June 2021 along with comparisons for previous year.

Further to the FSS, in order to provide GDPs with as much support as possible, at the end of June 2020, I approved £1 million worth of Level 1 PPE which was distributed to Northern Ireland dental practices free of charge. In August 2020, I approved an additional £3.8 million in funding to support dentists in the purchase of the Level 2 PPE necessary to undertake Aerosol Generating Procedures.

FSS payments are due to continue through to the end of June 2021 and discussions are ongoing in respect of the support arrangements for the remainder of 2021-22.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to increase COVID-19 testing for care home staff.

(AQW 7423/17-22)

Mr Swann: Protecting residents and staff in our care homes continues to be a key priority for my Department throughout all phases of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A rolling programme of COVID-19 testing for care homes in Northern Ireland is ongoing. As part of this regular testing programme, it is currently recommended that in care homes where there is no suspected or confirmed COVID-19 outbreak, all staff are tested every 14 days and residents are tested every 28 days.

This regular programme of COVID-19 testing in care homes plays a significant role in helping to minimise the risk of COVID-19 through early identification of single cases and potential clusters of cases. This enables immediate steps to be taken to prevent spread of infection, thereby ensuring the continued safety of all care home residents and staff.

In addition to the regular programme of care home testing, there is an enhanced testing protocol in place for care homes with a suspected or confirmed COVID-19 outbreak.

The requirement to vary the frequency of the testing undertaken in care homes is kept under active review by my Department and continues to be informed by sound public health principles, evolving scientific evidence, and other contributory factors, including local community transmission rates of the virus in Northern Ireland.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether he has any plans to review the criteria for COVID-19 testing to take account of asymptomatic cases.

(AQW 7743/17-22)

Mr Swann: The groups eligible for testing are kept under constant review by my Department's Expert Advisory Group on Testing and are updated in line with scientific and medical evidence, and as priorities change as the pandemic continues to evolve.

On 24 February, I announced a targeted expansion of testing using Lateral Flow Devices. This will enable targeted testing for communities, businesses and emergency services across Northern Ireland.

Everyone in Northern Ireland remains eligible for a COVID-19 test if they are showing symptoms of infection.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Health how many face-to-face consultant outpatient appointments have taken place in the last three months.

(AQW 9258/17-22)

Mr Swann: There were 177,838 face to face outpatient appointments carried out between 1st July and 30th September 2020, 425 of which were carried out in Day Case Procedure Centres. Between 1st October and 31st December 2020, 169,714 face to face outpatient appointments were carried out, 678 of which were carried out in Day Case Procedure Centres. Data is provisional and is subject to revision.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Health to detail his Department's work to date on a 2020 pay award.

(AQW 9282/17-22)

Mr Swann: The pay award for 2020 for staff on Agenda for Change terms and conditions has already been processed and was paid to these staff in April 2020. The 2020 pay uplift for medical and dental staff of 2.8%, recommended by the Review

Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration (DDRB), is currently being processed and Business Services Organisation (BSO) have confirmed this will be paid in March.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health, given the recurrence of people without symptoms testing positive for COVID-19, whether he will expand the criteria for testing.

(AQW 9567/17-22)

Mr Swann: I do not have any current plans to expand the criteria for a COVID-19 test.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the impact to North South cooperation caused by differences in the common COVID-19 symptoms between his Department and the Department of Health in Dublin.

(AQW 9878/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am not aware of any obvious impacts on North South cooperation caused by differences in the common COVID-19 symptoms between my Department and the Department of Health in Dublin.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has played a direct role in developing guidance for tests to occur within school settings.

(AQW 10052/17-22)

Mr Swann: On 15 March, I announced in a joint statement together with Education Minister Peter Weir that a programme of regular testing for COVID-19 was to be introduced in schools in Northern Ireland.

Testing will commence initially in post-primary staff (including teaching and support staff) and older students in Years 12-14. This programme of regular testing which will use Lateral Flow Device tests.

This is a joint project involving my Department and the Public Health Agency, working together with the Department of Education and the Education Authority.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health when COVID-19 testing will be introduced for staff and care workers in sheltered support on the same basis as in care homes.

(AQW 10999/17-22)

Mr Swann: Following a multi-agency review, the Department has extended routine COVID-19 testing for asymptomatic staff working in the supported living sector across Northern Ireland. This COVID-19 testing programme is available to asymptomatic staff across all four supported living thematic groups (older people; disability and mental health; younger people and homelessness), and will include jointly and non-jointly commissioned schemes.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health whether a person, who books a COVID-19 test claiming symptoms but fails to attend, can nonetheless be given a positive result and therefore become eligible for the COVID-19 isolation grant.

(AQW 11881/17-22)

Mr Swann: As previously answered during AQO 1070, Such incidences have previously been reported through the Public Health Agency, however upon investigation, no specific details were made available to enable the issue to be fully investigated. Public Health Agency advise that individual test swabs with unique identification numbers are processed in the laboratory and corresponding results are issued to the appropriate customer.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health, in light the rates of COVID-19 in the wider Newry, South Armagh and Mourne area, whether he will (i) review the suitability of the testing facility at the Albert Basin, Newry; (ii) provide additional testing capacity at the Albert Basin, Newry; and (iii) instruct the operators of the facility to ensure that there is a mix of both walk-in and drive-through facilities to ensure accessibility for those with reduced mobility and those who are frail or medically vulnerable.

(AQW 12501/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) Testing through the National Testing Programme is managed by the Department of Health and Social Care in London (DHSC).. In line with the placement of all other sites through the National Programme, DHSC assessed the suitability of the site and determined that it was suitable for a walk-through testing site. Unlike a mobile testing unit, this site will remain in place for the duration of the pandemic.
- (ii) The testing service offers flexibility to increase testing capacity at the site if necessary. Testing capacity can be enhanced locally if required for example in response to increasing levels of transmission or an outbreak situation. Testing capacity at all sites across Northern Ireland is carefully monitored and reviewed as necessary.
- (iii) 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.

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.

Details on the location of testing sites are available on the PHA website. Testing for COVID-19 | HSC Public Health Agency (hscni.net) (<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/testing-covid-19>)

The online booking portal will offer a COVID-19 test at a site closest to the person's home address.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail his plans to progress the Rare Diseases framework, including a time frame for bringing forward a Rare Diseases Action Plan.

(AQW 12548/17-22)

Mr Swann: All four UK nations collaborated in the development of the UK Rare Diseases Framework, published on 9 January 2021. As Health is a devolved matter, the Framework gives a commitment that each UK nation will develop its own action plan within one year of publication, where possible, which will be reviewed regularly. The Northern Ireland action plan will be developed in collaboration with our rare disease community through additional engagement and will detail the steps required to deliver the aims of the new Framework in Northern Ireland and improve the lives of those living with rare diseases here, subject to available resources.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health how his Department proposes to identify unpaid carers for vaccination against COVID-19; and (ii) when he expects them to be vaccinated.

(AQW 12783/17-22)

Mr Swann: The main carer for vulnerable people will be vaccinated as part of priority group 6.

Carers were invited to book an appointment for vaccination from 17th February.

Online booking for this cohort has however now closed. All main carers who have still to book an appointment for vaccination should contact their local Trust carer coordinator who will take their contact details and pass to the vaccinating teams who will make contact to arrange an appointment where appropriate.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether he intends to expand the criteria for a COVID-19 test to include other symptoms.

(AQW 12972/17-22)

Mr Swann: I do not have any current plans to expand the criteria for a COVID-19 test.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health whether he will bring forward a promotion campaign to encourage carers, especially unpaid carers, to self-register with their local Health and Social Care Trust to ensure those carers are officially registered and can receive the COVID-19 vaccine as intended by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation in their Priority Group List, group 6.

(AQW 13010/17-22)

Mr Swann: 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.

In particular, there was extensive consultation with carer's groups to ensure widespread awareness and uptake when the vaccination programme was opened to carers in Priority Group 6.

At 17th March 2021, there has been significant uptake of vaccination among carers with 62,436 individuals identifying as carers having received a vaccination.

As all of the recent slots were filled so quickly, online booking for this cohort has been closed. All main carers who have still to book an appointment for vaccination are asked to contact their local Trust Carer Coordinator, who will take their contact details and pass to the vaccinating teams who will make contact to arrange an appointment.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health when a COVID-19 rapid testing facility will be provided for drivers working within the haulage industry.

(AQW 13013/17-22)

Mr Swann: Testing for COVID-19 using Lateral Flow Devices has been available for all Northern Ireland hauliers travelling to France from 01 February 2021. Testing is being conducted at Queen's University Belfast and at the four Ulster University campuses. Drivers travelling to France can book a test online before attending any of the test sites.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health how many people are being treated for alopecia in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 13060/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of people being treated for alopecia in each Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust is not collected centrally or by HSC Trusts. To provide an answer would require a disproportionate use of Trust resources to identify each patient individually.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health what support there is for people with eating disorders; and whether this support includes in-patient treatment.

(AQW 13136/17-22)

Mr Swann: Each Health and Social Care Trust within Northern Ireland has a specialised community based Eating Disorder Service for both young people and adults. Services for young people are based within Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) Teams and the Adult Eating Disorder Service within Adult Mental Health and Learning Disability Services. Inpatient services for young people with an eating disorder in NI are based in Beechcroft Hospital, Belfast HSC Trust and inpatient services for adults with an eating disorder are based in local Trust Mental Health Acute Inpatient Units.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health (i) to detail (a) each Health and Social Care Trust's use of the private sector; and (b) the services that are bought in, broken down by constituency; and (ii) what is the total cost of using the independent private health sector since his appointment as Minister.

(AQW 13137/17-22)

Mr Swann:

(i)(a) The broad areas of private sector expenditure are outlined in each Trust's published annual accounts 2019/20. These include:

- Agency staff costs
- Purchase of care from non-HSC bodies
- Personal social services
- Supplies and services – Clinical (includes medicine etc)
- Supplies and services – General (includes equipment, ICT etc)
- Establishment (including rates, rent)
- Transport
- Premises (includes utilities)
- Rentals under operating leases
- Training
- Professional fees
- Patients travelling expenses
- Elective care
- PFI and other Service concession arrangements

(i)(b) This information cannot be broken down by parliamentary constituency.

(ii) My response to AQW 15661/17-22 provides details of expenditure by Health and Social Care Trust on the independent and private health care sector in each of the last three years by clinical specialty.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he has considered increasing funding and access to dementia services.

(AQW 13694/17-22)

Mr Swann: Much work has already been carried out to improve dementia services. This includes the development of the Regional Dementia Care Pathway published in 2018, building on the 2011 'Improving Dementia Services in Northern Ireland: A Regional Strategy'

The DSC Dementia Phase I and II projects have seen significant additional investment in dementia services, including the appointment of Dementia Service Improvement Leads, Dementia Navigators and Dementia Companions (Hospitals) as well as a range of e-health, data analytics and research which includes:

- Dementia Apps <https://apps4dementia.orcha.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

Looking forward, Integrated Care Partnerships (ICP), Local Commissioning Groups (LCG) and Trusts have been working with the Community and Voluntary sector, people with a dementia and carers, to develop proposals for dementia prototypes in each Trust area.

Funding for these prototypes and any other service developments will need to be considered alongside other pressures facing the Department.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Health whether rapid COVID-19 testing can be explored in hospitals as a means of allowing a birth partner into hospitals.

(AQW 13766/17-22)

Mr Swann: The most recent visiting guidance to all healthcare settings, including hospitals, took effect on 1 March 2021. This guidance states that birth partners will be facilitated to accompany the pregnant woman to dating scan, early pregnancy clinic, anomaly scan, in the event of pregnancy loss and bereavement, Fetal Medicine Department, when admitted to individual room for active labour (to be determined by midwife) and birth, and to visit in antenatal and postnatal wards for up to one hour once a week.

The decision to permit visitors into a facility is based on a risk assessment and relies on the ability to ensure safety of patients, staff and the visitor.

Potential use cases for rapid testing technologies are kept under active review.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has plans to increase (i) awareness of; and (ii) medical staff training on treating specialised eating disorders.

(AQW 13996/17-22)

Mr Swann: Therapeutic staff working in Eating Disorder services are highly trained and most will have as a minimum training in at CBT-Enhanced and/or MANTRA as per NICE guidance.

Health and Social Care Trusts currently offer an extensive range of training opportunities for staff working outside of the specialism to raise awareness of Eating Disorders. Commonly used approaches are the use of a course provided by the Clinical Education Centre, the provision of modules by Recovery Colleges, and training of medical students.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has plans to expand regional services for patients with a specialised eating disorder.

(AQW 13997/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Mental Health Action Plan identified a Review of Eating Disorder services for completion by March 2021. The Review has been received by the Department, is being considered and will help shape the new 10 year Mental Health Strategy.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the (i) location; (ii) geographical area covered; and (iii) number of patients, of each specialist eating disorder clinic.

(AQW 14033/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) Eating Disorder Service is located in Woodstock Lodge on Woodstock Link. The service provides treatment to those living in Belfast and South Eastern (SEHSCT) catchment areas. There are currently 189 individuals in receipt of treatment.

The Northern HSCT has its main base is in the Villa, Holywell Hospital, Antrim, and has satellite clinics in the Mid Ulster Hospital Site in Magherafelt, Braid Valley Hospital in Ballymena, Whiteabbey Hospital and Mountfern House in Coleraine. It covers the Northern Health and Social Care Trust and currently has 81 patients.

The Southern HSCT Specialist Adult Eating Disorder Service is based in Ashleigh House, Armagh, and is a Trust wide service, with further clinics provided in Lurgan, Newry, Portadown, Dungannon and Banbridge. It currently has 118 patients.

The South Eastern HSCT has its services delivered by the Belfast HSCT.

The Western HSCT has bases in Old Bridge House in Londonderry and in Rivendell, Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital, Omagh. The Service covers the entire Trust area with outreach clinics in main towns and currently has 49 individuals in receipt of treatment.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether his Department will produce a plan to reduce the backlog of autism spectrum disorder assessments.

(AQW 14175/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am aware of the backlog of autism assessments and of the challenging circumstances this presents for individuals and families. Whilst autism assessments are operational matters for the Trusts, efforts are being made to provide alternative methods of delivering assessment and deploying services and interventions, for example, through digital platforms or Helplines providing clinical support. These methods of delivering support having been widely embraced throughout the

pandemic and along with some Trusts providing additional appointments, for example, through weekend clinics, will support efforts to address waiting lists. The recently published Autism – Interim Strategy, will place emphasis on the need for early intervention for those on waiting lists regardless of whether there is an autism diagnosis or not.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health to detail the process for autism spectrum disorder assessments during the present COVID-19 restrictions.

(AQW 14176/17-22)

Mr Swann: Whilst autism assessments are operational matters for individual Trusts, I am aware that the pandemic has placed significant constraints on the ability to complete assessments. Autism services have continued to collate case histories for those being assessed and supports and interventions have been provided through digital platforms and clinical helplines. However, the observational element of the assessment, Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS), could not be undertaken due to the social distancing measures in place and the impact of PPE on the individual being assessed. Trusts have worked diligently to source alternative methods of delivering this aspect of assessment, both nationally and internationally, and this is currently being implemented across the region.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Health whether he will consider making rapid Covid tests free and available to construction and other companies with more than 50 employees engaged in travel as part of essential work.

(AQW 14247/17-22)

Mr Swann: Employers have a vital role to play in minimising the spread of infection among those who cannot work from home by introducing regular testing for asymptomatic staff. Workforce 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 provide additional assurance to customers or the general public who are interacting with staff in person.

On 24 February, I announced a targeted expansion of workforce testing using lateral flow devices in Northern Ireland. Further information on how employers can access the testing programme is available on the Department's website (Workforce Testing | Department of Health (health-ni.gov.uk) (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/workforce-testing#:~:text=Employers%20from%20key%20sectors%20within,essential%20services%20to%20begin%20with.>).

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 9419/17-22, whether additional funding will be made available during the current financial year to help mental health services, including eating disorder services, to respond to demand arising from the ongoing pandemic.

(AQW 14268/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer to my response to AQO 1071/17-22 which provides details of additional funding that my Department has made available for mental health services in 2020/21. No further additional funding is available in this financial year.

At the start of the pandemic arrangements were put in place to mitigate and address the impact of Covid-19. The Mental Health Action Plan which was published on 19 May 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:

- the development of an online apps library to help and support self-help;
- provision of free Stress Control classes online;
- rollout of psychological first aid training to staff and volunteers on the front line;
- a range of other online resources to support staff, children and young people, students joining the workforce early, and those bereaved during this time.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on the provision of GammaCore as a treatment for neurological conditions.

(AQW 14339/17-22)

Mr Swann: The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) endorsed gammaCore™ for cluster headaches under the NICE medical technologies guidance MTG46 on 3 December 2019. My Department does not endorse or publish NICE medical technology guidance (MTG) however, Health and Social Care Trusts can use NICE MTGs as best practice guidance. Whilst gammaCore™ treatment is not routinely commissioned by the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB), headache specialists in Northern Ireland who are keen to use it to treat patients may discuss individual patient requirements with the manufacturer, with a view to providing access to suitable patients on a trial basis for 3 months. Thereafter, they can work with the HSCB to determine any longer term patient requirements.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health whether his Department is making plans to have an upright scanner to facilitate people with claustrophobia getting vital screening.

(AQW 14357/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are currently no plans to have an upright MRI scanner in any Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust in Northern Ireland. This is a relatively new modality in diagnostic imaging which has limited scope in terms of the conditions for which it may be beneficial. For patients who experience difficulty with undergoing an MRI investigation, such as those with

claustrophobia, HSC Trusts will offer general anaesthesia and other sedation methods. Clinically suitable patients may also be referred to independent sector providers in England through the normal extra-contractual referral processes.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health to detail the existing provision of MRI scanning services at Altnagelvin hospital; and the plans in place to improve service provision.

(AQW 14444/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Western Health and Social Care Trust currently has three MRI scanners. Two are located at Altnagelvin Hospital (one in the imaging department and one in the North West Cancer Centre) and one is located in the South West Acute Hospital.

Trusts have responsibility for planning and prioritisation of capital funding, including imaging equipment.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister of Health how many Northern Health and Social Care Trust patients are being cared for in mental health facilities in England.

(AQW 14499/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has three patients being treated in mental health facilities in England.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health how much each Health and Social Care Trust has been spent on eating disorder services in each year since 2015.

(AQW 14748/17-22)

Mr Swann: The information requested is provided in the table below. Please note that services for the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) are delivered by the Belfast HSCT, and that expenditure for 2020/21 is for the first 10 months.

HSC Trust	2015/16 (£)	2016/17 (£)	2017/18 (£)	2018/19 (£)	2019/20 (£)	2020/21 (£)
Belfast	944,088	1,061,159	795,075	924,841	875,438	577,011
Northern	444,515	437,519	462,585	465,316	502,623	407,318
South Eastern	0	0	0	0	0	0
Southern	487,556	510,156	485,065	533,160	616,971	530,414
Western	354,753	376,747	388,591	331,461	386,145	341,753

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Health (i) how many care homes in the North Belfast constituency have had COVID-19-related deaths; and (ii) how many audits have been undertaken to monitor adherence to policies and guidance in relation to do not resuscitate orders in care homes in the North Belfast constituency.

(AQW 14881/17-22)

Mr Swann:

(i) The information you seek is not collated by constituency. Deaths are recorded by Government District and also by setting within Northern Ireland. Accordingly as of the 19th March 2021:

- there has been 384 COVID-19 deaths recorded in the District of Belfast; and
- 409 COVID-19 deaths in Care Homes in Northern Ireland.

These figures are based on the number of deaths where the deceased has had a positive test for COVID-19 and died within 28 days, whether or not COVID-19 was the cause of death. This information is updated daily on the Department of Health Dashboard (see link below)

<https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoizGYxNjYzNmUtOTlmZS00ODAxLWE1YTETmMjA0NjZmZmN2JmliwidCI6IjIjOWEzMGRLWQ4ZDctNGFhNC05NjAwLTRIzTc2MjVmZjZjNSIsImMiOjh9>

(ii) The information you seek in relation to the number of audits that have been undertaken to monitor adherence to policies and guidance in relation to do not resuscitate orders in care homes in the North Belfast constituency is not available.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health (i) how many people aged over 70 years have yet to receive their first vaccination; (ii) when he expects those vaccinations to be completed; and (iii) whether he will consider allowing those able to visit one of the regional vaccination hubs to avail of their service and book their vaccine online.

(AQW 14947/17-22)

Mr Swann:

(i) As of 22nd March 2021, patients aged over 70 have been split into three categories 70-74, 75-79 and those over 80. To date 88% of those 70-74 and 93% of 75-79 year old have received their COVID-19 vaccination. 98% of those over

80s have also been vaccinated. The figures are 71,727 vaccines with 71,726 of those being first doses administered to the 70-74 cohort and 58,273 vaccines with 58,269 of those first doses. 82,865 doses have been given to over 80s with 70,383 being first doses. There may be some cross over in cohort of those over 70 with some perhaps falling within the care home residents and clinically extremely vulnerable category.

- (ii) Largely those over the age of 70 will have been offered their vaccination and those who wish to avail shall be in the process of getting an appointment date for their first dose.
- (iii) Currently there are number of ways for over 70s to be vaccinated. We have seven mass vaccination centres, a GP programme, mobile teams for those who are housebound and most recently, planning for a new additional Greater Belfast vaccination centre to be sited at the SSE Arena.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what legislation is in place to allow for legal action to be taken against care home providers who commit neglect offences.

(AQW 15114/17-22)

Mr Swann: The current Adult Safeguarding policy framework is set out in the regional Adult Safeguarding Prevention and Protection in Partnership Policy, published jointly by the Departments of Health and Justice in 2015. All current safeguarding activity within the Policy is guided by five underpinning principles: a rights-based; empowering; person-centred; consent-driven and collaborative approach.

The law in this area is complex, with a patchwork of legislation having evolved over the years. There are, for example, powers and duties under wider criminal law; regulated services provided under health and social care legislation; and protections under mental health and mental capacity legislation.

Building on the response to the Commissioner for Older People's Home Truths Investigation into Dunmurry Manor Care Home and CPEA's Independent Review into Safeguarding and Care at Dunmurry Manor, officials are undertaking a public consultation to inform the development of an Adult Protection Bill, subject to the approval of the Northern Ireland Executive.

One of the proposals set out in this consultation relates to introducing new 'care worker' and 'care provider' offences that will create offences for wilful neglect in Northern Ireland, similar to those already introduced in other parts of the UK.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the number of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnoses in each of the last three years; and (ii) what mechanisms are in place to diagnose and treat PTSD.

(AQW 15130/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) Information on the number of PTSD diagnoses in the last three years is unavailable. Health and Social Care information systems do not currently collect any data in relation to PTSD diagnoses.
- (ii) Services for individuals with a potential diagnosis of PTSD are offered by both existing services (Community Mental Health Teams and Psychological Therapy Services) and the newly established Regional Trauma Service which has a team of therapists in each Trust.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health how many children and young people have been chemically restrained during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 15149/17-22)

Mr Swann: All prescribing in Northern Ireland is subject to extant guidance (NG11) issued by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, which has been endorsed by the Department. Medication can sometimes be prescribed in response to a range of circumstances, including heightened anxiety and extreme states of agitation. Prescribing for children and young people is based on a best interest decision and involves a clinical assessment and engagement with families.

No child is prescribed medication for the purpose of restricting their liberty therefore it is not possible to answer this question directly. The Department will continue to liaise with HSCB and Trusts to examine the use of medicines and ensure that NG11 guidance is adhered to.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the roll-out of the Rapid Assessment Interface Discharge crisis service, including the funding provided to each Health and Social Care Trust in each year since the programme began.

(AQW 15177/17-22)

Mr Swann: Each Trust provides Emergency Department and Acute Hospital patients with rapid access to specialist mental health assessment (within 2 hours and 24 hours respectively) but this is not standardised across the region and full coverage does not exist across all sites on a 24/7 basis. However, there is evidence that it has improved outcomes for service users.

The tables below provides the funding for each 5 Trusts since the programme began:

Health and Social Care Trust	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Belfast	32,000	272,000	498,027
Northern	28,492	110,838	92,700
Southern	47,881	330,490	814,957
South Eastern	49,000	237,000	237,000
Western	49,316	247,751	179,632
Total	226,689	1,198,079	1,822,316

Notes

Funding in FY20/21 still subject to in year adjustments, which may result in a lower total.

The Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT) has been provided with an additional £1,160,000 of recurrent funding in each of the last 4 financial years.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he has any plans to increase the funding for child and adolescent mental health services to deal with increased demand.

(AQW 15196/17-22)

Mr Swann: Since the beginning of the pandemic I have been mindful of the mental health impact on our children and young people. In recognition of this, during 2020 I allocated an additional £750k in year funding to CAMHS to assist with waiting list and staffing pressures. In addition, I also allocated a further £200k to take forward the Managed Care Network (MCN) for acute CAMHS, which will enable improved and more tailored care for children and young people.

From 2021/22, my department is also allocating a further £1.5m recurrent funding to assist with the implementation of the Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework, which will include the planned rollout of CAMHS Emotional Wellbeing Teams in Schools.

Future funding increases for CAMHS will be considered as part of the development of the new Mental Health Strategy, which is currently out for public consideration, alongside other funding pressures and taking account of the challenging financial situation.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health how much of his departmental budget is currently allocated to each Health and Social Care Trust for autism spectrum disorder services.

(AQW 15234/17-22)

Mr Swann: Since 2016 significant investment has been made in autism services, with an additional £2m being allocated to children's autism services on a recurrent basis.

Service provision and supports for both adults and children with autism are funded across a range of programmes and services which, dependent on need, may include both generic services and those of a specialist nature provided by multi-disciplinary staff.

As funding in relation to these services are covered by a number of budgets it is not possible to give precise details for individual Trusts.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to increase budget allocations to children's mental health services.

(AQW 15235/17-22)

Mr Swann: Since the beginning of the pandemic I have been mindful of the mental health impact on our children and young people. In recognition of this, during 2020 I allocated an additional £750k in year funding to CAMHS to assist with waiting list and staffing pressures. In addition, I also allocated a further £200k to take forward the Managed Care Network (MCN) for acute CAMHS, which will enable improved and more tailored care for children and young people.

From 2021/22, my department is also allocating a further £1.5m recurrent funding to assist with the implementation of the Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework, which will include the planned rollout of CAMHS Emotional Wellbeing Teams in Schools.

Future funding increases for CAMHS will be considered as part of the development of the new Mental Health Strategy, which is currently out for public consideration.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health how much of his departmental budget is currently allocated to each Health and Social Care Trust for children's mental health services.

(AQW 15237/17-22)

Mr Swann: The allocated amount to each Health and Social Care Trust for children's mental health services is provided in the table below. Please note that Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services for the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) are delivered by the Belfast HSCT.

HSC Trust	2020/21 (£m)
Belfast	£13.2
Northern	£3.5
South Eastern	0
Southern	£5.2
Western	£3.1

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether the detection of the South African COVID-19 variant is related to international travel; travel from Britain; or transmission on the island of Ireland.

(AQW 15262/17-22)

Mr Swann: Five confirmed cases of the South African variant of Covid-19 have been detected in Northern Ireland. Two cases have been linked to international travel.

A detailed health protection risk assessment and contact tracing response was swiftly deployed. Departmental and PHA officials continue to monitor the situation extremely closely and to take all necessary actions.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health (i) how many staff are employed in each (a) hospital and (b) Health and Social Care Trust; (ii) how many are engaged in social care roles; and (iii) how many in healthcare delivery roles.

(AQW 15278/17-22)

Mr Swann: Due to the integrated nature of Health and Social Care (HSC) services, it is not possible to categorise all staff roles exclusively as either social care or healthcare delivery roles. Details of staff by personnel area has therefore been provided instead.

The information detailed below has been provided by each of the HSC Trusts as at 31 January 2021.

Staff Employed in each HSC Trust, by Personnel Area

Personnel Area	HSC Trust					
	BHSCT	NHSCT	SEHSCT	SHSCT	WHsCT	NIAS*
Admin & Clerical	3,681	1,982	1,775	2,016	1,911	123
Estates Services	257	154	96	129	148	2
Support Services	2,341	1,128	1,199	876	1,225	0
Qualified Nursing & Midwifery	5,544	3,073	854	3,263	899	0
Nursing & Midwifery Support	1,808	826	2,957	900	3,218	0
Social Services	2,839	2,701	2,192	2,937	2,009	0
Professional & Technical	3,741	1,844	1,433	1,784	1,601	0
Medical & Dental	1,618	570	670	672	604	1
Ambulance	0	0	0	0	0	1,340
Total	21,829	12,278	11,176	12,577	11,615	1,466

Excludes bank staff, staff on career break and staff seconded out of Trusts.

* Does not include staff currently working within the Emergency Ambulance Control (EAC) in the role of Clinical Support Desk (CSD) or Emergency Medical Dispatcher (EMD).

Due to recording methods within the Belfast HSC Trust, not all staff who work on hospital sites are clearly recorded as such. A search of individual records would be required to determine the exact location of some staff which would be at a disproportionate cost. The figures provided for the Belfast HSC Trust below therefore only reflect those staff whose location is clearly recorded as one of the main hospital sites, and will therefore be an undercount.

Staff Employed in each Hospital in the Belfast HSC Trust, by Personnel Area

Personnel Area	Hospital		
	Royal	Mater	Belfast City
Admin & Clerical	778	177	519
Estates Services	4	3	0
Support Services	737	205	413
Qualified Nursing & Midwifery	2,148	391	940
Nursing & Midwifery Support	613	136	287
Social Services	52	8	13
Professional & Technical	871	177	696
Medical & Dental	737	103	343
Ambulance	0	0	0
Total	5,940	1,200	3,211

Only includes those staff whose location is clearly recorded as one of the main hospital sites.

Personnel Area	Hospital		
	Musgrave	Muckamore	Knockbracken
Admin & Clerical	307	27	91
Estates Services	5	0	1
Support Services	51	12	59
Qualified Nursing & Midwifery	71	6	33
Nursing & Midwifery Support	72	0	2
Social Services	74	3	42
Professional & Technical	174	19	27
Medical & Dental	55	12	24
Ambulance	0	0	0
Total	809	79	279

Only includes those staff whose location is clearly recorded as one of the main hospital sites.

Staff Employed in each Hospital in the Northern HSC Trust, by Personnel Area

Personnel Area	Hospital			
	Antrim Area	Causeway	Holywell	Mid Ulster
Admin & Clerical	624	205	211	62
Estates Services	52	21	31	9
Support Services	362	180	120	43
Qualified Nursing & Midwifery	1,209	493	181	104
Nursing & Midwifery Support	327	126	76	36
Social Services	64	31	50	16
Professional & Technical	657	183	86	102
Medical & Dental	344	104	58	5
Ambulance	0	0	0	0
Total	3,639	1,343	813	377

Personnel Area	Hospital			
	Braid Valley	Route	Dalriada	Robinson
Admin & Clerical	79	127	6	10
Estates Services	12	14	0	0
Support Services	24	27	13	9
Qualified Nursing & Midwifery	46	30	32	24
Nursing & Midwifery Support	18	0	20	9
Social Services	15	53	3	0
Professional & Technical	83	25	12	19
Medical & Dental	5	2	0	2
Ambulance	0	0	0	0
Total	282	278	86	73

Staff Employed in each Hospital in the South Eastern HSC Trust, by Personnel Area

Personnel Area	Hospital			
	Ulster	Lagan Valley	Thompson House	Downe
Admin & Clerical	627	197	24	75
Estates Services	49	17	0	2
Support Services	652	112	10	78
Qualified Nursing & Midwifery	481	88	19	65
Nursing & Midwifery Support	1,551	311	40	219
Social Services	75	65	40	41
Professional & Technical	669	145	13	117
Medical & Dental	496	56	1	42
Ambulance	0	0	0	0
Total	4,600	991	147	639

Figures include clinical buildings on site.

Personnel Area	Hospital		
	Downshire	Ards Community	Bangor Community
Admin & Clerical	90	193	10
Estates Services	11	3	0
Support Services	41	71	4
Qualified Nursing & Midwifery	33	43	3
Nursing & Midwifery Support	73	180	28
Social Services	286	73	30
Professional & Technical	51	116	36
Medical & Dental	11	23	1
Ambulance	0	0	0
Total	596	702	112

Figures include clinical buildings on site.

Staff Employed in each Hospital in the Southern HSC Trust, by Personnel Area

Personnel Area	Hospital		
	Craigavon Area incl Bluestone Unit and Blossom C&YP Centre	Daisy Hill	Lurgan
Admin & Clerical	582	154	26
Estates Services	47	15	3
Support Services	418	144	30
Qualified Nursing & Midwifery	1,354	541	142
Nursing & Midwifery Support	425	191	55
Social Services	36	3	15
Professional & Technical	710	219	99
Medical & Dental	398	157	18
Ambulance	0	0	0
Total	3,970	1,424	388

Staff whose work location recorded is listed as 'Main Building' on each of the hospital sites is included, unless otherwise stated.

Personnel Area	Hospital	
	South Tyrone incl Loane and Woodlawn House	Mullinure (Gillis Ward only)
Admin & Clerical	59	1
Estates Services	3	0
Support Services	31	0
Qualified Nursing & Midwifery	168	22
Nursing & Midwifery Support	60	17
Social Services	39	1
Professional & Technical	84	2
Medical & Dental	5	0
Ambulance	0	0
Total	449	43

Staff whose work location recorded is listed as 'Main Building' on each of the hospital sites is included, unless otherwise stated.

Staff Employed in each Hospital in the Western HSC Trust, by Personnel Area

Personnel Area	Hospital		
	Altnagelvin	Southwest Acute	Tyrone & Fermanagh
Admin & Clerical	864	201	44
Estates Services	104	2	17
Support Services	461	266	20
Qualified Nursing & Midwifery	365	152	4
Nursing & Midwifery Support	1,470	559	25
Social Services	35	58	38
Professional & Technical	789	278	24

Personnel Area	Hospital		
	Altnagelvin	Southwest Acute	Tyrone & Fermanagh
Medical & Dental	404	120	13
Ambulance	0	0	0
Total	4,492	1,636	185

Personnel Area	Hospital		
	Omagh (OHPCC)	Waterside (Gransha site)	Lakeview (Gransha site)
Admin & Clerical	92	7	27
Estates Services	1	0	0
Support Services	75	21	11
Qualified Nursing & Midwifery	44	47	30
Nursing & Midwifery Support	205	77	35
Social Services	10	4	34
Professional & Technical	128	19	15
Medical & Dental	16	2	1
Ambulance	0	0	0
Total	571	177	153

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how many staff in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust are able to administer peg feed devices.

(AQW 15303/17-22)

Mr Swann: Belfast Health and Social Care Trust reported that approximately 70 staff are trained in the administration of peg feeds within surgery.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health to list each occasion his Department has directly engaged with representatives of care home providers (i) in relation to care partner arrangements; and (ii) on other issues, since he came to office.

(AQW 15340/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information requested up to 3rd March 2021 is detailed in the tables below.

(i) Meetings with representatives of care home providers in relation to care partner arrangements.

01/10/2020	Meeting with IHCP
16/10/2020	Two CNO Engagement Sessions with Care Home providers.

(ii) Meetings with representatives of care home providers in relation to other issues.

28/01/2020	Meeting of the Reform of Adult Social Care Project Board
16/03/2020	Meeting to discuss Coronavirus Guidance in the Independent Care Sector
01/06/2020	Meeting to discuss issues with care homes and home care sectors
10/06/2020	Presentation on the Rapid Learning Initiative into the transmission of Covid-19 in care homes to HSCB and PHA meeting with independent care home sector
12/06/2020	Meeting to discuss care home costs of covid
30/06/2020	Two online engagement sessions on the Rapid Learning Initiative into the transmission of Covid-19 in care homes
01/07/2020	Two online engagement sessions on the Rapid Learning Initiative into the transmission of Covid-19 in care homes
09/07/2020	Meeting to discuss funding issues and insurance matters

28/07/2020	Meeting to discuss the introduction of a planned regular programme of COVID-19 testing for all staff and all residents in care homes.
30/07/2020	Meeting to discuss care home and domiciliary care issues
14/08/2020	Meeting to discuss care home issues
11/09/2020	Rapid Learning Review Steering Group Meeting
01/10/2020	Rapid Learning Review Steering Group Meeting
21/10/2020	Meeting to discuss Regional Recruitment campaign and mechanism for Adult Social Care
22/10/2020	Meeting to discuss domiciliary care income guarantee
29/10/2020	Meeting to discuss block booking of Agency Care Staff
30/10/2020	Follow-up meeting to 29/10/2020
05/11/2020	Meeting to discuss aspects of the COVID-19 testing programme in care homes.
06/11/2020	Meeting with Chief Medical Officer and Deputy Chief Social Worker
16/11/2020	Meeting to discuss content of letters to be issued by Trusts on care home and domiciliary care funding
25/11/2020	Follow-up meeting in relation to letters and workforce issues
02/12/2020	Care Homes Clinical Care Network
08/12/2020	Meeting in relation to funding packages
10/12/2020	Meeting to discuss Domiciliary Care Review
11/12/2020	Meeting on additional measures to be taken on visiting care homes
22/12/2020	Rapid Learning Review Steering Group Meeting re implementation of recommendations
19/01/2021	Meeting to discuss care home financial support
08/02/2021	Meeting to provide update on care home funding
22/01/2021	Pre-meeting Reform of Adult Social Care Project Board
23/01/2021	Meeting of the Reform of Adult Social Care Project Board
26/01/2021	Rapid Learning Review Implementation Group meeting
27/01/2021	Care Homes Clinical Care Network
18/02/2021	Independent Sector ECCF engagement meeting
24/02/2021	Care Homes Clinical Care Network
25/02/2021	Meeting to provide update on care home issues
26/02/2021	Meeting with IHCP - ECCF team delivered an update to the project
02/03/2021	Meeting to discuss care home visiting

In addition, there are frequent telephone calls, email exchanges and correspondence with care home providers and their representatives. The HSCB and PHA also have a joint weekly update meeting in place with IHCP.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health (i) what arrangements are in place for cross border care workers in relation to accessing the vaccination programme; and (ii) whether he will raise the issue with the Health Minister in Dublin to ensure no carer is left without access to vaccination.

(AQW 15388/17-22)

Mr Swann: Frontline health and social care workers who are at increased personal risk of exposure to infection with COVID-19 and of transmitting that infection to susceptible and vulnerable patients in health and social care settings were offered the vaccine first and within a number of weeks the programme was extended to the wider health and social care community sector, provided they were employed within the Health and Social Care system.

In Northern Ireland, the COVID-19 vaccination programme for Health and Social Care workers also includes registered agency nurses working within the HSC system.

My Department continues to communicate regularly with their ROI colleagues and raise issues of mutual interest.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health whether he has any plans to bring forward priority vaccination for adults with learning disabilities who do not hold a shielding letter.

(AQW 15389/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member will be aware that adults with learning disabilities have been vaccinated as part of Cohorts 4 or 6 (depending on severity of vulnerability) in Phase 2 of the Programme, whether they have a shielding letter or not.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health how the community and voluntary sector will be involved in the development of regional eating disorder services as part of the Mental Health Action Plan.

(AQW 15403/17-22)

Mr Swann: The report flowing from the Review of Eating Disorder Services - identified in the Mental Health Action Plan - has been received by the Department and will help shape the new 10 year Mental Health Strategy. It has been developed by the Regional Eating Disorder Network Group (REDNG) which consists of key stakeholders including the Eating Disorders Association and people with lived experience.

Further opportunities for contributing to the development of future eating disorder services are available through the Mental Health Strategy consultation process which is open until 26 March. A series of consultation events to supplement the process, which included a specialist interventions meeting, recently ended.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health, in light of the success of the vaccination programme and the lower number of COVID-19 cases in the community, whether he will review visiting guidelines for hospitals and care settings.

(AQW 15450/17-22)

Mr Swann: In response to the most recent data around COVID-19 transmissions across the country, the four UK Chief Medical Officers recommended on 25th February 2021 that the regional Alert Level should revert from Level 5 to Level 4. On 26th February 2021 my Department published updated visiting guidance for all care settings (available here: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/Covid-19-visiting-guidance>), which took effect from 1st March 2021. This guidance is applicable in all care settings across Northern Ireland, and each of the Health & Social Care Trusts are required to ensure its implementation.

My officials continue to keep the guidance for all healthcare settings under review, in line with the best available scientific and medical evidence and are soon to commence work with other stakeholders from across the healthcare sector to prepare an updated guidance document in line with the Northern Ireland Executive's "Nine Pathways" road map back to normality.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Health whether registered childminders will be added to the vaccination programme.

(AQW 15498/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member will be aware that JCVI has not recommended prioritisation by occupation beyond health and social care workers and care home staff.

Therefore the Northern Ireland Covid 19 Vaccination programme is being rolled out in line with JCVI recommendations on priority groups. As such, registered childminders will generally be offered vaccination in line with the age cohort they belong to.

While I remain sympathetic to the anxieties of individuals waiting to be offered vaccination, it is essential that we concentrate on those at greatest risk of severe outcomes from COVID-19 infection.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Health whether there are any plans to create a way of identifying non-paid carers who are in genuine need of the vaccine, following the removal of the booking system for non-paid unregistered and non-paid registered carers due to alleged abuse to the system.

(AQW 15499/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member will be aware that, as all of the recent slots were filled so quickly, online booking for this cohort has closed. All main carers who have still to book an appointment for vaccination should contact their local Trust carer coordinator, who will take their contact details and pass to the vaccinating teams who will make contact to arrange an appointment.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health why bed capacity has reduced from 5,800 in August 2019 to 3,039 in February 2021.

(AQW 15528/17-22)

Mr Swann: Please see below tabulated average available beds data for the period quarter ending March 2019 to quarter ending December 2020. It should be noted the COVID-19 Daily Dashboard data is not comparable with other data sources or reports. The figure of 3,039 available beds which was displayed on the dashboard on the 26th February 2021 represents only acute and geriatric inpatient beds at the 12 main hospital sites. Data prior to 18th October 2020 also cannot be compared with current data following a change in the method of measurement which was introduced as a more representative metric of bed occupancy levels. For more information on the COVID-19 Daily Dashboard data as well as the most recent data please see the link provided <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/covid-19-daily-dashboard-updates>.

Average Available beds March 2019 - December 2020.

Quarter	Average Available Beds
Mar-19	5,865
Jun-19	5,804
Sep-19	5,731
Dec-19	5,799
Total	5,800
Mar-20	5,786
Jun-20	5,480
Sep-20	5,576
Dec-20	5,805
Total	5,662

Source: KH03a returns.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what use he anticipates making of the private sector in assisting the Health Service in reducing the waiting list backlog caused by the pandemic.

(AQW 15555/17-22)

Mr Swann: Given the impact of Covid-19 on health service operating capacity, the HSC has secured theatre capacity during 2020/21 from the three local independent sector (IS) hospitals to treat the most urgent and time critical patients. During the period 1 April 2020 to 14 February 2021, approximately 4,450 patients have been treated by HSC consultants in IS facilities.

In addition, the HSC has secured capacity from a number of other IS healthcare providers both within Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland to provide assessments, diagnostics and treatments. Furthermore, a number of private healthcare providers are providing in-sourcing services whereby privately recruited teams of clinicians are providing services for HSC patients using available HSC infrastructure.

I have also established a regional approach that ensures that any available theatre capacity across Northern Ireland is allocated for those patients most in need of surgery as we come out of this surge. This approach ensures that all available HSC and IS capacity is fully maximised.

With the scale of the backlog of patients waiting for assessment and/or treatment, it is expected that capacity in the IS will be required for some time.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health when all staff in special educational needs schools will receive COVID-19 vaccinations.

(AQW 15557/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member will be aware that the Northern Ireland Vaccination Programme is being implemented in line with JCVI recommendations.

My department is facilitating the vaccination of a limited number of staff working in special schools who were supporting the care of children who were deemed to be clinically extremely vulnerable and with complex needs.

The staff eligible for vaccination would undertake roles which align with the multi-agency educational and care plans for the most vulnerable children at greatest risk of adverse outcomes from Covid 19 infection.

In particular, they would be staff that undertake regular duties working in close proximity for prolonged periods of time providing a range of interventions including close personal and intimate care and support for invasive procedures such as PEG feeding.

As a result of work undertaken by community paediatricians, the Education Authority and the PHA, these children were identified and then the eligible staff.

This has led to 696 Invitations being issued to staff at Special Schools

(Including 249 in the Belfast Trust) to book vaccinations.

Whilst I acknowledge the anxieties of staff, parents and carers for children and young people who attend special schools, JCVI has not recommended prioritisation by occupation, other than Health and Social Care workers and care home staff. As such, any special school staff not identified in the process outlined above will generally be vaccinated in line with the cohort of the population they belong to.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) any plans he has to create, outside Belfast, a mass vaccination centre, such as that planned for the SSE Arena; and (ii) any conversations he has had with Health and Social Care Trusts in relation to this issue.

(AQW 15624/17-22)

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.

In addition, approximately 350 pharmacies across Northern Ireland will shortly begin administering vaccinations.

There are currently no further plans in place to open another mass vaccination centre in Northern Ireland.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health for an update on oncology services for children in the Royal Victoria Hospital, including specialist paediatric surgical teams.

(AQW 15663/17-22)

Mr Swann: Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children (RBHSC) is the tertiary paediatric hospital for N Ireland. It is home to all the tertiary paediatric specialties for the region. The Children's Haematology & Oncology Unit is a 10-bedded in-patient unit within the RBHSC and is the designated Principal Treatment Centre (PTC) for all children in Northern Ireland with malignant disorders and benign haematological disorders.

The PTC offers a range of Systemic Anti-Cancer Therapies including chemotherapy, radiotherapy, immunotherapy, and autologous haemopoietic stem cell transplant. The centre also offers clinical trials for a range of haematological and oncological conditions. Care is led by a team of haematologists and oncologists and delivered by a range of other disciplines including nursing and many other Allied Health Professions.

A separate day care unit was designated in 2013, and in 2020 this facility was further developed. There is a 24/7 telephone triage service with open access to the unit for all children on treatment.

Arrangements are in place with cancer treatment centres outside Northern Ireland for provision of highly specialist treatments that are not available here.

All of these services have remained fully operational during COVID-19. Members of the team have also been working with the Department on the Northern Ireland Cancer Strategy ensuring that the needs of the child with cancer and their family are at the forefront of any future direction of Cancer Services in Northern Ireland.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health whether those close contact services that may offer treatments for cancer patients can continue to provide these when requested.

(AQW 15699/17-22)

Mr Swann: The provision of close contact services is subject to clinical priority and the requirement to ensure a safe environment for staff and patients. Where close contact services have been temporarily paused, organisations will seek to reinstate and resume these fully as soon as capacity is available and it is safe to do so.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of dental care workers access to the NHS pension scheme.

(AQW 15702/17-22)

Mr Swann: The HSC Pension Scheme is an occupational pension scheme designed for staff engaged primarily in the delivery of HSC services.

In terms of the dentistry profession, the proportion of HSC work undertaken by a typical dental practice is normally much smaller and more variable, compared to that of a GP practice for example, where HSC work is more dominant. The higher level of private practice makes it more difficult to identify staff as being primarily engaged in the delivery of HSC services and for this reason dental practice staff are prevented from joining the HSC Pension Scheme in Northern Ireland and the NHS Pension Schemes in England & Wales and Scotland.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the total expenditure on the procurement of mesh implants, broken down by year.

(AQW 15790/17-22)

Mr Swann: The total expenditure on the procurement of gynaecological mesh implants is only readily available from 2012/13 and details are set out in the table below.

2012/13 £'000	2013/14 £'000	2014/15 £'000	2015/16 £'000	2016/17 £'000	2017/18 £'000	2018/19 £'000	2019/20 £'000	Total £'000
119	182	158	177	94	52	15	4	801

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health whether his Department recognises binge eating disorder as a condition.
(AQW 15799/17-22)

Mr Swann: Binge Eating Disorder is a recognised condition treated within General Adult Mental Health Services and General Psychology.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to provide a medium secure unit for young people as part of mental health service provision.
(AQW 15852/17-22)

Mr Swann: An analysis of the need for secure mental health beds in Northern Ireland, carried out by HSCB on behalf of Department of Health in 2019, concluded that a medium secure unit for children and young people would not be sustainable in terms of population size and demand.

However, the analysis did conclude that there was a need for locally-provided low secure mental health beds for both adults and CAMHS (and Learning Disability). This has been included as an action to be taken forward within the Mental Health Strategy (action 18 - "develop regional low secure in-patient care for patients who need it."), which is currently out for public consultation.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 14643/17-22, why the option for carers to book a COVID-19 vaccine has been removed.
(AQW 15876/17-22)

Mr Swann: The open booking portal received over 50,000 bookings, and as all of the available slots were filled so quickly, online booking for this cohort has closed.

All main carers who have still to book an appointment for vaccination have the option to contact their local Trust Carer Coordinator, who will take their contact details and pass to the vaccinating teams who will make contact to arrange an appointment.

The Department of Health has worked closely with carers groups to ensure the main carers of clinically extremely vulnerable patients are vaccinated.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health in what situations Health and Social Care Trusts can issue performance notices to care homes and withhold payment for services.
(AQW 15883/17-22)

Mr Swann: Trusts maintain an escalation protocol and register as part of the governance framework for commissioned services (care homes and domiciliary care).

Where an individual care home reaches a level of escalation within this framework, the relevant Trust will take the appropriate action with the safety and care of the residents being the main concern.

Under the Regional Residential and Nursing Home contract there are a number of contractual actions that can be taken by a Trust, including suspension of new admissions, issue of performance notices, withholding of sums and termination of contract.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health which care homes have implemented the care partner scheme.
(AQW 15884/17-22)

Mr Swann: Up to and including 15th March 2021, care homes across Northern Ireland have reported that Care Partner arrangements were in place for 1771 individuals in their services.

At 15 March 2021, 269 homes reported that they have implemented the care partner scheme with at least one care partner.

It is important to note the data reported above is received through care homes self-reporting to RQIA. Additional work is being carried out to validate the data on care partner arrangements to ensure its accuracy. Other homes are working towards implementing the scheme and are being supported to do so, or have not had any requests from family members/carers to do so.

In addition, as at the 12th March, Nursing and Residential Care Homes had been paid a total of £6.61m in funding for staff support in respect of visiting (either face to face and/or virtual) including delivery of care partnering arrangements.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health which care homes have availed of funding for the care partner scheme; and how much each home has availed of.
(AQW 15885/17-22)

Mr Swann: Up to and including 15th March 2021, care homes across Northern Ireland have reported that Care Partner arrangements were in place for 1771 individuals in their services.

At 15 March 2021, 269 homes reported that they have implemented the care partner scheme with at least one care partner.

It is important to note the data reported above is received through care homes self-reporting to RQIA. Additional work is being carried out to validate the data on care partner arrangements to ensure its accuracy. Other homes are working towards implementing the scheme and are being supported to do so, or have not had any requests from family members/carers to do so.

In addition, as at the 12th March, Nursing and Residential Care Homes had been paid a total of £6.61m in funding for staff support in respect of visiting (either face to face and/or virtual) including delivery of care partnering arrangements.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether vaccine supplies for people in Phase 2 on the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation list and living in West Belfast has been impacted.

(AQW 15958/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member refers to JCVI Phase 2 which is the population aged 18 to 50. We are currently offering vaccination to those aged 50 and above, being the final cohort of JCVI Phase 1.

The member will be aware that the Department is unable to provide conformation on deliveries and quantities of vaccine for security reasons. The Department does not hold information on vaccinations by constituency area.

All HSC Trusts and GP surgeries have received sufficient allocations of vaccine to allow them to roll out the Vaccination Programme at pace for all their patients.

At the time it is anticipated the programme will open to those under 50, the SSE Arena will be operational as a mass vaccination centre and community pharmacy will have become involved in the deployment of vaccines.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health, in light of the Budget Settlement proposed by the Minister of Finance, what planned capital investment for the 2021-22 year will not now go ahead as planned or will be delayed.

(AQW 16034/17-22)

Mr Swann: The indicative capital allocation for my Department for 2021/22 is £326.5m, which includes £3.6m of Covid funding.

If confirmed, this allocation would be sufficient to meet our existing contractual and inescapable priorities.

My ability to transform and rebuild our services is directly linked to the level of capital resources available to my Department and whilst this allocation is a welcome 10% increase on the 2020/21 opening capital budget, it is not sufficient to address the growing demand for our services or to transform the way they are delivered.

The key issue is the affordability of capital schemes in future years and I am not be able to commit to any significant new health investment projects without additional resources and a multi-year budget settlement.

This applies to investments my Department would wish to take forward across all of our services for example in mental health, increasing emergency department and theatre capacity, investing in our emergency services, diagnostic equipment, and primary and community care facilities.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health what plans he has in place to address waiting lists for surgeries in comparison to what was proposed in the New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 16035/17-22)

Mr Swann: As we emerge from the latest wave of the pandemic, the focus of our health service will continue to be on resetting all elective services in an environment that is safe for both staff and patients. HSC Trusts are working with clinicians and the Health and Social Care Board to prioritise the care needs of patients who have been referred into the HSC and also to ensure that all available capacity is utilised as effectively and equitably as possible across the region.

The HSCB is also continuing to work with independent sector healthcare providers in order to increase the capacity available to the HSC to provide elective care in the coming months.

Waiting times for diagnosis or treatment were unacceptably long before the pandemic. COVID-19 has simply exacerbated a situation that was already reaching a critical point. My Department is currently working alongside the HSC to develop a longer term approach to tackling our waiting lists on a sustainable basis.

However, it is important to be clear the scale of the gap between health service capacity and patient demand is continuing to increase. Without major sustained investment over the next ten years it will simply not be possible to return waiting times to an acceptable standard and to keep them there. I have made it clear that hospital waiting lists must be a major Executive priority in 2021 and beyond.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health (i) what plans his Department has to deal with COVID-19 on an ongoing basis; (ii) whether his Department is planning for an annual Covid Vaccination; and (iii) whether he anticipates Covid wards being an normal part of our hospital estate in the years ahead.

(AQW 16036/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Strategic Framework for Rebuilding Health and Social Care (HSC) Services provides the roadmap for strategically managing service delivery in the COVID-19 context and is overseen by the Rebuilding Management Board. These arrangements are reviewed regularly and will continue to be kept under review as the pandemic develops.

- (i) The Northern Ireland vaccination programme began on 8 December 2020 and focused on care home residents and staff. And was following JCVI guidelines and priority groups: Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation: advice on priority groups for COVID-19 vaccination, 30 December 2020 - GOV.UK (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).

We are currently vaccinating up to priority group 9, those aged 50 and above. Further to this we hope to start to offer COVID-19 vaccinations to all adults over 18 years of age in the near future. We anticipate this programme will run into summer 2021. We hope to achieve the continuation of the progress achieved so far by continuing with our approach of offering services via GPs, Hospital Trust sites, community pharmacies and mobile units.

- (ii) There are no plans currently in place for an annual COVID 19 vaccination. However COVID will change, so a booster similar to the annual flu vaccine may be implemented.
- (iii) It is my hope that, when the vaccination programme has been successfully completed, hospital admissions will have decreased dramatically. It may be some time before our hospitals are completely COVID-free. COVID-19 specific infection control measures will continue to be important as long as COVID-19 is circulating in the population. This will include measures to, wherever possible, keep COVID-19 positive patients separated from non-COVID-19 patients.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health (i) how many; and (ii) what share of care home residents have care partners, as of 1 March 2021.

(AQW 16065/17-22)

Mr Swann: Up to and including 15th March 2021, 269 care homes across Northern Ireland reported they have implemented the care partner scheme with at least one care partner and that care partner arrangements were in place for 1771 individuals in their services.

It is important to note the data reported above is received through care homes self-reporting to RQIA. Additional work is being carried out to validate the data on care partner arrangements to ensure its accuracy.

Other homes may be either working towards implementing the scheme and are being supported to do so, or have not had any requests from family members/carers to do so.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on the roll-out of the multidisciplinary team model, embedded in General Practice, with regard to (i) timescales for further roll-out to the next Federation areas; (ii) action being taken to address pressures arising from the pandemic on key roles in social work and mental health; and (iii) an anticipated timescale for the roll-out of the model to the whole of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16145/17-22)

Mr Swann: The MDT model is now complete or well developed in 5 of the 17 GP Federations in Northern Ireland – Down, Londonderry/Derry, West Belfast, Causeway and Newry & District Federations. I am pleased to advise that a small MDT footprint is also currently being introduced jointly in the North Down and Ards Federations areas.

My Department and the HSCB are currently engaged in a process to develop a 'road map' for the implementation of MDTs across all remaining GP Federations. This process is expected to be completed before summer 2021. The road map will enable robust planning for the rollout of the model to the remainder of Northern Ireland.

Whilst it was anticipated that the MDT Programme could be expanded at a rate of around 2 GP federation areas per annum, with estimated completion around 2026, this target has been impacted by the Covid pandemic. Additionally, further rollout of the model is dependent on the availability of a suitably qualified and experienced workforce, readiness of accommodation and the appropriate funding.

Overall, the Programme currently supports around 280 staff, including over 50 mental health staff and 80 social work staff, who have played a key role in supporting the most vulnerable in society during the Covid pandemic.

Support for social workers and mental health practitioners in primary care is provided in a number of ways.

The HSCB has developed a 'Framework for Leaders and Managers on Supporting the Wellbeing Needs of our Health and Social Care Staff During Covid 19', which is guiding the response to staff working across the health and social care sector.

In addition to the usual practice team, line management and supervisory support, all staff have access to Covid psychological helplines and to a range of virtual mental health resources.

The Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) has provided and promoted a range of learning resources on staff support on their website and through online webinars. These are open access and available to all primary care staff.

Additionally, the GPNI website provides a range of information on support available to patients and staff. This site also runs a webinar series to support GP practice staff in their care delivery during the pandemic.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on the strategic plan to address the waiting lists crisis, particularly with regard to the progress and delivery associated with GP elective care to help support care for patients in the community. (AQW 16146/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department is currently working alongside the HSC to develop a longer term approach to tackling waiting lists on a sustainable basis. The approach will set out how we will restart elective activity as the process of de-escalation gets underway; how we will systematically reduce the backlog of patients waiting; and how we will redesign the service to enhance and protect elective capacity on a sustainable basis.

The focus of our health service will continue to be on resetting all elective services in an environment that is safe for both staff and patients. HSC Trusts are working with clinicians and the Health and Social Care Board to prioritise the care needs of patients who have been referred into the HSC and also to ensure that all available capacity is utilised as effectively and equitably as possible across the region.

The Elective Care Plan, which sets out the plan for the transformation and reform of elective care services, includes the expansion of capacity and capability in primary care. The continued development of pathways and services within primary care are strategically important in the management of waiting lists.

A range of pathways have been designed to facilitate patients being managed more appropriately in primary care without the need to refer to hospital services. The pathways provide primary care capacity and also support an improved approach to demand management via peer support, peer review, peer education, self-management and self-directed care at a population level within GP Federations.

Current services provided and activity to date include:

- Dermatology: to safely manage a range of routine dermatological conditions in a primary care setting; At the end of January 2021, a total of 4,052 (including dermatology surgery) patients were seen face to face as well as a further 933 patients managed remotely;
- Gynaecology: to safely manage a range of routine gynaecological conditions (Coil fitting, Long-Acting Reversible Contraception) in a primary care setting. A total of 2,538 patients were seen and treated and a further 1,007 remote consultations provided;
- Vasectomy: to safely deliver non-scalpel procedures in a primary care setting. A total of 1,479 patients were treated;
- Musculo-skeletal/Pain: to safely manage a range of routine MSK conditions in a primary care setting. A total of 2,302 were seen in clinic and a further 233 patients managed remotely;
- Minor Surgery: to safely manage a range of routine minor surgical procedures (lipoma excisions, sebaceous cysts, dermatofibroma, excisions for diagnostic purposes) in a primary care setting. A total of 548 patients were treated.

These services reduce elective waiting times for patients and the current elective backlogs across the relevant specialities. It is planned that these services would continue into 2021/22 with planned expansion across the HSC and the introduction of new specialties in primary care, including Cardiology, Photo Dermatology and Gastroenterology, subject to funding.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health what actions are being taken to ensure equality of uptake of COVID-19 vaccines under Phase 4 of the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme Phased Plan among (i) areas of multiple deprivation; (ii) essential workers; and (iii) the protected grounds covered by the Section 75 statutory equality duty. (AQW 16155/17-22)

Mr Swann: As you may already be aware, 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.

Further, Community Pharmacies should become an active part of the vaccination programme in coming weeks. It is hoped this will increase engagement and access to the programme in all communities across Northern Ireland.

JCVI did not recommend the prioritisation of any other professions apart from Health and Social Care workers. While I am appreciative of all who worked throughout the pandemic it is essential that we concentrate on those at greatest risk from severe outcomes of Covid 19 infection.

We hope to offer vaccination to all those over 18 years of age in the coming programme and hope to have to majority of adults who wish to be vaccinated by late summer 2021.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Health for an update on the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority review into Dr Watt, including a timeline of the next steps following the publication of the framework document. (AQW 16176/17-22)

Mr Swann: Progress on the RQIA's Deceased Patients Review has been adversely affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic that caused a temporary cessation of RQIA's review programme. This was a temporary situation and the RQIA have since recommenced work and are progressing the review.

With the agreement of a legal framework in place, the RQIA are progressing to the next phase of the review programme which will include the completion of a review of the deceased patient records. A full update on progress will be provided to the Assembly in the coming weeks.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the challenges that will be presented with the regulatory differences for medicines coming into Northern Ireland from Great Britain after 31 December 2021.
(AQW 16187/17-22)

Mr Swann: The NI Protocol raises a number of potential issues relating to the regulation of medicines. The implications are under consideration currently and guidance for industry is being developed.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Health whether his Department is aware of any pharmaceutical companies that intend to withdraw products from the Northern Ireland market from 1 January 2022.
(AQW 16189/17-22)

Mr Swann: An agreement between the UK Government and EU Commission was reached to give the pharmaceutical industry 12 months from 1 January 2021 to comply with regulatory requirements. From 1st January 2022 industry will have to supply medicines to NI that comply with the packaging and labelling requirements of the EU Falsified Medicines Directive and also comply with additional batch testing and certification on goods moving from GB to NI.

The 12 month grace period appears, at present, to have broadly mitigated the immediate risk of companies reducing their products and portfolios available for supply to the NI market. My Department cannot comment on the status of any individual supplier or medicine due to commercially sensitive information considerations.

My Department has ongoing engagement with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) in England and the MHRA. DHSC are developing guidance to inform the pharmaceutical industry of what action they need to take to be ready for 1st January 2022 and the possible mitigations the industry may need to put in place.

My Departmental officials have been engaging with representatives from the pharmaceutical industry, including the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI). My Department, DHSC, and MHRA are working closely with industry and will continue to do so throughout 2021 to support them in their preparations to comply with the Protocol and to help ensure the availability of medicines for patients in NI.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health for an update on the resettlement programme from Muckamore Abbey Hospital for those with a delayed discharge.
(AQW 16257/17-22)

Mr Swann: Work to complete the resettlement of the patients remaining in Muckamore Abbey Hospital is ongoing, although in common with other HSC activity, the pace of the resettlement programme has been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

At 5 February 2021, there were 44 inpatients in the hospital, with a further 2 patients on trial resettlement. One patient was on extended home leave at the request of their family. Of the patients on site at this date, one was undergoing active treatment, and the remaining 43 have their discharge delayed. This compares to the 51 in-patients who were in the hospital in February 2020, the 66 in-patients in February 2019, and the 235 in-patients who were identified by the Bamford Review in 2007.

Although much progress has been made on completing the resettlement programme, I have made clear my commitment to continuing to reduce lengthy hospital admissions by supporting people to live sustainably in local communities – in line with the vision that was set by the Bamford Equal Lives report and more recently the Bengoa review.

To deliver on this, a Regional Learning Disability Operational Delivery Group – chaired by the Health and Social Care Board and reporting to the Muckamore Departmental Assurance Group – is co-ordinating a regional approach to the resettlement of the in-patient population at Muckamore.

While resettlement is an important issue, the welfare of individual patients must be paramount and this means a one size fits all approach is not appropriate. It is important that people are supported to live in settings which can safely meet their often complex needs.

I can assure you that my Department will continue to work in partnership with all the Trusts, the NIHE and housing providers, in a very challenging budgetary environment, to ensure that no-one has to live in a hospital any longer than is necessary.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health for an update on the staffing levels in Muckamore Abbey Hospital.
(AQW 16258/17-22)

Mr Swann: The nurse staffing levels in Muckamore Abbey Hospital for the week commencing 8th March, broken down by registered nurses (reg) and healthcare assistants (non-reg), are set out in the table below.

Staff	Belfast Trust (whole time equivalent)	Agency (block booking)	Other backfill (bank/add hours/overtime)
Reg	16.29	57.35	7.58

Staff	Belfast Trust (whole time equivalent)	Agency (block booking)	Other backfill (bank/add hours/overtime)
Non-reg	49.97	22.61	22.61
Total	66.26	79.96	33.79

Current nurse staffing levels, with the combination of Trust substantive nursing staff, long-term agency staff and nurse bank staff, are providing a safe level of care. The Trust has signed a 12-month Service Level Agreement with Direct Health Care agency to provide 50 whole time equivalent registrants on a block booked basis to help stabilise the nursing registrant workforce. A weekly staffing report is provided to my Department and this is reviewed by professional nursing colleagues in the Department.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health how many people from Northern Ireland have travelled to Great Britain for an abortion on the grounds of a diagnosis of (i) Down's syndrome; and (ii) cleft pallet.
(AQW 16264/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of people travelling to Great Britain is not collected by the Department of Health. However the Department of Health and Social Care published Abortion Statistics: England and Wales, 2019 in June 2020. In this publication it was stated that for women travelling from Northern Ireland, in 2019, for medical abortions performed under Ground E, Down's Syndrome was mentioned in two cases and cleft pallet was not mentioned.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what supportive measures are in place to allow addiction support services to continue operating during COVID restrictions.
(AQW 16267/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department, the Health & Social Care Board (HSCB), and the Public Health Agency (PHA) have worked with the Health & Social Care Trusts and the community and voluntary sector to ensure, as far as possible, the continued provision of alcohol and drug services throughout the period restrictions have been in place. For example, regional guidance on the operation of alcohol and drug services has been co-produced and published.

In addition, HSCB has provided a co-ordinated strategic overview to support all five local Trusts in the delivery of statutory addiction treatment & support services. HSCB has also supported the availability of additional Opiate Substitutes and provided additional funding for PPE for Regional Tier 4 Services.

The PHA has also implemented a number of measures to support procured and commissioned substance misuse services, primarily from the community and voluntary sector, to continue to deliver services during the pandemic throughout 2020/21. This has included:

- ensuring that all costs linked to PHA contracts with service providers have been paid so that the financial viability of service providers has not been adversely impacted (with agreement from the Department of Health);
- providing additional in-year funding of £400,000 to meet service & COVID needs within Step 2 and Low Threshold substance misuse services;
- providing additional in-year funding of £143,195 to meet service & COVID needs within the Needle & Syringe Exchange Scheme (NSES) and the Take Home Naloxone Programme (THN);
- providing PPE / related COVID equipment (e.g. screens, hand sanitiser etc.) to voluntary and community service providers through direct delivery and/or funding to facilitate COVID preparedness;
- holding remote monthly contract review/support meetings with all service providers; and
- adapting training to online webinars to ensure continued quality standard of service delivery and support to service providers in maintaining delivery of harm reduction services during the pandemic.

Overall, PHA-funded substance misuse services are currently operating at pre-COVID levels and recent feedback from service providers in a PHA stakeholder engagement process indicated online delivery of some services is improving client retention.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the impact on people's health of the promotion of conversion therapy.
(AQW 16269/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department for Communities are leading on the important work on conversion therapy as part of their larger sexual orientation work. I have asked that my officials work closely with the Department for Communities to consider any health related issues that arise as part of this.

It is worth reiterating however, that my Department does not fund any organisation to carry out reparative or conversion therapy. Statutory services within the HSC do not prescribe reparative or conversion therapy.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health what actions he is taking with Executive colleagues to decarbonise public buildings. (AQW 16275/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Finance (DoF) is responsible for managing the Civil Service Office Estate, which equates to around 4% of the total Public Sector energy consumption here.

DoF aims, through its Office Estate Energy Efficiency and Carbon Reduction plans, to achieve culminative energy savings and consequential reductions in carbon. These savings support and feed into the wider 'Energy Management Strategy and Action Plan to 2030 for Central Government' introduced by the Department for Economy (DfE).

By implementing Connect 2 regional hubs, footfall in regional locations should increase, thereby reducing commuting frequencies and distances. This, in turn, should lead to reductions in carbon emissions, helping to improve the sustainability of how we work and protect the environment.

Further, new or refurbished DoF buildings undergo BRE Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) appraisal and the use of energy efficient installations has been incorporated into the Civil Service Accommodation Standards specification.

My officials are also liaising with colleagues in other Departments on related cross-departmental issues. This includes on the development of an Energy Strategy with the Department for the Economy, and 'Future Generations' work on carbon reduction planning with the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health how many patients have been admitted to hospital with a stroke diagnosis since April 2020, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 16296/17-22)

Mr Swann: Please see below tabulated data on the number of admissions to HSC Hospitals in Northern Ireland with a diagnosis of stroke between April and October 2020. This is the most recent data available due to a lag in clinical coding. Data provided is provisional and therefore subject to change.

Number of Admissions¹ to HSC Hospitals in Northern Ireland with a Diagnosis of Stroke², April - October 2020^P

HSC Trust	Apr 2020	May 2020	Jun 2020	Jul 2020	Aug 2020	Sep 2020	Oct 2020
Belfast	68	87	85	90	96	77	104
South Eastern	53	44	64	61	50	51	50
Northern	56	73	88	72	72	66	93
Southern	56	53	68	72	55	66	49
Western	37	45	50	56	54	39	25

Source: Hospital Inpatient System, Hospital Information Branch, Information & Analysis Directorate, Department of Health, NI.

Notes:

- P Due to a lag in clinical coding, 2020-21 data is provisional and subject to change.
- 1 Admissions are approximated through deaths and discharges and are reported by month of discharge. These figures do not denote individuals. Figures do not include admissions to mental health or learning disability programmes of care which account for less than 1% of all hospital admissions.
- 2 The following ICD-10 Codes were used to identify admissions with a recorded primary diagnosis of stroke -
- I60 Subarachnoid haemorrhage
 - I61 Intracerebral haemorrhage
 - I62 Other nontraumatic intracranial haemorrhage
 - I63 Cerebral infarction
 - I64 Stroke, not specified as haemorrhage or infarction

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the direct engagements his Department has had with pharmaceutical companies and suppliers on sustaining access to products following The Trade and Cooperation Agreement on Brexit. (AQW 16306/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has not engaged directly with pharmaceutical companies or suppliers specifically in relation to The Trade and Cooperation Agreement on Brexit. However, since the introduction of the NI Protocol (NIP) on 1st January 2021 my Department has continued to engage with industry to mitigate against risk to the Northern Ireland supply chain.

An agreement between the UK Government and EU Commission was reached to give the pharmaceutical industry 12 months from 1st January 2021 to comply with new regulatory requirements which apply only to NI and are a consequence of the NIP.

My Department is liaising with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) who are developing guidance to inform the pharmaceutical industry of what action they need to take to be ready for 1st January 2022 and the possible mitigations the industry may need to put in place.

To ensure a process is in place to enable industry to be ready by 1st January 2022, DHSC has established a Northern Ireland Protocol Programme Board. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) and Department of Health officials are represented on this Board. The programme will include the implementation of a multi-layered approach for the continued supply of all medicines and medical products.

My Departmental officials have also been engaging with representatives from the pharmaceutical industry, including the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI) to discuss the industries plans for continuing supplies into NI from January 2022.

My Department, DHSC, and MHRA will continue to work closely with industry and the wider supply chain throughout 2021 to support them in their preparations to comply with the Protocol and to help ensure the availability of medicines for patients in NI.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the current waiting list for paediatric surgery.

(AQW 16307/17-22)

Mr Swann: There were 787 patients waiting for paediatric surgery on the 31st December 2020, detailed in the table below.

Number of Weeks Waiting	Number of Patients Waiting	
0-6	48	(6.1%)
>6-13	98	(12.5%)
>13-21	50	(6.4%)
>21-26	28	(3.6%)
>26-52	164	(20.8%)
>52	399	(50.7%)

Source: DoH Inpatient Waiting Times Dataset

Statistics relating to the inpatient and day case waiting list are published on a quarterly basis at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/inpatient-waiting-times>

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 2622/17-22, whether the report on vaginal mesh was finalised by the Public Health Agency and sent to his Department in March 2020.

(AQW 16326/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Northern Ireland Vaginal Mesh Review Progress Report by the Public Health Agency has been finalised and was received by the Department in September 2020.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether he will expand access to the COVID-19 Health and Social Care staff psychological helpline to unpaid carers.

(AQW 16329/17-22)

Mr Swann: Carers continue to play a very important role in providing care during this COVID-19 pandemic. I have put on record my wholehearted appreciation for the significant contribution they have made during this time. Carers have gone over and above what was expected of them in the support that they have given to their family members and loved ones, particularly during periods of limited or reduced short break provision.

At the start of the pandemic my Department put arrangements in place to mitigate and address the mental health impact of COVID-19 on people. When my Department published the Mental Health Action Plan on 19 May, www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/mental-health-action-plan, it included a dedicated Covid-19 Mental Health Response Plan which set out the mental health response to the pandemic and outlined specific actions to support individuals and families. This support is available to all, including carers, and includes resources such as the Health and Social Care apps library, which provides a range of safe and approved apps to support individuals manage their mental health and emotional wellbeing. These include free online stress control classes, as well as a range of published advice and support material available via the www.mindingyourhead.info website and the Covid-NI Wellbeing Hub: <https://covidwellbeingni.info/>.

To further support the provision of advice to carers, my Department approved an additional £50k of grant funding to allow Carers NI to extend their advice line operating hours from 24 hours per week to 40 hours per week from 11 May 2020 to 31 March 2021. This has enabled Carers NI to increase their capacity to answer enquiries received from carers.

Individuals can also speak to their GP to access community mental health support and therapy, and on the basis of clinically assessed need, receive onward referral to statutory mental health services.

A Listening Ear Service is also available for carers within the Belfast, Southern and South Eastern Health and Social Care Trusts which provides a confidential listening services, offering reassurance and comfort as well as relaxation and mindfulness advice.

HSC Trusts are experiencing an increased level of demand for psychological support for HSC staff and it is expected this demand will increase as the pressure of the surge recedes and redeployed HSC staff return to their substantive posts. As a consequence therefore HSC Trusts would not have the capacity within their staff services to offer carers who are not employed by the HSC Trust access to the staff psychological helpline.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health how many inpatient beds there are in each Health and Social Care Trust for those with an addiction; and how many people are currently on a waiting list for these services.

(AQW 16330/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information provided by Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCT) indicates that there are 30 inpatient beds for people with addictions.

HSCT	Inpatient Beds for Addictions
Belfast	0
Northern	10
South Eastern	12
Southern	0
Western	8
Total	30

Information on the number of people on a waiting list for these services is not readily available

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 15598/17-22, for a breakdown of the £1.39 million support provided foster carers; and whether payments made directly to individual carers via an intermediary.

(AQW 16342/17-22)

Mr Swann: The £1.39 million additional departmental funding provided to foster carers supported a 20% uplift in the food and household elements of the fostering allowance over two 12 week periods in 2020/21. £635k funding was provided starting June 2020. An additional £755k was made available for the period January to March 2021. Payments are currently being processed.

Foster carers are recruited by a HSC Trust or an Independent Service Provider (ISP). Each HSC Trust is responsible for making direct payments to the foster carers recruited by them. The additional payments are made to each ISP by the relevant HSC Trust. ISPs then distribute the allowances to those foster carers recruited by them.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of people who have received COVID-19 vaccinations who have subsequently been diagnosed with COVID-19.

(AQW 16345/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Health does not currently hold this detailed information.

Vaccines are not 100% effective and so individuals may still test positive, particularly if they have not received both doses.

A summary of available operational reporting data submitted to the Department of Health for the purposes of monitoring the roll-out of vaccinations in the region can be found at:-

NI Covid-19 Vaccinations Dashboard | COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Northern Ireland (hscni.net)

The summary is not currently systematically/digitally generated but provides an interim step ahead of a full vaccination data management system.

In due course a more detail report will be created from the new Northern Ireland Vaccinations Management System, once it is fully populated with all sources of vaccinations.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of people who have received COVID-19 vaccinations and have subsequently been hospitalised with COVID-19.

(AQW 16346/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Health does not currently hold this detailed information.

Vaccines are not 100% effective and so individuals may still test positive, particularly if they have not received both doses.

A summary of available operational reporting data submitted to the Department of Health for the purposes of monitoring the roll-out of vaccinations in the region can be found at:-

NI Covid-19 Vaccinations Dashboard | COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Northern Ireland (hscni.net)

The summary is not currently systematically/digitally generated but provides an interim step ahead of a full vaccination data management system.

In due course a more detail report will be created from the new Northern Ireland Vaccinations Management System, once it is fully populated with all sources of vaccinations.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of people who have received COVID-19 vaccinations and have subsequently died within 28 days of testing positive for COVID-19 or where COVID-19 is mentioned on the death certificate. **(AQW 16347/17-22)**

Mr Swann: The Department of Health does not currently hold this detailed information.

Vaccines are not 100% effective and so individuals may still test positive, particularly if they have not received both doses.

A summary of available operational reporting data submitted to the Department of Health for the purposes of monitoring the roll-out of vaccinations in the region can be found at:-

NI Covid-19 Vaccinations Dashboard | COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Northern Ireland (hscni.net)

The summary is not currently systematically/digitally generated but provides an interim step ahead of a full vaccination data management system.

In due course a more detail report will be created from the new Northern Ireland Vaccinations Management System, once it is fully populated with all sources of vaccinations.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health what progress has been made by his Department in addressing the recommendations set out in last year's Northern Ireland Audit Office report on workforce planning for nursing and midwifery, particularly in relation to addressing excessive expenditure on agency nursing staff. **(AQW 16369/17-22)**

Mr Swann: My Department welcomed the publication of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report Workforce planning for nurses and midwives on 31 July 2020.

My Department will be very happy to update the Public Accounts Committee further as they progress their consideration of this audit report.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health to detail the expenditure by each Health and Social Care Trust on travel and accommodation for agency nursing staff during (i) 2018/19; and (ii) 2019/20. **(AQW 16371/17-22)**

Mr Swann: The information requested is not available.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health to detail the difference between the hourly rate paid to an NHS employed nurse and an agency employed nurse during the hours of 6:00am-8:00am, broken down by nursing grade. **(AQW 16375/17-22)**

Mr Swann: The charging structure within the Agency framework (that is payable by HSC to agencies) is made up of several elements including the equivalent Agenda for Change (AfC) hourly rate for a given pay band, experience level and shift. Whilst the basic hourly rate is the same as AfC, the amount that the agency pays to the individual could vary. Appointments made outside of the Framework will not be the same as they are based on individual agency costs and taking account of demand and supply for the specific post needing to be filled.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health (i) how he will bring clarity regarding the allegation that Dr El-Naggar, the consultant who is investigating Dr Michael Watt, is himself under investigation by the General Medical Council; (ii) what alternative replacements will be made to Consultancy Neurology; (iii) how he will ensure that the patients currently under the previous care of Dr Watt and Dr El-Naggar be assured and not re-traumatised; and (iv) how patients will receive clarification of these allegations from the Department. **(AQW 16386/17-22)**

Mr Swann: My Department is aware of an impending hearing by the General Medical Council (GMC), regarding the consultant's practice in England and has sought assurance from the Belfast HSC Trust in the context of the consultant's work as part of the Neurology Recall.

The Belfast Trust has provided an assurance it has not identified concerns regarding the specific area of work this consultant was asked to undertake as part of the Neurology Recall or the ongoing follow up of patients in his care. The consultant does

not have any restrictions on his practice and there have been no fitness to practice concerns relating to his work in Belfast Trust.

Patients and families impacted by the Neurology Recall will continue to be supported by the Belfast Trust. Any patient who feels that they need psychological support should contact their GP in the first instance. The Neurology Advice Line (0800 980 1100) is also available to take any calls for patients who are concerned.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the additional monies provided to each core grant funded group for 2020/21.

(AQW 16391/17-22)

Mr Swann: Annex A provides details of the additional payments received by each of the Department's 65 core funded organisations, worth 25% of their 2020/21 annual core grant allocation.

ANNEX A

Organisation Name	25% uplift allocation
Accord	£16,340.63
Children In Northern Ireland	£19,276.46
Children's Law Centre	£13,494.06
Community Development & Health Network	£8,778.59
Greater Shankill Partnership	£46,323.58
Harmony Community Trust	£5,905.31
Home-Start NI	£9,453.75
NICMA The Childminding Association	£13,709.00
Relate NI	£40,991.33
Parenting NI	£18,328.31
Women's Resource & Development Agency	£8,600.75
Volunteer Now	£25,165.87
Action Mental Health	£15,932.00
ADD NI	£4,687.50
AWARE	£5,791.81
CAUSE	£6,187.50
Cruse in Northern Ireland	£9,837.50
Eating Disorders Association (NI)	£4,687.50
Inspire Wellbeing	£36,443.50
Lighthouse	£6,150.00
MindWise	£15,972.50
The Samaritans	£3,101.00
Threshold	£16,508.75
Action on Hearing Loss	£5,520.75
Cedar Foundation	£5,683.50
Contact a Family	£5,831.75
Crossroads Caring for Carers (NI) Ltd	£10,795.50
Disability Action	£30,966.00
Epilepsy Action	£2,275.25
Everyday Harmony Music Therapy	£3,201.00
RNIB NI	£14,755.00
Sense NI	£4,694.75

Organisation Name	25% uplift allocation
Stroke Association	£2,702.50
Addiction NI	£24,843.19
Northlands	£31,607.44
Adopt NI	£3,509.81
Adoption UK	£3,956.50
Family Routes (Formerly known as Church of Ireland Board of Social Responsibility)	£14,099.79
Family Care Adoption Services	£33,466.13
Fostering Network	£10,872.38
Include Youth	£8,621.56
Voice of Young People in Care	£10,294.75
Age NI	£41,415.00
Alzheimer's Society	£8,023.75
Carers NI	£7,901.75
Presbyterian Council for Social Witness	£9,280.50
Society of St Vincent de Paul	£15,728.00
Aids Care Education & Training (ACET)	£10,323.75
Cara-friend	£5,944.75
Informing Choices NI	£14,661.75
Life NI	£5,178.00
Positive Life	£19,433.75
Rainbow Project	£6,083.25
Twins and Multiple Births Association (TAMBA)	£2,625.00
Women's Information Northern Ireland (WINI)	£3,206.75
Autism NI	£9,598
Downs Syndrome Association	£6,571.25
Mencap NI	£20,652.75
British Red Cross	£1,250.00
Childline NI	£11,698.50
Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA)	£17,686.25
Nexus NI	£14,071.25
Women's Aid Federation NI	£36,986.50
Northern Ireland Hospice	£25,093.00

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health how many community pharmacies are due to take part in the COVID-19 vaccination programme, including the number of (i) premises; (ii) pharmacy staff; and (iii) pharmacists.

(AQW 16392/17-22)

Mr Swann: At this time I can confirm that 350 community pharmacies (out of a total of 528) have expressed an interest in providing the Covid-19 vaccination service. The Health and Social Care Board is in the process of establishing contracts with those pharmacies that wish to participate. It is expected that the community pharmacy vaccination service will be widely distributed geographically across Northern Ireland, providing easy access to the population to book their vaccination locally.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 11197/17-22, how many of those admitted to hospital with Meningitis from 2015/16 onwards had had Meningitis B.

(AQW 16437/17-22)

Mr Swann: Hospital records are completed by trained coders using the World Health Organisation International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 10th Revision (ICD-10). Advice from the HSC regional clinical coding team is that there is no specific code that classifies Meningitis B. Meningitis B is a form of meningococcal meningitis which is classified as A39.0 D and G01.X A, which includes any type of meningococcal meningitis.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health whether social work-qualified probation officers are being considered for the £500 special recognition payment.
(AQW 16453/17-22)

Mr Swann: An FAQ on the special recognition payment, which includes eligibility criteria, is available on my Department's website at the following link;

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/hsc-staff-recognition-payment-faqs>

Social work-qualified probation officers are not eligible for the £500 special recognition payment. They are funded by the Department of Justice and it would be for that Department to take forward if they wished.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to list each occasion that his Department engaged with counterparts or health agencies from the south on professional registration of cross border services.
(AQW 16469/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has been working closely and regularly with the Irish Department of Health, the Medical Council of Ireland (MCI) and the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland (NMBI) to smooth the process for those HSC doctors and nurses who require to be registered with their replicate professional regulator.

Given the frequency of this contact, it is not possible to provide an accurate list of each occasion.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to outline each cross-border service for which his Department has required staff to be professionally registered in the south.
(AQW 16470/17-22)

Mr Swann: Dual registration of HSC healthcare professionals will be required for planned cross-border service as dictated by the legislative framework of the relevant regulators in the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether his Department is undertaking any schemes or initiatives to offset the costs for staff having to hold professional registration on both sides of the border.
(AQW 16471/17-22)

Mr Swann: Any HSC employee required to register with a healthcare regulator in the Republic of Ireland as a consequence of duties mandated by their employer will have the full cost of registration met by the employing Trust.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health when all the multi-disciplinary teams will be operational.
(AQW 16508/17-22)

Mr Swann: The MDT model is now complete or well developed in 5 of the 17 GP Federations in Northern Ireland – Down, Londonderry/Derry, West Belfast, Causeway and Newry & District Federations. I am pleased to advise that a small MDT footprint is also currently being introduced jointly in the North Down and Ards Federations areas.

My Department and the HSCB are currently engaged in a process to develop a 'road map' for the implementation of MDTs across all remaining GP Federations. This process is expected to be completed before summer 2021. The road map will enable robust planning for the rollout of the model to the remainder of Northern Ireland.

Whilst it was originally anticipated that the MDT Programme could be expanded at a rate of around 2 GP federation areas per annum, with estimated completion around 2026, this target has been impacted by the Covid pandemic. Additionally, further rollout of the model is dependent on the availability of a suitably qualified and experienced workforce, readiness of accommodation and the appropriate funding.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 11197/17-22, how many people who were admitted to hospital with Meningitis B had been vaccinated.
(AQW 16515/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of people admitted to hospital with a diagnosis of meningitis who had also received a meningitis B vaccination is not available.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health whether he intends to introduce a replacement to the Cross Border Healthcare Initiative.
(AQW 16524/17-22)

Mr Swann: The future relationship negotiations between the UK and the EU ended on 24 December 2020 when the Trade and Cooperation Agreement was reached. The Cross-Border Healthcare Scheme was not provided for in the Trade and Cooperation Agreement.

Historically there has been significantly more use of the Cross-Border Healthcare Scheme in Northern Ireland than any other part of the UK and I appreciate the interest in the continuance of a similar scheme.

Setting up a replacement for the Cross-Border Healthcare Scheme with some or all of the EU Member States, EFTA countries and Switzerland would take time to negotiate and operationalise and would bring additional costs in future years.

However I have asked my officials to consider the policy options to the principles of the Cross-Border Directive in this post EU Exit environment and consider any resulting consultation and legislative requirements.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health (i) for an update on neurology services in relation to Cohort 2; (ii) whether another recall is to be announced, and (iii) what processes have been put in place to support neurology patients.

(AQW 16543/17-22)

Mr Swann: It was intended that the Neurology Cohort 2 Outcomes Report would be published in the first half of 2020. However, some of the staff involved with the work were redeployed as part of the Covid-19 response. The preparations for the publication of this work resumed in recent months and I can advise that I expect to make a statement to the Assembly addressing that publication and related matters in the coming weeks.

Patients and families impacted by the Neurology Recall will continue to be supported by the Belfast Trust. Any patient affected by the recall and who has concerns, can avail of the Neurology Advice Line which is available Monday to Friday from 9.00am to 5.00pm on 08009801100.

My Department will continue to engage with the patients and families, through the Patient Client Council (PCC), to ensure the effective communication on any future announcements relating to the Neurology Review.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health what is the cost to the Health Service of the private health sector providing support services to address the waiting lists for diagnostic services and routine medical procedures in each of the last two years.

(AQW 16558/17-22)

Mr Swann: The total cost to the Health Service in Northern Ireland of the private health sector providing support services to address the waiting lists for diagnostic services and routine medical procedures in each of the last two years was:

2018/19 £m	2019/20 £m
17.4	9.4

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for an update on the Muckamore Abbey Public Inquiry including engagements with (i) patients; (ii) patients' families; and (iii) staff, in relation to the terms of reference.

(AQW 16561/17-22)

Mr Swann: I hosted 3 engagement events with families and carers in December 2020, facilitated by the Patient Client Council (PCC) and attended by the Inquiry Sponsor Team. During January and February 2021 the PCC carried out further discussions with both former and current patients. I received the PCC report of the findings of the engagements on 12 March 2021 and am considering. Engagement with staff will likely take place post the appointment of the Chair of the Inquiry.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health for an update on the rollout of multi-disciplinary teams in general practice.

(AQW 16641/17-22)

Mr Swann: The MDT model is now complete or well developed in 5 of the 17 GP Federations in Northern Ireland – Down, Londonderry/Derry, West Belfast, Causeway and Newry & District Federations. I am pleased to advise that a small MDT footprint is also currently being introduced jointly in the North Down and Ards Federations areas.

My Department and the HSCB are currently engaged in a process to develop a 'road map' for the implementation of MDTs across all remaining GP Federations. This process is expected to be completed before summer 2021. The road map will enable robust planning for the rollout of the model to the remainder of Northern Ireland.

Whilst it was originally anticipated that the MDT Programme could be expanded at a rate of around 2 GP federation areas per annum, with estimated completion around 2026, this target has been impacted by the Covid pandemic. Additionally, further rollout of the model is dependent on the availability of a suitably qualified and experienced workforce, readiness of accommodation and the appropriate funding.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on the Crisis Prevention service in Derry City; and whether he has plans to extend the service to West Tyrone.

(AQW 16664/17-22)

Mr Swann: Londonderry's Crisis Intervention Service is commissioned by Derry and Strabane District Council and is delivered solely by Extern. Decisions on its future reside with the Council.

I agreed to provide additional funding to enable the service to continue until the end of March 2021 and for the Council and Extern to explore sustainable future funding. A separate funding bid for the service to continue thereafter has been made by Extern. I understand that the Council has extended the service until the end of June 2021.

A review of crisis services across Northern Ireland under the Mental Health Action Plan and Strategy is currently being undertaken. It is expected that this review will report at the end of April, and it will detail preferred options for regionally consistent crisis services across Northern Ireland.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health what steps he is taking to ensure the mental and physical wellbeing of frontline medical staff that have experienced increased stress, trauma or other illness due to their working environment of the past year.

(AQW 16735/17-22)

Mr Swann: Covid-19 has placed an enormous strain on our Health professionals within all sectors of the health care setting – they staff have played a vital role, and continue to do so, in dealing with the additional demands being placed on them. I have put on record my wholehearted appreciation for the significant contribution they have made during the pandemic.

My Department has worked alongside colleagues in the HSC to coordinate a comprehensive response to the psychological impact of the coronavirus pandemic, both in the immediate and longer term.

A Regional Staff Wellbeing Work stream was initiated in response to Covid-19, and has worked closely with colleagues within Mental Health services at the Health and Social Care Board, officials within my Department, and with colleagues in the PHA to build resources and support for staff.

In April 2020, I launched "Supporting the Well-being Needs of our Health and Social Care Staff during COVID-19: A Framework for Leaders and Managers". The measures within the framework include a range of initiatives across organisations, which will support psychological well-being of staff, with an aim to preventing the development of mental health difficulties, including PTSD, in the aftermath of the pandemic, and to allowing early identification and intervention to be available in the aftermath period.

It is vitally important to ensure that all staff and volunteers, irrespective of where they work, have access to the information and support they may need over the coming months. In situations where specific individual help is needed, this is available through the Occupational Health arrangements in each Trust.

All HSC trusts have in place a variety of measures to support staff emotional health and wellbeing. These range from psychological support helplines, reading resources, videos, and mindfulness relaxation exercises, to opportunities to come together as teams, to reflect on the challenges and losses they have experienced, and continue to face, to the potential to seek individual support as required.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the current laws and guidelines on parking cars on public footpaths.
(AQW 16104/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): The rules of the road are contained within the Highway Code for Northern Ireland. Rules 234 to 252 provide advice on 'Waiting and Parking, and Rule 244 specifically asks drivers not to park on a footway.

There is no single piece of legislation that prohibits cars from parking on all footways, however, where there are parking restrictions, these apply to both the carriageway and footway, and my Department can carry out enforcement action against vehicles parked in contravention. The PSNI also has powers to take enforcement action against vehicles causing an obstruction on footways. In addition, footway parking is generally prohibited along urban clearways and rural clearways, and Article 30 of the Road Traffic (NI) Order 1995 also prohibits heavy commercial vehicles from parking on verges, central reservations and footways.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to changes to planning advice contained within Chief Planner's Updates, whether it is procedure for relevant stakeholders to be engaged before the changing of such advice.
(AQW 16112/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The intention of a Chief Planner's Update is to provide Heads of Planning within councils with updates and guidance about various aspects of the planning system, as and when required. It provides information on particular planning issues that the Department considers to be of relevance and of interest to councils and is published on the Department's website to inform the wider public as a form of good practice.

A Chief Planner's Update does not however include legislative or policy changes that would require stakeholder engagement.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given the cross-cutting nature of the issues involved, whether she obtained Executive approval for her opposition to the union connectivity proposals of Her Majesty's Government.

(AQW 16149/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Union Connectivity Review is at a very early stage. As Minister for Infrastructure with responsibility for roads and public transport, I consider that it is within my remit to comment and express my view on proposals that could impact on our local transport infrastructure and in fact have been encouraged to do so by the review team.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the current (i) backlog; and (ii) waiting times for driver theory test applicants.

(AQW 16190/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Driver theory tests have been suspended since the Executive's decision to increase lockdown restrictions from 26 December 2020. Affected candidates have had their theory test rescheduled into a 'virtual test centre' from where they can change to a date, time and location that suits them, or cancel their appointment and receive a refund. Just over 6,200 candidates are currently in this 'virtual test centre'.

The table below shows the next available appointments at each of the theory test centres as of 16 March 2021:

Test Centre Location	Next Appointment
Ballymena	17 July
Belfast	15 July
Derry	20 July
Newry	15 July
Omagh	22 July
Portadown	15 July

As soon as the date for the resumption of driving tests is agreed by the Executive, additional theory test appointments will be made available through a combination of extended opening hours and an additional temporary centre, to help address the backlog and clear those waiting in the 'virtual test centre' within a reasonably short timeframe. Customers in the 'virtual test centre' will be contacted by the theory test provider about the additional slots, when the date for resumption of services is known.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether taxi drivers that required a licence renewal in the last 12 months are being impacted on payments within the taxi support schemes.

(AQW 16193/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A taxi driver whose licence was due for renewal during the scheme(s) 12 month period 22nd March 2020 to 21st March 2021, will still have been eligible to apply for financial assistance (subject to meeting the other eligibility criteria). In cases where a driver had either a break in their insurance or a break in their licence for a number of days, the total payment they received will have been adjusted to reflect this.

In order to ensure value for money for each payment, the Taxi Drivers' Financial Assistance Schemes were dependent on actual expenses having been incurred and the support is in addition to payments drivers may have received through the SEISS schemes.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure why applicants for disabled blue parking badges can no longer apply by filling in a hard copy form but must do so online.

(AQW 16215/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Individuals and Support Organisations can apply for or renew a Blue Badge by filling in a hard copy application form or by applying online using the NIDirect website. The Blue Badge Unit within my Department has maintained this service throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the work her Department is undertaking to develop greenways in West Tyrone.

(AQW 16224/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is actively seeking opportunities to assist Councils by providing capital funding to help them deliver their key greenway projects. This year I have made over £2 million available to Councils for that purpose.

In terms of West Tyrone specifically, as outlined in my answer to AQW 10006/17-22, my Department has provided Fermanagh and Omagh District Council with grant funding for a feasibility study along the greenway route from Omagh to Carrickmore. In September 2020, I announced capital funding of almost £0.5 million to Derry City and Strabane District Council for the delivery of the Strabane North Greenway, due to complete in the next financial year.

I am keen to help Councils, but it is important that they work with communities, landowners and other stakeholders to develop their proposals to the point that they are ready to be built.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure when her Department intends to clear the graffiti from the Cairnshill Road underpass.

(AQW 16231/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The painting of graffiti on Departmental property is an offence under Article 87(1) of the Roads (NI) Order 1993. However, the Department has limited resources to deal with graffiti and would normally only act immediately to remove it where it presents a risk to road safety, for example, where a road sign has been obscured.

Within the resources currently available my Department will also prioritise the removal of graffiti that is offensive, racist, or sectarian in nature and where we are satisfied that removing it will not further raise community tensions, or present risks to the safety of our staff and contractors.

I have asked officials to inspect the structure at Cairnshill Road and to take action as appropriate.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the works programme of (i) local transport; and (ii) safety measures in North Down for 2021/22 will be presented to Ards and North Down Borough Council.

(AQW 16249/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As advised in recent related correspondence, details of work programmes are presented to local councils after budgets have been confirmed and programmes have been finalised. This normally occurs in late spring / early summer. These reports are then published online and can be accessed through the www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications webpage.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 10570/17-22, (i) to provide details of the planned development which will include the relevant footway approved by her Department; and (ii) for an update on the provision of additional signage and associated road markings for Chancellors Road, Newry which were to be completed in the New Year.

(AQW 16253/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) Details of the approved development under planning reference number LA07/2019/1064/F can be viewed through the Planning Public Access portal which will include the Private Street Determination drawing showing the footway along the development frontage that is to be adopted by my Department.
- (ii) I can confirm the additional signs have already been erected on Chancellors Road and the associated road markings will be completed as part of a batch of similar works to be taken forward by our contractor as resources permit and subject to favourable weather conditions.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the proposed Carryduff Greenway.

(AQW 16309/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As outlined in my answer to AQW 15764/17-22, the proposed 'Carryduff Greenway' is a capital project being developed by Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council and an update can be provided by the Council.

I am keen to work with Councils and stakeholders in the development of active travel routes. In doing so, it is important that Councils work with communities, landowners and other stakeholders in formulating agreed proposals that can be developed into greenway schemes that are ready to be built.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the rationale for not providing part-funding towards the upgrade of Foundry Lane, Omagh.

(AQW 16321/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware that Fermanagh and Omagh District Council has approached my officials to explore the possibility of my Department working in partnership with them to deliver an improvement scheme at Foundry Lane in Omagh. My officials have confirmed that the paving in Foundry Lane is currently in a serviceable condition and that there are many other footways within the district in greater need of improvement.

Therefore owing to budgetary constraints and other competing priorities, my Department unfortunately was unable to commit to assisting the delivery of an improvement scheme at Foundry Lane at this time. The proposal will however remain under consideration for possible inclusion in future programmes of work.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister for Infrastructure what input her Department had into the Mental Health Strategy currently being consulted on, including the relevant actions.

(AQW 16327/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is represented on the Department of Health's cross departmental working group, which was established to support the development of the draft Mental Health Strategy. As such, my Department contributed fully to the preparation of the draft Strategy and, despite the fact that none of the specific actions will be led by my Department, I will ensure that we contribute fully to this important area, by supporting the relevant lead Departments as required.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to journeys she has taken in her Department's electric car during the 2019/20 financial year, to detail what journeys were for (i) Red Box, University Street, Belfast; (ii) Europa Hotel, Belfast; and (iii) Grand Central Hotel, Belfast.

(AQW 16335/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) Red Box, University Street, Belfast was for media training on 6 February 2020.
- (ii) Europa Hotel, Belfast was to attend and speak at the NI Chamber in Camera Series 2020 on 26 February 2020. Grand Central Hotel, was to attend and speak to an event, Keeping the Cranes Up:
- (iii) Thinking Bigger on 27 February 2020.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how her Department was able to support bids made by ports after initially declaring it could not do so.

(AQW 16338/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department was not able to submit a bid to the Department of Finance (DoF) for additional in year funding for ports due to a number of issues, including legal and subsidy control complexities which could not be addressed within the short timeframe set by DoF for bids. Nevertheless, my officials continued to explore the possibility of supporting Harbour Authorities within the 2020/21 financial year from Departmental funding while working to resolve these issues. Following this work I was therefore able to support Warrenpoint Harbour Authority with £1.5m of grant funding.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will be improving guidance for the development of cycle lanes.

(AQW 16340/17-22)

Ms Mallon: It is my ambition to create more opportunities for active travel and make our roads safer for those who want to walk, wheel and cycle. The Member will be aware that I am keen to take a more innovative approach to driving forward a green recovery, which has been demonstrated in the recent development of several pop-up cycle lanes.

My Department already has a range of guidance documents for use when designing new cycle facilities, including the most recently adopted Department for Transport Local Transport LTN1/20 'Cycle Infrastructure Design'. This document includes the very latest thinking on cycling design.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what work her Department is doing following from the Rathlin Island Policy and Action Plan.

(AQW 16341/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister with lead responsibility for the Rathlin Island Policy and Action Plan, I am continuing to work with the Rathlin community to develop a vibrant, healthy community and to ensure that islanders are involved in the development of policies and projects which improve conditions for all the people of the island while protecting Rathlin's environment.

I recently had the pleasure of meeting virtually with representatives of Rathlin Development and Community Association (RDCA) and agreed that, in addition to those normal day to day operations that my Department supports, my officials will continue work with RDCA and other key stakeholders on a range of interrelated activities to advance Rathlin's carbon neutral ambitions and to progress the community led development of the island's East Light site.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the progress of the Enniskillen bypass.

(AQW 16355/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In June last year I announced my commitment to fund the continued development of a number of Strategic Road Improvement schemes, including the A4 Enniskillen Southern Bypass, as part of my plan to aid economic recovery and community transformation, while addressing regional imbalance.

I acknowledge the significance of the Enniskillen Southern Bypass and reaffirm my commitment to moving ahead with this important scheme, which I understand is also being considered as part of the Mid-South West Growth Deal.

I have asked my officials to complete the work necessary to allow me to arrive at a decision on how the scheme should proceed. This includes a review of the environmental reports after which I hope to be in position to consider the next steps.

Progression to construction will remain subject to completion of all of the statutory procedures, and securing the necessary funding.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will carry out a road resurfacing scheme on Rashee Road, Ballyclare.

(AQW 16374/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is currently deferring resurfacing works at Rashee Road, Ballyclare (Asda roundabout to Erskine Park) until all ongoing utility works in the area have been completed in line with Departmental standards. Following the completion of utility works my officials monitor utility work for settlement and defects usually for a one year period. Once they are satisfied with the completed works my Department will then include this section of road in its resurfacing programme.

In the meantime my Department will continue to carry out routine cyclical maintenance inspections on the Rashee Road, Ballyclare and any defects that meet the necessary criteria within our maintenance standards are identified and programmed for repair.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail any plans to upgrade the stretch of the Ulster Canal from Stranmillis Basin to Lisburn.

(AQW 16376/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The stretch that the Member refers to is part of the Lagan Navigation corridor rather than the Ulster Canal. In 2019, my Department commissioned Sustrans to undertake a Lagan Navigation Blueway feasibility study on developing the whole route as a Blueway, including the section from Stranmillis to Lisburn. On foot of this, the Waterways Community (TWC) is leading on proposals for a Lagan Valley Blueway for this area.

The existing Lagan Towpath between Stranmillis and Union Locks, Lisburn is well established as a commuter route and also for leisure and recreation. Improvement projects and upgrades to activity nodes have been identified within the feasibility report to improve accessibility for all along this stretch.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the extent of car parking problems within Dundonald village; and what action she is planning to take to address the issue.

(AQW 16387/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware that demand for parking within the Dundonald area has increased in recent years partly due to ongoing construction work within the Ulster Hospital and a reduction in available parking within the hospital site. This has resulted in additional on-street parking, mostly in streets off the Comber Road and more recently on the Ballyregan Road.

My Department can reduce on-street parking availability through the application of waiting restrictions however these are usually only considered for traffic progression and road safety reasons, are often contentious within residential areas and can result in displacement of the problem to other locations rather than providing a resolution.

I can advise that, due to road safety concerns arising from parking on Ballyregan Road, waiting restrictions have recently been implemented on Ballyregan Road in the vicinity of Stoney Road. My officials will monitor the effectiveness of these restrictions as well as the ongoing parking situation generally in the Dundonald area.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the purpose of her Department's service of enforcement notices in February 2021 on those extracting sand from Lough Neagh Special Protection Area; and (ii) what those enforcement notices relate to and require.

(AQW 16396/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The enforcement notice issued in February 2021 relates to operations prior to the recent grant of planning permission and its practical effect is that dredging remains restricted in areas of the Lough not benefitting from planning approval. Due to the unique circumstances that exist with mineral operations, the notice is of a technical nature and does not require the LNST to stop dredging in the 3.1km area of the Lough recently granted planning approval.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for how much was Portavoe Reservoir sold.

(AQW 16406/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has advised that Portavoe Reservoir was sold for £67,575.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many inquiries have been held by the Transport Regulation Unit since 2019.

(AQW 16412/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since 2019 the Transport Regulation Unit have held 14 inquiries (including 2 preliminary hearings). This is the highest volume of inquiries held since 2016/17 and has been achieved against the challenging backdrop of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Dates have also been set for six further inquiries between now and 4th May 2021.

In addition, Transport Regulation Unit have held two hearings to consider applications for vehicles detained by DVA. The Department has, as a result, disposed of five heavy goods vehicles that had been operating illegally on NI roads.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the Driver and Vehicle Agency anticipate all diesel vehicles will be given an emissions test in line with legal standards.

(AQW 16413/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) currently conducts a fully compliant diesel emissions test on all heavy goods vehicles, buses and vans over 3,500kgs, and a partial diesel emissions test for cars and light goods vehicles. This includes a visual inspection of the vehicle's emissions and a check of the engine Malfunction Indicator Lamp (MIL), which indicates a defect in the vehicle emission control systems.

The reintroduction of a full emissions test for cars and light goods vehicles under 3,500kgs, will require a substantial capital investment in the vehicle testing estate to create a safe environment for staff and customers, in which an emissions test for diesel cars and light goods vehicles can be conducted. As a first step, the DVA has recently awarded a contract to build a new test centre at Hydebank in Belfast – due to be completed in the autumn of 2022. This new test centre includes facilities for full emissions testing and will meet all of the current and known future requirements and its design will be used as a template for further proposed test centres, subject to further consideration and funding.

I am committed to ensuring that the DVA can safely deliver a fully compliant diesel emissions test for cars and light goods vehicles.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) to outline the water supply and wastewater capacity issues that exist in the Larne area; and (ii) how Northern Ireland Water is working to resolve these capacity issues.

(AQW 16423/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) NI Water has advised me that there are no drinking water supply issues in the Larne area. However, there are wastewater capacity issues in Larne in relation to both sewers and the wastewater treatment works (WwTW). The Larne WwTW is experiencing issues associated with its wastewater treatment process. The sewer network cannot convey flows to the WwTW, resulting in spills from the network into the receiving environment through combined sewer overflows (CSOs). CSOs act as safety valves to stop sewage backing up in the sewers during rainfall events which can cause internal flooding in properties. If the CSOs operate more frequently than they should, they are classified by NI Water as unsatisfactory intermittent discharges (UIDs). The causes of these discharges must be addressed to prevent the spills entering the sensitive marine environment.
- (ii) The alleviation of the capacity issues in Larne will require significant investment in new assets throughout the PC21 (2021-2027) period. Such investment is dependent on factors such as funding, land availability and planning approvals. NI Water has estimated the cost of the required investment at approximately £30 million. NI Water's proposals involve new sites for treatment facilities, network storage, pumping solutions and opportunities to maximise storm water separation and sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) in the Larne catchment. NI Water is also undertaking network modelling, which is due for completion in 2021-22. The modelling is essential for allowing NI Water to correctly size the network solutions. It is also a requirement of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency with whom all NI Water wastewater solutions must be discussed and agreed.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Infrastructure how she plans to create employment in the area of nature-based solutions.

(AQW 16435/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recently consulted on "Living With Water in Belfast" - a £1.4 billion investment plan for drainage and wastewater management within the greater Belfast area. The plan sets out a new approach to the provision of drainage and wastewater infrastructure by promoting holistic and integrated solutions that achieve a wide range of benefits at reduced cost and disruption. Proposed measures include more conventional hard-engineered infrastructure such as bigger pipes or higher flood defences, alongside greener drainage solutions such as sustainable drainage systems and river floodplain restoration works. The inclusion of these more natural blue/green infrastructure measures has the potential to create new employment opportunities in the area of nature-based solutions. I am very keen to see this approach extended to other parts of the North and I have recently commissioned a study in Derry to examine opportunities to use blue/green spaces to naturally attenuate surface water to improve water quality in the rivers and reduce flood risk within the surrounding area.

Further employment opportunities also exist in the provision of nature-based treatment solutions for drinking water and wastewater. The Company's Sustainable Catchment Management Planning (SCaMP) Project has been successful at demonstrating how catchments can be managed to provide both improved water quality and an enhanced natural environment. NI Water is increasingly taking a new more innovative, resilient and environmentally sustainable approach to managing catchments, by working in partnership with stakeholders and landowners in source catchments, to improve water quality before it even reaches the water treatment works. The Company aims to use fewer chemicals and less energy to treat drinking water, which is good news for their customers and the environment. In addition, the company is currently evaluating a number of different nature-based methods for sustainable wastewater treatment. Some of these technologies are already in operation, including the integrated constructed wetlands at Stoneyford and at Castle Archdale in Fermanagh.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for an update on the future of St. Lucia barracks site, Omagh; and (ii) whether her Department has been approached regarding the redevelopment of the site.

(AQW 16447/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) The St Lucia site was transferred from Ministry of Defence, to allow the NI Executive to raise funds by their disposal to help meet exceptional resource pressures. Currently the site remains in joint ownership between my Department and the Ministry of Defence (MOD) who retain ownership of the Historic Core.
- (ii) There have been a small number of enquiries including from local elected representatives asking about the redevelopment of the St Lucia site. My officials will continue to explore options with key stakeholders for the regeneration and future use of the St Lucia site so that it can be brought back into active use.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Infrastructure what her Department is doing to expand the network of electric vehicle charge points.

(AQW 16451/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The electric vehicle public charge point network is owned by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and is operated on a commercial basis. It is responsible for the operation, maintenance and development of the network. I would also confirm, that ESB currently does not charge e-car drivers for the use of its public charge points in Northern Ireland. There are currently 320 22kWh (Fast) charge points at 160 locations and a further 17 50kWh DC (Rapid) public charge points in the North. 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. Whilst the market is open to other commercial operators who would wish to provide charging infrastructure, to date, ESB is the only public network provider in the North.

My officials are currently considering the future requirements in terms of public charge point infrastructure across Northern Ireland. Officials 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 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.

Funding opportunities for the installation of charge point infrastructure in GB-NI are provided by the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV). My Department has been engaging with OZEV and with the Energy Saving Trust (EST), who administer the On-street Residential Charge Point scheme (ORCS), in particular, with reference to councils in the North. The EST held a workshop last year with local councils about the scheme and has indicated its intention to hold further events to support councils in the North interested in applying to the ORCS scheme in the next financial year. My Department has also engaged with a number of local councils in relation to the need for more electric vehicle charge points, including more recently with regard to ORCS. I appreciate that not everyone can install a charge point as this requires either a garage or a driveway at their home. Therefore, the installation of on-street residential charge points, in urban residential areas, is essential going forward. My officials will continue to make themselves available to local councils to provide assistance, advice and guidance in respect of electric vehicle related matters.

I have 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 implementation of the project rests with the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) and it has agreed a delivery schedule with the project partners, led by the East Border Region Group Limited, which includes the approval of the final location of charge points. I understand this project is in its early stages of development and final site selections have not been identified. 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 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. As part of this work my Department, is in the process of commissioning research to consider future demand for charge points in Northern Ireland. 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.

I remain committed to working in partnership with Executive colleagues and others across our islands to help deliver a change in the way we travel that also helps us to tackle the climate crisis.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure to provide a date for the removal of traffic restriction on the new dual carriageway between the Castledawson and Toome roundabouts to ensure reopening of the new dual carriageway.

(AQW 16461/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Good progress has been made on the construction of the 4.5 mile Castledawson to Toome stretch of the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson Dualling scheme in the last 12 months despite the constraints of the coronavirus pandemic. Although one lane in each direction was opened to the travelling public in November, a large programme of finishing works remained. This is now well advanced and officials are working with the contractor to determine the date on which Temporary

Traffic Management can be removed to allow the opening of two lanes of traffic in each direction. I have asked officials to advise you directly when a date is confirmed.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to list the new road build projects planned for the next financial year.
(AQW 16495/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In the next financial year, the Department will continue to progress the planning of a number of strategic road schemes which are at various stages of development, including the A5 Western Transport Corridor; York Street Interchange; A24 Ballynahinch Bypass; A4 Enniskillen Southern Bypass; A32 Omagh to Enniskillen Cornamuck scheme; A1 Junctions Phase 2; Newry Southern Relief Road; A2 Bunrana Road; and the A29 Cookstown Bypass.

In 2021/22 construction work will continue on the 2 sections of the A6 Flagship project, representing an investment of over £400m to enhance the connectivity of the North West, improve journey time reliability, reduce journey times and improve road safety. The section between Randalstown and Castledawson will be completed in spring of 2021, with the section between Dungiven and Drumahoe on schedule for completion in 2022.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number of unpaid parking fines across North Down, in each of the last two financial years.

(AQW 16497/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Details of the number of unpaid Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) for towns within North Down, in each of the last two financial years, are provided in the table below:

Town	2018/19	2019/20
Bangor	314	283
Donaghadee	18	6
Groomsport	0	1
Hollywood	67	114
Millisle	1	1
Total	400	405

These totals equate to under 7% of all PCNs issued within North Down.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the number of applications made to the second taxi driver assistance scheme, broken down by local council area; (ii) when she anticipates the processing of these applications will be complete; and (iii) when payments will be made.

(AQW 16503/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Applications for the taxi driver financial assistance scheme were not collected by local council area. I can tell you that, following closure of the scheme on 26th February, 5,082 valid applications were received from taxi drivers. Of these, 4,651 were processed to payment within one week of the scheme closing (92%). To date, over 99% of valid applications received have been processed to payment. Staff are working at pace to process the small number remaining where applicants did not fully provide the requested information with their application.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 14757/17-22, (i) how many of the 73 Rapid Charge Points from the FASTER Project will be located in Northern Ireland; and (ii) for her assessment of whether the £455,371 her Department is contributing represents good value for money.

(AQW 16504/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am pleased to have been able to support the FASTER Project, funded through the INTERREG VA Territorial Co-operation Programme which is managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

The responsibility for the implementation of the project rests with SEUPB and it has agreed a delivery schedule with the project partners, led by the East Border Group Limited, which includes the approval of the final location of charge points. I understand this project is in its early stages of development and final site selections have not been identified.

The SEUPB has put in place a robust assessment and approvals process for projects funded through the INTERREG VA Programme which provides me with the necessary assurance on the value for money of my Department's contribution to the FASTER project.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the current position for people trying to MOT vehicles that are ten years old or over.

(AQW 16535/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since vehicle testing was suspended in late March 2020 due to Covid-19, the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) has applied TECs to all eligible vehicles to ensure that they may continue to be driven legally on the road. From 20 July 2020, MOT testing resumed for priority vehicle groups, including those vehicles not able to avail of TECs. The DVA has steadily increased its vehicle testing capacity by adopting a range of measures including the recruitment of additional vehicle examiners, the use of overtime to provide cover for leave and sick absence and a reduction of the vehicle test appointment time.

In light of the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions, I recently announced that existing TECs for qualifying vehicles will be extended by a further four months. This applies to private cars, light goods vehicles and motorcycles aged 4-9 years, with TECs which will expire between 26 March 2021 and 25 March 2022. Four year old cars and motorcycles and three year old light goods vehicles due a first time test between the above dates will also have a four month TEC applied.

The DVA is delivering vehicle testing at all 15 of its test centres for those vehicles without TECs. While there is sufficient capacity for customers to book a vehicle test appointment, it may not always be possible to book a test at their preferred test centre, and they may have to travel to an alternative centre to secure a test before their current test pass certificate expires.

The DVA recently extended the period in which MOT reminder letters are issued to six weeks prior to the test due date, increasing to seven weeks in mid-June to provide customers with earlier notice to book their test.

The demand for vehicle testing is high due in part to customers, who do not require a test, booking an appointment. To manage capacity, the DVA is currently identifying and cancelling vehicle tests which have been booked by customers even though their vehicle has a current TEC. It also makes additional vehicle test slots available daily at most centres and further slots may also become available due to cancellations. Customers are able to change existing appointments to a different test centre and time if a slot becomes available.

The DVA is also offering vehicle test appointments on a Sunday at most test centres, and has started to release additional vehicle test appointments at most test centres for 5 April, 6 April and 3 May 2021. Following conversion of an adjoining building at the Newbuildings test centre, additional testing capacity is available to meet demand in the north-west.

The DVA encourages customers to check the booking system daily as vehicle slots become available at short notice. For those customers who are unable to secure a test date and whose MOT is due to expire within five days or has already expired, they should contact DVA customer services at dva.customerservices@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk and the DVA will seek to secure an urgent appointment for the customer.

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.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has any plans to either resurface or carry out repairs to the roadway in Fernmore Park, Bangor.

(AQW 16586/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The resurfacing programme for 2021/22 will be finalised upon confirmation of the budget allocation to my Department, and as such, I am unable to confirm at this stage whether any works will be undertaken in Fernmore Park during the next financial year. Details of the works programme for the 2021/22 year will be included in the Spring report to Ards and North Down District Council which will, in due course, be presented to the Council following confirmation of budgets.

You will hopefully appreciate that while I want to do more to improve the condition of the road network for all road users, I am constrained by the level of funding available to me. However, I can assure you that I will continue to make the case for more funding to be made available in the 2021/2022 financial year.

I can confirm that regular routine safety inspections will continue to be carried out in Fernmore Park and any actionable defects will be recorded and prioritised for repair in accordance with our current road maintenance standards.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 10567/17-22, for an update on funding for the Active and Sustainable Travel Centre in Derry.

(AQW 16635/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As I previously advised the Member in AQW 10567/17-22, 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 advises that this is still under consideration and it will not be in a position to respond to the request until later this year.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the criteria used to prioritise schools for the part-time 20mph speed limit zones.

(AQW 16684/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I was delighted to be able to commit funding from this year's budget to introduce part-time 20 mph speed limits at 103 schools. All schools were assessed across our four Roads Divisions using factors such as traffic speeds, traffic volumes, and number of collisions, as well as individual site constraints.

The assessment form used to score schools is included within the Departmental policy and procedure guide 'Road Safety at Schools (RSPPG E070)', which can be accessed via the following link:

www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/road-safety-schools-rsppg-e070

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure how TransportNI can help repair the footpath system across Bangor following work carried out by BT.

(AQW 16715/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Firstly may I explain that, under Streetworks legislation, utility companies have a legal right to place and maintain their services in the footway and carriageway but in doing so are required to adhere to certain standards including in respect of reinstatements.

Given the extensive scale of the current programme of works being undertaken by BT, the Department does not have sufficient resources to upgrade / resurface the affected footways once the utility works are complete. However any footways impacted by works will be considered for inclusion in future footway resurfacing programmes.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the planned Rural Roads Fund spend in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area; and to list the roads that will be included in the scheme.

(AQW 16743/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Recognising the importance of investment in the rural roads network to improve connectivity, help communities and tackle regional imbalance, I allocated £12m of the Structural Maintenance budget to a Roads Recovery Fund, of which £10m was specifically directed towards improving 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 across the North will have benefitted from this initiative.

I am pleased to advise that an extensive list of rural roads as below are included within this programme in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ■ B47-3 Dergbrough Road | ■ U1136_4 Fincairn Road |
| ■ B48-52 Duncastle Road | ■ U1138_1 Kilnappy Road |
| ■ B74-7 Glenshane Road (2 sites) | ■ U1138_3 Kilnappy Road |
| ■ B165-2 Bellspark Road, Clady | ■ U1141_1 Ballygudden Road |
| ■ B165-2 Bellspark Road at The Glebe | ■ U1147_1 Ervey Road |
| ■ C506-2 Edenreagh Road | ■ U1147_3 Ervey Road |
| ■ C507-2 Tirbracken Road | ■ U1148_2 Ballygroll Road |
| ■ C513_3 Longland Road | ■ U1152_1 Ballynamore Road |
| ■ C515_1 Forge Road | ■ U1153_1 Old Foreglen Road |
| ■ C515_2 Forge Road | ■ U1153_2 Oughtagh Road |
| ■ C515_3 Bigwood Road | ■ U1159_4 Disertowen Road |
| ■ C516_4 Trench Road | ■ U1160_2 Curryfree Road |
| ■ U1122_1 Judges Road | ■ U1170_5 Kildoag Road |
| ■ U1131_2 Wests Lane | ■ U1171_2 Gosheden Road |
| ■ U1132_1 Killylane Road | ■ U1179_1 Lisbunny Road |
| ■ U1132_2 Tullanee Road | ■ U1182_2 Teenagh Road |
| ■ U1134_2 Fincairn Road | ■ U1186_1 Magherabrack Road |

Mr Lynch asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Ulster Canal.

(AQO 1796/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In 2007, the Irish Government gave a commitment to fund the total cost of restoration of the Ulster Canal from Lough Erne to Clones. In that same year, Waterways Ireland was given NSMC approval to explore the possible restoration of the Ulster Canal from Lough Erne to Clones. Work is progressing well. Phase 1 which was the restoration of the stretch from Lough Erne to Castle Saunderson was completed in Spring 2019 and is now open for navigation. Phase 2, the restoration of the stretch from Clones to Clonfad, is currently underway. A commission to investigate a source of a sustainable water supply for the marina has been completed.

Waterways Ireland is satisfied that a suitable supply has been sourced in order to facilitate the development. Creative design is also ongoing to develop a vision for the canal within Clones. Work relating to land requirements and purchase

arrangements for this section of the restoration has also commenced. Phase 3, the restoration of the stretch from Castle Saunderson to Clonfad, will be completed in three stages. Phase 3.1 and phase 3.2 both run through County Fermanagh.

Waterways Ireland is working with colleagues in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to explore the possibility of funding being released from the Shared Island Fund for work to progress phases 3.1 and 3.2. All three phases of the project have been funded by the Irish Government.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the proposed flood alleviation schemes in the North West. (AQO 1795/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is continuing to progress proposals for three major flood alleviation schemes in the North West.

Ground investigation works have commenced for a proposed scheme in Eglinton, with similar works planned for Drumahoe during the spring of this year. These investigations are necessary to progress the design proposals.

Both these projects are currently at the early design phase and it is anticipated that it is likely to take up to two years to complete the detailed design. Throughout the design process the economic viability of these schemes will continue to be reviewed.

Following completion of the design, and subject to their continued economic viability, both schemes will then progress via separate procurement exercises to appoint contractors for the works.

A feasibility study for Derry City has also recently been completed and the business case was approved in October 2020. This project will be progressing to early design stage in the coming months subject to receiving the necessary internal Departmental approvals.

In addition, my Department is currently completing a £300,000 Flood Alleviation Scheme on the Donneygowan Burn, in Clady, Co. Tyrone. The scheme includes the replacement of a temporary flood defence with a permanent structure and the widening of the existing road bridge to help convey heavy flows of water. It is anticipated that these works will be complete by June 2021. The new flood wall will significantly reduce the risk of flooding to eight properties in the area.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the York Street Interchange. (AQO 1797/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The member will be aware that I commissioned a short sharp review of the York Street Interchange scheme, to ensure it is future-proofed and forward looking. This review was completed in November 2020. I am currently considering its findings with a view to deciding on the next steps for the scheme, after which I will make an announcement.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the legislation she intends to introduce by July 2021. (AQO 1798/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister for Infrastructure, I am responsible for a wide range of statutory functions where I feel that primary legislative change would be beneficial. However, given the constraints on Assembly time within the current mandate and the impact of the COVID pandemic on the processes required to facilitate these, I have been unable to progress these legislative changes to the point where they could be introduced in the current mandate. However, my officials do continue to work in key areas in relation to primary legislation.

Officials are currently conducting a review of the implementation of the Planning Act (NI) 2011 as required by section 228 of the Act and also on work to support commencement of the Reservoirs Act 2015 following the transfer of functions from DAERA.

In terms of my remaining priorities, my officials have been working on an Active Travel Bill, which would enhance my vires in respect of developing active travel routes and provide powers to grant fund active travel activities.

As regards to subordinate legislation my Department continues to progress large numbers of routine legislative instruments with regard to key functions such as Roads, Planning and Vehicle & Driver licencing standards. The Member will be aware that I have recently introduced new subordinate legislation to increase penalties associated with the use of mobile phones while driving and to introduce financial support packages to the taxi and bus and coach sectors.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans are in place to upgrade the electric vehicle charge point network. (AQO 1800/17-22)

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 intended to allow commercialisation and development of the network, which was also opened to other operators.

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.

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. Funding opportunities for the installation of charge point infrastructure in Great Britain and in the North are currently provided by the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV).

I would also advise, that ESB currently does not charge e-car drivers for the use of its public charge points in Northern Ireland. I remain committed to working in partnership with Executive colleagues and others across our islands to help deliver a change in the way we travel that also helps us to tackle the climate crisis.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline any discussions she has had with the Department of Health to facilitate priority vaccinations for driving instructors.
(AQO 1801/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The COVID-19 vaccination programme in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), an independent medical and scientific expert body. The JCVI recommended that the primary purpose of the vaccination programme should be to prevent COVID-19 mortality and protect health and social care staff and systems. Its secondary focus should be to protect those at increased risk of hospitalisation or exposure and to maintain resilience in essential public services.

In responding to this pandemic, it is important that we are guided by the advice of the CMO and CSA. The Department of Health has published a vaccination phased plan document on their website (COVID-19 vaccination programme phased plan) (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/covid-19-vaccination-programme-phased-plan>). This has the agreement of the Executive. I can assure you that, just as I raised the issue of driving instructors during the Executive's discussion on the TEO Covid Task Force Roadmap to Recovery, I will continue to do so and seek the most up to date medical advice.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her plans to improve road infrastructure in Mid Ulster.
(AQO 1802/17-22)

Ms Mallon: On 10 June 2020, I announced to the Assembly my intention to progress a number of strategic infrastructure and flagship projects as part of my plan to aid economic recovery and community transformation.

The A6 flagship project, and particularly the improvements to provide a dual carriageway from Toome to Castledawson, is at an advanced stage of delivery and is expected to fully open later this year. This project will improve connectivity and bring substantial travel and economic benefits to the Mid Ulster area.

Another important project that I am committed to progressing is the A29 Cookstown Bypass and I can confirm that the review of the preferred route is currently being finalised for my consideration in preparation for a public information day later this year to invite public comment.

My officials are also currently developing the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) which will set out future investment and improvement for our strategic transport networks, by road, rail and bus, and reflect my commitment to improving connectivity for the benefit of our economy and communities across all of the North.

Details of other local road improvement schemes that we plan to deliver are included in Council reports for Mid Ulster District Council. Information on schemes to be taken forward in 2021/22 will be included in the Spring report which will be presented to Council in due course and will be available online thereafter.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on how she is addressing wastewater sewerage capacity deficits across the Foyle constituency.
(AQO 1803/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has advised that it completed an analysis of its wastewater investment plans for the Foyle constituency at the end of last year. This investment will require The Executive to provide capital funding of approximately £29 million.

The planned improvements will target capacity issues in the Culmore wastewater treatment works network, including a £12 million investment in the upgrade of the Strathfoyle siphons, as well as nearly £5million investment in the Culmore Wastewater Treatment Works itself.

In terms of servicing new growth, approximately £9 million is associated with new sewerage infrastructure investment for the Skeoge Lands, along the A2 Buncrana Road, that NI Water is seeking to align with the DfI Roads A2 upgrade scheme.

Department of Justice

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the adequacy of cross border crime prevention.
(AQW 15987/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Effective collaboration between governments and law enforcement agencies is key to successfully disrupting and preventing organised criminality. Tackling and preventing cross-border criminality and the

assessment of impact is principally an operational matter for the two police forces. The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) collaborates with An Garda Síochána (AGS) on a number of levels to prevent cross border crime and to pursue and bring offenders to justice. The cooperation that already exists between the PSNI and AGS, and other law enforcement partners, is working effectively and I know that all partners remain committed to a shared approach to tackling organised criminality on both sides of the border.

The Joint Agency Task Force (JATF), set up under the terms of the Fresh Start Agreement, plays a key role in the concerted effort to tackle organised and cross jurisdictional crime. I provided an update to the Assembly in December 2020 on the work of the JATF which is available at: <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-07-12-2020.pdf>

More recently, the JATF operation in February 2021 also highlights how successful this collaboration is. Both AGS and PSNI were active in high visibility patrols and coordinated activity to detect crime and provide reassurance to the public. The PSNI made twelve arrests and seized a number of vehicles, which caused disruption to cross border criminals and helped keep communities in the border areas and beyond safe. Engagement between PSNI and AGS at a strategic level, as well as partnership working and information sharing at a local level, and on a daily basis, is essential.

The Rural Crime Cross Border Task Force also plays an important role. Working together my Department, PSNI, AGS and other agencies including the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, and the Policing and Community Safety Partnerships meet on a regular basis to share information on emerging or re-occurring crimes and to develop a co-ordinated response.

Cross-border co-operation and engagement is essential in the fight against organised criminality on this island and I commend all law enforcement agencies, north and south of the border, for their ongoing commitment to collectively detecting and disrupting organised crime in all its forms.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Justice whether she will instruct her Department to develop a violence against women and girls strategy.

(AQW 16095/17-22)

Mrs Long: I fully recognise the very specific experience that women and girls face within society, particularly their experiences of both direct and indirect violence. It is an issue that is extremely important to me and one I have prioritised during my time as Justice Minister.

This has included an ambitious agenda of activity and new laws to protect those most at risk of violence including, but not limited to, the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act, a Stalking Bill and changes to implement recommendations from the Gillen Review on Serious Sexual Offences.

Whilst many of these measures ensure protections are available to all victims, they will disproportionately benefit women and girls due to the gendered nature of many of these offences, and will ensure that we are in a better place at the end of this mandate.

In terms of a violence against women and girls strategy, I am supportive of such a strategy being developed. You will be aware that there is already a cross-departmental strategy in place, on which my Department leads alongside the Department of Health, that covers some of the key justice issues in this space. The Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse strategy is aimed at tackling domestic and sexual violence for all victims, regardless of gender or sexual orientation etc. in line with Section 75 requirements and reflecting that 30% of domestic abuse victims are males and 40% of domestic homicides are male.

However, violence against women and girls, and any work to meaningfully change their experience, is much broader than domestic and sexual violence. We must recognise that violence can come in many forms: physical violence, but also “indirect” violence, such as emotional or psychological violence, or harassment. Issues of gender inequality and societal attitudes are key to changing the lived experience for women.

Any steps to address this are not solely, or even primarily, for Justice. Any strategy to address violence against women and girls, to be effective and holistic, requires societal and cultural change from the roots up as early as possible. We need to change behaviours, ensuring that there is meaningful change upstream, on preventative initiatives, and a commitment to changing societal attitudes through more targeted education and relationship awareness. Any such approach cannot be simply about responding once offences have been committed, or ensuring that appropriate criminal justice responses are in place – though this is of course an important part of it.

As such, I see this as a cross-cutting issue that requires Executive leadership, cross-departmental co-operation and support to deliver effectively. I have, therefore, tabled an Executive paper on this matter to determine a way forward.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Justice what mental health support is available for people in the criminal justice system.

(AQW 16179/17-22)

Mrs Long: Many of those who come into contact with the criminal justice system (CJS) have a range of unmet or unidentified health and mental health needs. While it is the responsibility of the Department of Health to provide mental health support to everyone, including those within the CJS, my Department works with a number of partners to connect individuals to support pathways at the earliest possible juncture.

To that end, a range of initiatives are supported by the justice system to ensure the provision of mental health support, including: local, council-led Support Hubs; Community Safety Wardens engaged through the Derry and Strabane Policing and Community Safety Partnerships; the use of a Multi-Agency Triage Team within the Belfast and South Eastern Trusts, working closely with the PSNI; and the provision of healthcare services within the police custody setting, currently operating at Musgrave Street.

Within our prisons, the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust leads on the provision of mental health services at each establishment, comprising of mental health nurses, psychiatrists, mental health occupational therapists and clinical psychologists.

For young people in custody, a range of mental health support is available through the Forensic Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (FCAMHS) for Northern Ireland which offers both In-Reach CAMHS (based in Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre) and Community Forensic CAMHS. The general healthcare team in Woodlands also includes a mental health nurse for the provision of assessments and support for those with a non-specialised mental health need.

In addition, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) has established partnerships and pathways with all the Health Trust Community Forensic Mental Health Teams, ensuring the provision of support, including for the most difficult and complex cases. PBNI also has a range of mental health support services and referral pathways in place with voluntary and community organisations to address mental health and addiction problems.

We recognise that victims and witnesses coming into contact with the CJS are often also in need of mental health support. My Department invests in a number of initiatives aimed at supporting them, both emotionally and practically through the criminal justice process, including through the Registered Intermediary Scheme and the establishment of Remote Evidence Centres. Work currently underway to develop a new Victim and Witness Strategy, will further consider the mental health needs of this cohort.

To support staff working in the CJS, the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust (PRRT) offers psychology therapies for clients who may present with psychological disorders such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, anxiety and depression. Internal provider status arrangements also allow the PRRT to provide services to other DOJ bodies on request.

Recognising the roles of prison officer and Governor can be stressful, I recently published 2 independent reports into support services for prison staff. These include a number of recommendations to improve the mental health provision for staff within the NI Prison Service. An Implementation Board has been established to take these forward and a written update to the Justice Committee on progress made will be provided by early summer.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of legal claims made by republican prisoners against the Northern Ireland Prison Service, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 16184/17-22)

Mrs Long: The number of claims made by republican prisoners (defined as those housed in separated accommodation) against the Northern Ireland Prison Service in each of the last three years is provided in the table below.

Year	Number of claims made
2018	5
2019	2
2020	3
2021 (YTD)	6

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Justice what input her Department had on the Mental Health Strategy currently being consulted, including the relevant actions.

(AQW 16256/17-22)

Mrs Long: I can confirm that, together with our justice partners, my Department has taken every opportunity available to ensure that the needs of those coming into contact with the justice system – whether victim, witness or offender, are provided for within the Department of Health's new, 10 year Mental Health Strategy for Northern Ireland.

In doing so, input has been offered via a Cross Departmental Working Group, as well as a number of Virtual Stakeholder Reference Groups led by senior health officials. We have also sought to ensure that those within our care have had the opportunity to share their lived experience and that their voices are heard in the development of the strategy. This was helpfully facilitated by the Interim Mental Health Champion during a visit to Hydebank Wood College in October 2020 and more recently, by Health and Social Care Trust staff who engaged with a number of those in our care at Maghaberry.

In addition, I have written to Minister Swann in response to the consultation, highlighting that I would be keen to see more evidence throughout the strategy that the needs of those in contact with the justice system have been considered, including those within the custodial setting. Key points emphasised the need for a person centred and whole life approach to be taken, including the continuity of support to those resettling from custody back into the community. I noted the importance of PSNI's engagement in the current review of crisis care, as well as ensuring the needs of those with dual diagnosis or a personality

disorder are met. I confirmed my support for early intervention and prevention initiatives for children and young people, including those vulnerable to the effects of paramilitary activity. I also highlighted that the strategy did not address the need for an alternative to custody for this cohort, in terms of appropriate community accommodation. In doing so, I acknowledged that the joint health and justice repurposing programme is considering this issue.

Finally, I can confirm that I attended the Executive Working Group on Mental Wellbeing, Resilience and Suicide Prevention on 3 March, at which time I also took the opportunity to highlight the need for a truly coherent and integrated approach to be taken to the development and implementation of a number of strategies and action plans affecting mental wellbeing. This included, but was not limited to, the strategies for Mental Health and Substance Misuse, while recognising that other issues such as homelessness and poverty are also of critical importance.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Justice what action she is taking to publish a specific strategy to help bring an end to violence against women and girls.

(AQW 16272/17-22)

Mrs Long: I fully recognise the very specific experience that women and girls face within society, particularly their experiences of both direct and indirect violence. It is an issue that is extremely important to me and one I have prioritised during my time as Justice Minister.

This has included an ambitious agenda of activity and new laws to protect those most at risk of violence including, but not limited to, the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act, a Stalking Bill and changes to implement recommendations from the Gillen Review on Serious Sexual Offences.

Whilst many of these measures ensure protections are available to all victims, they will disproportionately benefit women and girls due to the gendered nature of many of these offences, and will ensure that we are in a better place at the end of this mandate.

In terms of a violence against women and girls strategy, I am supportive of such a strategy being developed. You will be aware that there is already a cross-departmental strategy in place, on which my Department leads alongside the Department of Health, that covers some of the key justice issues in this space. The Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse strategy is aimed at tackling domestic and sexual violence for all victims, regardless of gender or sexual orientation etc. in line with Section 75 requirements and reflecting that 30% of domestic abuse victims are males and 40% of domestic homicides are male.

However, violence against women and girls, and any work to meaningfully change their experience, is much broader than domestic and sexual violence. We must recognise that violence can come in many forms: physical violence, but also “indirect” violence, such as emotional or psychological violence, or harassment. Issues of gender inequality and societal attitudes are key to changing the lived experience for women.

Any steps to address this are not solely, or even primarily, for Justice. Any strategy to address violence against women and girls, to be effective and holistic, requires societal and cultural change from the roots up as early as possible. We need to change behaviours, ensuring that there is meaningful change upstream, on preventative initiatives, and a commitment to changing societal attitudes through more targeted education and relationship awareness. Any such approach cannot be simply about responding once offences have been committed, or ensuring that appropriate criminal justice responses are in place – though this is of course an important part of it.

As such, I see this as a cross-cutting issue that requires Executive leadership, cross-departmental co-operation and support to deliver effectively. I have, therefore, tabled an Executive paper on this matter to determine a way forward.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Justice why Northern Ireland is the only region of the United Kingdom that does not have a specific strategy to help bring an end to violence against women and girls.

(AQW 16273/17-22)

Mrs Long: I fully recognise the very specific experience that women and girls face within society, particularly their experiences of both direct and indirect violence. It is an issue that is extremely important to me and one I have prioritised during my time as Justice Minister.

This has included an ambitious agenda of activity and new laws to protect those most at risk of violence including, but not limited to, the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act, a Stalking Bill and changes to implement recommendations from the Gillen Review on Serious Sexual Offences.

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However, violence against women and girls, and any work to meaningfully change their experience, is broader than domestic and sexual violence. We must recognise that violence can come in many forms: physical violence, but also “indirect” violence, such as emotional or psychological violence, or harassment. Issues of gender inequality and societal attitudes are key to changing the lived experience for women.

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As such, I see this as a cross-cutting issue that requires Executive leadership, cross-departmental co-operation and support to deliver effectively. I have, therefore, tabled an Executive paper on this matter to determine a way forward.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the implications of the flat cash budget for her Department as relates to the delivery of the Modern Slavery Strategy 2021-22 objectives.

(AQW 16281/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Modern Slavery Strategy for 2021-22 does not require any additional resources. Implementation of the finalised Strategy relies on multiagency collaboration to be delivered by members of NI Organised Crime Task Force Modern Slavery Sub-Group and other key partners working to address modern slavery and human trafficking. The Strategy seeks to maximise available resources by drawing together and enhancing existing operational relationships, improving collaboration and raising awareness.

The commitment to achieving the objectives in 2021/22 will continue to utilise the resources available both across partners and from within my department’s existing baseline in terms of training and the support contracts delivered by Migrant Help and Belfast and Lisburn Women’s Aid for adult victims of human trafficking and slavery.

Statutory partners allocate resources to support various elements of the strategy. For example, there is a dedicated PSNI Modern Slavery Human Trafficking Unit and provision has been made by the Health and Social Care Board and by my Department to support child and adult victims of human trafficking and modern slavery respectively. Any additional resourcing pressures that arise can be considered by the Organised Crime Task Force Modern Slavery Human Trafficking Sub Group.

You may also be aware that I propose to amend the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 to move from annual publication of a strategy to publication once every three years, and to extend support arrangements to victims of slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour. In taking a longer term strategic view the need for additional resources may be identified and will be assessed and kept under review and if required, bid for through the normal budget process.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Justice to detail what additional spend has been allocated to tackling paramilitarism, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 16285/17-22)

Mrs Long: Phase One of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme has been funded through ring-fenced money originating from the Fresh Start Agreement. That funding period expires on 31st March 2021.

The Executive agreed a three-year extension to the Programme in July 2020, with an associated budget allocation of £8m per annum, on the basis that the UK Government (UKG) would continue to match fund delivery. However, subsequent to that decision, the Spending Review process was changed from a three year settlement to a one year settlement.

Following the outcome of UKG decisions on match funding, I advised the Executive on 2nd March 2021 of the financial settlement for 2021/22. That settlement consists of three parts. The first is the £8m allocation from the Executive for 2021/22 which was included in the draft budget; the second is a £5m allocation from UKG for 2021/22; and the third is a £10m allocation from New Decade New Approach (NDNA) funding which can be profiled across three years to align with Phase 2 of the Programme to 2024/25.

The Northern Ireland Office (NIO) has indicated that the NDNA allocation of £10m will be provided directly to The Executive Office (TEO) for the Communities in Transition (CiT) project. This provides three years of surety for CiT’s community based interventions.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the legal use of pepper spray for self defence.

(AQW 16325/17-22)

Mrs Long: Personal safety is very important to me as Justice Minister and the risk of individuals being subject to an attack. However, as in the rest of the UK and Ireland, ownership, possession and use of pepper spray by citizens in Northern Ireland is illegal. This is prohibited under Article 45(1) (f) of the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2004. There are no plans to review this position.

I would implore anyone who believes that a crime is about to take place, or that someone is going to commit a crime against them, to always try to contact the police, or call for help, before confronting an attacker or person committing a crime.

Further advice on personal protection can be found on the PSNI website at https://www.psni.police.uk/advice_information/protecting-yourself/attacks/.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Justice whether class numbers going through the PSNI Training College are going to be reduced in the immediate future due to budgetary constraints.

(AQW 16336/17-22)

Mrs Long: The prioritisation of PSNI resources, including class numbers going through the PSNI Training College in the immediate future, 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.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Justice how many court cases occurred in the last five years relating to negligence or workplace safety.

(AQW 16343/17-22)

Mrs Long: Loss or injuries sustained following negligence or a breach of workplace safety may result in a civil claim.

Information on the number of civil cases with a cause of negligence disposed of in the last five years is provided in the table below.

It is not possible to determine the exact cause of the negligence and consequently the figures may include cases of negligence that occurred outside of the workplace.

Civil Bills Disposals with cause of action Negligence

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020 ^P	Total
Negligence, Breach of Statutory Duty, Nuisance	173	166	145	141	51	676
Breach of Statutory Duty	1049	630	822	736	271	3508
Negligent Employer	348	156	136	168	110	918
Negligence	543	423	256	225	139	1586
Total	2113	1375	1359	1270	571	6688

P Figures for 2020 are provisional.

In some cases negligence or breaches of workplace safety may constitute a criminal offence in which case a prosecution may be brought by the PPS on behalf of the police, Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland and other Departmental bodies.

Information on the number of criminal prosecutions for health and safety offences in the last five years is provided in the table below.

Prosecutions and convictions at courts for health and safety offences, 2016 – 2020

Year	Prosecutions	Convictions
2016	24	19
2017	14	13
2018	14	11
2019	24	17
2020 ^P	10	7

Notes:

- 1 Figures relate to initial disposal at court.
- 2 Figures relate to cases prosecuted by PPS on behalf of the PSNI, Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland and other Departmental bodies.
- 3 Figures relate to offences under Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 and other relevant health and safety legislation.
- 4 Figures for 2020 are provisional.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Justice how much was paid out on average in relation to court cases around workplace negligence or health and safety breaches at a workplace.

(AQW 16344/17-22)

Mrs Long: The information requested is not centrally collated. Any information that may be available could only be obtained from a manual trawl of court files, the costs of which would be disproportionate.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice to detail all provisions relating to devolved matters for which legislative consent will be required for the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill 2021 that will apply to Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16394/17-22)

Mrs Long: The provisions in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill 2021 relating to devolved matters and for which legislative consent will be required for their extension to Northern Ireland are:

- amendments to the Crime (Overseas Production Orders) Act 2019;
- measures placing the National Driver Offender Retraining Scheme (courses as alternative to prosecution) on a statutory footing;
- the placing on a statutory footing of powers to extract information from digital devices of witnesses, victims and others, to the extent that these provisions are not covered by the exception/reservation in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 in relation to the subject matter of sections 3 to 10 of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016;
- the application of section 29 of the Petty Sessions (Ireland) Act 1851 (which includes provision for the execution of process of English courts in Northern Ireland) to the provisions in the Bill enabling a judge in England and Wales to make an order authorising the police to obtain information about the location of human remains outside of a criminal investigation; and
- amendments relating to the enforcement in Northern Ireland of orders made in Scotland under Part 2 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 and amendments to that Act to enable a court in Northern Ireland to vary an order made under Part 2 by a court in Scotland.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Justice for an update on when her Department intends to bring forward legislation to make upskirting a specific criminal offence in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16403/17-22)

Mrs Long: Legislative proposals to provide for a specific offence of upskirting will be included in the Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, which is planned for introduction into the Assembly in May.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Justice for an update on plans to make up-skirting a specific criminal offence in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16430/17-22)

Mrs Long: I refer the Member to the response to AQW 16403/17-22.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Justice for an update on introducing legislation to make upskirting an offence in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16443/17-22)

Mrs Long: I refer the Member to the response to AQW 16403/17-22.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice whether she intends to introduce a violence against women and girls strategy for Northern Ireland in this Assembly mandate.

(AQW 16480/17-22)

Mrs Long: I fully recognise the very specific experience that women and girls face within society, particularly their experiences of both direct and indirect violence. It is an issue that is extremely important to me and one I have prioritised during my time as Justice Minister.

This has included an ambitious agenda of activity and new laws to protect those most at risk of violence including, but not limited to, the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act, a Stalking Bill and changes to implement recommendations from the Gillen Review on Serious Sexual Offences.

Whilst many of these measures ensure protections are available to all victims, they will disproportionately benefit women and girls due to the gendered nature of many of these offences, and will ensure that we are in a better place at the end of this mandate.

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However, violence against women and girls, and any work to meaningfully change their experience, is much broader than domestic and sexual violence. We must recognise that violence can come in many forms: physical violence, but also “indirect” violence, such as emotional or psychological violence, or harassment. Issues of gender inequality and societal attitudes are key to changing the lived experience for women.

Any steps to address this are not solely, or even primarily, for Justice. Any strategy to address violence against women and girls, to be effective and holistic, requires societal and cultural change from the roots up as early as possible. We need to change behaviours, ensuring that there is meaningful change upstream, on preventative initiatives, and a commitment to changing societal attitudes through more targeted education and relationship awareness. Any such approach cannot be simply about responding once offences have been committed, or ensuring that appropriate criminal justice responses are in place – though this is of course an important part of it.

As such, I see this as a cross-cutting issue that requires Executive leadership, cross-departmental co-operation and support to deliver effectively. I have, therefore, tabled an Executive paper on this matter to determine a way forward.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice for a breakdown of the number of people who have been prosecuted for assaults that took place in schools, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 16496/17-22)

Mrs Long: The information requested is not readily available. Datasets held by my Department currently do not contain information on the location at which offences were committed and there is no offence specific to an assault in a school.

To identify cases which related to prosecution for an offence which related to an assault in a school would require a manual search of case records for common assault and assault occasioning actual bodily harm offences, of which there were 1,629 where the defendant was under 18 year old dealt with at courts or through out of court disposal in 2017 – 2019, the most recent 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. It is estimated that to search systems manually for relevant information to identify whether offences for which a prosecution related to an assault in a school setting, it will take one member of staff approximately ten minutes per case, giving a total of over 271 hours work. At a cost of £25 per hour, this equates to over £6,700 which is higher than the appropriate limit.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Justice to confirm the number of successful prosecutions for the delivery of intoxicating liquor to underage persons.

(AQW 16557/17-22)

Mrs Long: For the period from the start of 2016 through to the end of 2020, there have been no convictions at courts for offences relating to the delivery of intoxicating liquor to underage persons.

Notes:

- 1 Figures for 2020 are provisional.
- 2 Figures relate to relevant offences under Licensing (Northern Ireland) Order 1996.
- 3 Figures relate to initial disposal at court. Appeals are not included.
- 4 Figures relate to cases where there was a conviction for at least one of the offences specified.
- 5 Figures relate to cases prosecuted by PPS on behalf of police, Airport Constabulary, Harbour Police, and other Departmental bodies.
- 6 Figures exclude cases where there was a conviction for offences related to permitting consumption of alcohol by a minor, purchasing alcohol for a minor or selling alcohol to a minor.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Justice for an update on making upskirting illegal.

(AQW 16581/17-22)

Mrs Long: I refer the Member to the response to AQW 16403/17-22.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice whether she will bring forward legislation to amend Clause 28 of the Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 to include those in a position of trust in the areas of sport and religion similar to that contained in Clause 45 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill 2021.

(AQO 1809/17-22)

Mrs Long: I am fully committed to protecting the safety of young people in our society, and to ensuring that the law is robust in safeguarding their interests in this important area.

I propose to strengthen the law in Northern Ireland by widening the scope of the existing position of trust legislation, so that our young people are afforded greater protection across a broader range of environments.

As Minister, it has always been important for me to ensure that whilst protecting our young people, we can achieve an appropriate balance in terms of safeguarding their ability to enter into healthy sexual relationships.

I am very aware of the calls made to change the law in relation to the abuse of trust offences, to include sports coaches and other groups of people working with children and young people, such as faith groups. Similar areas of concern have been voiced in England and Wales.

People in these roles can, and do, have a significant level of influence and power over the young people in their care, and I am aware of reported cases where such positions of trust have been abused.

I am pleased to announce my intention to widen the scope of the current positions of trust legislation, which I will achieve through an amendment to the Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill during the course of its passage in the Assembly later this year.

Work on the required amendment is at an early stage, but I can say that it will be developed in consultation with key stakeholders, including NSPCC, and taking account of the experience of neighbouring jurisdictions, to ensure that an informed and workable definition of abuse of trust can be achieved.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Justice to outline the number of prosecutions for the non-payment of TV Licences in each of the last five years.

(AQO 1810/17-22)

Mrs Long: BBC TV Licencing has responsibility for enforcing the payment of the licence fee.

The number of prosecutions for the non-payment of TV licences in each of the last five years, including a provisional figure for 2020, is as follows:

Year	Prosecutions
2016	5,028
2017	4,280
2018	3,879
2019	3,714
2020 ^P	1,833

P Provisional Figure

These figures relate to cases where there was a prosecution for at least one TV licence offence. They relate to initial disposals at court and appeals are not included.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Justice given the budget settlement, for her assessment of how the current and projected number of police officers is consistent with commitments in New Decade New Approach.

(AQO 1811/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Chief Constable has indicated that the draft 2021-22 budget allocation for PSNI is likely to mean a reduction of more than 300 police officers and almost 100 police staff. The proposed budget is not, therefore, consistent with 'New Decade New Approach', which included a commitment by the British and Irish governments to increase police officer numbers to 7,500.

In light of this commitment, my Department had submitted a bid to increase the number of police officers to 7,500 since the reality is that the funding package which accompanied 'New Decade New Approach' falls well short of the amount needed to deliver all of the priorities that were set out by the two governments.

I remain, of course, committed to working with Executive Colleagues, including the Minister of Finance, and the Chief Constable, to ensure we have a police service that is properly resourced in all aspects for the challenges it faces.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Justice what cooperation has taken place between the Justice authorities in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in relation to the PSNI discovering that citizens of the Republic of Ireland were more than the regulatory distance from their homes when the matter is discovered in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 1812/17-22)

Mrs Long: At a strategic, Departmental level, there is first-class collaborative working between us and our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland on a range of issues through the Intergovernmental Agreement on criminal justice matters. In addition, PSNI and An Garda Síochána work closely together on a range of matters such as public protection, organised crime, EU Exit and hate crime as well as matters relating to the COVID 19 restrictions.

However, any questions specifically regarding the PSNI's approach to enforcing the public health regulations in Northern Ireland should be directed to the Chief Constable.

The Chief Constable operates independently and is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. As Justice Minister I am committed to respecting that independence.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (NI) 2020 are the responsibility of the Department of Health. Questions regarding the Health Protection Regulations should be directed to the Department of Health.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Justice when she will publish her Department's Modern Slavery Strategy.
(AQO 1813/17-22)

Mrs Long: A consultation on the Modern Slavery Strategy commenced on 16 October 2020 and closed on 7 January 2021.

A summary of the consultation responses and proposed next steps for finalising the 2021/22 Strategy was shared with the Justice Committee on 3 March. During an oral briefing session with the Committee on 11 March, my officials agreed to update the Strategy based on the outcome of the consultation and views of the Committee and to share the revised version with the Committee before publication.

Officials are currently working to make those amendments and, subject to any further views of the Committee on the revisions the aim is to publish the Strategy on the DoJ website in the coming weeks.

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the roll-out of the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme.
(AQO 1814/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department completed the work necessary for the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme to open for applications this month in line with the target date: opening the Scheme was always envisaged to be a two stage process, with work on the medical assessment continuing in parallel whilst applicants completed their documentation.

The medical assessment service is an important component of the Scheme to assess the level of permanent disablement for applicants, where relevant. Capita has been engaged to design the medical assessment service and that work is ongoing.

Following consultation with the main groups representing victims of the Troubles, Mr Justice McAlinden, President of the Victims' Payments Board, has indicated their preference is that guidance on the medical assessment service should be available to applicants in advance of the scheme opening for applications, allowing a single stage process.

Discussions are ongoing with Capita around the timeframe for development of the medical assessment guidance. It will, however, be a matter for the President and the Victims' Payments Board to confirm when the scheme will open for applications.

Any arrangements for prioritisation of applications to the Scheme is a matter for the Victims' Payments Board, which is independent of the Department. However, the Board is required to prioritise applications made by applicants who are terminally ill and who disclose that fact to the Board.

The Board may also decide to prioritise how applications to the Scheme are determined more generally. If a decision is made to prioritise applications, the Board must have regard to whether the available evidence is likely to allow it to determine the application quickly, the age and health of the applicant.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Justice whether she is considering introducing a strategy to address violence against women and girls.
(AQO 1816/17-22)

Mrs Long: I fully recognise the very specific experience that women and girls face within society, particularly their experiences of both direct and indirect violence. It is an issue that is extremely important to me and one I have prioritised during my time as Justice Minister.

This has included an ambitious agenda of activity and new laws to protect those most at risk of violence including, but not limited to, the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act, a Stalking Bill and changes to implement recommendations from the Gillen Review on Serious Sexual Offences.

Whilst many of these measures ensure protections are available to all victims, they will disproportionately benefit women and girls due to the gendered nature of many of these offences, and will ensure that we are in a better place at the end of this mandate.

In terms of a violence against women and girls strategy, I am supportive of such a strategy being developed. Members will be aware that there is already a cross-departmental strategy in place on which my Department leads on alongside Health, that covers some of the key justice issues in this space. The Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse strategy is aimed at tackling domestic and sexual violence for all victims, regardless of gender or sexual orientation etc. in line with Section 75 requirements reflecting that almost 30% of domestic abuse victims are males and 40% of domestic homicides are male.

However, violence against women and girls, and any work to meaningfully change their experience, is much broader than domestic and sexual violence. We must recognise that violence can come in many forms: physical violence, but also “indirect” violence, such as emotional or psychological violence, or harassment. Issues of gender inequality and societal attitudes are key to changing the lived experience for women.

Therefore any steps to address this are not solely, or even primarily, for Justice. Any strategy to address violence against women and girls, to be effective and holistic, requires societal and cultural change from the roots up as early as possible. We need to change behaviours, ensuring that there is meaningful change upstream, on preventative initiatives, and a commitment to changing societal attitudes through more targeted education and relationship awareness.

Any such approach cannot be simply about responding once offences have been committed, or ensuring that appropriate criminal justice responses are in place – though this is of course an important part of it. As such, I see this as a cross-cutting issue that requires Executive leadership and support to deliver effectively.

I have, therefore, tabled an Executive paper on this matter to determine a way forward.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to outline how the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme will prioritise applications.

(AQO 1818/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department completed the work necessary for the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme to open for applications this month in line with the target date: opening the Scheme was always envisaged to be a two stage process, with work on the medical assessment continuing in parallel whilst applicants completed their documentation.

The medical assessment service is an important component of the Scheme to assess the level of permanent disablement for applicants, where relevant. Capita has been engaged to design the medical assessment service and that work is ongoing.

Following consultation with the main groups representing victims of the Troubles, Mr Justice McAlinden, President of the Victims' Payments Board, has indicated their preference is that guidance on the medical assessment service should be available to applicants in advance of the scheme opening for applications, allowing a single stage process.

Discussions are ongoing with Capita around the timeframe for development of the medical assessment guidance. It will, however, be a matter for the President and the Victims' Payments Board to confirm when the scheme will open for applications.

Any arrangements for prioritisation of applications to the Scheme is a matter for the Victims' Payments Board, which is independent of the Department. However, the Board is required to prioritise applications made by applicants who are terminally ill and who disclose that fact to the Board.

The Board may also decide to prioritise how applications to the Scheme are determined more generally. If a decision is made to prioritise applications, the Board must have regard to whether the available evidence is likely to allow it to determine the application quickly, the age and health of the applicant.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of recent media revelations relating to the weapon used in a number of historical killings in Armagh and Mid Ulster.

(AQO 1815/17-22)

Mrs Long: I am unable to make an assessment nor would it be appropriate for me to do so.

The information reported in the media forms part of a review currently being undertaken by the Operation Kenova team. In addition there may be linkages to completed and outstanding inquests. I would not wish to prejudice either by commenting at this time.

Department for the Economy

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the timescale for payment of Newly Self Employed Support Scheme grants.

(AQW 12603/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): As at 16 February 2021, 2,808 applications has been submitted under the Newly Self Employed Support Scheme (NSESS), with payments made to 1,341 applicants, totalling approximately £4.7m.

The NSESS is an evidence based assessment process and each application needs to be reviewed and assessed, based on the evidence submitted by the applicant, against the eligibility criteria. Unfortunately in over 80% of initial applications the evidence submitted has not be of a sufficient quality to allow a final decision to be made in a timely manner. This has resulted in multiple follow up interactions between the processing team and the applicants to gather the required evidence on which to base a decision. These follow ups increase the length of time it takes to fully process each individual application.

My officials continue to work tirelessly to process NSESS applications as quickly as possible.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy (i) to provide a rationale for excluding hotels under £50,000 NAV, self-catering accommodation, hostels and bunk houses from tourism sector-specific COVID-19 Business Support Schemes; and (ii) to detail whether she will extend sector-specific support to such businesses.

(AQW 13801/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has introduced a number of Schemes aimed at supporting our tourist accommodation providers. Most recently, we introduced the Bed and Breakfast, Guest House and Guest Accommodation Scheme which seeks to support tourist accommodation establishments in these sectors which were required to close between March 2020 and the start of July 2020, with many unable to access grant support. In addition, when re-opened, many of these establishments experienced significantly reduced levels of demand (and the opportunity to generate much needed revenue) as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am aware that Hostels and Bunk Houses, which offer shared accommodation, also experienced reduced levels of demand over the summer, with a number of establishments also unable to access grant support. The Bed and Breakfast, Guest House and Guest Accommodation Scheme has, therefore, been extended to include hostels and bunkhouses.

Hotels and guest accommodation premises with an NAV below £51k were eligible for £10k or £25k Covid Business Support Schemes, made available by my department during the spring/early summer lockdown, whereas those with an NAV above £51k received no such support at that time. During the current lockdown period extended from October to early March, all such business premises continue to be eligible for support under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

Self-catering establishments, especially in rural and coastal areas, experienced a more positive summer in 2020, due to increased consumer confidence in respect of the self-contained nature of self-catering establishments. My Department has not introduced a Scheme aimed specifically at the Self-catering sector, however the sector is able to access support under the Local Restrictions Support Scheme. I am acutely aware that 2021 will be another challenging year for tourism and my officials will monitor the position in respect of our tourist accommodation industry. Should the self-catering sector, or other accommodation sectors, require support this year I will consider bringing forward an appropriate scheme, subject to budget availability.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy whether any new Brexit business support schemes are planned to reflect new realities under the Trade and Co-operation Agreement, or whether existing schemes are to be overhauled.

(AQW 13854/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department, with Invest NI and InterTradelreland, continues to offer guidance and practical support for businesses responding to the new trading environment arising from the Trade and Cooperation Agreement. These schemes, developed against the risk of a non-negotiated outcome and to prepare for the Protocol, have been tailored and refocused to respond to the terms of the TCA, for example offering support with tradable services, VAT, tariffs and rules of origin. InvestNI has been running a range of support services including EU Exit Advice Clinics and Information Workshops to support businesses since December 2018. InterTradelreland continues to offer a Brexit Advisory Service and a dedicated voucher programme. This provides funding for professional advice to help businesses to identify trade flows and improve supply chain exposure. While no new specific schemes are planned, 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 of concern to business. This support factors into my Department's recently announced Economic Recovery Action Plan, with Investment, Trade and Exports a key plank to this.

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 size of the Magee campus to 10,000 students.

(AQW 14111/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am aware of the New Decade, New Approach agreement in relation to the Magee Campus of Ulster University. You will be aware that expansion at UU's Magee Campus is already in train, not least through the Executive's decision to progress and fund the UU Medical School project as well as other actions proposed by the University.

I am sure you recognise that further expansion is not something that can be delivered overnight, rather would be long-term in nature and dependent on a number of factors. One of the biggest challenges faced in such long-term planning is the overall funding situation of the University Sector within Northern Ireland, which without additional funding support from the Executive Support will constrain the University's ability to grow further and get to an appropriate regional balance across all of its campuses. The absence to date of long-term budget settlements and lack of sightline on additional long-term funding to the Northern Ireland University sector is a further impediment on the ability of the University, and DfE, to work in partnership to deliver what we all wish to see which is expansion of the University within the context of attaining such regional balance.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether she is aware of research projects (a) Geothermal Energy Use, Country Update for Ireland, published at the European Geothermal Congress 2019; (b) Assessment of Geothermal Resources for District Heating in Ireland; and (c) Geothermal Energy in Ireland - A Roadmap for a Policy and Regulatory Framework, which conclude that geothermal energy can make a substantial contribution to meeting Northern Ireland's energy needs for the heating of properties; and (ii) whether she is taking steps to fast track the exploitation of geothermal energy for property heating in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 14301/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) My officials attended the launch of the Assessment of Geothermal Resources and the Geothermal Energy in Ireland Roadmap at the Geoscience 2020 Conference on 18 November. Both publications are currently being considered as part of the development process for the new Northern Ireland Energy Strategy. My Department intends to publish a draft policy options consultation in March 2021, with a final Energy Strategy later in 2021.
- (ii) Geothermal energy in Northern Ireland is currently under consideration as part of this new Energy Strategy development process. Although geothermal resources remain largely untapped in Northern Ireland, there is significant potential for geothermal to meet some of our future heating and/or cooling needs going forward. Geothermal energy can provide consistent, sustainable, low-carbon energy, which is cost-effective over long periods, and has been demonstrated in many countries in Europe. On 11 December 2020, the Geological Survey of Northern Ireland (GSNI) and the Centre for Sustainability, Equality and Climate Action (SECA) at Queen's University Belfast, jointly hosted a conference on the future of geothermal for Northern Ireland. Following the conference, GSNI has drawn up a list of relevant stakeholders to establish and chair meetings of a future new Geothermal Advisory Committee to identify gaps in Northern Ireland geothermal data and information, as well as offer advice on ways to overcome barriers and harness opportunities. GSNI, through collaboration with counterparts in the Geological Survey Ireland, is currently developing a project proposal to establish two shallow geothermal district heating scheme pilots and drill two deep geothermal wells, one of each in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for the Economy what consideration has she given to working with the Minister for Communities to provide cross-departmental funding for labour market intervention.

(AQW 15054/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Minister for Communities and I fully recognise the need to provide support to individuals and specifically those whose livelihoods have been impacted by the current pandemic. Both Departments have already put in place a range of interventions as part of the Executive's initial response to Covid.

I have recently published my plans for economic recovery over the next number of years, including a package of £50m to support the development of skills. These interventions are dependent upon access to additional funding and I continue to engage with the Finance Minister as part of the Budget process to secure this investment. I have recently engaged with the Minister for Communities to discuss the budget implications and how we might work collaboratively to achieve a positive outcome for the Northern Ireland labour market.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for an explanation for the delays to payments under the Limited Company Director's Support Scheme; and (ii) what actions she is taking to urgently resolve any issues.

(AQW 15611/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) In the rolling out of the Limited Company Director's Support Scheme, a potential issue was identified relating to the tax treatment of the proposed grant. In order to prevent retrospective difficulties for applicants, the decision was taken to pause the processing of applications until a solution to the tax treatment issue was identified. Whilst I appreciate that this delay is frustrating for applicants it was considered the best approach to reduce the overall administrative burden and delay of payments.
- (ii) After taking advice from relevant stakeholders, including HMRC, a solution to allow payments to proceed has been identified. Invest NI, who manage the scheme on behalf of my Department, has written to all relevant applicants providing an update and seeking all relevant additional information to enable processing of applications to proceed. It is anticipated that payments will begin to be made to the employing company of the applicant as soon as possible.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy, in light of her recent decision to open up the Large Tourism and Hospitality Business Support Scheme to large entertainment and leisure businesses, to detail the criteria that shall be used to define large entertainment and leisure businesses to be deemed eligible to receive assistance under the scheme.

(AQW 15686/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: To be eligible for the Large Tourism and Hospitality Business Support Scheme (LTHBSS) it is essential that the business must be in the tourism and hospitality sectors with a NAV £51,001 and above and also be in receipt of the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme. The LTHBSS provides "top-up" grant support to LRSS for large businesses in these sectors in order help them meet significant and unavoidable fixed costs. The focus of the LTHBSS is in supporting Northern Ireland's tourism ecosystem primarily visitor experiences (e.g. attractions, activities, hospitality/ food) and places for visitors to stay (i.e. accommodation). My officials, working closely with Tourism NI, have identified the businesses categories that are providers of tourism assets. This include providers of leisure and entertainment in circumstances where such provision is clearly providing a tourism asset. In defining the scope of the LTHBSS, my officials also worked closely with the Department for Communities and Department of Finance to ensure the alignment of remit and policy intent of respective Covid response schemes, and to seek to avoid overlap and over compensation. Many large providers of leisure and entertainment – such as cinemas, theatres, exhibition/conference centres - were within the remit of the Covid-19 funding schemes put in place by DfC and are outside the remit of the LTHBSS. My Department has delivered £350m of lifeline support to the Northern Ireland economy, and is in the

process of delivering another £200m of essential support to businesses in NI. This is an extremely difficult and challenging time for businesses, individuals and our economy in general, and the Executive will continue to do all that it can to protect both lives and livelihoods. This is a very live and fluid situation and I would encourage everyone to continue to monitor the websites below, and to listen for any future announcements through the various media outlets. Further details can be found or will be published on the NI Business Info website, whilst new financial packages of support announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer will appear on the UK Coronavirus Business support site. I have included a link to both for your information: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/campaign/coronavirus-updates-support-yourbusiness> <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus/business-support>

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy when the £500 Covid Disruption payment will be paid to students.
(AQW 15810/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As I previously advised in my responses to AQW 14922/17-22 and AQW 15098/17-22, the Covid Disruption payments will be paid to eligible students by the end of March 2021.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the investment; (ii) jobs created; and (iii) jobs promoted by Invest NI in West Tyrone, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 15904/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) The table below shows the amount of assistance offered by Invest NI to projects approved in the West Tyrone constituency in each of the last three years and the investment that this support contributed towards. The investment figures include assistance offered by Invest NI.

Assistance Offered and Investment Secured (£m) by Invest NI in West Tyrone Constituency (2017-18 to 2019-20)

Year	Assistance Offered £m	Total Planned Investment £m
2017-18	2.80	17.77
2018-19	2.47	14.74
2019-20	2.45	13.68
Total	7.72	46.19

- (ii) With the introduction of its Business Strategy 2017-2021 Invest NI aligned its reporting with the broad Outcome Based Accountability approach adopted within the draft Programme for Government. By doing so, we measure the wider impact of all of our support, based on Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) gathered annually from a large cohort of businesses with which we work most closely, and track progress towards the outcomes within the Business Strategy. The table below shows the number of additional jobs created in the West Tyrone constituency in 2017, 2018 and 2019 by businesses supported by Invest NI.

Invest NI Additional Jobs Created in West Tyrone Constituency (2017, 2018 and 2019)

Year	Additional Jobs Created
2017	257
2018	259
2019	169
Total	685

Note: "Additional Jobs" are based on all jobs created by Invest NI supported businesses that increased their employment during the period under review.

- (iii) The table below shows the number of new jobs assisted (formerly known as promoted) through projects approved by Invest NI in the West Tyrone Constituency in each of the last three years.

Invest NI New Jobs Assisted in West Tyrone Constituency (2017-18 to 2019-20)

Year	New Jobs Assisted
2017-18	163
2018-19	118
2019-20	173
Total	454

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy what plans her Department has to encourage more people from Protestant working class communities to enter further education.

(AQW 15953/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The opportunity to enrol in Further Education (FE) is available to all, irrespective of their religion or socio-economic background. The Department for the Economy remains committed to removing barriers to participating in the labour market; through widening participation in education and training; by addressing literacy and numeracy difficulties, and through the raising of the qualifications and skills level of those in work and those seeking to find employment. FE colleges continue to have a strong record of engaging participants from the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland. In 2018/19, over two-fifths (42.9%) of regulated enrolments were from the two most deprived quintiles. Moving forward, the new Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland will seek to provide the necessary support and encouragement to help everyone, regardless of background, reach their potential. We want people to see that the skills and qualifications they gain can enable them to secure good jobs; that those already in work can build on their experience and potential, to progress towards better jobs and ensure that those who are furthest from the labour market have access to the support and opportunities they need to connect with it, recognising the variety of support and pathways needed to achieve that. The Strategy's stated focus is to work across government and with councils across Northern Ireland to tackle social deprivation. We must also build on our support for individuals in Northern Ireland's most deprived communities, developing new, collaborative approaches to addressing social inequality. Individuals with low or no skills are most exposed to economic shocks, such as COVID-19 and the rapid change taking place in our labour market, through the development and adoption of new technologies. Also, poor education outcomes are correlated with low rates of employment; high rates of health deprivation and disability; poor living environments; and a prevalence of crime and disorder. The new Strategy sets out the role the skills system can fulfil in providing a whole-of-government approach to tackling disadvantage. It places a focus on enabling more individuals to participate in post-compulsory education (level 3 and above), which will drive our economic recovery and create new, better employment opportunities.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the progress that has been made in negotiations between her Department and representatives of lecturers in further education concerning pay; and (ii) her estimated timescales for the resolution of this 3 year issue.

(AQW 15955/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department is not directly involved in the negotiations on lecturers' pay and conditions that have been taking place between Trade Union Side and the College Employers' Forum. I would reiterate that Further Education colleges are employers in their own right and only if an agreement is reached between both parties through these negotiations, will the Department become involved in appraising any resulting Business Case.

It is important that the negotiations are afforded the space needed to reach agreement and it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the current position or on the expected timescale for resolution. However, I do recognise that the recent announcement by the University and Colleges Union of industrial action by FE lecturers will have raised concerns for learners, parents and indeed for staff themselves. I would encourage unions and employers to continue to engage to seek a resolution to limit any impact on learners.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the ways in which she is working to attract returners, or highly skilled members of Northern Ireland's diaspora as highlighted in her Economic Recovery Action Plan.

(AQW 16045/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Northern Irish Connections (NIC) is the global diaspora initiative for Northern Ireland. Led by a team based in Invest NI's International Investment Group, its fundamental aim is to engage with the Northern Irish diaspora to harness the influence and contribution which this group can bring to the future economic growth of the region including the potential to attract experienced talent to thriving sectors of the economy. A pilot Attract Back/In digital campaign was developed by NI Connections in 2019 targeting the overseas diaspora to promote opportunities in the Fintech sector. In light of the traction of the pilot with employers and potential candidates, a second digital campaign launched in February 2021 focussed on promoting Cyber Security opportunities. The campaign features a spectrum of NI Cyber and Technology employers from across the NI Cyber ecosystem <https://www.niconnections.com/cyber> Both campaigns showcase the strength of the sectors to a global audience whilst simultaneously highlighting career opportunities for those wishing to return or relocate. The campaigns have also served to present a partnership approach across the tech ecosystem to build a talent pool to drive continued growth. Appetite for company participation has been strong, traction with the diaspora encouraging and feedback from the wider technology sector has been positive. NI Connections will continue to run attract back / in campaigns as part of the Economic Recovery Action Plan in response to industry demand in high value sectors identified in the Recovery plan.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for the Economy to confirm (i) whether the Coronavirus Restrictions Business Support Scheme will continue after 1 April 2021; and (ii) when this will be announced.

(AQW 16059/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Earlier this month, I announced the extension of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) to cover the new period of Covid restrictions. Additional payments will continue for successful applicants to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) Parts A and B, for the period that the restrictions currently continue to apply, up to and including 31 March 2021. Whilst there is currently no budget in place to continue with the CRBSS beyond that date,

I believe that support should continue for those who are impacted by the regulations after that period and this matter will be brought to the Executive for a collective decision. It should be noted that, following the recent budget announcements by the Chancellor, that two further Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) grant payments will be made to cover the respective periods February to April 2021 and May to September 2021. This is relevant given that the majority (around 87% of CRBSS applicants) are self-employed, and therefore many will be eligible for SEISS. My focus moving forward will be on re-opening the economy, as I firmly believe that the best way to support all of our local businesses, employers and high streets, is to make a full and safe return to trading as soon as possible.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister for the Economy whether she have any plans to give further education students a £500 Covid Disruption Payment like those in higher education in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16083/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Covid-19 Disruption Payment is for full-time UK and EU students at Northern Ireland publicly funded HE Institutions and full-time HE students at the FE Colleges, in recognition of the disruption suffered by students to their studies due to the impact of Covid-19. There are no plans to give FE students a £500 Covid-19 Disruption payment as students on FE courses at local colleges are instead being supported through a range of other mechanisms. The Department secured additional funding of £7.7 million, of which £4.8 million is being used to provide additional Information Technology (IT) equipment to allow continued access from home for both college staff and students and to help address digital poverty, including providing almost 1200 SIM cards, and the remaining £2.9 million for an additional 500 devices, and a one-off payment of £60 to eligible full-time and part-time FE students to help with data costs. Furthermore, the Department has worked with the colleges to increase the flexibility of their policies in relation to student support, to make them more accessible. This has included paying childcare retainer fees during the initial lockdown; FE grants and Hardship Fund have been updated to facilitate claimants participating in distance learning with an extension to the closing date for grant applications; Free School Meals and holiday payments for all eligible school age FE students have been made directly into households; increases to the Dependant Student rate, which provides eligible FE students with an additional £15 per week; and making part-time and repeat students eligible to apply to Hardship Funds.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for an update on the Limited Company Directors' Support Scheme; and (ii) whether claimants will receive payment before the end of the current financial year.

(AQW 16093/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In the rolling out of the Limited Company Director's Support Scheme, a potential issue was identified relating to the tax treatment of the proposed grant. In order to prevent retrospective difficulties for applicants, the decision was taken to pause the processing of applications until a solution to the tax treatment issue was identified. Whilst I appreciate that this delay is frustrating for applicants it was considered the best approach to reduce the overall administrative burden and delay of payments. After taking advice from relevant stakeholders, including HMRC, a solution to allow payments to proceed has been identified. Invest NI, who manage the scheme on behalf of my Department, has written to all relevant applicants providing an update and seeking all relevant additional information to enable processing of applications to proceed. Payments will be made to the employing company of the applicant as soon as possible.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy to outline (i) the reasons for the closure of Invest NI's Crescent Capital IV Development Fund; (ii) whether a review has been commissioned into the closure of the earlier Crescent Capital Fund; (iii) why a review has been commissioned; and (iv) for her assessment of the outcomes of these equity investment funds.

(AQW 16097/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) The Crescent Capital IV Development Fund was launched in September 2019 following a successful tender submission by Crescent Capital ("Crescent"). At the time of launch, Crescent had received commitments from private investors for £13.25m with a requirement to obtain commitments for a further £19.25m. Crescent was unable to obtain any further commitments from private investors thus making the Fund unviable. As a direct consequence of being unable to obtain the additional commitments, Crescent Capital wrote to Invest NI in January 2021 to advise of its intention to terminate Fund IV.
- (ii) Fund IV was the successor to the Crescent Capital III Fund, which was established in 2013 and is currently in its realisation phase. Crescent Capital III has not been closed. As part of its normal processes, Invest NI undertakes regular monitoring and reviews of all its funds and programmes to assess performance against objectives. This ongoing assessment will feed into the appraisal process for any successor Development Fund.
- (iii) As above, as part of its normal processes, Invest NI undertakes regular monitoring and reviews of all its funds and programmes to assess performance against objectives. This ongoing assessment will feed into the appraisal process for any successor Development Fund.
- (iv) Crescent Capital III was established in 2013. It is a £30m Development Fund, with 50% of the funding provided by Invest NI. Crescent Capital III is a 10 year fund with a target to make 20 investments in the first five years. The Fund made 19 investments in 12 companies in the first five years. It is 8 years into this term and has to date made 39 investments (including initial and follow-on investments) totalling £17.9m in 15 companies. The fund is now in its

realisation phase and has either partially or fully exited three companies. With a number of years still to run, it is too early to determine the outcome of this Fund.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy to outline (i) when she will publish her report into the Review of Vocational Qualifications in Northern Ireland; and (ii) whether she has any plans to provide an independent or Northern Ireland based regulator for vocational qualifications as an alternative to the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation.
(AQW 16124/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: CCEA Regulation has been the regulator for vocational qualifications delivered in Northern Ireland since 2016. CCEA Regulation works closely with other Regulators across the UK to ensure consistency of approach particularly for vocational qualifications that are awarded across several jurisdictions such as BTECs and other vocational qualifications that represent occupational competence. It is important that these qualifications are valued and recognised by employers and educational institutions across the UK to provide learners with equal opportunities for progression. Vocational education policies have been changing rapidly across the Administrations of the UK and in response to this the vocational qualification market has been changing. Work is ongoing in my Department to reform and improve the vocational education system in Northern Ireland including qualifications. The experience of working within the current vocational qualification market during the COVID pandemic has further highlighted challenges with the current system. My Department is engaging, as a matter of priority, with stakeholders and exploring options for a future system that will deliver high-quality, industry led qualifications that meet the needs of learners and employers to support the local economy.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will allocate £3 million to provide a pay increase for further education lecturers.
(AQW 16129/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department is not directly involved in lecturers' pay and conditions. Further Education colleges are employers in their own right and it is their responsibility through the College Employers' Forum to bring forward proposals to my Department for any pay increases, supported by a robust Business Case. At that point, if the Business Case is approved, the Department will assess the financial implications and will give consideration to meeting any additional resource requirements.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for the Economy to outline how she intends to address the disparity of pay increases between further education staff and school teachers.
(AQW 16130/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I would refer the member to my response to AQW 16129/17-22. It would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this time.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the sectors identified as being at risk of automation in the short, medium and long term.
(AQW 16133/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The evidence is clear that innovation and the technological change and automation it drives is overwhelmingly a force for good for economies and for societies. It drives productivity growth, improves overall living standards and drives up working conditions.

The digital revolution is a recent example of how technological advancements and associated automation can improve lives, livelihoods and enable economies to adjust with greater pace to economic shocks including the current pandemic. Many have been able to sustain employment in ways that would not have been possible just a few years ago.

Research commissioned by my Department to assess the impact of automation on the Northern Ireland economy by the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC), undertaken before the pandemic, estimated that up to 98,600 additional jobs could be created in Northern Ireland by 2030.

The UUEPC report contends that automation will drive change in many existing occupations but that it will have a clearly positive impact overall.

According to UUEPC's forecasts, health & social care and professional services may experience the largest net employment gains in Northern Ireland by 2030. When analysing growth in the context of sector size, the fastest growing sectors are ICT and professional services.

However, the research is also clear about the importance of our people and our economy being well positioned to build on the economic opportunities that automation presents. That requires in particular sustained investment in the skills of our existing and emerging workforce.

The Department is developing a bold and ambitious new vision for the Northern Ireland economy. This will set out how we can best exploit windows of opportunity for core sectors and technologies; ensuring that innovation is diffused across the economy to every industry and locality. The vision will bring a renewed focus on investment in skills so that all our people can drive and benefit from these ambitions.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy (i) when she expects the 100 people supported by her Department in obtaining an export and trade qualification to complete their studies; (ii) to detail the number that have committed to working in Northern Ireland on the completion of their course; and (iii) whether there are positions available when their studies are completed.

(AQW 16134/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am pleased to say that approximately 120 students will be supported to undertake this qualification before the end of the year. The first cohort of this course, comprising 40 students (20 from South Eastern Regional College and 20 from North West Regional College), commenced their studies on 8 February 2021 and will complete the qualification by the end of May 2021. A second cohort of 40 will commence training on the 28th April, with an expected completion of qualification in August. The colleges have advised that all of those completing the course are, or will be, working in Northern Ireland; none have indicated they intend to work elsewhere. The majority of the students are working in an environment where the qualification will be of benefit to them, a few who are not currently employed have experience working in this field and there are a number of students seeking to move into a career in Export & Trade. In recent job advertisements, there have been opportunities in the areas of Customs Administrative Assistant, Customs Compliance Manager and Freight Co-ordinator jobs. Both NWRC and SERC have a strong working relationship with the Institute of Export (IOE), which has a job board and is involved with organisations recruiting customs and trade personnel. The college cannot guarantee a job, however students are directed to vacancies through the IOE job board.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy, given the higher rate of local corporation tax compared to the Republic of Ireland, (i) how she will ensure Northern Ireland's competitiveness in attracting private investment; and (ii) to detail any conversations she has had with the government at Westminster regarding the potential lowering of the rate in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16135/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) Potential investors assess a number of factors when determining the optimum location for their operations. Northern Ireland is a highly attractive location for both local and international investment as evidenced by our strong track record. We have a compelling offer to investors including our highly skilled and talented workforce, competitive cost base, advanced infrastructure appealing quality of life and access to key markets.

Factors such as the prevailing rate of corporation tax are considered in combination with the above factors rather than in isolation by potential investors when evaluating our attractiveness relative to competing locations.

Invest NI continues to promote this value proposition in overseas markets to attract mobile international investment to the region.

- (ii) It is the Department of Finance that leads engagement with UK Government on matters related to tax devolution. I have not had formal discussions with UK Government regarding the potential lowering of the corporation tax rate in Northern Ireland.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy how much public money has gone towards Teleperformance in Enniskillen in each year since 2015.

(AQW 16150/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: None.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy how many of the 800 jobs at Teleperformance in Enniskillen anticipated in 2015 were actually created and how many currently exist on the site.

(AQW 16152/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In 2015 Teleperformance agreed a deal with Liberty Insurance to manage and operate its insurance contact centre in Enniskillen, involving the transfer of 178 staff from Liberty Insurance to Teleperformance under TUPE arrangements.

In parallel, Invest NI provided an offer of financial assistance to Teleperformance to create an additional 800 jobs at the Enniskillen site.

Despite repeated engagement by Invest NI, this project did not progress and no jobs were created as a result. No public money has been paid out against this planned investment and there are no clawback implications as a result.

In March 2020, Teleperformance announced that it was ending its contract with Liberty Insurance to operate its Enniskillen-based contact centre. It also advised that the project to create an additional 800 jobs in Enniskillen will no longer be implemented. This is very disappointing, but it was a commercial decision taken by the company.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for the Economy whether musicians, named in the regulations as having to stop performing in live venues, are eligible for Part A of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme.

(AQW 16162/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department for Communities has policy responsibility for the arts, including musicians, and have provided support through various schemes, such as the Artist Emergency Programme (AEP), and the Individual Emergency Resilience Programme (IERP).

Musicians are not specifically named in The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 as being a business required to close, and as such would not be eligible for Part A of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS).

They may be entitled to support through Part B of the CRBSS, as a business that is not named in the Regulations, but which supplies goods or services to such a business, or is reliant upon such a business being open and fully operational in order to trade. Many in the wider entertainment industry will have been eligible for support through Part B of CRBSS, subject to meeting the eligibility criteria.

Musicians and other artists may also have been eligible for support through the UK Government Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS), which the Chancellor has recently announced further grant support covering up to September 2021.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the rationale for not expanding the criteria for the £500 Covid Disruption Payment to include students who attend further education colleges and not studying a higher education degree. **(AQW 16164/17-22)**

Mrs Dodds: As detailed in my responses to AQW 14149/17-22 and AQW 15229/17-22, my Department has already put in place a range of support measures for further education students, and so I have deemed there to be no need to expand the criteria for the Covid Disruption Payment Scheme to include FE students.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy will she commit to raising the repayment threshold for student loans to £25,000 by April 2021. **(AQW 16177/17-22)**

Mrs Dodds: Students from Northern Ireland make their repayments in line with the Education (Student Loans) (Repayment) Regulations (NI) 2009, as amended. These loans are issued under the 'Plan 1' repayment plan. Under this plan, repayments will begin the April after leaving their course and equate to 9% of income over the repayment threshold, currently £19,390 a year, rising to £19,895 from April 2021. Changing the repayment threshold would entail moving from the Plan 1 repayment plan and would necessarily require a long lead in time of at least two years. There would likely be a need for public consultation, agreement of HM Treasury, amendments to legislation and amendments to Student Loans Company (SLC) systems. Therefore I cannot commit to changing the repayment threshold for student loans to £25,000 from April 2021.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for the Economy, given the success of shows including Line of Duty, the Fall, Bloodlands, and Game of Thrones, that were filmed in Northern Ireland in recent years, what measures her Department (i) has taken; and (ii) plans to take to encourage further use of Northern Ireland for television and film production, with the associated benefits. **(AQW 16194/17-22)**

Mrs Dodds: My Department invests approximately £12m annually into our screen agency, Northern Ireland Screen, to support the continuing development of screen industries. Northern Ireland Screen's current strategy, Opening Doors Strategy 2, runs from 2018-22, with funding of over £50m required to deliver it. Northern Ireland Screen's activities supported by my Department are multifaceted. It provides investment and support to production companies to undertake projects in Northern Ireland, it supports the growth of the indigenous sector through production and development funding, it invests in skills to support a growing screen workforce, and most importantly it coordinates these strands of activity to promote coherent and sustainable growth in the sector. A major constraint on growing the amount of large scale projects is studio capacity, and I am greatly encouraged that the Belfast Harbour Studios is seeking to expand its studio space considerably, including an additional six purpose-built film and television studios. Northern Ireland Screen supports screen industries from across many genres: large scale projects, TV drama, factual and entertainment TV programming, children's and animation, independent film and, increasingly importantly, interactive, games and multimedia. In common with most of the NI economy, screen industries have suffered during the pandemic, with production ceasing for a period. Northern Ireland Screen, in conjunction with both my officials and the Department of Health, have developed and agreed industry production protocols and secured exemptions which have minimised the impact of Covid-19 on the screen industry in NI. As a result, Northern Ireland was the first part of the UK to emerge from the initial lockdown to restart production. Northern Ireland Screen has also put in place additional Covid-19 intervention measures during 2020-21: a £1.2m Coronavirus Development Fund to support the indigenous sector through the production standstill to develop new investorready projects, and a £400k Screen Reboot programme to provide additional skills and development within the growing games sector. Given the current and future predicted demand for global screen productions, the sector here is well positioned for sustained growth over the next strategy period (2022-26). Decisions on the level of funding that is available for this period will be made on the basis of evidence and appraisal later in 2021.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will establish a de-commissioner of last resort regime in Northern Ireland similar to that in Great Britain, to ensure that major energy projects are not abandoned without appropriate decommissioning measures.

(AQW 16204/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The term 'decommissioner of last resort' is generally used in relation to arrangements for ensuring that offshore energy projects can be safely decommissioned at the appropriate time, for example, if the project owner/operator is unable to carry out full decommissioning due to company failure.

For offshore oil and gas projects, the decommissioning regime in Great Britain, administered by the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and the Oil and Gas Authority, may require companies to establish a type of insurance bond to cover the costs of completing the decommissioning process in the event that the owner/operator does not do so. Drawing on this experience, consideration is currently being given to those arrangements which the developers of the Islandmagee gas storage project may provide, as part of the leasing arrangements with The Crown Estate for such projects, to ensure the safe decommissioning of the facility in due course.

For offshore electricity generating stations, there is no decommissioning regime in Northern Ireland and therefore no 'decommissioner of last resort' in that regard. Discussion has taken place with colleagues in relation to the scheme operating in Great Britain for offshore renewable energy projects and it is an issue that will need to be given careful consideration as we develop the Northern Ireland Energy Strategy, particularly if we are to pursue offshore electricity generation as part of an ambition to diversify our technology mix.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) all the land plots and acres owned or controlled by Invest NI which are not currently utilised, by location across Northern Ireland; (ii) the towns and locations where there are additional lands needed; and (iii) the areas where Invest NI is currently engaged with prospective investors for the development of lands under its control.

(AQW 16210/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- i) Invest NI is the freehold owner of c2400 acres of land across Northern Ireland. The vast majority of this land has been sold by way of long leases to businesses and there is currently c450 acres of usable land remaining available in support of economic development projects brought forward by qualifying businesses. Invest NI lands are developed as industrial estates/business parks. Of these estates/business parks only one currently remains totally vacant. The remainder are occupied either in part or in full. The table at Annex A shows those industrial estates/business parks owned by Invest NI where there is unutilised land and the associated remaining acreage.
- (ii) Invest NI will only acquire and develop industrial land where there is a demonstrable market failure, i.e. the private sector is either unable or unwilling to meet the demand. At this time Invest NI has not identified any areas in Northern Ireland where market failure is prevalent.
- (iii) Invest NI's negotiations for selling land is considered commercially sensitive. At any one time there are numerous negotiations ongoing with businesses, not all of which will result in a land sale. At this time I can advise that Invest NI is in discussions with businesses exploring expansion options that includes Invest NI land right across Northern Ireland. Invest NI is engaged with prospective investors with regards to the sale of land and development on the following industrial estates: Antrim Technology Park Global Point Business Park, Newtownabbey Strabane Business Park Skeoge Business Park, Londonderry Campsie Industrial Estate, Londonderry Maydown Industrial Estate, Londonderry Wattstown Business Park, Coleraine Woodside Road Industrial Estate, Ballymena Springbank Industrial Estate, Belfast Whiterock Business Park, Belfast Balloo South Industrial Estate, Bangor Ballyharry Industrial Estate, Newtownards Down Business Park, Downpatrick Carnbane Business Park, Newry Halfpenny Valley Industrial Estate, Craigavon Creagh Business Park, Toome Carran Business Park, Enniskillen.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on Strabane Enterprise Park.

(AQW 16222/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The development of Strabane Business Park by Invest NI was a long-term investment in the economic infrastructure of West Tyrone. The land was acquired to address a recognised market failure. To date three businesses have chosen the Park as the location to bring forward their new investment projects. Discussions with other interested parties are continuing and I am hopeful that these will lead to further investment for Strabane in the near future. Invest NI will continue to market Strabane Business Park to businesses, both indigenous and external to Northern Ireland as an attractive investment location.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy, given the recent SONI report on renewable energy and in line with renewable energy targets for 2030, whether her Department will incentivise data companies that consume large amounts of electricity to locate in the North West as a result of the opportunities stemming from Project Kelvin and the huge potential for the North West region to produce and continue to grow capacity in renewable wind energy.

(AQW 16255/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI promotes a 'whole of Northern Ireland' value proposition to potential international investors based a talented and loyal workforce, advanced telecoms infrastructure, a pro-business environment, competitive operating costs and proximity to major markets.

Invest NI has, and continues, to highlight the benefits of the region's world class telecoms infrastructure, including the transatlantic link provided by Project Kelvin, to promote Northern Ireland as an attractive and viable location for new inward investment opportunities, and to secure additional projects from existing international investors.

The availability of appropriate incentives are also considered in potential investors' assessment of the overall NI proposition. However, they will evaluate a range of factors in combination when determining the optimum location for their international operations, rather than any individual factor being considered in isolation.

Ultimately, the investor will make the decision as to where they locate based on their specific business needs and having considered the options available to them.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for the Economy to confirm whether a restart grant to benefit the (a) retail, (b) hospitality, (c) accommodation, (d) leisure and (e) personal care sectors will be made available in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16282/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: With the roll-out of a vaccination programme now well underway, my focus moving forward will be on re-opening the economy as I firmly believe that the best way to support all of our local businesses, employers and high streets, is to make a full and safe return to trading as soon as possible.

The launch of 'Moving Forward - The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions' included a specific reference to the High Street Stimulus Scheme to help stimulate economic activity and protect local jobs'. This has brought the implementation of the scheme into sharp focus and I intend to put forward a bid to the Executive and am confident that work on progressing the scheme to a state of operational readiness can be completed with launch activity forecast for the next financial year.

I remain fully committed to working with my Executive colleagues to consider how best to support those who require ongoing financial assistance, within the designated budget available to us.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on her Department's work on zero hours employment contracts.

(AQW 16284/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My priority to date in respect of employment law has been to protect those immediately affected by the pandemic. I have taken steps to protect workers' rights in respect of ensuring that statutory family-related payments and various statutory entitlements connected with redundancy or the termination of employment are based on normal pay rather than furlough pay.

The need to prioritise these important protections, as well as focus on wider economic recovery, has meant it has not been possible to consider in detail the issues relating to zero hours contracts.

In relation to workers' rights, however, I am pleased that I have been able to make progress towards the introduction of Parental Bereavement Leave and

Pay. This is an important new employment right for those parents in work who suffer the loss of a child and shows my commitment to employment relations in Northern Ireland. I plan to introduce the necessary Bill to the Assembly before the summer recess.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy whether she intends to amend the legislation pertaining to Credit Unions before May 2022.

(AQW 16299/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: A Review of Section 1 of the Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 as it relates to unincorporated associations has been carried out. This Review was at the request of the ETI Committee and a Report will be laid before the Assembly in due course. Legislation to mitigate the statutory requirements on credit unions was delivered in 2020 and February 2021 to ease their burden during the current coronavirus restrictions. This work was delivered by the Department in challenging circumstances and we continue to liaise with the sector on further amendments. My Department continues to ensure ongoing legislative functionality for the credit union sector.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy whether she would consider extending the power to allow Credit Unions to undertake additional banking services.

(AQW 16300/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Presently credit unions can offer basic deposit and lending services similar to Post Offices, although some have more capability than others to do so. Additionally, some credit unions are able to offer services beyond that of the Post Office, such as longer term lending, current account services, cash ISAs and mortgages, but this depends on their capacity and attaining regulatory permissions.

The powers already exist so that a credit union can apply for such permissions, but it is a matter for each organisation to consider if it wishes to do so.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy how much her Department will receive from the Community Renewal Fund, and how this interacts with her Department's European Social Fund Succession Project.

(AQW 16301/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Community Renewal Fund announced as part of Budget 2021 is to be delivered directly by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government. There is no formal role for or allocation of funding to the Department or the wider NI Executive.

The ESF Succession project is a joint project established with the Department for Communities. The project is currently considering policy and delivery options with a view to developing appropriate succession programmes and my Department will continue to engage with MHCLG, Westminster and the NI Executive to ensure that we access the budget that will be needed to deliver any programmes that emerge from that work.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether, in developing proposals to introduce an energy efficiency home retrofit scheme to drive energy efficiency in the NI building stock, provide opportunities for job creation and green economic growth, she will be doing so in partnership with the Minister for Communities, Minister of Finance and Minister for Infrastructure; and (ii) to detail if amended building regulations, the planning system and social housing will form part of the scheme.

(AQW 16312/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) On 25th February I published my Economic Recovery Action Plan. The Plan set out an action under the 'Building a Greener Economy' pillar to develop proposals for an Energy Efficiency Home Retrofit Scheme to support investment in the energy efficiency of our housing stock. This action is being taken forward in the context of the new Energy Strategy. Officials from the Department for Communities (DfC), the Department of Finance (DoF) and the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) are closely involved in the development of the new Energy Strategy.
- (ii) Proposals for the pilot Energy Efficiency Home Retrofit Scheme are currently under development and will consider what housing types will be within scope. These proposals will be developed by a cross-departmental Energy Efficiency working group, which includes representatives from DfC, DoF, the Consumer Council and the Utility Regulator among others. Reviews of building regulations or the planning system are not within scope of the new retrofit scheme, however the forthcoming Energy Strategy options consultation will bring forward proposals in relation to these issues where appropriate.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy to detail, by location, (i) any Community Fibre Schemes which have been approved in each of the last three years; (ii) the number of properties impacted by each scheme; and (iii) the total cost of each scheme.

(AQW 16349/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has not funded any Community Fibre Schemes in Northern Ireland. We are aware that BT-Openreach have initiated and progressed a number of Community Fibre Partnership Schemes.

My Department does not hold any information/data in relation to these schemes.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the current 4G mobile phone network in (i) Derry City and Strabane District Council area; and (ii) Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area.

(AQW 16365/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As telecommunications policy is a Reserved matter, DCMS is leading on 4G improvements to the rural areas of Northern Ireland through the Shared Rural Network (SRN) programme.

My officials have confirmed the current 4G coverage from all 4 of the main Mobile Network Operators (Vodafone, O2, Three, EE) is 63.5% in Derry City and Strabane District Council area, and 74% in Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area. Current coverage levels are published by Ofcom. You can find further information on mobile coverage in Northern Ireland here: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/multi-sector-research/infrastructure-research/connected-nations-2020/data-downloads>

A recent SRN press release announced plans for O2, Three and Vodafone to build and share 11 new mobile masts in Northern Ireland to improve 4G coverage in rural areas, including Derry City and Strabane and Fermanagh and Omagh council areas. This work is due to be completed by June 2024. Mobile Operator EE has also recently announced its SRN plans to upgrade 4G in 38 areas across Northern Ireland by the end of 2021.

On completion of the SRN programme coverage in Northern Ireland will reach 98% from at least one operator, and 85% from all four operators. This compares to 97% and 75% today. The coverage improvements for each individual council area has not been shared with my Department as yet.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 14207/17-22, how many G-rated oil burners have been replaced under the Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme grant scheme in the last five years.

(AQW 16402/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEP) Framework Document states that for any oil boiler to be replaced, it must be over 15 years old or broken beyond viable economic repair. A specific rating of the oil boiler is not a requirement of the scheme so is therefore not recorded. Under NISEP, 1019 boilers have been replaced within the last five years.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department monitors cases of dismissal and unfair dismissal in relation to people that have engaged in whistleblowing.

(AQW 16420/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I refer the Member to my answer to Question AQW 15199.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what actions she is taken to ensure resilience in the Northern Ireland electricity grid against the possibility of more severe weather events in the future as a result of climate change.

(AQW 16424/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: NIE Networks is responsible for the maintenance and resilience of the electricity network in Northern Ireland and has provided my department with the following assurances:

Annually NIE Networks refurbish or upgrade c. 1,800km of overhead line network across all voltage levels. This work includes removing aged wooden poles, weaker overhead line conductors, etc. and where required, replaced with modern specification equipment capable of withstanding more severe weather.

NIE Networks also annually maintain safety clearances to c. 10,000 km of overhead lines (and other equipment) across all voltage levels from nearby vegetation. The cutting cycle has been changed to help accommodate increased tree growth due to climate change and this is kept under constant review.

For all large substations (transmission and primary distribution levels) if the substation is within a predicted flooding area, a site specific flood risk assessment is undertaken to determine the predicted flood depth and the subsequent flood defence/protection required. In doing this, NIE Networks is working towards the 2080 climate change models that were developed by the Met Office in its UK Climate Projections (UKCP 18).

NIE Networks is also reviewing its technical standards for electrical plant and apparatus to operate in wider temperature ranges, with higher average summer temperatures.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether the upper age restriction of 25 for any higher level apprenticeships within Northern Ireland still applies; and (ii) if not, when will this change apply so as to enable candidates and employers to benefit immediately.

(AQW 16438/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There are no upper age restrictions for Higher Level Apprenticeships at Levels 4 and above.

The recently launched Economic Recovery Plan confirms my commitment to make apprenticeship opportunities available to more people and sectors by amending age related criteria under the ApprenticeshipsNI programme which is at Levels 2 and 3.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has detailed plans on the roll-out of Project Stratum in West Tyrone.

(AQW 16444/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Project Stratum will deliver gigabit-capable broadband infrastructure to more than 76,000 primarily rural premises across Northern Ireland. Of those, 9,591 premises are within the West Tyrone Constituency.

Current deployment plans show that the first premises in the West Tyrone Constituency are scheduled for improvement in Summer 2022. There are a further 382 premises within the target intervention area in West Tyrone that are currently out of scope. These premises will not be left behind. Discussions have already commenced with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and now with Fibrus Networks on board, we are working to identify the solutions and costs to bring those premises into this intervention.

A website has been developed by Fibrus Networks to provide key information throughout the deployment phase of the project. The website includes an on-line postcode/address checker, enabling citizens and businesses to confirm if/when their premises are included for improvement. The website can be accessed at www.hyperfastni.com. If necessary, residents and businesses should register their interest in improved broadband to ensure they are kept informed of the project.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy, further to her public statement of 11 March 2021 regarding the series of meetings she has had to support the Belfast City Deal, to list the meetings she has had to support the Derry City and Strabane City Deal.

(AQW 16491/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am supportive of all the Northern Ireland City Deals and the opportunity that the significant additional investment will bring to the people and economy of Northern Ireland.

Following the Heads of Terms signing of the Derry City and Strabane District Council City Deal on 24th February 2021 I have written to John Kelpie, Chief Executive, congratulating him on the recent signing and requesting a meeting with him and the Lord Mayor, to discuss how we can work collaboratively to accelerate delivery of the Deal.

My officials meet regularly with representatives of the DCSDC City Deal and will continue to support the Council to develop its Deal and the projects for which my Department is the policy lead.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for an update on the pay dispute in further education; and (ii) whether she has made any bids to the Executive for an increased pay award.

(AQW 16514/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The University and Colleges Union is one of the three main trade unions of which Further Education lecturers are members. The Union has advised they will stage a one day strike on Wednesday 24 March 2021 and have then asked members to move to action short of a strike from the next day. This will see UCU members restrict working to contracted hours, refusing to work overtime, and boycotting any additional duties. I know this announcement will have raised concerns for learners, parents, the businesses that colleges work with and indeed for staff themselves as they seek to engage learners during this very difficult period.

As I have advised in previous responses, my Department is not directly involved in the negotiations on lecturers' pay and conditions that have been taking place between Trade Union Side and the College Employers' Forum. Further Education colleges are employers in their own right and only if an agreement is reached between both parties through these negotiations, will the Department become involved in appraising any resulting Business Case and considering the financial implications.

In the meantime, it is important that the negotiations are afforded the space needed and it would be inappropriate for me to comment further, other than to continue to encourage unions and employers to engage in negotiations to seek an agreed resolution.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy whether officials instructed consultants, in calculating the Renewable Heat Incentive rebate tariff for 2020/21, to use types of counterfactual fuels, volumes of fuel, and prices of fuel (including VAT) that may have resulted in the rebate tariff calculation being skewed.

(AQW 16531/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The type of counterfactual fuel, volumes of fuel and prices of fuel used in the tariff calculations as set out in the 2020 Tariff Review Report were determined by the independent consultants, Cornwall Insight.

It should be noted that the tariffs used in Options 2 and 4 of the consultation on the Future of the Scheme have been increased from the Cornwall Insight tariffs to reflect more recent fuel costs. Further detail on this is available in Section 4 of Annex B (<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/economy/Annex-B-rhi-tariff-review-consultation-report.pdf>) to the consultation document.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the concerns expressed in the University of Exeter report into proposals for a new energy strategy that her Department is too susceptible to influence from vested interests.

(AQW 16533/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The comment referred to in the University of Exeter report is solely based on views and opinions from a small number of interviews carried out. There is no evidence provided to back this opinion up.

Our approach in developing a new Energy Strategy is to focus on evidence. This is being gathered through a range of sources including the 161 responses received to the Call for Evidence, the upcoming Options Consultation and an ongoing programme of research, modelling and data analysis.

This approach ensures that future policies will be focused on what the evidence identifies as being the most appropriate pathway for Northern Ireland.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for the Economy having received support from the Student Hardship Funds, for an update on the advice for students in rent arrears that still cannot afford to pay rent.

(AQW 16546/17-22)

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.

However, I have asked 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.

I recently 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, including those experiencing financial difficulties as a result of their accommodation situation.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for the Economy to confirm the implications of the reform of vocational qualifications, including BTEC in England for Northern Ireland's schools.

(AQW 16555/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has policy responsibility for vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland which are delivered across a range of educational settings including FE colleges, training providers and schools. The Entitlement Framework requires schools to provide access to a minimum number of applied qualifications. Vocational Qualifications play an important role in helping schools to meet this statutory requirement.

Vocational education policies have been changing rapidly across the Administrations of the UK with significant changes in England and in response to this the vocational qualification market has been changing. Awarding Organisations are assessing the future viability and validity of some qualifications and the resulting decisions have the potential to create gaps in qualification provision in Northern Ireland. The experience of working within the current vocational qualification market during the COVID pandemic has further highlighted challenges with the current system.

My Department is engaging, as a matter of priority, with stakeholders including the Department of Education to explore options for a future vocational qualification system that will deliver high-quality, industry led qualifications that meet the needs of learners and employers to support the local economy.

The Department of Education will continue to work closely with my Department to address concerns in relation to vocational qualifications and ensure the needs of schools are taken into consideration.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on her attempts to attract major sporting events to boost the tourism sector, as committed to in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 16576/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Major events are a key economic development and tourism driver. We have proven Northern Ireland's ability to deliver exceptional events such as The Open. These events have showcased Northern Ireland on a world-wide stage, enhancing our reputation as a place to visit, live, work, study and invest in. Major events will play an important role in the recovery of the NI economy post Covid-19 pandemic.

Due to confidentiality clauses, I am unable to provide specific details about potential events currently being considered by my Department and Tourism NI.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) when the University of Exeter was commissioned to produce its report Energy governance for the Northern Ireland energy transition; (ii) what date her Department first received the report; (ii) what date her Department published the report; and (iv) the reason for the delay in publication.

(AQW 16579/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Thank you for your questions, I will answer each in turn: (i) My department did not commission the energy governance report. It provided grant funding in response to a research proposal from the University of Exeter as part of the development of the Energy Strategy evidence base. The date of award of funding was 30 March 2020. (ii) My department received a first draft of the report on 9 July 2020. (iii) My department did not publish the report. As an independent external research report it was published by the academics. (iv) As authors of the research, the timescales involved in publication would be a matter for the academics at the University of Exeter.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy, given the Hatch Regeneris Report commissioned by her Department does not assess the prohibition of petroleum licensing and the positive public health, environmental and climate change considerations of that action, if this risks her Department to be open to challenge.

(AQW 16634/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Member's assertion is incorrect. Hatch Regeneris has been commissioned by the Department to undertake an assessment of the environmental, social and economic impacts of onshore petroleum exploration and development in Northern Ireland. The specification for the research details a range of scenarios including a baseline scenario of no exploration and development. It also specifically asks that local community health impacts be considered and I have also previously responded to AQW 2527/17-22 stating that the research and review will take account of climate change.

The specification for the research is available on the Department's website <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/specification-research-economic-societal-and-environmental-impacts-onshore-petroleum-exploration-and>

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has commissioned any kind of study to determine options for continuing to receive Erasmus+ students.

(AQW 16687/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Alongside the United Kingdom (UK) and European Union's (EU) Trade and Cooperation Agreement reached on 24 December 2020, it was confirmed that the UK Government had decided not to continue to participate in the Erasmus+ programme 2021-27. As a result Erasmus+ funding for inward students to Northern Ireland will no longer be available.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether the energy strategy will include a practical and achievable plan for the transformation of the housing stock to be retrofitted to become net zero in carbon emissions by 2050 and to reflect the findings of the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee report, Energy Efficiency in Existing Homes.

(AQW 16705/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I welcome the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee report on 'Energy Efficiency of Existing Homes' and note the concern that the target to be net zero carbon by 2050 will be missed unless urgent action is taken to improve energy efficiency of homes this decade.

Research into the 'Future of Energy Efficiency Policy in Northern Ireland', published by my Department in January, also highlighted that to align with the 2050 net zero commitment, policies will be needed to drive retrofitting of more than 50,000 buildings per year in Northern Ireland within the next decade, more than treble the current rate. I recognise a step change in retrofitting buildings is therefore needed in Northern Ireland.

I recently published an Economic Recovery Action Plan which includes an action to develop proposals to introduce an Energy Efficiency Home Retrofit Scheme. Proposals for a pilot scheme are currently under development.

In parallel, the Energy Strategy options consultation, to be published at the end of March 2021, will include proposals to improve energy efficiency in existing buildings, including domestic retrofit. The responses to this consultation will inform further development and refinement of policies to retrofit the housing stock and achieve net zero carbon energy by 2050.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has submitted a proposal to the Minister of Finance for funding for restart grants for businesses comparable to those in England and for which Barnett consequential are due to be received.

(AQW 16706/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Executive and UK Government have responded to COVID-19 with an unprecedented range of financial support for businesses, individuals and families since March 2020. The Department for the Economy (DfE) has made payments totalling over £400million to more than 30,000 businesses via a number of schemes, and continues to pay millions of pounds to thousands more.

The combination of this financial help and support has been designed to mitigate against the worst impacts of the pandemic, to prevent businesses from closing and protect people's main jobs and livelihoods.

Moving forward, my focus will be on the re-opening the economy, as I believe that the best way to support all of our local businesses, employers and high streets, is to make a full and safe return to trading as soon as possible in line with the health regulations and the published roadmap 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions'.

My own Department's 'Economy Recovery Action Plan' sets out the actions to be taken over the next 12-18 months to support this rebuilding effort. This includes the delivery of a High Street Stimulus Scheme and a Tourism 'Staycation' voucher. It is intended that both will be launched as soon as it is safe to do so, and that, combined, they will provide a financial boost and injection of expenditure into our local villages, towns and cities throughout Northern Ireland during 2021.

The Finance Minister has recently announced the extension of the Rates Relief scheme for a further twelve months for a number of key sectors who have been most impacted by Covid-19, as well as £178 million in new business support grants.

It will be for the Executive collectively to determine how any new or additional Covid-related funding will be allocated as we move out of restrictions and to support a sustained and successful economic recovery moving forward.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 2 April 2021

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mrs D Kelly asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Troubles-related incident Victim Payments Scheme.

(AQW 3969/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): We remain entirely committed to delivering the Victims' Payments Scheme for Permanent Disablement and acknowledge that the scheme needs to be funded to operate properly.

The Executive Office has designated the Department of Justice as the Department to exercise the administrative functions of the Victims' Payments Board on the Board's behalf under para 2(1) of Schedule 1 to the Victims' Payments Regulations 2020.

Considerable progress has already been made in areas such as developing the IT system, appointing Board members, appointment of an assessment service provider by DoJ and sourcing staff and accommodation. The Lord Chief Justice has also appointed Mr Justice McAlinden as President of the Victims' Payments Board.

Ministers are committed to opening the Scheme as soon as possible. The President has decided 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. He is discussing the implications of this and options for scheme opening with sectoral representative groups.

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.

It remains our view that the scheme should be funded through Westminster as an addition to the Block Grant.

However, this will not prevent The Executive Office from seeking the funds from the Department of Finance as they fall due.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) for an update on the Troubles Pension; and (ii) which Department will have oversight of same.

(AQW 4179/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We remain entirely committed to delivering the Victims' Payments Scheme for Permanent Disablement and acknowledge that the scheme needs to be funded to operate properly.

The Executive Office has designated the Department of Justice as the Department to exercise the administrative functions of the Victims' Payments Board on the Board's behalf under para 2(1) of Schedule 1 to the Victims' Payments Regulations 2020.

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It remains our view that the scheme should be funded through Westminster as an addition to the Block Grant.

However, this will not prevent The Executive Office from seeking the funds from the Department of Finance as they fall due.

Mr Beattie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the cause of the ongoing delay to the Victims' Payment Scheme.

(AQW 4646/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We remain entirely committed to delivering the Victims' Payments Scheme for Permanent Disablement and acknowledge that the scheme needs to be funded to operate properly.

The Executive Office has designated the Department of Justice as the Department to exercise the administrative functions of the Victims' Payments Board on the Board's behalf under para 2(1) of Schedule 1 to the Victims' Payments Regulations 2020.

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It remains our view that the scheme should be funded through Westminster as an addition to the Block Grant.

However, this will not prevent The Executive Office from seeking the funds from the Department of Finance as they fall due.

Miss Woods asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) what options are being considered for interim arrangements to fill the position of the Attorney General; and (ii) when they expect a successor to be appointed.

(AQW 4873/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The process to select and appoint a new Attorney General is currently being developed. This process will follow the principles around public appointments and will be an open competition.

In order to ensure the continuity of the role and functions of the office of Attorney General, we have agreed that Ms Brenda King, First Legislative Counsel, should discharge the functions of Attorney General in the interim period. We announced this in the Assembly on 16 June. This arrangement will ensure continuity in maintaining the responsibilities and statutory functions of the Attorney General.

Ms McLaughlin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) why the position of Head of the Civil Service was not advertised until nine months after the previous postholder notified his retirement; and (ii) why interviews for the position were conducted after the previous postholder had already retired.

(AQW 8782/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Planning for the Head of the Civil Service (HOCS) recruitment exercise was underway in January 2020, with the intention that a replacement would be appointed by the time the previous post holder retired at the end of August.

We met with officials on 5 February 2020 to agree a broad outline of the proposed approach for the recruitment exercise, including our specific role (as set out in the agreed policy) in the selection process.

Recruitment for the HOCS appointment comprised an eligibility sift against agreed criteria, an individual assessment by an occupational psychologist and a two stage interview process. From January to mid-March, significant work was undertaken on each of these elements including developing and agreeing all of the recruitment competition literature, advertising and outreach and arrangements in relation to the first stage panel and its members, etc. We were consulted by officials at regular intervals throughout.

We received bespoke NICS recruitment and selection training on 7 April 2020. While the unprecedented challenges associated with COVID-19 meant that there was some inevitable delay (with considerations having to be given to a range of issues), we met again with officials in June to finalise and agree all aspects of the selection process and the recruitment opportunity was advertised widely in mid-July, working to a tight timetable.

An eligibility sift took place on 3 August 2020, followed in mid-August by the occupational psychologist's individual assessment of those applicants who met the eligibility criteria.

First stage interviews were held on 26 August 2020 and final stage interviews, originally planned for 16 September, took place on 23 September 2020.

Ms Armstrong asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) when the legislation will be brought forward, as outlined in part 27 of New Decade, New Approach, for the Irish Language and Ulster Scots/Ulster British Commissioners; and (ii) whether this legislation will not be introduced under accelerated passage.

(AQW 11196/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Our officials continue with preparatory work, to legislate for the core elements of the Rights, Language and Identity proposals contained in 'New Decade, New Approach'.

This includes arrangements to progress the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Amendment No. 2) Bill which provides for the establishment of an Irish Language Commissioner, and to progress the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Amendment No.3) Bill which provides for a Commissioner to enhance and develop the language, arts and literature associated with the Ulster Scots and Ulster British tradition here.

We will progress the legislation during the current mandate and the appointment of the Commissioners as quickly as possible thereafter.

The legislative process is yet to be agreed by the Executive; we will update the Assembly in due course.

Dr Aiken asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their preparations for a no-deal Brexit.
(AQW 11699/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: On 24 December 2020, the UK and the EU concluded the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) and associated agreements in areas such as trade in goods, digital trade, intellectual property, public procurement, aviation and road transport, energy, fisheries, social security coordination, law enforcement and judicial cooperation in criminal matters, thematic cooperation and participation in European Union programmes

Dr Archibald asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the contingencies being put in place to mitigate the uncertainties and the instability caused by the failure to reach agreement in the EU trade negotiations, with only 17 days left to the end of the Brexit transition period.

(AQW 12031/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: In December 2020, the UK and the EU reached agreement initially on the grace periods related to the Protocol, followed by the wider Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) and associated agreements.

This did not leave much time for businesses to get ready for the changes that were brought in on 1 January 2021, but as a result of the programme of readiness work and contingency planning carried out by Executive departments and the preparatory work undertaken by our traders in 2020, for the most part our local businesses were well prepared.

However, this was generally not the case for those businesses in England, Scotland and Wales that trade with us, which, alongside the Covid-19 situation at the time, led to some disruption during January 2021.

The NI Central Crisis Management Arrangements and NIHUB structures which had been activated in October 2020 to deal with an increase in Covid-19 transmission were escalated in December 2020 to deal with the concurrent issues of Covid-19, EU Transition and winter risks, until they were stood down on 10 February 2021.

Since the end of the Transition Period, we have continued to work closely with the UK Government and the other devolved administrations to identify, assess and seek to resolve issues as they arise. Our officials are also in regular contact with their counterparts in the Irish Government on relevant issues.

The Executive regularly reviews preparations for the end of the grace periods, including those which were unilaterally extended by the UK Government in March 2021, as well as ongoing issues related to the end of the Transition Period, including business readiness, SPS and VAT and Customs issues.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether a department has been nominated to take forward work on a COVID-19 support package for travel agents.

(AQW 12723/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive agreed to provide a financial support scheme to help vulnerable but viable travel agents, including self-employed homeworkers. The scheme will provide support for the costs of re-opening or keeping a business operational; re-connecting with employees and customers and adapting customer marketing; and financial planning. It will provide a flat payment of £10,000 per premises to travel agency businesses operating from commercial premises, or a £3,500 single payment to self-employed travel agents working from home.

The scheme opened for applications from 19-26 March 2021 (inclusive) and is being delivered by the Executive Office.

Mr M Bradley asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will consider relisting shoe retailers as essential retail, particularly in relation to childrens' shoes.

(AQW 15410/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Contactless click-and-collect services for baby equipment shops, clothing shops, footwear shops, and electrical goods shops re-commenced from Monday 8 March 2021.

Mr Carroll asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the threat of and challenges posed by the far-right.

(AQW 15532/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: In accordance with Standing Orders governing Assembly questions we must decline to answer this question as not relating to our official responsibilities.

Ms S Bradley asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether any victims submitting applications to the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board have been asked to pay upfront for required medical reports.

(AQW 15616/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Redress Board has not asked any applicant to pay up front for a medical report. The governing Rules provide for the provision of supporting material and for costs.

It is not always necessary to provide an expert report in support of an application for compensation to the Redress Board. However, if an applicant or applicant's solicitor considers an expert report to be relevant they must submit that expert report together with their application. It is for the solicitor to obtain and pay for such an expert report, which will be reimbursed by the Redress Board on presentation of receipt of payment, if the Board considers the expert report was necessary. Approximately 95% of applications to the Redress Board are made via a solicitor.

If an applicant has not instructed a solicitor, the Redress Board will assist the applicant in obtaining and paying for an expert report, if necessary.

If an applicant submits an application without an expert report, and a Redress Board panel believes that an expert report is necessary to help it reach a determination, the Redress Board will arrange for this to be prepared and paid for on the applicant's behalf.

As of 2 March 2021, the Redress Board has commissioned a total of 4 expert reports on behalf of applicants. In addition, the Redress Board has paid for approximately 21 medical/expert reports on production of a receipt of fee from a solicitor.

Ms S Bradley asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will give an assurance to victims submitting applications to the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board that access to justice will not be limited to those who are financially able to pay upfront for medical reports or other similar submissions.

(AQW 15720/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Redress Board does not require an applicant to pay up front for a medical report, and it is not always necessary to provide an expert report in support of an application for compensation to the Redress Board.

However, if an applicant or applicant's solicitor considers an expert report to be relevant they must submit that expert report together with their application. It is for the solicitor to obtain and pay for such expert report, which will be reimbursed by the Redress Board on presentation of receipt of payment, if the Board considers the expert report was necessary. Approximately 95% of applications to the Redress Board are made via a solicitor.

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If an applicant submits an application without an expert report, and a Redress Board panel believes that an expert report is necessary to help it reach a determination, the Redress Board will arrange for this to be prepared and paid for on the applicant's behalf.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the Nation Brand Index 2020 will affect the relationship between Northern Ireland and China.

(AQW 15743/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We will analyse the results of the 2020 Nations Brand Index survey with officials and determine how they might contribute to planning of our Programme for Government and international activities. This will include our work in China.

Miss Woods asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the dedicated fund for restorative justice initiatives, as outlined in A9 of the Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime: Executive Action Plan.

(AQW 15931/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive Office has joint responsibility for Action A9 of the Executive's Action Plan on Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime.

While the Department of Justice has been undertaking preliminary work on establishing the Centre of Restorative Excellence, the Executive Office has been considering the most feasible approach on how to implement a dedicated fund for restorative justice initiatives.

A series of options for implementing the dedicated fund have been developed by Officials. We will consider these options to progress the fund within the context of the work on establishing the Centre of Restorative Excellence.

Miss Woods asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what assumptions were given by their Department, if any, to the Government Actuary's Department to come to the figure of £848 million for the central estimated costs of the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme.

(AQW 15932/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive Office (TEO) carried out extensive scoping work to determine potential numbers of successful applications to the Scheme and engaged Government Actuary's Department (GAD) to provide detailed modelling based on those estimates. This has been a challenging task because there is no definitive information on numbers who may qualify and any estimates have to come with significant caveats.

The figures provided by TEO to GAD for the purposes of modelling potential costs were based on an estimate of successful applications ranging from 9,300 as a conservative estimate to 17,200 as an upper estimate, with 11,200 as a central estimate.

Uncertainties over fundamental factors in the Scheme relating to numbers injured, degree and permanence of disability and the choices made by applicants, make cost estimates very uncertain.

Ms Sugden asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline (i) the current policies in place to ensure gender equality in pay and opportunities throughout the public and private sectors; and (ii) their assessment of the success of these policies to date.

(AQW 15984/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Policy responsibility for gender matters now rests with the Department for Communities (DfC) following the reorganisation of departments in 2016. DfC is currently working to develop a new Gender Strategy.

Section 19 of the Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 allocated responsibility to the Executive Office for the reporting of gender pay differentials and the development of a strategy and action plan to eliminate gender pay differences.

The timing of the Employment Act and the subsequent absence of an Assembly prevented the allocation of these gender pay provisions to DfC. However a Transfer of Functions Order to transfer responsibility for them from TEO to DfC is currently in preparation.

Mr Carroll asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether victims currently going through the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board have to pay for access to their own medical records.

(AQW 16031/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The HIA Redress Board does not require an applicant to pay up front for a medical report, and it is not always necessary to provide an expert report in support of an application for compensation to the Board.

However, if an applicant or applicant's solicitor considers an expert report to be relevant they must submit that expert report together with their application. It is for the solicitor to obtain and pay for such expert report, which will be reimbursed by the Redress Board on presentation of receipt of payment, if the Board considers the expert report was necessary. Approximately 95% of applications to the Redress Board are made via a solicitor.

If an applicant has not instructed a solicitor, the Redress Board will assist the applicant in obtaining and paying for an expert report, if necessary.

If an applicant submits an application without an expert report, and a Redress Board panel believes that an expert report is necessary to help it reach a determination, the Redress Board will arrange for this to be prepared and paid for on the applicant's behalf.

Mr Newton asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) to outline the projects being delivered through the Urban Villages Initiative in the Belfast East constituency; and (ii) to detail the project budgets and expected outcomes.

(AQW 16554/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: In 2020-21, there are 13 Urban Village community led projects and cross cutting projects active across the Eastside Urban Village area under the themes of: tourism; arts and creativity; employability; capacity building; education and training; and mental and physical health, with a funding allocation of c£270,000. To date, community led projects have supported 543 events and workshops and 4,720 participants.

In addition, a number of capital projects have already been completed, including: Fraser Pass; Short Strand Outdoor Play Area and classroom; The Foundry Training Café; The Diamond Project Community Gym; Ballymacarrett Walkway; Titanic Halt and the Short Strand Tourism Project. Investment in these projects totals c£3million.

Prokick Community Gym Project is currently at design stage and a landmark project at Pitt Park is at an advanced business case stage. Both projects represent a total investment of circa £2.8million and will have a lasting impact on the local

community, improving the physical environment and developing thriving places as well as supporting mental and physical health.

Mr Newton asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether there is the intention to deliver additional Urban Village Initiative projects in the East Belfast constituency.

(AQW 16556/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Since 1 April 2018, more than £800k has been invested in Urban Village community led projects in the Eastside area, supporting 543 events and workshops and 4,720 participants. In 2020/21, Urban Villages is supporting 13 community led projects with a total investment of c£250k. These projects are multi annual and are expected to continue until 2023.

A number of capital projects have been completed, including: Fraser Pass; Short Strand Outdoor Play Area and classroom; The Foundry Training Café and The Diamond Project Community Gym; Ballymacarrett Walkway; Titanic Halt and the Short Strand Tourism Project.

The Prokick Community Gym Project is currently at design stage and the redevelopment of a transformational project at Pitt Park is at advanced business case stage with approval expected in the coming months. Additional capital projects proposals are also being developed with a view to completion by 2024, subject to budget availability and business case approval.

Ms Sugden asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the properties their Department owns in East Londonderry that are currently unused; (ii) the annual cost of maintaining them; and (iii) whether any alternative uses are being considered.

(AQW 16609/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive Office currently does not own any properties in East Londonderry.

Mr Frew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) why is their Department is advertising and tendering for a Public Information Campaign for COVID-19 to last up to two years commencing in April 2021; (ii) what is the objective of the campaign; and (iii) what assessments were completed to arrive at a value of procurement figure of £2 million.

(AQW 16675/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: It is important for the Executive to continue to promote public health advice to all its citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since March 2020, the Executive's COVID-19 information campaign has promoted public health advice and information regarding coronavirus restrictions across a mix of communications channels.

In recent weeks, steps have been taken to appoint an advertising agency to ensure the Executive is able to respond to the challenges arising from the ongoing pandemic and to encourage everyone to continue to adopt behaviours to keep themselves and others as safe as possible from the virus as the vaccination programme is rolled out.

Due to the unpredictable nature of the pandemic there is no guarantee as to the level and value of work to be placed throughout the lifetime of this contract. All aspects are subject to the continuing assessment of need for public information.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what indications have arisen from the Joint Consultative Working Group under the EU Protocol of upcoming changes in EU laws applicable in Northern Ireland; and how will these changes be notified to the Assembly.

(AQW 16750/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Joint Consultative Working Group convened for a short meeting on 29 January 2021 to agree its rules of procedure. No other items were on the agenda and the Joint Consultative Working Group has not met again. To date no indications have arisen from the Joint Consultative Working Group of upcoming changes in EU laws applicable in Northern Ireland.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to list the dates on which the Executive Committee Dealing with EU Exit Matters has met; and to list the agreed actions resulting from such meetings.

(AQW 16751/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The first meeting of the Brexit Sub-Committee took place on 4 February 2020.

To facilitate a more streamlined decision making process the Brexit Sub-Committee was replaced by the Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters, which held its inaugural meeting on 4 March 2020.

The Brexit Sub-Committee and the Executive Committee Dealing with EU Exit Matters has met on the following occasions:

Date	Meeting
2020	
4 February	Brexit Sub-Committee meeting
11 February	Brexit Sub-Committee meeting
20 February	Brexit Sub-Committee meeting
26 February	Brexit Sub-Committee meeting
4 March	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
8 June	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
15 June	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
2 July	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
9 July	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
23 July	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
30 July	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
6 August	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
20 August	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
3 September	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
10 & 11 September	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
17 September	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
24 September	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
5 October	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
8 October	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
16 October	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
22 October	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
29 October	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
5 November	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
19 November	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
26 November	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
3 December	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
8 December	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
15 December	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
28 December	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
2021	
5 January	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
12 January	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
19 January	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
28 January	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
9 February	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
23 February	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
9 March	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters
23 March	Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters

For practical reasons relating to the Covid-19 pandemic, between 4 March and 8 June 2020 issues relating to EU Exit were considered during standard Executive meetings as necessary.

The content of Executive papers and all aspects of Executive business are regarded as confidential.

Miss Woods asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 12904/17-22, (i) to detail all engagements they have had with children and young people directly on changes to the Health Protection Regulations and Executive decision making on COVID-19; and (ii) whether they will hold a children and young people's press conferences as we move out of lockdown.

(AQW 16758/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We appreciate that our young people have specific issues and concerns and as part of our ongoing commitment to communicate with them, we have taken part in a range of engagements.

Our most recent event was our online participation with Politics In Action as part of their 'New Normal' project.

This gave pupils from 20 schools the opportunity to ask a series of questions in a press conference style in front of an audience of around 200 students.

In addition, the Executive's public information campaign uses a mix of media channels to communicate directly to young people.

We are currently considering a number of other opportunities to engage further with young people as we move out of lockdown.

Ms Bailey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how they ensure that staff members of the Racial Equality Unit, and their wider Department, have the skills, experience and knowledge to meaningfully tackle racism, including institutional racism.

(AQO 1696/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The NICS People Strategy includes a range of actions aimed at helping to create an inclusive work place culture and the NICS Diversity Action Plan for 2020/21 includes a commitment to review and update NICS diversity and inclusion training and awareness products.

Unconscious Bias training was piloted in the NICS in 2016 and subsequently rolled out as a short training course to approximately 200 senior civil service (SCS) during the period April to September 2017 and a mandatory (for all staff) e-Learning training package was introduced in July 2017.

TEO's Racial Equality Unit (REU) is also working with NICS HR to develop an e-Learning package provisionally titled "Racial Equality - your role and responsibilities" to be made available to all NICS colleagues. It is anticipated that this will be introduced during the first quarter of 2021/22.

In addition REU has run a number of seminars jointly with the Diversity Champion on racial equality issues to continue to raise awareness among staff.

Across the NICS officials regularly engage key stakeholders and experts to inform policy. TEO and indeed other departments work closely with the Racial Equality Subgroup to inform and implement policy relevant to racial equality here.

Mrs D Kelly asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the implementation of their New Decade, New Approach commitments.

(AQO 748/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The New Decade, New Approach document contains a wide range of proposals which, taken together, constitute an ambitious and very challenging package of measures to be taken forward by all Departments.

Whilst the Executive's priorities in recent months have been the management of the Covid-19 pandemic and charting the path for recovery, a number of the NDNA proposals are already being progressed at a departmental level, and some have been achieved already.

Looking forward, the Executive will soon have the opportunity to consider the totality of the NDNA proposals in the context of work underway on the development of a multi-year Programme for Government. The aim is to have the Programme ready by the summer.

Mr Beattie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the support their Department is giving to the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board to speed up the process and assist communications with survivors.

(AQO 1781/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We want the victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse to get the redress they deserve as quickly as possible, to acknowledge the huge trauma and suffering they have experienced.

TEO has sponsorship and budgetary responsibility for the Redress Board; however the Redress Board is operationally independent.

The President, Mr Justice Huddleston, is committed to ensuring continued engagement between the Board, Commissioner, and victims' and survivors' groups. Following discussions with the Commissioner, he is meeting the groups on 31 March 2021 and 1 April 2021.

Despite being launched at the height of the pandemic and operating during COVID restrictions, the Redress Board has considered 576 applications, making determinations to a value of £12 million.

There has been a quarter-on-quarter increase in the number of panel sittings since the Board came into operation. The President also follows the practice of his predecessor in chairing a panel personally where there are additional cases ready to be heard.

A challenge for the Board is that it is currently awaiting further information from parties, mainly solicitors and Institutions, in 418 cases. These can only be validated and progressed to consideration by a panel once all the necessary outstanding evidentiary documentation has been provided.

95% of applicants are represented by solicitors who are responsible for communicating with and updating their client. The Redress Board regularly updates solicitors on the progress of applications. The Redress Board will be holding an information event with solicitors in late April 2021 to discuss any challenges that solicitors are facing.

The Redress Board communicates directly with unrepresented applicants on the status and progress of their application and will continue to review their communications with unrepresented applicants.

Mr Irwin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how they will maximise the effectiveness of their Department's messaging on COVID-19.

(AQO 856/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the Executive's COVID-19 campaign has promoted public health advice across a mix of communications channels.

It is estimated that the campaign messaging has been seen or heard over 505 million times since March 2020, meaning the average adult will have seen or heard the public health messaging approximately 337 times.

Over the course of the past year, there have been a number of different campaigns developed to target specific messages to key audiences.

Between November 2020 and February 2021, TEO commissioned a 'Don't pass it on' campaign, that was seen or heard over 295 million times, meaning that an adult will have seen or heard the messaging approximately 197 times over this period.

Post campaign research results and evaluation show that 84% of individuals questioned agreed that the campaign "would persuade me to take steps to protect myself and others from coronavirus infection".

The Executive has used a mix of communications channels to reach as wide an audience as possible. As well as traditional advertising on television, radio and press, we have used a number of social media channels, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Spotify and TikTok.

The Executive recently launched the next phase of its public information campaign in which we encourage the public to continue to adhere to the public health advice while the vaccination programme is rolled out.

This is being rolled out across a mix of channels until the end of April. It features a Belfast Trust doctor who delivers the key public health advice. This concept tested well and will be evaluated for its impact at the end of its run.

The Executive Information Service has been working with local Councils so that the public health messages, can be shared across channels in order to maximise their reach. This has included developing shared assets for key dates such as Christmas, Mother's Day and St Patrick's Day.

In addition, the Executive Information Service worked with a number of community groups to develop short video messages to promote key public health advice and shared across the Executive's social media channels.

We are operating in a very complex environment and we recognise that there can't be a one-size-fits-all approach to our communications and as such our approach is regularly reviewed and refreshed.

Mrs Barton asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on discussions they have had with the Her Majesty's Government on implementing the Stormont House Agreement legacy mechanisms, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQO 235/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: No discussions have been held on implementing the Stormont House Agreement Legacy mechanisms, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.

Ms Bailey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many outcomes have been met from the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025.

(AQO 1783/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We want this to be a truly shared, equal and safe society for all our people, regardless of race or ethnicity. We therefore remain committed to the full implementation of the Racial Equality Strategy to achieve its outcomes.

We have met with a number of stakeholders recently to discuss racial equality, including our Racial Equality Subgroup and representatives from the Regional Travellers Health and Wellbeing Forum.

We therefore know that there are many entrenched issues across our society, and tackling racism and racial inequality requires a sustained approach.

The Racial Equality Indicators Baseline Report was published in November 2018 and presents data measuring the progress of the Racial Equality Strategy 2015 - 2025 on four key outcome areas: equality of service provision; combating prejudice, racism and hate crime; participation, representation, and belonging; and, respecting cultural diversity.

We are pleased that the report shows headway made in a number of areas. Notably, it shows there has been a significant decrease in the proportion of respondents reporting they are prejudiced against people from minority ethnic communities, a fall from 24.8% in 2014 to 19.7% in 2017.

It also reports a significant increase in the proportion of respondents who agree that the culture and traditions of the minority ethnic community add to the richness and diversity here, increasing from 60.9% in 2014 to 70.7% in 2017.

A second report was due to be published last year. Due to the pandemic, publication was delayed but we welcome that it is now expected in the coming weeks.

We look forward to considering the report once available and remain committed to progressing the remaining actions in the Racial Equality Strategy to achieve the outcomes.

Mr Buckley asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their commitment to ensuring that the religious orders responsible for institutions where individuals suffered historical abuse provide appropriate financial redress.

(AQO 750/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We met with Archbishop Eamon Martin, Archbishop John McDowell, and representatives from Barnardo's and the Association of Leaders of Missionaries and Religious of Ireland (AMRI) on 9 February to discuss the remaining Hart recommendations for victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse.

The meeting discussed a range of issues including progress on redress payments and provision of services for victims and survivors, the centrality of the views of victims to an official apology, and the principles to underpin forthcoming discussions on contributions by the Institutions involved in the ownership and governance of children's homes to the costs of redress.

All agreed that acceptance of responsibility and recognition of the harm done were central to the way forward. Historical institutional abuse should never have happened. Trust was breached and significant trauma caused to innocent victims.

Those present committed to work together to address the apology, memorial, and contributions to the costs of redress in a way that will put fairness at its core and will meet the needs of victims and survivors.

It was agreed that a roundtable meeting with relevant Institutions will take place in the coming weeks when the principles underpinning discussions on contributions for all concerned will be addressed before individual discussions with each Institution.

The Executive Office will also continue to engage with the Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse and with the Institutions to ensure that a timely and appropriate joint official apology is made to victims and survivors of Historical Institutional Abuse.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps his Department is taking to support the supply of unwashed potatoes from Britain to Northern Ireland.

(AQW 13307/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I escalated the issue of the movement of potatoes from GB to NI, including with soil attached, to the Secretary of State George Eustice, requesting urgent resolution to disproportionate controls for UK internal market movements. The Northern Ireland Executive Office again highlighted the need to resolve sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) issues in a letter to the Rt. Hon Michael Gove MP on 05 November 2020 and again to UK Government (UKG) in late January 2021, having then experienced the severity of the disruption to GB to NI trade.

The movement of unwashed potatoes from GB to NI has now been addressed by the UKG unilateral announcement and publication of operational guidance on 4 March 2021. This provides for practical temporary measures enabling their movement without compromising biosecurity.

The measures announced cover the movement of ware potatoes subject to appropriate pre notification and phytosanitary certification, however, these do not apply to seed potatoes which remain prohibited under certification and marketing restrictions that apply to their movement into the EU regulatory zone.

My Department is continuing to press the UKG and the EU to adopt appropriate SPS arrangements for UK internal market movements to facilitate the continuation of long term trade between GB and NI businesses.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps his Department has taken to support (i) riding schools; and (ii) livery yards throughout the COVID-19 outbreak.

(AQW 15486/17-22)

Mr Poots: A range of financial support has been made available by government for businesses, including equine businesses, affected by the pandemic. The Department of Finance, for example, has established the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme which provides support to businesses that have been required to close or limit their operations.

In autumn last year, my Department established the Interim Equine Forum which includes representatives from across the equine sector. Through the Forum, it ensures that the sector is made aware of the restrictions that impact on it and the financial support that is available. There is also ongoing direct liaison between my officials and equestrian representatives on these matters.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail what steps his Department has taken to address the smuggling of puppies from the Republic of Ireland via Northern Irish ports.

(AQW 15582/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department takes the illegal movement of dogs and puppies very seriously and uses intelligence provided by partner agencies to conduct targeted checks at ports in Northern Ireland.

The Department recently established a multi-agency forum to ensure a co-ordinated approach to the illegal movement of dogs and puppies. There is also ongoing collaboration between my officials and their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland on the matter.

In addition, my Department is supporting a public awareness campaign - 'Paws for Thought' - which encourages the public to report any suspicions regarding the illegal movements of dogs and puppies.

I am aware of the concerns that the third party sale of puppies can, on occasions, be linked to their illegal movement. I welcomed the petition you presented to the Northern Ireland Assembly on the introduction of a law to prohibit the sale of puppies and kittens by anyone other than licenced breeders and note that Mr Robin Newton, MLA, has proposed a Private Member's Bill on the matter. I intend to meet with Mr Newton shortly to discuss his proposal.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the Official Controls Regulation charges which would ordinarily be due to Northern Ireland businesses under the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.

(AQW 15655/17-22)

Mr Poots: Under the terms of the EU Withdrawal Agreement and the Northern Ireland (NI) Protocol, NI must continue to adhere to the EU Official Controls Regulation 2017/625 (OCR). The OCR sets out the Sanitary and Phyto-Sanitary (SPS) controls that must take place on goods and products that enter the EU SPS regulatory zone from a third country, or those legally defined as such by the European Union for the purposes of import controls, including Great Britain (GB).

The OCR also details mandatory fees and charges and provides that the competent authorities shall collect fees or charges for the official control checks they perform at Points of Entry (POEs) on first arrival into the EU SPS Regulatory zone. This is for a range of consignments, including animals, products of animal origin, germinal products, animal by-products, plants and plant products, hay and straw and foodstuffs containing both products of plant origin and processed products of animal origin ('composite products').

The OCR details a number of alternative methods upon which to base the collection of charges, including a flat rate charge, the actual costs of the official control check and the weight of the consignment.

Given the uncertainty around the number of checks that may be required in future, along with the requirement to consult with industry on the matter, my Department does not hold any clear information on what a future charging regime may look like.

I am opposed to the introduction of charging. I have highlighted to the UK Government on a number of occasions the detrimental impact it would have on Northern Ireland business and consumers. I plan to refer the issue to the Executive for consideration, given its cross cutting nature and the possible wider impact to NI society.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps his Department is taking to tackle pet theft.

(AQW 15771/17-22)

Mr Poots: I understand how important dogs and other pets are to their owners and the emotional distress that can result from losing a pet to theft.

The theft of a pet is a criminal offence in Northern Ireland under the Theft Act (Northern Ireland) 1969. The offence attracts a significant maximum penalty of up to ten years imprisonment which is higher than that available in other jurisdictions of the UK. In determining the sentence to be imposed, the courts take account of the individual circumstances of the offence including its impact on the victim.

I am satisfied that the existing law is sufficiently robust to deal with pet theft. Any change to the law relating to the theft of a pet would, in any event, be a matter for the Department of Justice and enforcement action is the responsibility of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). My Department does, however, continue to work with the PSNI and other key partners on issues associated with pet theft.

Departmental legislation also requires puppies to be microchipped within eight weeks of birth. This can act as a deterrent to the theft of these animals and can facilitate the return of any stolen animals to their rightful owners. The Department encourages dog owners to ensure that the microchipping database is kept up to date.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what engagement his Department has had with the British Government to clarify what their plans are for direct support payments beyond 2022.

(AQW 15938/17-22)

Mr Poots: In October 2020, HM Treasury circulated a 'Replacement of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) funding' paper which sets out its view on the UK Government's 2019 manifesto commitment to maintain the current annual budget to farmers in every year of this Parliament. That paper advised that in cash terms, Northern Ireland would be entitled to budgetary ceilings totalling £330m in each year of this Parliament to replace the funding that would otherwise have derived from the EU budget.

DAERA continues to engage with UKG and HM Treasury on EU replacement funding issues so that we can benefit from the opportunities that will arise as a result of the United Kingdom leaving the EU.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail what action his Department has taken to address puppy smuggling in to, and out of, Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16245/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department takes the illegal movement of dogs and puppies very seriously and uses intelligence provided by partner agencies to conduct targeted checks at ports in Northern Ireland.

The Department recently established a multi-agency forum to ensure a co-ordinated approach to the illegal movement of dogs and puppies. There is also ongoing collaboration between my officials and their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland on the matter.

In addition, my Department is supporting a public awareness campaign - 'Paws for Thought' - which encourages the public to report any suspicions regarding the illegal movements of dogs and puppies.

I am aware of the concerns that the third party sale of puppies can, on occasions, be linked to their illegal movement. I welcomed the petition you presented to the Northern Ireland Assembly on the introduction of a law to prohibit the sale of puppies and kittens by anyone other than licenced breeders and note that Mr Robin Newton, MLA, has proposed a Private Member's Bill on the matter. I intend to meet with Mr Newton shortly to discuss his proposal.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the timeline for a draft environment strategy for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16310/17-22)

Mr Poots: Business units across DAERA are in the process of supplying relevant input to the draft Environment Strategy.

Officials are also currently engaging with senior contact points in other Departments to secure input on what measures those Departments are and will be taking to improve the natural environment.

Subject to Executive approval, it is intended that the draft Strategy will be published for consultation this spring, with the final Strategy being published this autumn.

I am committed to ensuring that we take the time necessary to deliver a comprehensive and ambitious Strategy which will play a key role in shaping our environment in the coming decades.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what action his Department can take to address damage to property, premises and trees in country parks.

(AQW 16315/17-22)

Mr Poots: My officials are not aware of any recent damage reports to property, premises and trees in country parks. My officials based at these sites undertake routine inspections throughout all of my Department's country parks and where such damage is found, remedial actions as appropriate are enacted to ensure the ongoing safety of members of the public visiting these sites.

Where applicable, my Department's country parks are subject to routine tree safety inspections along with regular health and safety inspections. Again, where any issues are recorded, remedial actions are enacted as appropriate. Of further relevance, my Department's Country Parks are subject to seasonal opening hours and where possible the parks are gated and locked outside of these hours with one way exit measures, further improving security of these sites.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what input his Department had into the Mental Health Strategy currently being consulted on, including the relevant actions.

(AQW 16328/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department is represented at a senior level on the cross Departmental Working Group on Mental Health and is involved particularly in actions relating to Mental Health within rural areas.

I also met the Interim Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland, Profession Siobhan O'Neill in January 2021 to discuss Mental Health issues generally.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what alternatives were considered before his Department engaged in the recent mass slaughter of animals on the farm of Family A.

(AQW 16381/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- 1 As this case is under active investigation, I am unable to disclose details relating to this case or the alleged offences.
- 2 I can however provide details of the general approach of my Department to protect animal welfare and the alternatives available to achieve compliance with animal welfare legislation.
- 3 Owners and keepers of farmed animals are required to comply with the Welfare of Animals Act (NI) 2011 and the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (NI) 2012.
- 4 To inform and assist owners and keepers of farm animals to comply with their animal welfare obligations, my Department publishes a series of Codes of Practice for Farmed Animal Welfare which provide advice and guidance for the upkeep of farm animals and details of relevant legislation. These codes are available to the general public via <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/> or via contacting the local DAERA Direct office.
- 5 Routinely when a welfare non-compliance is found on farm, DAERA inspectors issue Improvement Notices or Welfare Cover Breach Letters. These documents detail the breaches and the actions needed to improve and rectify the situation. Breaches or non-compliances could include inadequate housing, bedding, diet, care, veterinary treatment or medicine records. Rectification actions could include the provision of adequate feed, water, housing or veterinary attention for particular animals by the Private Veterinary Practitioner. A reasonable timeframe is permitted to achieve compliance by the herdkeeper, provided animals are not in distress and urgent intervention is necessary.
- 6 The keeper is provided with the relevant Code of Practice, and where applicable, is also advised or required to seek ongoing advice and intervention from a Private Veterinary Practitioner, or where husbandry or nutritional advice is required, from a specialist agricultural adviser. In some cases this may involve a herdkeeper reducing his/her stock numbers.
- 7 Follow-up inspections are carried out to check if compliance is achieved and where necessary to monitor the situation. In many cases, these actions result in the farmer making improvements and achieving a welfare standard to the extent of good practice. My Department's aim is to resolve any issues or shortcomings with welfare and achieve compliance.
- 8 However in other cases, standards may not improve or even deteriorate and it is necessary for Department officials to increase inspections and consider further enforcement measures to achieve compliance. This often prompts a case conference of officials (from Divisional Veterinary Office, welfare, enforcement and/or advisory branches) to consider the next steps, with the welfare of the animals the primary objective.
- 9 In those particularly serious cases where animals are in distress, the Welfare of Animals Act (NI) 2011 Section 17 provides powers for inspectors to take immediate steps to alleviate suffering. An inspector may destroy an animal when a veterinary surgeon certifies that the condition of the animal is such that it should in its own interests be destroyed. Section 17 also provides the power for the Department to take into possession animals in distress. In some cases this is not a viable option for example if animals are unfit to be transported.
10. Current procedures ensure veterinary opinion, supported by certification, is obtained when deciding to euthanise an animal under Section 17.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what categories of nature based solutions his Department is considering for future investment.

(AQW 16417/17-22)

Mr Poots: Nature-based solutions (NbS) are solutions that work with and enhance nature to help address societal challenges such as climate change, while simultaneously providing multi-functional benefits to biodiversity and people.

My Department supports a wide range of such solutions and other measures to help contribute to a reduction in emissions, climate change mitigation and adaptation, improved water cycling, reversals to biodiversity decline and improved health and wellbeing.

For example to assist with climate change mitigation and adaptation my Department supports measures to increase carbon sequestration in ecosystems and to deliver benefits to biodiversity such as reforestation and peatland restoration. We also improve the adaptive capacity of biodiversity to future climate change through for example restoring hedgerows that could potentially facilitate species movement within the landscape. NbS measures we take to assist with the creation of accessible green spaces also benefit health and well-being.

My Department is committed to the continued protection and improvement of the environment and I have championed a Green Growth Approach to transform and grow the Northern Ireland economy whilst protecting our natural assets and reducing our carbon emissions. I have initiated a number of specific measures to help address these matters for example: in March 2020 I announced the Forests for the Future Programme which will involve the planting of 18 million trees over the next 10 years; and I have continued to support measures to conserve and restore our natural habitats such as those delivered through the Departments Environment Fund and our Agri-Environment Schemes.

This range of programmes alongside the work of other Executive colleagues will together help contribute to the delivery of NbS and other measures that will help us to achieve environmental and climate change targets.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs pursuant to AQW 15709/17-22, (i) for an estimate of the costs to his Department associated with halting work; and (ii) what advice was sought prior to the decision to halt construction work.

(AQW 16422/17-22)

Mr Poots: On 26th February former Minister Lyons instructed DAERA officials to halt works in relation to the permanent infrastructure facilities at the Northern Ireland Points of Entry.

Construction of the permanent facilities has not yet commenced and my Officials will work through the contractual implications and associated costs of any decision to suspend construction work once the extent is realised.

I have previously confirmed that I will be bringing the matter to the Executive for consideration as soon as possible.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he would consider financial support for the Lough Erne Eel fishing sector that had to cease eel fishing due to EU regulations.

(AQW 16439/17-22)

Mr Poots: The commercial eel fishery on Lough Erne ceased in 2010 following the European Eel Regulations (2007) for the conservation of declining populations of European eels and also following a transboundary Eel Management Plan for the Erne catchment.

The previous commercial eel fishery on the Erne was replaced by a trap and truck system whereby many of the previous commercial eel fishermen were paid by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) to catch migrating adult (silver) eels to be safely transported around Cliff and Cathleen's Falls dams to continue their onward migration to spawning grounds in the Sargasso Sea.

Many of the previous commercial eel fishermen on the Erne have therefore continued to derive an income from catching eels, albeit in a conservation fishery.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs who made the decision to relocate his Department's headquarters to Ballykelly over Strabane.

(AQW 16446/17-22)

Mr Poots: The decision to relocate the Department's headquarters to Ballykelly was taken by the then Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) Minister, Michelle O'Neill.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether the outcome of the internal investigation into the recent mass slaughter of animals on the farm of Family A will be published in full to the family.

(AQW 16456/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department is conducting an investigation of alleged animal welfare breaches, in a case in which a large number of cattle were humanely destroyed by Department staff under The Welfare of Animals Act (NI) 2011. I am unable to

disclose details about this enforcement case as it remains under investigation although I can confirm that my Department is not conducting an internal investigation of staff.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on a strategic horticultural review. (AQW 16466/17-22)

Mr Poots: I recognise there are opportunities for the sustainable growth and development of the local production horticulture sector. There is a demand from consumers for locally grown, fresh produce and this presents a real opening for Northern Ireland growers to supply these markets.

I intend to launch a new Agricultural Policy Framework in the coming months which will include production horticulture. At that stage, I hope to provide greater clarity on how the horticulture industry and government can work in partnership to realise the undoubted potential that exists for this sector.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what plans he has to introduce legislation to deliver the Clean Air Strategy. (AQW 16474/17-22)

Mr Poots: Work is now well underway within my Department to develop Northern Ireland's first Clean Air Strategy.

I recently ran 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 sought views on a wide variety of matters relating to air quality. It did not set out policy options or indicate a particular policy position at this stage.

To ensure the best air quality outcomes are achieved, a two-staged approach has been adopted:

- 1 A 12 week public consultation on the Discussion Document. This has now concluded. The Discussion Document set out evidence, existing polices and posed questions to promote discussion; and
- 2 Draft the Clean Air Strategy. This will be based on analysis of stakeholder views and Ministerial policy direction. This will be a shorter document, and will be subject to a further public consultation and Executive approval.

Following the period of public discussion, responses received are being reviewed over the next few months, options considered and a range of proposals will be formulated. Some may relate to expansion of the monitoring network or the introductions of legislation, while others may relate to increasing awareness about air quality. Once I have considered the options and decided on a policy direction, it is anticipated that further work will be needed during the summer and autumn to develop preferred options more fully. Officials will then begin to draft the first Clean Air Strategy for Northern Ireland. This will be a more focused and shorter document than the Discussion Document and will contain specific proposals relating to policy and other measures which can improve air quality. This draft Clean Air Strategy will be subject to an additional public consultation and due to the cross-cutting nature of the policy area, Executive approval will also be sought at that time. It is hoped that this consultation will launch by the end of the year.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline plans to expand the current air quality monitoring network in 2021/22. (AQW 16475/17-22)

Mr Poots: Work is now well underway within my Department to develop Northern Ireland's first Clean Air Strategy.

I recently ran 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 sought views on a wide variety of matters relating to air quality. It did not set out policy options or indicate a particular policy position at this stage.

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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 increase air pollution monitoring would be considered as part of the LAQM process and I encourage any council wishing to increase monitoring to contact the Air and Environmental Quality Unit within DAERA.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for an update on the Clean Air Strategy for Northern Ireland; and (ii) when he expects the Strategy to be published.

(AQW 16476/17-22)

Mr Poots: Work is now well underway within my Department to develop Northern Ireland's first Clean Air Strategy.

I recently ran 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 sought views on a wide variety of matters relating to air quality. It did not set out policy options or indicate a particular policy position at this stage.

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- 3 A 12 week public consultation on the Discussion Document. This has now concluded. The Discussion Document set out evidence, existing policies and posed questions to promote discussion; and
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Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when he plans to introduce a financial assistance scheme for Lough Neagh fishermen impacted adversely by restrictions during this pandemic.

(AQW 16522/17-22)

Mr Poots: I fully recognise the pressures faced by the Lough Neagh fishing industry as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

I have directed my officials on how I wish to proceed with a support scheme to alleviate the financial impacts of the pandemic on commercial fishermen licensed to fish on Lough Neagh.

My officials are liaising with the Department of Finance to seek approval to proceed with the scheme.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) the number of complaints received by NIEA in relation to illegal dumping and landfill; (ii) how long it takes for a complaint to be fully investigated; (iii) what enforcement action has been taken; and (iv) how much it has cost his Department to clear up the waste, broken down by local council area, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 16523/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department primarily focuses its enforcement actions on addressing larger scale incidents of illegal waste disposal, rather than lower level ad hoc dumping often regarded as fly-tipping, is primarily addressed by District Councils (DCs). In that context the following is provided:

- i) Over the last 3 calendar years (2018/19/20), my Department has received the following numbers of complaints of illegal waste disposal:

Year	No. of complaints received in relation to illegal waste disposal
2018	1,024
2019	878
2020	1,061

- (ii) Due to the wide range of potential waste offending reported, there is no definitive answer as to how long it takes to fully investigate a complaint. For example, a report of small scale fly-tipping accompanied by a photograph/s would be immediately referred to the relevant DC and closed by NIEA. However, larger scale unauthorised illegal waste disposal, if linked to serious/organised criminality, could require a lengthy multi-agency investigation and subsequent referral to PPS and into the Crown Courts system. This could take a number of years, consistent with other serious crime investigations passing through the Northern Ireland Criminal Justice System. In all cases, my Department will seek to investigate matters reported as expeditiously and efficiently as possible.
- (iii) My Department utilises a range of enforcement powers to effectively deal with matters reported which fall within the remit of NIEA; these will range from voluntary clear-up of waste and advice and guidance, to the use of fixed financial penalty notices for offending behaviour (as a cost effective non-criminal justice disposal), through to referral to the Public Prosecution Service for consideration of Court action.

- On Crown Court conviction, sentences can be up to an unlimited fine and a custodial sentence of up to 5 years. Confiscation of financial criminal benefit can occur and in all cases my Department will seek to ensure remediation of the harmful effects of the polluting behaviour, either voluntarily or by making the 'polluter pay' for the remediation.
- The range and number of enforcement actions for each of the last three calendar years (i.e. 2018/19/20) are as follows:

Year	Court outcomes and fines (value) ¹	Confiscations (no. and value) ²	Fixed Penalty Notices (no. and value)	Statutory notices (inc. advice and guidance)	Warning Letters
2018	19 (£10,000)	4 (£115,106.74)	20 (£7,500)	69	21
2019	26 (£56,300)	3 (£40,002.00)	24 (£8,600)	45	4
2020	0	1 (£235,460.39)	17 (£5,900)	94	19

1 Includes convictions, suspended sentences, directorial disqualifications, conditional discharge, community services and charges left on the books

2 Recorded by financial year

- (iv) The cost of clear up of waste to my Department broken down by DC, in each of the last three years is as shown below. Please note that these figures are for financial years as the information is gathered for financial accounting purposes.

District Council	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Antrim and Newtownabbey	4,043	2,105	0
Ards and North Down	19,476	5,765	10,605
Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	34,952	4,933	28,230
Belfast	26,289	25,204	7,735
Causeway Coast and Glens	13,976	4,956	14,382
Derry and Strabane	27,233	2,977	14,566
Fermanagh and Omagh	14,517	2,697	34,253
Lisburn and Castlereagh	5,902	4,140	8,397
Mid and East Antrim	2,070	6,279	7,191
Mid Ulster	7,014	1,035	18,159
Newry, Mourne and Down	54,398	53,401	43,112

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the total level of COVID-19 related expenditure from his Department since 1 March 2020; and to provide an overview of each scheme or policy funded under this heading.

(AQW 16539/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has spent £39.0m to date on COVID-19 related expenditure. An overview of each initiative funded is broken down in the table below.

Initiative	Description	Explanation	Spend to date – 23 March 2021 £'000
Market Intervention in the Agri Food Sector	Package of Market Support measures	<p>The Dairy, Beef and Horticulture sectors have experienced a fall in prices.</p> <p>These measures reflect the complex challenges the agriculture industry and in particular the Dairy and Beef sectors have faced in 2020-21. The Department continues to proactively engage with a wide range of organisations in order to assess the level of assistance that can be provided.</p> <p>Funding is focused on those most in need and those who can clearly demonstrate tangible losses as a result of COVID-19.</p>	19,575

Initiative	Description	Explanation	Spend to date – 23 March 2021 £'000
Waste Management	Package of Waste measures to support local Councils to help cover higher waste collection, treatment and disposal costs	This funding is helping support the additional costs of implementing social distancing measures and ensure that staff across councils are able to fulfil these crucial waste management roles in a safe manner.	12,504
Fishing	Scheme to support sector	This financial scheme is helping the fishing industry during the COVID-19 pandemic after social distancing measures and the collapse of the European and domestic fish markets have made trading virtually impossible. Smaller payments have been made to support aquaculture, catching sector tie ups and potting.	1,707
Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation	Funding to Support Rural Communities	This Resource funding is to support a range of interventions that help address rural poverty and social isolation issues and address a range of COVID-19 related matters.	2,123
Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation	Funding to Support Rural Communities	This Capital funding is helping to support the revitalisation of rural communities, the investment in forest parks and community trails and to support rural businesses.	3,093

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps his Department is taking to support family farm businesses in Northern Ireland to reduce emissions and protect the environment.

(AQW 16562/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department support the Agri-Forestry Greenhouse Gas Implementation Partnership's (GHGIP) action plan 'Efficient Farming Cuts Greenhouse Gases Implementation Plan to tackle greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from agriculture. There is a strong emphasis on both nutrient and livestock management within the plan.

The farmed landscape also contains important sinks for carbon in soils, peatlands, forestry, hedgerows and farm trees.

The ability of our farmed landscape to sequester carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and store carbon in soils and vegetation places farmers, as our primary land managers, at the forefront of efforts to offset local GHG emissions and contribute to the UK Net Zero by 2050 ambition.

My department will continue to assist farmers adopt low-carbon farming practices through scientific research, knowledge transfer and farm support schemes.

Among the body of scientific research is work to more accurately account for the amount of carbon stored and sequestered in our grassland soils. Emerging evidence indicates that managed grasslands continue to sequester carbon after many decades and sequestration rates are enhanced where cattle slurry is applied, a common practice on farms in NI.

CAFRE is delivering advice to approximately 415 farms through the new Environmental Business Development Group Programme where 20 groups have been set up across the province focusing on sustainable farm systems and helping farmers identify carbon reduction measures and how to help protect the environment.

Forest Service is leading on 'Forests for our Future' aiming to create 9,000 hectares of new woodland by 2030 and plan to open a new stand-alone Small Woodland Grant Scheme to help farmers integrate woodland on their farms. Also, the Environmental Farming Scheme supports over 5,000 farms via carbon friendly practices including maintaining and establishing native woodland, hedgerows, agro-forestry and peatland restoration.

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.

My officials will continue to develop measures of support for farms to play their part in reducing emissions and help them protect the environment.

My department will also continue to progress other initiatives including plans to consult on a strategy to reduce ammonia emissions, issuing of Pollution Prevention and Control Farm Permits, promoting use of technologies like low emissions slurry spreading equipment and working with the Greenhouse Gas Implementation Partnership.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department intends to conduct a further Social Survey of Farmers and Farm Families in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16565/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Social Survey of Farmers and Farm Families was conducted in 2001/02. Officials looked into running a follow-up survey in 2011 but the costs were deemed prohibitive and alternative ways of obtaining this information were considered.

As part of this work, DAERA statisticians are liaising with Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and the Administrative Data Research Centre in Northern Ireland to securely and confidentially link de-identified data. These data are sourced from the Census of Population, various DAERA datasets linked to the farm register and Inter Departmental Business Register (IDBR) with the aim of researching the characteristics of farms, farmers, farm households and farm workers.

The Department will also consider adding a small number of additional questions to the Farm Census survey and other regular surveys, on an ad hoc basis, in order to ensure that information previously gathered through the Social Survey of Farmers and Farm Families, that is not available from other datasets, continues to be available to inform policy development.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in opening up the countryside to the public, for his assessment of the uptake by landowners of permissive paths.

(AQW 16583/17-22)

Mr Poots: Permissive Path Agreements are made between a district council and a landowner who thereby consents to the public crossing their land. These are designated paths that the public are then permitted to use and can be subject to conditions and for a specified number of years.

Such agreements are currently delivered through the provisions of the Recreation and Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 which is not part of my Department's legislation. My Department does not hold records regarding the number that are in existence.

A key action of The Outdoor Recreation Action Plan for Northern Ireland 2014 was "to develop policies and to support appropriate legislative priorities, changes and developments to optimise the benefits and opportunities for outdoor recreation." Following extensive discussions with council Access Officers and other key stakeholders, it is likely that new legislation would be required to address current outdoor recreational issues, particularly the provision for access through the countryside.

My Department is currently undertaking a review of access to the countryside and Permissive Paths is one area that is being reviewed as part of this process. It is important to find a balance that will allow public access to our natural environment while protecting that environment and ensuring the rights of the relevant landowners and their properties. Feedback suggests that flexible Permissive Path Agreements, with landowners, may be an agreeable solution.

Further public consultation is currently under way, using a two stage approach. A Stage 1 Key Stakeholder Consultation is seeking the views of groups with an obvious interest and/or knowledge of public access issues, including councils, landowner groups and outdoor recreation organisations. Returns are expected by 29th March 2021.

Following consideration of the Stage 1 Key Stakeholder Consultation we plan to seek wider public opinion (Stage 2).

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail what vacant sites his Department owns in West Tyrone.

(AQW 16610/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department owns no vacant sites in West Tyrone.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on a compensation payment for farmers in the Glenelly Valley impacted by flooding in August 2017.

(AQW 16614/17-22)

Mr Poots: I recently visited the area to learn about the challenges faced by those directly affected and see the impact of the landslides. I spoke with representatives of the Ulster Farmers Union, local farmers and political representatives to hear about the work required to restore land back to productivity.

I have requested officials to develop a support scheme that would provide financial support to those farmers affected for income foregone and costs of reinstating land to productive use. I continue to consider very carefully all the relevant issues surrounding the matter and plan to make an announcement in the near future.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs pursuant to AQW 11967/17-22, AQW 10453/17-22, AQW 9725/17-22, AQO 591/17-22 and given the answers to these Assembly Questions, when a package of support for the fishing community on Lough Neagh will be delivered.

(AQW 16630/17-22)

Mr Poots: I fully recognise the pressures faced by the Lough Neagh fishing industry as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

I have directed my officials on how I wish to proceed with a support scheme to alleviate the financial impacts of the pandemic on commercial fishermen licensed to fish on Lough Neagh.

My officials are liaising with the Department of Finance to seek approval to proceed with the scheme.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the Lough Agency's investigation into the Meenbog peat slide.

(AQW 16662/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Loughs Agency continue their investigation into the Meenbog peat landslide and are considering the evidence that has been gathered. This information must be treated as 'sub judice' and any update on the specifics of the investigation may jeopardise future potential action. I therefore am unable to offer further comment at this stage.

As for the wider issue, Loughs Agency, as a cross-border Agency, continues to co-ordinate efforts with the NIEA, EPA Ireland and Donegal County Council. Both the enforcement and restoration working groups I have mentioned previously continue to meet and progress their respective objectives. Officials from my Department continue to be represented on both groups.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) what progress has been made in ensuring Northern Ireland fishermen get their full and fair share of the Brexit increase in UK fish allocation; and (ii) what agreement has been signed.

(AQW 16672/17-22)

Mr Poots: I firmly believe full apportionment of all quota on the basis of Fixed Quota Allocation units gives the Northern Ireland fleet the best overall share of additional quota. I have written to and met, the Secretary of State George Eustice and the DEFRA Fisheries Minister Victoria Prentis, several times and left them in no doubt about my feelings on this issue and the importance of rewarding our fishermen who have invested significantly in UK fisheries not just in the Irish Sea but in all UK waters. However, the other Administrations favour alternative approaches to allocation of the additional quota.

In spite of our wishes the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs made an announcement on 24th March to allocate additional quota gained from the EU in 2021 on the basis of track record and geographical zonal attachment. Further discussions will take place in relation to allocation of additional quota for 2022 and beyond. I will continue to make the case on behalf of our fishing fleet for a fairer allocation.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the revenue generated by the carrier bag levy in the last two financial years.

(AQW 16712/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department have published official validated statistics each year since the introduction of the levy in 2013 and revenue generated in the last two financial years is detailed in the table below –

Period	Revenue Generated
2018/19	4.6 million
2019/20	4.4 million

The next set of official validated statistics for the period 2020 – 2021 will be published at the end of August 2021.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has any plans to introduce a ban on the burning of garden waste.

(AQW 16824/17-22)

Mr Poots: In Northern Ireland, we already have a comprehensive collection system for compostable waste (garden and food waste). My Department actively encourages these resources to be moved up the waste hierarchy through the promotion of recycling of compostable biodegradable waste. In 2019/2020 almost 235,000 tonnes of this type of waste was sent for composting.

My Department has recently put efforts into encouraging more home composting too, particularly during the height of the pandemic when Council resources were stretched and more people were spending time at home.

Local councils already have the authority to deal with issues regarding burning rubbish in domestic properties. They can investigate complaints such as garden bonfires or burning of waste that is regular and causes repeated smoke nuisance at any other property. If the Council is satisfied that the smoke is causing a nuisance it can serve an Abatement Notice on the

person responsible requiring them to reduce or cease the burning. This can be enforced by the local councils under the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

Therefore I do not see a need for me to introduce a ban on burning of domestic/garden waste.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has any plans to implement a statutory ban on the burning of domestic garden waste.

(AQW 16884/17-22)

Mr Poots: In Northern Ireland, we already have a comprehensive collection system for compostable waste (garden and food waste). My Department actively encourages these resources to be moved up the waste hierarchy through the promotion of recycling of compostable biodegradable waste. In 2019/2020 almost 235,000 tonnes of this type of waste was sent for composting.

My Department has recently put efforts into encouraging more home composting too, particularly during the height of the pandemic when Council resources were stretched and more people were spending time at home.

Local councils already have the authority to deal with issues regarding burning rubbish in domestic properties. They can investigate complaints such as garden bonfires or burning of waste that is regular and causes repeated smoke nuisance at any other property. If the Council is satisfied that the smoke is causing a nuisance it can serve an Abatement Notice on the person responsible requiring them to reduce or cease the burning. This can be enforced by the local councils under the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

Therefore I do not see a need for me to introduce a ban on burning of domestic/garden waste.

Department for Communities

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities what the Housing Executive has done to resolve issues of structural instability revealed by grant aided refurbishment works at 102 Gracehill Road, Stranocum; and what proposals it has to bring the matter to a satisfactory conclusion.

(AQW 15909/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I have written directly to the Member today on this matter, to protect the personal information relating to the owners of the property.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of (i) energy efficiency surveys carried out by Housing Executive surveyors under the Affordable Warmth Scheme; (ii) surveys that identified problems with cavity wall insulation; and (iii) homes that have undergone remedial work due to cavity wall insulation problems highlighted by such inspections.

(AQW 16121/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has provided the following information in relation to energy efficiency surveys under the Affordable Warmth Scheme.

(i) **energy efficiency surveys carried out by Housing Executive surveyors under the Affordable Warmth Scheme**

The Housing Executive has confirmed that between September 2014 and 28 February 2021 there have been 24,012 property inspections.

(ii) **surveys that identified problems with cavity wall insulation**

The Housing Executive has advised that an electronic record breakdown for the detail requested is only available from April 2019. The survey breakdown from this date to February 2021 is provided in the following table:

No cavity wall insulation measures required (existing CWI in good condition)	2,651
Not applicable (property not suitable due to internal/external defects or construction type Solid Wall / Timber Framed/ Flats)	949
Cavity wall insulation recommended	563
Applicant refused boroscope check	221

The Housing Executive can confirm it has offered cavity wall measures to a total of 3,575 households between September 2014 and 28 February 2021.

Cavity Wall Insulation may be provided:

- when the property is suitable for cavity wall insulation; and
- where a cavity has no insulation; or
- partially built in polystyrene sheets; or

- extraction and refill is considered necessary.

(iii) **homes that have undergone remedial work due to cavity wall insulation problems highlighted by such inspections**

The Housing Executive has confirmed that 2,432 households have chosen to install cavity wall measures between September 2014 and 28 February 2021.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities what COVID-19 track and trace policy the Housing Executive has in place for contractors and subcontractors carrying out maintenance work within its properties.

(AQW 16227/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has in place the following procedures / protocols with their Maintenance Contractors and a formal Advice Note has been issued to all Contractors / staff as of 18/12/2020:-

- 1 The protocol for Contractors in respect of COVID-19 is that PHA guidance and regulations relating to this are strictly followed at all times and all staff self-isolate and do not attend work if they or anyone in their household has symptoms of COVID-19. Contractors must ensure that they have all appropriate and necessary Risk Assessments and Method Statements in place.
- 2 All staff must wear the appropriate PPE – face coverings, gloves etc. and ensure that they are sanitising and maintaining appropriate social distancing, completing deep cleans as required, all aligned to PHA guidance and regulations.
- 3 Contractors must immediately complete the Housing Executive pro-forma “COVID-19 Testing & Self-isolation Information Report (Maintenance / Heating Contracts)” informing the Housing Executive:
 - If one of their staff is symptomatic and suspects that they may have contracted COVID-19.
 - If one of their staff has been formally instructed to self-isolate.
 - All results of any test that a staff member has taken, be that a positive test or a negative test.

The Housing Executive ensure that any personal data recorded is adequate, relevant and limited to what is necessary. The confidentiality of the individual is protected and only co-workers that may have been in contact will know details.

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Communities how much investment has been provided to rural communities from the exercise of her Department’s powers under the Social Need (NI) Order 1986 in the last twelve months.

(AQW 16294/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Investment provided to rural communities from my Department under the Social Need (NI) Order 1986 in the last twelve months is not readily available as the information is not recorded specifically under this category, therefore I am unable to provide the amount invested under these powers.

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Communities how much investment has been provided to urban communities from the exercise of her Department’s powers under the Social Need (NI) Order 1986 in the last twelve months.

(AQW 16295/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I can confirm that the Housing Development Grant (HDG) operates under the Social Need (NI) Order 1986 and £216,967.50 was spent in 2020/21 on the Cliftonpark Avenue HDG scheme.

This information is not readily available for other areas of my Department as it is not recorded specifically under this category therefore I am unable to provide further detail on the amount invested under these powers.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the accuracy and completeness of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive’s records of the quality of insulation in its properties.

(AQW 16323/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive acknowledges that its data on the quality of cavity wall insulation in its stock is not comprehensive, primarily because the installation of cavity wall insulation was undertaken before the introduction of electronic records systems for physical works. The Housing Executive, therefore, considers that the research report provided by the British Board of Agrément in 2019 provides the best available data on the quality of cavity wall insulation in their stock given that it was based on a sample designed to reflect its profile in terms of age, type and location.

Although not comprehensive, there is more data on loft insulation in the Housing Executive’s stock as it is inspected - and upgraded where required on a regular basis as part of their heating schemes. At present the Housing Executive have completed works and survey data that indicates that there is loft insulation of varying depths in 33,704 of their dwellings (or 70,447 if Savills’s extrapolation methodology is utilised) and 13,075 where loft insulation would not be applicable. Details on the other properties will be gathered through Housing Executive heating schemes and its annual stock survey programme.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities whether energy performance certificate (EPC) inspections were due to have been undertaken on properties after they received improvements through the Affordable Warmth Scheme; and whether those inspections have been carried out and EPCs issued.

(AQW 16324/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Affordable Warmth Scheme is my Department's main tool for mitigating the effects of fuel poverty. The Scheme targets and assists owner occupiers and householders who rent their home from a private landlord. The Scheme offers a range of heating and insulation measures to improve the energy efficiency of low income households.

The Affordable Warmth Scheme is primarily a fuel poverty mitigation Scheme and does not use Energy Performance Certificates.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the work of her officials with the Department of Work and Pensions to establish a replacement Payment Exception Service for the Post Office Card Account when the contract expires in November 2021.

(AQW 16366/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Post Office card account (POCa) contract, which is due to end in November 2021, will be replaced with a new Payment Exception Service.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on behalf of the Department for Communities (DfC) is issuing letters to POca users to provide advance notice of this change, encouraging them to switch payment into a mainstream account, ahead of the POca contract ending. Work is ongoing on the procurement of this new Payment Exception Service and it is due to go live in August 2021. For those customers who are unable to access or manage a mainstream account my Department will ensure that they are migrated to this new Payment Exception Service, thus guaranteeing payment continuity.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities what has been delivered under the Warm Homes Scheme over the last three years.

(AQW 16407/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Affordable Warmth Scheme replaced the Warm Homes Scheme from April 2015. This Scheme is delivered in partnership between my Department, the 11 Local Councils and the Housing Executive. The Scheme targets and assists low income households who experience the effects of fuel poverty and energy inefficiency.

In the last three complete financial years from 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2020 the Scheme has improved the energy efficiency of 9,950 homes.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Communities what level of funding support is available for the Northern Ireland Centenary celebrations.

(AQW 16442/17-22)

Ms Hargey: There are no plans in my Department for a funding stream available for the purpose of marking the centenary.

A £3m fund to mark the centenary has been set up by the British Government which includes £1m of funding to be distributed through the National Lottery Heritage Fund. This is a matter for the NIO.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of social housing units (i) built in the last two years; and (ii) planned to be built over the next five years, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 16449/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Given the large volume of information contained within the response, I will arrange for the answer to this question to be placed in the Assembly library.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the total amount of funding applied for during phase 2 of the Covid-19 Charities fund.

(AQW 16499/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department's Delivery partners, Community Finance Ireland received 426 applications to the Covid-19 Charities Fund with a total ask of £10.4 million. Not all applications were eligible. Work is ongoing to assess eligible applications and determine grant awards which I expect to be finalised in the near future.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the total amount of funding issued during phase 2 of the Covid-19 Charities fund.

(AQW 16500/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Community Finance Ireland, is in the process of distributing grant awards to successful applicants. Although due diligence checks to prevent duplication of Executive Covid funding are ongoing and may impact on the final figure, it is anticipated that the total funding to awarded in Phase 2 will be in the region of £7 million.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities whether there will be a third phase of the Covid-19 Charities fund.
(AQW 16501/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Irish Language Strategy and the Ulster Scots Language, Heritage and Culture Strategy

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the (i) Irish Language Strategy; and (ii) the Ulster Scots Language, Heritage and Culture Strategy.
(AQW 16525/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I remain committed to the development and delivery of an Irish Language Strategy and an Ulster Scots Language, Heritage and Culture Strategy. The principles and practice of citizen and community engagement and co-design will be a key part of the development of both strategies and I have agreed to this approach. Executive approval is now required to publish a timetable which would allow for this work to commence and progress.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities whether she intends to revisit the transfer of regeneration powers to councils.
(AQW 16541/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department works closely with councils in the delivery of regeneration programmes. This is a relationship which has been strengthened further in our response to Covid-19 where the Department collaborated with councils and other stakeholders to develop locally designed recovery plans funded through the Covid-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme.

Further work is required therefore my department does not have immediate plans to revisit the transfer of regeneration powers to councils.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities how many people are expected to have lost money from the collapse of Football Index betting company.
(AQW 16592/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I have recently written to Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport with responsibility for the Gambling Commission, seeking clarification on what has happened with Football Index and what help is available for any affected people here.

As the licensing of Football Index is a matter for the Gambling Commission, my Department does not hold any information on the number of customers it has or how many might lose money as a result of its collapse.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities what support can be offered to those impacted by the collapse of the Football Index betting company.
(AQW 16593/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I have written about this issue to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, who is responsible for the Gambling Commission which licensed Football Index. I have expressed my concern and sought clarification as to what assistance might be available to people here who may have lost money as a result of Football Index going into administration.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 15965/17-22, for an estimate of the number of Housing Executive houses in East Antrim requiring remedial work; and the timescale and projected costs.
(AQW 16596/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Any figures provided at constituency level are to be considered as indicative estimates only.

Approximately 60% of the properties surveyed in East Antrim had cavity wall insulation installations that were non-compliant with modern industry standards because there were found to be voids or debris in the cavity. Although the Housing Executive's data on the construction of all of its stock is not comprehensive, we estimate that if this 60% is extrapolated, it would represent some 1,860 of the likely cavity wall constructed properties in East Antrim. Applying average cavity wall insulation replacement rates for different types of properties suggests that a programme to address these properties would cost in the order of £3.9-£4.7 million.

The timescale for delivering such a programme is not known at this time. The intention is to implement a cavity wall insulation remediation/replacement programme for all cavity wall stock as part of the Housing Executive's future Energy Strategy.

In the interim, the Housing Executive intends to address instances where the condition of cavity wall insulation is having a detrimental impact on the structure of a property. It is currently identifying and investigating such instances with a view to addressing these, either through its response maintenance service (where they are single or small numbers of properties) or a programme of planned schemes (where there may be an estate-wide issue).

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister for Communities whether she has been in contact with the Gambling Commission in relation to the collapse of Football Index on behalf of local people who have lost money as a result of the company going into administration.
(AQW 16603/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am very concerned to hear that Football Index has gone in to administration, and of the potential losses many thousands of football fans and investors may be facing.

I have written to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and responsible for oversight of the Gambling Commission, to express my concern and to seek clarification for any customers based here as to what assistance may be available.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the Gambling Commission's licensing and oversight of Football Index.

(AQW 16604/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I have recently written to Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport with responsibility for the Gambling Commission, seeking clarification on what has happened with Football Index and what help is available for any affected people here.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the vacant sites her Department owns in West Tyrone.

(AQW 16612/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department owns the SCORE site on Canal Street and Dock Street in Strabane, which is currently vacant, but is part of the site for the proposed Strabane Town Centre Regeneration Project, one of the City Deal initiatives.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities whether consideration has been given to overriding the cessation of benefits for claimants who have been in hospital for 28 days as a consequence of COVID-19.

(AQW 16617/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Hospital in-patient rules apply across a range of disability benefits including Attendance Allowance, Disability Living Allowance and Personal Independence Payment.

When a person aged 18 or over is admitted to hospital, any disability benefits they are receiving will continue to be paid for 28 days. After 28 days, payment of these benefits would be suspended on the basis that the Health Service is responsible for the person's disability-related extra costs and to pay certain benefits in addition would be a duplication of public funds intended for the same purpose.

Provided the person's circumstances are unchanged, payment of the benefits are reinstated as soon as the person is discharged. There is no need for the person to re-apply for the benefits.

The hospital-in patients' provisions apply irrespective of health condition

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Communities for an update on legislation for sign language.

(AQW 16618/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I remain committed to legislation built on the principles of equality and social inclusion to ensure that the Deaf community have the same rights and opportunities as those in the hearing community and are able to access services in their own language.

My officials have begun preparatory work towards the introduction of a Sign Language Bill.

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Communities to detail the total level of COVID-19 related expenditure from her Department since 1 March 2020; and to provide an overview of each scheme or policy funded under this heading.

(AQW 16623/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Since 1 March 2020, my Department has allocated the following funding to Covid-19 schemes:

Scheme	Description	Allocation (£'m)
Benefit Delivery Response	Targeted response to manage significant increases in benefit caseloads	5.0
IT Equipment	Measures implemented to ensure the delivery of essential public services	6.5
Accommodation	Measures required to safeguard essential staff working in DfC sites	0.5
Discretionary Support	Grant payments for short term living expenses for people affected by Covid-19	3.0
Help to find employment	Employment programmes to support individuals return to employment	0.5

Scheme	Description	Allocation (£'m)
Homelessness	A package of measures including increased funding for temporary accommodation, out of hours staffing, funding to outside agencies, street audits and food provisions	7.1
Supporting People	Emergency funding to Supporting People providers for bank/relief staffing and additional funding to Supporting People providers facing financial challenges as a result of Covid-19	8.4
Housing Executive Supporting People PPE	Funding to Supporting People Providers to obtain Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for their protection against Covid-19	1.1
Council Funding	To support local councils with their financial pressures as a result of Covid-19	85.3
Sports Funding	In partnership with Sport NI, the Department is delivering 3 grant programmes to the sports sector: The Sports Sustainability fund, The Sports Hardship fund and the Covid Safe PPE Sports Pack Project	28.2
Culture Resilience Fund	The initial response to the impact of Covid-19 on individuals and organisations across the arts and wider culture and creative sectors	8.0
Culture, Languages, Arts & Heritage Support Programme	To mitigate the immediate negative financial impacts of the pandemic on the culture, language, arts and heritage sectors, and to invest in renewal activity to underpin longer term recovery with a focus on social recovery and tackling poverty.	26.0
Access to Food Support	Providing food boxes to those who were asked to shield and vulnerable citizens with no other means of accessing food during lockdown	13.5
Community Support Fund	Provision of additional funding to: Voluntary groups and grass roots organisations (via local councils) involved in the Covid-19 response linked to food, financial and connectivity and support expansion of regional co-ordination organisations	6.5
Community Support Fund - Warm, Well and Connected Scheme	Provide fuel support to those in crisis and who are experiencing hardship as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Delivery of wellbeing projects also targeting those in rural areas to keep people connected and less isolated, and improved mental wellbeing.	3.0
Charitable Grant Fund	To support charities that have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic	20.9
Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise Sector	To accommodate the safe delivery of essential services during the Covid-19 crisis, assisting with the procurement of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and other items to assist with the safe reopening of the Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise sector; and to provide IT and digital devices to groups within the sector that needed to move services to an online platform.	3.8
Social Enterprise Support Fund	To support social enterprises to stabilise and manage cash flow due to Covid-19.	9.3
Heating Payment Scheme	To provide groups in receipt of specified or overlapping benefits with financial assistance in recognition of the additional costs as direct result of Covid-19	44.3
Housing Executive Supplier Relief payments	Payments made by the Housing Executive to contractors unable to work in line with PGNs 01/20 and 02/20 resulted in additional costs	1.6

Scheme	Description	Allocation (£'m)
Housing Executive Loss of Rental Income	The temporary suspension of the Housing Executive's rent increase of CPI + 1% in 2020-21 for 6 months due to the pandemic	4.5
Co-ownership Housing Association Stimulus Funding	Additional Financial Transaction Capital funding to provide help to first time buyers who are facing difficulty obtaining traditional mortgages	13.0
Town Centre Revitalisation Programme	A programme of capital interventions to councils to prepare town centres for the relaxation of restrictions	12.0
DoH Jointly Supported Living Scheme Care Costs	To allow the Housing Executive to administer the care element of Covid-19 additional staff costs through its supported living scheme	1.2
Total		313.2

This excludes Annually Managed expenditure (AME) on social security benefits which is demand led.

My Department has been working to spend all of the Covid-19 allocations within the current financial year.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities how she is prioritising steps to tackle climate breakdown within her Department.

(AQW 16632/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I recognise the profound challenges that climate change creates for all of us, and the specific responsibilities that fall to my Department in this regard. I am a member of the Ministerial Green Growth Group and, through this, ensure that I contribute to Executive efforts to address climate change and the significant issues arising.

I have established a Climate Change Working Group of officials from my Department and key ALBs in order to develop and progress a Climate Change Action Plan, and to consider the establishment of a Climate Change Fund. I have written to all ALBs that my Department sponsors to ensure that they are taking appropriate action in relation to climate change. My officials are also engaging with DAERA officials in their cross-departmental climate change work, including a group working to reduce our usage of single use plastics.

We face very significant challenges, including mechanisms to fund key interventions required, and I will continue to work with Ministerial colleagues to address these challenges.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities, in relation to the Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings process, to detail (i) how many applications have been received by her Department in each of the last ten years; and (ii) the number of successful applications in each of the last ten years.

(AQW 16633/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has provided the following table detailing the number of SPED applications it received and applications accepted for each of the past ten financial years.

Financial Year	Applications Received	Applications Accepted
2010/11	69	22
2011/12	67	25
2012/13	67	29
2013/14	29	9
2014/15	29	11
2015/16	25	7
2016/17	20	12
2017/18	13	5
2018/19	6	1
2019/20	17	4
2020/21	2	1

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the current level of demand for social homes in Sion Mills; and to provide details of any plans for new build social homes in the village.

(AQW 16665/17-22)

Ms Hargey: At the table below I have attached details of the waiting list data for Sion Mills at December 2020.

December 2020	All Applicants	Applicants in Housing Stress	Allocations to Applicants
Sion Mills	106	75	10

There are currently no new social housing schemes under construction or programmed to start in Sion Mills as part of the current Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP). That said the Draft SHDP 2021/22 – 2023/24 which has been submitted to my Department for consideration does include a 12-unit proposal for delivery by Habinteg Housing in 2022/23 on the Melmount Road.

I have been advised by the Housing Executive that the Rural Housing Association is actively investigating potential locations for additional social housing in the village. The Housing Executive has identified Sion Mills as a priority area for a Site Identification Study.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Communities how many families are currently impacted by the benefit cap and not protected by the welfare reform mitigations package.

(AQW 16695/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The latest information available to my Department (at 30 November 2020) is that 870 households which are subject to the Benefit Cap are not eligible to receive a mitigation payment.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities how much funding has been awarded to Ulster-Scots projects over the last three years.

(AQW 16713/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The department has awarded £7,237,420 of funding to various organisations to deliver Ulster-Scots projects in the language sector over the past three years.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities how much the Northern Ireland Housing Executive spent on interpreters in the 2014-15 financial year.

(AQW 16714/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has advised that it spent a total of £54,471 on interpreters in the 2014-15 financial year (including £8,001 specifically in relation to the Asylum Seekers Programme). This includes spend on all language support, such as linguistic interpreters (telephone based and face to face), sign language interpreters as well as document translation and specific (often disability related) requests for alternative formats, such as audio conversion.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities to list the golf clubs that received financial support from the Sports Sustainability Fund; and how much each received.

(AQW 16724/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Details of all sports organisations which have received support from the Sports Sustainability Fund is publically available at the Sport NI website link: - www.sportni.net/funding/our-funding-programmes/sports-sustainability-fund/sports-sustainability-fund-awards-list/

Details specific to golf clubs can be found at the Sport NI website link: - www.sportni.net/funding/our-funding-programmes/sports-sustainability-fund/sports-sustainability-fund-awards-list/golf-ireland-approved-award/

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities whether retailers operating only click and collect services must continue to adhere to the requirements around Easter Sunday trading.

(AQW 16771/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As Sunday trading legislation is the responsibility of my Department your question to the Minister for the Economy has been passed to me for response.

The Shops (Sunday Trading &c.) Order 1997 allows large shops, i.e. shops where the floor area used for the display and sale of goods exceeds 280 square metres, to open between the hours of 1pm and 6pm only on a Sunday for the serving of retail customers. Serving retail customers includes the provision of click and collect services.

Under the above legislation, where the Sunday is Easter Sunday or Christmas Day large shops are not permitted to open at all. Any change to these provisions would require legislation.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Communities to detail the financial support working women in receipt of (i) Universal Credit; and (ii) Tax Credits and Universal Credit are entitled to in relation to maternity allowance.

(AQW 16784/17-22)

Ms Hargey: A person who is in receipt of both Universal Credit and Maternity Allowance will have their full Maternity Allowance taken into consideration when calculating their Universal Credit entitlement. This means for each £1 received from Maternity Allowance, the Universal Credit payment is reduced by £1.

Anyone on a low income or out of work can get support by applying for Universal Credit. Claims can be made online and a step by step guide on how to make a claim is available on the Department's website at <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-universal-credit-step-by-step-guide.pdf>.

People making a claim to Universal Credit can also apply for a non-repayable grant from the Universal Credit Contingency Fund through the Discretionary Support Scheme. Anyone wishing to apply for a Universal Credit Contingency Fund grant can do so by completing an online form which can be found at: www.nidirect.gov.uk/publications/discretionary-support-form.

Further immediate financial support is also available for anyone struggling financially while waiting for their first payment of Universal Credit by applying through their online account for a repayable advance payment of up to 100% of their estimated entitlement. In addition, and in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, from 6 April 2020, the Universal Credit standard allowance increased for everyone by £86.67 a month for one year. This has been extended to October 2021.

A person considering making a claim for benefit can access the 'entitled to' benefit calculator to get an estimate of how much Universal Credit they may be entitled to <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/benefits-adviser>

Anyone currently in receipt of Tax Credits should read the information on www.gov.uk/working-tax-credit/further-information before making a claim to Universal Credit.

As Tax Credits is administered by HMRC, I am unable to provide detail in relation to any potential financial support for a person in receipt of Tax Credits and Maternity Allowance.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities whether her Department will provide funding for the Sion Mills master plan.

(AQW 16860/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Sion Mills is classed as a village, and as such, would fall under the remit of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Communities when she will bring forward recommendations for the resumption of non-contact, non-elite sporting events, such as equestrian sports, which are governed on an All-Ireland basis.

(AQW 16863/17-22)

Ms Hargey: On the 16 March, the Executive announced the 'Pathway out of Restrictions' plan which provides a measured approach to the easing of restrictions and one that will facilitate the safe return of outdoor sport, including equine sports, as part of the first cautious steps.

At this time there is no confirmed date for the resumption of non-elite outdoor competitions but they are part of Phase 2 of the Executive's Pathway out of Restrictions.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Communities to detail the communication her Department has had with relevant sporting bodies on (i) the impact of restrictions on children's organised sport; and (ii) the subsequent impact on mental health and wellbeing.

(AQW 16928/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I fully recognise the challenges that all our young people and society in general have had to face during the course of the pandemic. The impact on sport has been significant and it is a credit to all those coaches and clubs who have continued to engage with their young members via social media and other platforms to ensure that they are safe, have remained active and are ready to get back to playing their sport.

I can confirm that my Department and SportNI have recently held a number of online meetings with the sports sector, representing both outdoor and indoor sport, in relation to planning for a safe return to sport. I can also advise that I met with the governing bodies and have heard at first hand the impact the restrictions have had, particularly on our young people.

The 'Pathway out of Restrictions' plan provides a measured approach to the easing of restrictions and one that will facilitate the safe return of outdoor sport, including children's organised sport, as part of the first cautious steps.

The Executive announcement means that:

- from 1 April, up to 10 people (including children of all ages) from a maximum of two households can participate in outdoor sports activities; and
- from 12 April, up to 15 people (including coaches) can participate in outdoor sports training, through clubs affiliated to recognised sports Governing Bodies.

The return of outdoor sporting activities will have a positive impact in terms of the mental health and wellbeing of not just young people but of wider society.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities for an indicative date for the resumption of non-contact, non-elite sporting events, such as equestrian sports.

(AQW 16937/17-22)

Ms Hargey: On the 16 March, the Executive announced the 'Pathway out of Restrictions' plan which provides a measured approach to the easing of restrictions and one that will facilitate the safe return of outdoor sport, including equine sports, as part of the first cautious steps.

In terms of competitive sporting events, including non-contact, there is no confirmed date for the resumption but they are part of Phase 2 of the Executive's 'Pathway out of Restrictions'.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities whether she will consider working with her colleagues in the Republic of Ireland to adopt an all-island approach to the resumption of equestrian sporting events, which is governed on an all-island basis.

(AQW 16938/17-22)

Ms Hargey: On the 16 March, the Executive announced the 'Pathway out of Restrictions' plan which provides a measured approach to the easing of restrictions and one that will facilitate the safe return of outdoor sport, including equine sports, as part of the first cautious steps.

At this time there is no confirmed date for the resumption of non-elite outdoor competitions but they are part of Phase 2 of the Executive's Pathway out of Restrictions.

I can confirm that I have, along with the Department and SportNI, held online meetings with the sports sector, including Horse Sport Ireland, to provide advice and guidance on what is currently permitted. That engagement will continue as the Executive moves through the 'Pathway out of Restrictions'.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities (i) why Cycling Ireland was allocated just £14,518 from the Sports Sustainability Fund despite requesting £400,000; (ii) what checks and audits were carried out on this application; and (iii) how was the award decision reached.

(AQW 16940/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Following an initial review, as part of the standard assessment process, Sport NI contacted the applicant seeking clarification of the figures provided.

Cycling Ireland resubmitted revised figures and supporting evidence; following assessment a letter of offer was issued.

This application was subject to assessment, vouching and verification within SportNI, in line with the process set out in the Sports Sustainability Fund's Guidance Notes - Programme Guidance Notes (<http://www.sportni.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Revised-Governing-Body-Guidance-Notes-17.12.2011.pdf>).

Department of Education

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 15536/17-22 (i) why 326 of these contracts or 25% of them do not have social clauses; and (ii) what is the monetary value of those 326 contracts.

(AQW 16213/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Social considerations should be integrated into public procurement when they are relevant to the subject matter of the contract and when certain value thresholds apply. The Northern Ireland Procurement Board (NIPB) set out the approach to be taken in this regard in PGN 01/13.

The currently live contracts that do not include social clauses include:

- multiple contracts awarded from frameworks i.e. where the original procurement was not undertaken by the EA;
- contracts where the supplies/services did not meet the requirement for inclusion of social clauses/buy social (due to subject matter or value); or,
- where the contract was a legacy contract awarded prior to the requirement to consider the inclusion of social clauses. (The legacy contracts are all approaching the end of their term and replacement contracts will include social/community value/clauses.)

The total value of these contracts over their full term is £1,283,629,895.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of 4G hotspot devices ordered and allocated by school since January 2020 to date; and (ii) the number of laptops, electronic devices ordered and allocated by school since January 2020 to date.

(AQW 16425/17-22)

Mr Weir: On 21st May 2020, I announced a process to lend digital devices to disadvantaged pupils who may be unable to access devices at home, during the pandemic. The scheme for lending devices aims to ensure that resources are targeted where there is greatest need. 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 in year groups 12, 14, 7, 4, 11 and 13. Following the allocation of an initial 11,664 devices, I approved the procurement of a further 17,700 devices. These additional devices will allow the scheme to extend to pupils in the remaining year groups and up to 15 March 2021, 17,498 digital devices had been loaned to pupils.

In July, I announced free WiFi 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. Both WiFi vouchers and MiFi devices are being issued to disadvantaged and vulnerable learners in all year groups. The two options which currently exist to children are; access provided via a British Telecom 'Hotspot' using a voucher, or alternatively, young people working from home in rural areas will receive a MiFi device with a built in data allowance. The scheme has been extended to the end of July 2021. Up to the 15 March 2021, 6,577 vouchers and 2,046 MiFi devices have been allocated.

I have arranged for the information requested to be placed in the Assembly Library. The figures provided relate to the time period ranging from January 2020 to the 15 March 2021.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the total level of COVID-19 related expenditure from his Department since 1 March 2020; and to provide an overview of each scheme or policy funded under this heading.

(AQW 16538/17-22)

Mr Weir: In total my Department has received c£171.3m in Executive funds in the 2020-21 financial year to address COVID-19 related Education requirements, as detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Description	Total Funding allocated 2020-21 £m
Free School Meals Payments – Holiday Hunger	6.5
Free School Meals Payments – Term-time	44.1
Extension of Free School Meals to Youth	0.4
Funding for Childcare Providers - for ongoing sustainability support and for periods of COVID-19 temporary closures	30.5
Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) - including funding for hand sanitiser, face coverings, disposable aprons and eye protection	12.8
Non Statutory Pre School Settings - to meet staffing pressures due to absences and additional costs for cleaning and set-up between sessions	4.9
Engage Programme - to provide additional support to pupils to engage with learning following the COVID-19 lockdown period	12.1
EA Pressures - to cover lost income from school meals, school trips, cleaning service and music service	14.5
Wellbeing - to promote the wellbeing of children & young people on adjusting to the world as impacted upon by COVID-19	5.0
Schools lost income	5.7
Outdoor Learning / Residential Centres	1.0
Pathway Initiative	0.4
Schools - including funding delegated to schools, maintenance, and in-year growth	22.2
Special Educational Needs - including special school substitute cover, mainstream / pupil support, special schools lost learning and COVID-19 testing	4.4
Teaching & Non-Teaching Substitute Cover - to cover staff absences due to COVID-19	0.9
C2K - to provide funding for further software packages	1.6

Description	Total Funding allocated 2020-21 £m
EA Additional Cleaning	0.7
Standards and Learning	0.3
Transport - including loss of income, face coverings and additional costs for dedicated additional school routes	2.8
Departmental Staff Costs	0.5
Total	171.3

I have also allocated £16.2m from my Education budget for COVID-19 requirements relating to Teacher Substitution costs, CCEA Exam costs, Free School Meals, Lost Income and other Education Authority and staff costs.

Given that the 2020-21 Financial Year has not yet closed, I am unable at this time to provide expenditure against these budgets. However this information will be available later this year after departments submit their Provisional and Final Outturn returns to the Department of Finance.

In addition to the amounts noted above c£1.9m of expenditure was incurred in March 2020 for Free School Meals payments arising due to COVID-19.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education (i) whether he has received specific advice from the Department of Health for the return to Sure Start programmes; and (ii) when all Sure Start programmes will return in light of decisions taken by the Executive on 16 March 2021.

(AQW 16567/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Northern Ireland Executive's 'Pathway out of Restrictions' approach sets out that by the end of phase two (Cautious First Steps) there will be a resumption of the Sure Start programme.

At its meeting on the 25 March, the NI Executive agreed my proposals for a phased resumption of Sure Start, allowing child only services to open with immediate effect. Restart is subject to implementation of a range of COVID risk mitigations, based on advice from the Department of Health, Chief Medical Officer and deputy Chief Scientific Adviser.

My Department is liaising with the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) which administers Sure Start on the Department's behalf, to ensure that the mitigations required by the Executive are in place, prior to the resumption of these services.

It is my intention to resume the full range of Sure Start services, including programmes attended by parents, as soon as it is safe to do so and as determined by the Executive.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Education what consideration has been given to (i) lowering the price of secondary school uniforms; and (ii) increasing the grant to assist with uniform costs.

(AQW 16582/17-22)

Mr Weir: The wearing of a school uniform and the price of school uniforms are not matters governed by legislation but fall to schools and the suppliers of uniforms for those 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. I have also asked schools to show flexibility around the issue of school uniforms in these extraordinary times.

The guidance on school uniforms 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 issue of uniform grants is to be considered by the Department as part of its work with Department for Communities on the anti-poverty strategy.

I trust you find this information useful.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 15819/17-22, (i) whether the planned strategic area plan for special schools and specialist provision in mainstream, and any accompanying improvements, will be completed in time to help pupils in the 2021-22 school year who have so far been unable to get a place at the school closest to their home; and (ii) what interim measures he is considering to help these pupils.

(AQW 16605/17-22)

Mr Weir: As noted in AQW 15819/17-22, the Education Authority (EA) is currently consulting on two draft frameworks which set out the vision, rationale and delivery plans for special educational needs (SEN) provision in special and mainstream schools across Northern Ireland. Both consultations close on 12 April 2021.

In parallel the EA on behalf of the Department, is consulting on a pilot proposal to develop, test and agree a new process that will facilitate the establishment, closure or change of specialist provision in (sustainable) mainstream schools in an efficient and expedient manner without the requirement for a Development Proposal, but consistent with the EA's Draft Framework for Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools. The EA are expected to submit consultation reports and amended Frameworks to the EA Board and the Department for my approval and endorsement if appropriate, in July 2021.

Work continues with the EA's Special Educational Needs Strategic Development Programme (SDP) to identify and address potential pressures for school places for children with a statement of SEN by September 2021. The EA is actively engaging with schools, both special schools and specialist provision in mainstream, to identify physical capacity to accommodate additional resource provision, especially within particular geographical areas.

Departmental officials are attending regular EA cross-service group meetings with EA Directors to monitor progress on placements for September 2021. This work is also monitored by the SEN Governance Group chaired by the Permanent Secretary.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education when he will bring forward legislation to deliver a flexible school starting age. (AQW 16616/17-22)

Mr Weir: The issue of flexibility in school starting age for individual pupils is a key priority for me in the current mandate. Policy development and public consultation will take time to ensure we have a sound policy and evidence basis on which to move forward. My officials have begun scoping out the policy work which might support future change.

My immediate focus is on assessing the implications of any change 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 given effect under primary legislation.

Additionally, the Department will need to assess the impact on the work of its educational partners, including the Education Authority, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment. An extensive public consultation will also be required.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Education whether his Department will provide guidance for children in the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable category who are due to return to school. (AQW 16638/17-22)

Mr Weir: Shielding for 'clinically extremely vulnerable' (CEV) people was paused on 31 July 2020. Advice in relation to those classed as CEV is kept under review by the Chief Medical Officer and his team, to ensure the advice is tailored to reflect the current status of the virus in Northern Ireland.

The most up to date information can be found at Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance for 'clinically extremely vulnerable' and 'vulnerable' people | nidirect (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-and-vulnerable-people>).

The Department revised the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Guidance for Schools and Education Settings ([https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Coronavirus Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings - March 2021.pdf](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Coronavirus%20Guidance%20for%20Schools%20and%20Educational%20Settings%20-%20March%202021.pdf)) on 5 March 2021, and this is in line with the current public health advice.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) the funding assigned to the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework; and (ii) given the increasing need and supports required for school age students as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, whether he will commit to a future increase in funding. (AQW 16710/17-22)

Mr Weir: £5m recurrent funding has been made available by my Department to support implementation of the Framework, and the Health Minister has agreed to provide an additional £1.5m on a recurrent basis from 2021/22 onwards.

Additionally, £5m was made available in 2020/21 as part of the Education Restart Programme, direct to all schools (nursery, primary, post primary, special), as well as Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) and youth settings, to help address wellbeing pressures arising as a result of COVID-19. By receiving their own allocation, settings will benefit from having the flexibility to use the money to provide health and wellbeing support for their pupils and/or staff.

A further £5m bid has been submitted for 2021/22 to further meet the wellbeing pressures arising as a result of COVID-19.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, since the formation of the Education Authority in 2015, (i) how many school buildings have been sold, including their location; (ii) what is the total amount of revenue realised by these sales; (iii) how was the revenue used; (iv) are there any plans to build any further special schools on the sites of existing derelict schools, including the location. (AQW 16739/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) Thirty two properties have been sold since the formation of the Education Authority in 2015 (see Table 1 below).
- (ii) The total amount of revenue realised is £7,152,824.66 (less expenses related to disposals process).
- (iii) All revenue realised is returned to the Department of Education for reinvestment in the schools' estate.
- (iv) The EA is working with Special School leaders to address capacity pressures within this sector. The EA is looking at immediate, medium term and longer term strategic changes that are required to meet the increasing capacity required for the special schools' estate and to this end all available options are being considered.

Table 1- Properties Disposed of by the EA since 2105

Locality	Property Name	Location	Year of Disposal
E	Andrews Memorial PS	Newtownards	15/16
SW	Bridgehill PS	Castledearg	16/17
N	Garvagh Museum	Garvagh	16/17
E	Hilden Integrated PS	Lisburn	16/17
N	Land at Rathfern Estate	Newtownabbey	16/17
N	Land at Seacourt PS	Larne	16/17
E	Lisnasharragh HS	Belfast	16/17
E	Mersey Street PS	Belfast	16/17
E	School of Music Porters Memorial Annex	Belfast	16/17
E	Ballylesson PS	Belfast	17/18
N	Beechgrove Special School	Ballymena	17/18
N	Drumlegagh PS (Part of)	Newtownstewart	17/18
N	Dunfane Special School	Ballymena	17/18
N	Garvagh HS - Land	Garvagh	17/18
SW	Keady PS	Keady	17/18
N	Newtownabbey Community HS	Newtownabbey	17/18
E	Taughmonagh Youth Club	Belfast	17/18
E	Tyrella PS	Downpatrick	17/18
N	Ballykeel Playing Fields	Ballymena	18/19
N	Carnalridge PS	Portrush	18/19
N	Ebrington PS– (part of new site)	Londonderry	18/19
N	Rathcoole PS	Newtownabbey	18/19
E	Scrabo HS	Belfast	18/19
SW	Castledearg Transport Centre (Part of)	Castledearg	19/20
SW	Charley Memorial PS	Dunmurry	19/20
N	Former Ebrington PS (part of)	Londonderry	19/20
N	Gracehill PS	Ballymena	19/20
SW	Minterburn PS	Caledon	19/20
N	Bellarena PS	Limavady	20/21
N	Former Castle Tower School	Ballymena	20/21
N	Rosstulla School	Newtownabbey	20/21
E	Turf Lodge Youth Club	Belfast	20/21

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether he has any plans to build new special schools in the next three years, including their location.

(AQW 16740/17-22)

Mr Weir: I can advise that major capital works are currently in progress at Rossmar Special School, with further works planned for Ardnashee School & College, at a combined total cost of approximately £48.5m.

There is currently no live call for further major works projects at special schools, however significant investment is planned at a number of existing schools through the School Enhancement Programme (SEP) to address medium term needs and, more immediately, through the minor works programme to meet an anticipated rise in demand for places in September 2021.

The longer term needs of the sector will be considered following completion of the current consultation on the area planning framework for special schools by the Education Authority (EA), which will result in the EA bringing forward a new area plan.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) the individual statutory bodies or organisations that have, or will, been given places on both the working group and the reference Group on Restraint and Seclusion; (ii) whether any parents with a lived experience of restrictive practice on the reference group; and if not, to provide the rationale for their omission from the group.

(AQW 16741/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Restraint and Seclusion Working Group includes membership from the Departments of Education, Health and Justice, the Education Authority and the Education and Training Inspectorate (in an advisory role).

Membership of the Reference Group is from: the Northern Ireland (NI) Human Rights Commission; the British Association of Social Workers (NI); the Children's Law Centre; the Equality Commission for NI; the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People; Children with Disabilities Strategic Alliance; Barnardo's; the Red Cross and the Chief Allied Health Professions Office.

My officials are engaging with advocacy groups directly during the course of the review and indeed have already met with parents who have lived experiences. Officials are also making arrangements to undertake a parental survey to ensure that a broad range of evidence underpins any recommendations for change.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education for an update on his Department's negotiations with Invest NI and Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council to facilitate the land sale or transfer for the agreed rebuild of Portadown Integrated Primary School, including a timeline of discussions held with Land and Property Services.

(AQW 16744/17-22)

Mr Weir: My officials continue to give priority to the identification of an appropriate site for Portadown Integrated Primary School. Despite substantial efforts from everyone concerned over a long period of time a suitable site has not yet been identified.

Land and Property Services have been acting on behalf of my Department on this project since June 2014 on an ongoing basis. My officials are continuing to engage with all relevant stakeholders to identify an appropriate site for the school.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Education for an update on the progress of the major refurbishment works being undertaken at St Patrick's Primary School, Holywood.

(AQW 16760/17-22)

Mr Weir: There are currently no major refurbishment works being undertaken at St Patrick's Primary School in Holywood. The School was not submitted by its managing authority, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), for consideration under either of the most recent Major Capital Works or the School Enhancement Programme (SEP2) calls.

A minor works scheme for additional accommodation was completed in 2018 and included a Resource room, SEN room and refurbishment of an existing classroom. A fire risk scheme applied for under the 2017 joint call for minor works, is currently being considered. Five other applications received under that call have not been prioritised to progress at this time.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education when will he announce his decision in regard to Development Proposal, No.646, St John the Baptist College Portadown.

(AQW 16785/17-22)

Mr Weir: Officials are currently finalising the details of the submission to me in relation to Development Proposal (DP) 646 which proposes to establish Key Stage 4 provision at St John the Baptist's College, Portadown together with an annual phased increase in the school's enrolment number from 300 to 500 with effect from 1 September 2021, or as soon as possible thereafter. As soon as this has been completed, it will be submitted for my consideration and ultimate decision.

I assure you that I will make my decision on the proposal without any undue delay.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to outline the work his Department is undertaking to improve health and safety issues surrounding parking and vehicle congestion at Saint Conor's Primary School in Omagh.

(AQW 16794/17-22)

Mr Weir: In January 2020 the Department of Education (DE) completed a traffic management scheme at St. Conor's Primary School. This scheme was deemed the best option within the school grounds to alleviate the traffic management issues at the school. However, due to the lack of additional area within the school grounds, DE are unable to facilitate pupil drop off/ collection or additional car parking.

Whilst, my Department does not have responsibility for traffic management or road safety beyond the school boundary, my Officials are currently working with the school and other Agencies, to ascertain if there is a viable solution to improve health and safety issues surrounding parking and vehicle congestion at the school

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the proposed catch-up summer scheme for primary school, post-primary school and EOTAS settings in July/August 2021.

(AQW 16797/17-22)

Mr Weir: DE officials are working together to develop a policy on a Summer Scheme for up to three weeks during July/ August. The programme will be voluntary and settings will be provided with funding to deliver a programme suited to the needs of their learners.

The main purpose of the programme is to help pupils make a successful return to school in September 2021. The focus will be on emotional health and wellbeing, as well as activities which are interactive and fun, with plenty of scope for outside play, and for learning activities as and where appropriate, for pupils to be provided with the support they need, relevant to their setting and their needs. The programme is being offered to primary and post-primary schools and EOTAS settings.

I will be seeking the support of the NI Executive and funding for these summer programmes.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Education what action has been taken to implement the recommendations of the Gillen Review Report into sex and relationship education for school children in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16818/17-22)

Mr Weir: All publicly funded schools in Northern Ireland are required to deliver the statutory curriculum which includes Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) through Personal Development and Mutual Understanding at primary level and Learning for Life and Work at post-primary level.

The recommendations of the Gillen Review falling to my Department are currently covered within these areas of the learning. Beyond the statutory minimum content, as in all areas of learning across the curriculum, schools and teachers have the flexibility to decide the topics and approaches that best suit their pupils and how that fits with the school's overall ethos. This presents a number of advantages in relation to the teaching of RSE. Schools and teachers are able to use their professionalism to update and align curricular learning to reflect evolving societal thinking and behaviour.

During the last number of years my Department has provided additional funding to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to support the production of RSE resources and guidance materials, particularly on a range of sensitive topics. In June 2019, CCEA launched a new online RSE Hub to facilitate easy access to these resources. This approach is aimed at enhancing the teaching of RSE in schools by providing teachers with resources and support to increase their competence and confidence in this area. It is a matter for schools to decide which, if any, of these resources they use to inform the development and delivery of an RSE programme.

This year, I have provided additional funding to CCEA to enable further development of the RSE hub including the production of new resources and guidance materials and adaption of existing resources for those children with special educational needs. The hub will be updated with these new resources following piloting and consultation with key stakeholders.

CCEA is also developing a Curricular Progression Framework which will set out clearly for schools the key issues that should be covered at each Key Stage.

My Department is also liaising closely with colleagues in the Department of Justice (DOJ), who have lead responsibility for taking forward the recommendations set out in the Gillen report. Officials are part of DOJ's Education and Awareness Working Group which is a cross departmental multi-agency group established to raise awareness and education in Northern Ireland of issues highlighted in the review.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) his plans for the Education Restart Programme in schools; (ii) how many additional teachers have been temporarily employed to provide the additional services needed; and (iii) whether he has confirmed the budget allocation for the Education Restart Programme for the 2021/2022 financial year.

(AQW 16845/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Restart Programme is a programme of work carried out by a team within the Department of Education. The team liaise with key stakeholders to ensure school is a safe place for all and that mitigations and guidance is in place.

The Department of Education, the Department of Health, the Education Authority and the Public Health Agency have worked closely throughout the pandemic to maintain the education of children, to reduce the risk of outbreaks and to respond when these occur.

This work continues and the proposed phases under the Executives' "Pathway out of Restrictions" has been informed by the scientific and medical evidence and the advice provided by the CMO and CSA.

My officials continue to engage 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 inform my, and the Executive's, decisions.

As part of the EA response to COVID, The Education Through Covid programme 'stood up' an Emergency Resourcing Team in January 2021 to support schools and ensure they remained as open and operational as possible. However this team was only for support staff and not teachers. The EA advertised for classroom assistants, cleaners and catering staff and created a 'call off' list.

In terms of additional teachers - COVID funding for schools enables them to employ substitute teachers from the NISTR register, however it is up to schools individually to secure these staff.

Given the timing in relation to Executive agreement of the 2021-22 Budget, I am not presently in a position to confirm the budget allocation for the Education Restart Programme 2021/22.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the Sure Start services provided by location across Northern Ireland; (ii) the number of children and families accessing each service during 2019/2020 and 2020/2021; and (iii) his plan and scheduling for the full restarting of Sure Start services.

(AQW 16846/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) The Sure Start programme is delivered by 38 Sure Start projects located in the most disadvantaged areas across Northern Ireland. Information on the location of each of these projects and the services they provide can be found at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/sure-start-services>.
- (ii) Details of the numbers of children and families accessing Sure Start services during 2019/20 are provided in the table below. Details in respect of 2020/21 will not be available until after the end of the financial year.

	Numbers of Registered Children Accessing Sure Start Services	Numbers of Registered Families Accessing Sure Start Services
2019/20	41,114*	36,093

* Includes those children who, having reached their fourth birthday left the Sure Start Programme at some stage during the year

Source: Health and Social Care Board (HSCB)

- (iii) At its meeting on the 25 March the NI Executive agreed my proposals for a phased resumption of Sure Start, allowing child only services to open, with immediate effect. Restart is subject to implementation of a range of COVID risk mitigations based on advice from the Department of Health, Chief Medical Officer and the deputy Chief Scientific Adviser.

It is my objective to resume the full range of Sure Start services, including programmes attended by parents, as soon as it is safe to do so and as determined by the Executive.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the expansion options considered in Coleraine so all nursery pupils with special educational needs can be given a place at a school in the town for the academic year 2021/22; and (ii) what plans will be put in place to accommodate increased numbers of nursery pupils with special educational needs in Coleraine for the academic year 2022/23.

(AQW 16852/17-22)

Mr Weir: There are no actions in the current area plan in relation to the expansion of nursery provision in Coleraine. The Education Authority's (EA) Pre-School Education Group (PEG) is responsible for securing sufficient mainstream pre-school education provision in local areas to meet demand for target-age children. The EA has advised that there is currently sufficient provision to meet demand in the Coleraine area, with 340 funded pre-school places available and with 268 first preference applications received.

Any request for new or additional statutory pre-school education provision would require the publication of a Development Proposal, in line with the relevant statutory processes. The EA is currently consulting on two draft Area Planning Frameworks, which are open until 12 April 2021 and aim to provide a consistent regional approach to provision and which will help to inform future Area Planning priorities.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education to detail his plans for the creation or expansion of child outdoor education facilities in Northern Ireland as a whole, and in the East Londonderry constituency.

(AQW 16854/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) is responsible for youth service delivery and undertook a comprehensive review of Statutory Residential and Outdoor Learning Services in 2017 resulting in the establishment of a new framework to improve the educational experiences and outcomes for children and young people provided by these services.

The framework document - Residential and Outdoor Learning Service Provision - Moving Forward, remains current and can be accessed on the EA's website via the following link:

<https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-10/Residential%20and%20Outdoor%20Learning%20Service%20Provision%20-%20Moving%20Forwards%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>

Regarding voluntary provision, four organisations which deliver outdoor learning services have been successful in securing funding through my Department's Voluntary Youth Capital project scheme. These are the Northern Ireland Scout Council, Crawfordsburn (c. £600k); Share Discovery Village, Lisnaskea (c. £580k); Girlguiding Ulster, Holywood (c. 580k), and Riding for the Disabled, Maghera (c. £500k). There are no outdoor centres in the East Londonderry area being considered under the current Voluntary Youth Capital project scheme.

In addition to the above initiatives, and in recognition of the operational challenges faced by outdoor education centres due to the public health situation, I have made available £1m Covid relief funding for both voluntary and statutory Outdoor Education provision to enable them to remain viable and resume services as restrictions allow.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the right sizing proposal at Bunscoil Cholmcille, Derry. (AQW 16883/17-22)

Mr Weir: Bunscoil Cholmcille asked to reduce its approved admissions and enrolment numbers under the voluntary downsizing element of the Department's Resetting for Area Planning process.

The process has now concluded. It has been agreed that Bunscoil Cholmcille's admissions and enrolment numbers will reduce to 20 and 140 respectively with effect from September 2022.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Education for a breakdown of the current curriculum surrounding (i) financial management; (ii) saving; and (iii) assisting in the understanding of credit scores and mortgages. (AQW 16904/17-22)

Mr Weir: Financial Capability, including budgeting and money management, is a statutory element of the curriculum. Schools are required to provide pupils with opportunities to develop a range of skills to promote independence through planning, managing and using resources, across a number of areas of learning.

By the end of Key Stage 2, via teaching of Number, most learners are expected to interpret a calculator display when solving money problems, make choices about spending and value for money and know different ways in which payments for goods can be made. Pupils should also be taught to be able to plan and think ahead in terms of saving and spending money.

At post-primary level (key stages 3 and 4), pupils should be enabled to develop further their competence as discerning consumers in preparation for independent living. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA) offer a number of qualification options that enable young people to develop their Financial Capability skills and use this learning to gain certification. Such qualifications include: GCSE Learning for Life and Work; Level 1 and 2 Preparation for Adult Life; as well as established qualifications in Mathematics and Economics.

Also at Key Stage 4, pupils can be taught to understand the implications of credit and debt including overdrafts and different loan arrangements, and ways to compare interest rates, within the area of financial knowledge and understanding. Financial responsibility is also taught which raises awareness and understanding of the wider implications of personal financial decisions.

The CCEA GCSE in Learning for Life and Work includes substantial content on making financial decisions based on a knowledge of personal loans, current accounts and different savings schemes. This also includes learning about the consequences of poor budgeting and the dangers of fraud and identity theft.

Through its Financial Capability microsite CCEA provides schools with resources and links to case studies and ideas on how to provide opportunities for pupils to engage in activities related to money management, relevant to all key stages.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Education whether he has any plans to introduce a compulsory requirement to teach personal budgeting and financial management to the Learning for Life and Work Programme. (AQW 16926/17-22)

Mr Weir: Financial Capability, including budgeting and money management, is a statutory element of the curriculum. Schools are required to provide pupils with opportunities to develop a range of skills to promote independence through planning, managing and using resources, across a number of areas of learning.

By the end of Key Stage 2, most learners are expected to interpret a calculator display when solving money problems, make choices about spending and value for money and know different ways in which payments or goods can be made.

At post-primary level, pupils can be taught to understand the implications of credit and debt including overdrafts and different loan arrangements and ways to compare interest rates, within the area of financial knowledge and understanding. Financial

responsibility is also taught, which raises awareness and understanding of the wider implications of personal financial decisions.

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA) offer a number of qualification options that enable young people to further develop their Financial Capability skills and use this learning to gain certification. Such qualifications include: GCSE Learning for Life and Work; Level 1 and 2 Preparation for Adult Life; as well as established qualifications in Mathematics and Economics.

Through its Financial Capability microsite CCEA also provides schools with resources and links to case studies and ideas on how to provide opportunities for pupils to engage in activities related to money management.

I am confident that the curriculum we have in place caters for our young people to learn about the transition from school life into adulthood, via a range of learning opportunities and experiences.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Education whether substitute teacher payment support will be extended to cover periods of partial or phased return.

(AQW 16927/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Income Support Scheme for Substitute Teachers 2021 was initially announced to cover the period to 12 February, and has since been extended to 31 March 2021. I have no plans to extend this support further, as schools are expected to fully reopen for all pupils after the Easter break.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether he will provide advice to schools in relation to the future use of transfer tests.

(AQW 16931/17-22)

Mr Weir: The future of the transfer tests is directly related to future decisions about the use of academic selection which will be a matter for the Executive. I support the right of those schools that use academic selection to do so. Schools are equally free not to use academic selection.

The use of the results of the transfer tests in setting their admissions criteria is, by law, a matter for the Boards of Governors of individual schools. The Department plays no role in this process other than to provide general guidance in relation to the transfer process for all pupils moving from primary to post primary school. All schools are required to have regard to that guidance but they are not legally required to follow it.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the installation of CCTV cameras in special schools.

(AQW 16939/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) assess and make recommendations for the installation of CCTV at the request of Special Schools for the purposes of safeguarding and security of children and staff. Where CCTV is installed in Special Schools, the EA also assume responsibility for its maintenance and repair.

The EA's Information Governance team has made advice available for schools on the EA Think Data Online Resource Hub at (<https://www.eani.org.uk/about-us/privacy/ea-think-data-online-resource-hub>). This advice provides guidance in relation to the use of CCTV in schools including a CCTV Code of Practice, which is available at www.ico.org.uk and a recommendation to consider a carrying out a Privacy Impact Assessment when considering the use of CCTV. Advice and guidance is also provided on the secure retention, disclosure and authorised access to recorded material and the EA's Information Governance team is also available to provide schools with further advice and guidance on request.

Department of Finance

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW15365/17-22, whether he will review the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) criteria for hairdressers and other close contact services businesses in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area for the period 5 October 2020 to 15 October 2020 as hairdressers and other close contact services businesses were not permitted by the regulations to operate between those dates yet have been deemed ineligible for LRSS in that period.

(AQW 16174/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 introduced by the Department of Health on 5 October did not require hairdressers and other close contact services to close during the period to 15 October. As the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme was introduced to provide financial assistance for businesses directly restricted by the Health Protection Regulations, I am unable to extend support to any close contact service for that period. The criteria for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) is directly linked to the Health Protection Regulations and there is no need to review the criteria.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Finance (i) for an update on his Departments work with the Building Regulations Advisory Committee and other Departments to independently improve local energy efficiency standards for new buildings; and (ii) whether he intends to make any changes to building regulations in the current Assembly mandate to meet zero-carbon targets.

(AQW 16246/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My officials are continuing to engage with the Building Regulations Advisory Committee and its technical sub-committee on Part F (Conservation of fuel and power) of the Building Regulations with the intention of bringing forward an uplift to the relevant technical booklet guidance within this assembly mandate, if possible.

I provided a detailed briefing paper to the Finance Committee on proposals on 2 February 2021. Assessment of local impacts as well as technical issues relating to grid access for on-site renewables generating electricity, the software used in the assessment process and potential compatibility with future developments in other jurisdictions are providing challenges. My officials are continuing to progress work towards resolution of these issues.

In terms of the longer term ambition of zero-carbon, the Department is considering a provisional programme for a phased set of uplifts to Part F over the next ten years. This draft programme has been provided to the Finance Committee and to the Energy Strategy team in the Department for the Economy. It is proposed to consult on this and a wide range of technical considerations as part of a Discussion Document after the 2021 uplift to Part F guidance has been progressed.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance (i) whether he has reconsidered support for Sports Social Clubs who have not had access to the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme; (ii) how much such support would cost; and (iii) whether his Department has carried out an assessment of the impact on the clubs that have not had support under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

(AQW 16278/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

- (i) The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme was established to provide support to businesses required to cease trading or significantly curtail their normal services by the Health Protection Regulations. Sports clubs are not considered to be businesses because they are not established and operated to generate a profit for the owners. Support for Sports Clubs is the responsibility of the Department for Communities. I have allocated £25 million to that department for the Sports Sustainability Fund.
- (ii) It is not possible for my Department to assess the cost. Responsibility for sport rests with the Department for Communities.
- (iii) It is not the responsibility of my Department to assess the impact on clubs. Responsibility for sports clubs rests with the Department for Communities.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 5609/17-22, whether the cost has been reimbursed to the public.

(AQW 16379/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Yes.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether Estate Agents will be included in 100 per cent Non-Domestic Rates Relief planned in 2021/22.

(AQW 16398/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The business rate relief measures which I announced on 11 March 2021 were informed by updated expert research from the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre. This research recognised that whereas most sectors of the economy have been impacted by the ongoing crisis, some have been impacted more significantly than others. This work assisted the Executive in its decision on the scale and targeting of rate relief to business sectors for the coming year. Statutory Regulations will shortly be made and these will detail the specified business uses to be included for relief within the retail, hospitality, leisure, tourism, childcare and manufacturing sectors, as well as airports and newspaper production facilities. I do not intend to include retail estate agents and retail letting agents in this relief in 2021-22.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance what categories of nature based solutions his Department is considering for future investment.

(AQW 16416/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The new social value policy will set out how the imperative of reducing carbon emissions will be integrated into procurement. I am working with the Procurement Board to develop an enhanced social value model which will look to reduce carbon emissions through the performance of government contracts both with the main contractor and associated supply chains. This will include a target of developing procurement strategies and specifications that:

- Deliver additional environmental benefits in the performance of the contract including working towards net zero greenhouse gas emissions.
- support environmental protection and improvement.

- encourage supply chains that minimise carbon emissions.
- encourage companies to employ low or zero-carbon practices and/or materials

I am a member of the Inter-Ministerial Group on Green Growth which is overseeing the development of a Green Growth Strategy on behalf of the Executive.

My officials are also liaising with colleagues in other Departments on related cross-departmental issues which include the development of an Energy Strategy with the Department for the Economy, and 'Future Generations' work on carbon reduction planning with the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

It is for the Executive and individual Ministers to decide how this wider strategic framework will help inform future investment priorities including nature based solutions.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Finance how he plans to create employment in the area of nature-based solutions.
(AQW 16434/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I am a member of the Inter-Ministerial Group on Green Growth which is overseeing the development of a Green Growth Strategy on behalf of the Executive.

Policies and underpinning guidance that promote nature-based solutions will have to be considered as part of the wider Green Growth strategy and the wider commitment to contribute to Net Zero. It will be for the Executive and individual Ministers to determine the investment priorities required to deliver the agreed strategic outcomes going forward including job creation opportunities.

With regard to my Department, the new social value policy will set out how the imperative of reducing carbon emissions will be integrated into procurement. I am working with the Procurement Board to develop an enhanced social value model

which will look to reduce carbon emissions through the performance of government contracts both with the main contractor and associated supply chains.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Finance what level of funding support is available for the Northern Ireland Centenary celebrations.
(AQW 16441/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Northern Ireland Office (NIO) has a £3m fund. A number of initiatives have been announced by NIO and are being rolled out.

The member will know that; within the Executive, we are working to a flat budget this year. However; if departments wish to take forward events in relation to the Centenary, they may be able to find funding within their own budgets. Alternatively; they are free to bid at monitoring rounds and the Executive will decide collectively on funding priorities at these rounds.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether he will publish the options paper he received prior to announcing additional COVID-19 support schemes on the 15 March 2021.
(AQW 16484/17-22)

Mr Murphy: It is not normal practice to publish internal papers relating to the development of the policy proposals that are presented to the Executive. I see no pressing need for an exception to be made in this case.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance to detail the reasons for excluding car garages from the most recent COVID-19 support grants, while including car showrooms.
(AQW 16519/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Garages are not eligible for support under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) because a business providing motor vehicle repair and MOT Services is classed as essential under the Health Protection Regulations and has therefore been permitted to remain open during the period of the restrictions. Car showrooms are classed as non-essential retail and were required to close, and are therefore eligible for payment under the LRSS.

If a garage qualified for a Small Business Support Grant last year, and has not been able to avail of support through any other Executive Covid-19 support scheme, it will qualify for payment under the Small Business Top Up grant scheme which I announced on 15 March 2021.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to detail all the office estate that his Department (i) owns; and (ii) leases.
(AQW 16570/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department of Finance's Properties Division (PD) provides accommodation to all NICS departments, and some of their ALBs, based on their stated requirements. The office accommodation can be in owned or leased properties.

The office estate that my Department (i) owns; and (ii) leases is detailed in the tables below.

Owned DoF Office Estate as at March 2021

	Owned Office Estate	Address
1	Dungannon JBO	36 Thomas Street, Dungannon
2	Omagh JBO	19 Mountjoy Road, Omagh
3	Strabane JBO	18 Urney Road, Strabane
4	Enniskillen JBO	14 Queen Elizabeth Rd, Enniskillen
5	Cookstown SSO	38 - 40 Fairhill Rd, Cookstown (Vacant)
6	Castle Barracks	Castle Barracks, Enniskillen
7	Omagh County Hall	Drumragh Ave, Omagh
8	Elmview	20 Derry Road, Strabane
9	Deverney	32 Deverney Road, Omagh
10	Inishkeen House	21 Lough Yoan, Killyhelvin, Enniskillen
11	Marlborough House	2 Central Way, Craigavon
12	Armagh JBO	10 Alexander Street, Armagh
13	Ballynahinch SSO	8 Crossgar Rd, Ballynahinch
14	Banbridge JBO	18 Castlewellan Rd, Banbridge
15	Downpatrick SSO	9 - 11 Mount Crescent Downpatrick
16	Kilkeel JBO	58 Newry Street, Kilkeel
17	Newcastle SSO	2 Beverley Gardens, Valentia Place, Newcastle
18	Newry JBO	40 Bridge Street, Newry
19	Portadown JBO	84 -140 Jervis Street, Portadown
20	Lurgan JBO	Alexander Crescent, Lurgan
21	Rathkeltair House	Market St, Downpatrick
22	Glenree House	Unit 2, Springhill Road, Newry
23	Dundonald House	Dundonald House, Stormont Estate
24	Annexe D Dundonald House	Annexe D, Dundonald House, Stormont
25	Stormont Castle	Stormont Castle, Stormont Estate
26	Castle Buildings	Castle Buildings, Stormont Estate
27	Ladas Drive	83 Ladas Drive, Belfast
28	Hollywood Road JBO	106 -108 Hollywood Road ,Belfast
29	Shankill JBO	Shankill Rd J &BO 15-29 Snugville Street, Belfast
30	Knockbreda JBO	210 Upper Knockbreda Road, Belfast
31	Newtownabbey JBO	39 - 41 Church Road, Newtownabbey
32	Rathgael House	Balloo Road, Bangor
33	Fermanagh House	20A Ormeau Avenue, Belfast
34	Falls Road JBO	19 Falls Road, Belfast
35	Netherleigh	Massey Avenue, Belfast
36	Newtownards SSO	8 East Street, Newtownards
37	Careers Resource Centre	56 - 58 Ann Street, Belfast
38	Clarence Court	10 - 18 Adelaide Street, Belfast
39	College Street	34 College Street, Belfast
40	Carrickfergus JBO	1 Davys Street, Carrickfergus

	Owned Office Estate	Address
41	Larne JBO	45 Pound Street, Larne
42	Courier HQ	Courier Headquarters, Stormont Estate
43	Queens Court	Upper Queen Street, Belfast
44	Victoria Hall	Victoria Hall, 12 May Street, Belfast
45	Falls Road SAU	43 - 47 Falls Road, Belfast
46	Craigtanlet Buildings	Stoney Road, Stormont, Belfast
47	Castle Cottages	Stormont Estate Superintendent Office, Belfast
48	Annexe B Dundonald House	Annexe B Dundonald House, Stormont Estate, Belfast
49	DVA Corporation Street	148 - 158 Corporation St, Belfast
50	Massey House	Massey House, Stormont Estate, Belfast
51	Adelaide House	39 -49 Adelaide St, Belfast
52	Hillview Buildings	Stormont Estate, Belfast
53	Causeway Exchange	1 – 7 Bedford Street Belfast
54	Clare House	303 Airport Road West, Belfast
55	James House	Gasworks Commercial Park, Belfast
56	Colby House	9 Stranmillis Court, Belfast
57	Stormont House	Stormont Estate, Belfast
58	Knockview Buildings	Stormont Estate, Belfast
59	Andersonstown JBO	580a Falls Road, Belfast
60	Ballymena JBO	2 Parkway, Ballymena
61	The Stables	The Stables, Stormont Estate, Belfast
62	Walled garden	Unit 2 Walled Garden, Stormont Estate, Belfast
63	Seatem House	Seatem House, 28 - 32 Alfred St, Belfast
64	2-4 Bruce Street	2 - 4 Bruce Street, Belfast
65	Laganside House	23 - 27 Oxford Street, Belfast
66	Rivers HQ Loughry	49 Tullywiggan Road, Loughry, Cookstown
67	Ballykelly House	111 Ballykelly Road, Ballykelly, Limavady
68	Ballymena County Hall	182 Galgorm Rd, Ballymena
69	Coleraine County Hall	7 Castlerock Road, Coleraine
70	Foyle JBO	14 Asylum Road, L/derry
71	Coleraine JBO	8 Artillery Road, Coleraine
72	Antrim JBO	20 Castle Street, Antrim
73	Ballymoney JBO	37 - 45 John Street, Ballymoney
74	Limavady JBO	9 Connell Street, Limavady
75	Magherafelt JBO	31 Station Road, Magherafelt
76	1 Crescent Road	1 Crescent Road, L/derry
77	Orchard House	40 Foyle Street, L/derry
78	86 Main Street, Limavady	86 Main Street, Limavady
79	Academy House	121a Broughshane Street, Ballymena
80	Lisnagelvin JBO	2 Crescent Road, L/derry
81	Waterside House	75 Duke Street, L/derry

Leased DoF Office Estate

	Leased Office Estate	Address
1	Sperrin House	Sedan Avenue, Omagh
2	Boaz House	15 Scarffe's Entry, Omagh
3	Lisburn JBO	Bow House, 69 - 71 Bow Street, Lisburn
4	Centre House	79 Chichester Street, Belfast
5	Bangor SSO	110 Hamilton Road, Bangor
6	Castle Court	Royal Avenue, Belfast
7	Bankmore House	62 - 66 Bedford Street, Belfast
8	Conor Building	107 - 111 Great Victoria Street, Belfast
9	Park House	87 - 91 Great Victoria Street, Belfast
10	Design Centre	39 Corporation Street, Belfast
11	Oakbank	Unit 5, Bays 6-8 Oakbank Commercial Park, Belfast
12	Goodwood House	Goodwood House, 44 - 58 May Street, Belfast
13	SSA Superstore	Dargan Crescent, Belfast
14	Klondyke Building	Gasworks Commercial Park, Belfast
15	Killymeal House	Killymeal House, 2 Cromac Quay, Gasworks, Belfast.
16	Molesworth Plaza	Ground Floor, Molesworth Plaza, Cookstown
17	Meadowlane	Meadowlane Shopping Centre, Magherafelt
18	Castleton House	Castleton House, Trench Road, Mallusk
19	Atek Building	Units 4/11 Edenaveys Industrial Estate Armagh
20	Sketrick House	16 Jubilee Road, Newtownards
21	Lanyon Plaza	7 Lanyon Place, Belfast
22	9 Lanyon Place	9 Lanyon Place, Belfast
23	Carlisle House	Hawkin Street, L/derry
24	Progressive House	33 - 37 Wellington Street, Belfast
25	Queens House	10 -18 Queen Street, Belfast
26	Linum Chambers	Bedford Street, Belfast

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the implementation of the Non-Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive Report recommendations.

(AQW 16572/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Members of the Executive Subcommittee on Reform following the RHI Inquiry have agreed a draft report setting out the response to the Inquiry and the actions that are required to fulfil the remaining recommendations of the Inquiry report. This report was forwarded to the Executive on 26 March.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Finance what rates bills assistance is available for wholesale distributors that have been impacted by the closure of non-essential retail customers.

(AQW 16587/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The business rate relief measures which I announced on 11 March 2021 are informed by updated expert research from the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre. This research recognised that whereas most sectors of the economy have been impacted by the ongoing crisis, some have been impacted more significantly than others. This work assisted the Executive in its decision on the scale and targeting of rate relief for the coming year, recognising the need to prioritise this support to where the need is greatest, given the resources available.

That analysis did not identify general wholesale distributors supplying non-essential or non-food retail customers as in the group of greatest need. It did, however, identify the food service supply chain of wholesalers and distributors who purchase from the agri-food manufacturers and sell to the hospitality sector is a high priority sector. Although this relatively small sub-

sector merited targeted support, identifying and appropriately supporting these properties through the rating system presents practical challenges; they could be considered for support by the Department for the Economy.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance what direct assistance has been provided to BAME communities and organisations to complete the census.

(AQW 16590/17-22)

Mr Murphy: A number of steps have been taken to provide assistance to the Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) population in the census.

Census translation booklets have been produced in a number of languages including Arabic, Bulgarian, Cantonese, Czech, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Mandarin, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Slovak, Somali and Tetum. These booklets can be accessed online or hard copies requested via the Census contact centre. The Census website also provides translated information in these languages on how and when to complete the Census. A dedicated language support line is also available on 0800-5872021 with interpreter support in over 50 languages. Details of this support were highlighted in census packs sent to all households at the start of March.

Last year, officials gave presentations on the census at the Racial Equality Sub Group and other BAME community fora. This included the Belfast Migrant Forum, Regional Travellers Health and Wellbeing Forum and the Stronger Together Network.

Officials also engaged with 70 BAME-focused community groups and voluntary organisations. Information leaflets in 17 languages were provided to each of these community groups to help raise awareness of the census in the BAME population. Other information regarding the census was also shared including recruitment opportunities, links to resources and general information. In total 28 BAME focused

community groups were also given census information briefing sessions. BAME-focused community groups have supported the census in a variety of ways including through social media and providing information through their networks.

Officials have also briefed public bodies and statutory organisations who provide support to the BAME community on the Census. Census briefing was given to Good Relations officers in local councils, Health Trusts, the Public Health Agency, the Education Authority and the Housing Executive. These organisations have shared census messaging including the help and support available to the BAME population.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance when the various grant schemes he announced on 15 March 2021 will open for applications.

(AQW 16598/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Land & Property Services is currently bringing forward the Regulations for the new schemes needed to make these payments and planning their implementation. They are putting resources in place to ensure applications can be processed as quickly as possible, and will release further information on eligibility once the Regulations are made.

Land & Property Services intends, where possible, that payments under these schemes will be automatic, based on rating information and the data gathered during the administration of previous schemes.

It will be necessary for businesses to apply for the Large NAV Property Scheme. An online grant portal for applications is scheduled to open in the coming weeks.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether he intends to consider extending the Non Domestic Rates Relief in 2021-22 to those in the non-essential retail supply chain who have experienced a severe downturn in trade as a result of the COVID-19 Public Health Restrictions.

(AQW 16637/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The business rate relief measures which I announced on 11 March 2021 are informed by updated expert research from the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre. This research recognised that whereas most sectors of the economy have been impacted by the ongoing crisis, some have been impacted more significantly than others. This work assisted the Executive in its decision on the scale and targeting of rate relief for the coming year, recognising the need to prioritise this support to where the need is greatest, given the resources available.

That analysis did not identify general wholesale distributors supplying non-essential or non-food retail customers as in the group of greatest need. It did, however, identify the food service supply chain of wholesalers and distributors who purchase from the agri-food manufacturers and sell to the hospitality sector is a high priority sector. Although this relatively small sub-sector merited targeted support, identifying and appropriately supporting these properties through the rating system presents practical challenges; they could be considered for support by the Department for the Economy.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance how many staff absences occurred in each Executive Department due to mental health, including work related stress, in (i) 2019; and (ii) 2020.

(AQW 16655/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The number of sickness absence spells due to anxiety, stress, depression or any psychiatric illness, and the number of those spells that related specifically to work related stress are detailed in the table below for the 2019/20 financial year and the 2020/21 financial year to date. It is not possible to produce statistics on a calendar year basis.

Department	April 2019 - March 2020 ¹		April 2020 – December 2020 ¹	
	Anxiety, Stress, Depression or any other Psychiatric Illness	Work Related Stress	Anxiety, Stress, Depression or any other Psychiatric Illness	Work Related Stress
DAERA	211	47	130	33
DE	49	13	23	5
DfC	995	205	574	113
DfE	94	23	55	19
DfI	265	82	149	53
DoF	334	69	171	36
DoH	37	12	23	7
DoJ	397	154	298	95
PPS	47	10	25	*
TEO	24	11	16	9

Source: HR Connect

¹ The figures are presented in the format of financial year consistent with the National and Official Statistics.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance to detail the specific Barnett Consequential allocated to the Executive for the Job Start scheme.

(AQW 16668/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Chancellor in July 2020 announced the Kickstart Scheme. DfC is developing a JobStart scheme which is similar to the Kickstart scheme, funding for this will be considered by the Executive as part of its Final Budget

The funding for the Kickstart scheme is across 3 years and the Executive will receive Barnett Consequential of new funding in each of those years.

In 2020-21, as a result of funding provided to the Department for Work and Pensions for the Kickstart scheme, the Executive received £0.7 million Resource DEL funding. Further funding was provided in the Spending Review settlement for 2021-22, but as all Spending Review settlements are based on departmental outcomes, this was not broken down by individual measure.

As with all funding received through the Barnett formula it is for the Executive to decide how this should be allocated.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance how many staff absences occurred in each Department due to COVID-19 infection.

(AQW 16722/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The number of sickness absence spells due to COVID-19, from 1st April 2020 until 31st December 2020 are detailed in the table below.

Department	Number of Sickness Absence Spells due to COVID-19
DAERA	95
DfC	351
DfE	27
DE	11
DoF	85
DoH	12
DfI	113
DoJ	148

Department	Number of Sickness Absence Spells due to COVID-19
TEO	7
PPS	5

Source: HR Connect

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance how many staff absences have occurred in each Department due to self-isolation. (AQW 16723/17-22)

Mr Murphy: NICS employee absence records includes information in relation to staff who have been granted special paid and / or unpaid leave in relation to Covid-19 due to self-isolation. The total number of occurrences of paid and unpaid special leave due to Covid-19 self-isolation between February 2020 and March 2021 is set out in the table below.

Department	No. of Occurrences	Staff Headcount (at end Feb)
DAERA	339	3247
DE	14	532
DfC	1,609	6,951
DfE	67	1,172
DfI	884	2,973
DoF	189	3,492
DoH	9	498
DOJ	421	3,312
PPS	62	444
TEO	9	315
Total	3,603	22,936

Source: HRConnect

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance to detail (i) the properties his Department owns in Newry and Armagh that are currently unused; (ii) the annual cost of maintaining these; and (iii) the plans for their future use. (AQW 16728/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department does not own any property in Newry and Armagh that is currently unused.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance whether his Department now accepts that close contact businesses in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area were unable to trade due to COVID-19 regulations in the period 5 October 2020 to 15 October 2020 and are therefore eligible for financial support under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme; and when businesses that have previously been disallowed for that period will be paid. (AQW 16761/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I refer the Member to my Answer to AQW 16174/17-22.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Finance what is the projected under-spend of COVID-19 related funding for this financial year. (AQW 16774/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Since the January Monitoring outcome was announced in the Assembly further allocations of both Covid and non-Covid related funding have been made to departments ensuring that all easements declared by departments have been reallocated. Full details of these have been provided in Written Ministerial Statements the most recent of which was on 25 March 2021.

At this stage departments have not forecast underspends against the allocations.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Finance to detail the plans for a Connect 2 Hub in Omagh. (AQW 16792/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Planning for the Connect2 hub in Omagh is in its early stages and the location and details of the facility remains to be determined. At present, it is envisaged that the Omagh Connect2 will open in 2022.

My officials have already met and will continue to meet with the Chief Executive of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and her team to explore options to maximise the local regeneration and impact of the hub.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance, in relation to COVID assistance, whether sport clubs which qualified for support from the Sport Sustainability Fund could also qualify for separate support from hospitality support funding.

(AQW 16807/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The only scheme which my department operates which provides financial support to hospitality businesses is the Local Restrictions Support Scheme.

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 had to declare income from any other Covid related schemes, including LRSS, for consideration in the assessment of their award. My department and the Department for Communities have been sharing data on the applications received to our respective schemes.

A separate business attached or located within a club's premises, such as a shop, bar or restaurant business, which is owned by an operator who is independent of the club, and which is restricted by the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions), is eligible to apply to and receive support from the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Finance what measures are in place to restock the woodland areas on the Stormont Estate, following the felling of multiple trees throughout the woods.

(AQW 16811/17-22)

Mr Murphy: A woodland management plan was commissioned in April 2016 with the objective of providing a framework to achieve the long term sustainable management of the woodlands within the Stormont Estate. The plan covers a 15 year period with recommended work being taken forward in stages.

The plan includes recommendations for replanting and the recently cleared area is currently being prepared to facilitate restocking with native broadleaves.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 16234-17-22, when the water supply will be restored to the fountain and pond at the Reconciliation Statue in Stormont Estate; and to place a copy of the Stormont Estate Conservation Management Plan 2019-2029 in the Assembly Library.

(AQW 16812/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The water feature at the Reconciliation Statue was decommissioned and the water supply isolated in 2019. Work is due to commence shortly on a landscaping feature to complement the statue which will not include a water element.

A copy of the Stormont Estate Conservation Management Plan 2019-2029 has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance (i) to detail the number of staff in each Department that have been temporarily promoted during each of the last three years; (ii) to account for any increased numbers who have been acting-up above their normal role, over the last year; and (iii) what actions are being taken to reduce the need for temporary promotions and to ensure that permanent staff are in place.

(AQW 16918/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

(i) The numbers of temporary promotions over the last 3 years is set out in the table below.

Department	Number of Staff Temporarily promoted			Number of staff in post month ending February 2021
	Month Ending February 2021	Month Ending February 2020	Month Ending February 2019	
DAERA	391	248	268	3,247
DE	65	55	45	532
DfC	626	542	642	6,951
DfE	139	93	153	1,172
DfI	159	136	168	2,973
DoF	313	276	265	3,492

Department	Number of Staff Temporarily promoted			Number of staff in post month ending February 2021
	Month Ending February 2021	Month Ending February 2020	Month Ending February 2019	
DoH	92	79	73	498
DOJ	187	224	156	3,312
PPS	33	38	31	444
TEO	32	32	28	315
Total	2,037	1,723	1,829	22,936

Source: HR Connect

- (ii) Temporary promotions are managed by business areas within individual Departments. Temporary promotion arrangements are designed primarily to meet business and management needs. The need for such arrangements can arise for a variety of reasons e.g. to cover the absence of a member of staff or the creation of a short-term temporary post. It may also be necessary to temporarily fill a substantive vacant post until the vacancy can be filled permanently.
- (iii) A NICS rolling recruitment plan is in place to fill affordable vacancies across departments. Decisions on when to refer vacancies to the centralised NICSHR, in the Department of Finance, to actively fill on a permanent basis lies with individual departments. Decisions on when to put in place temporary resourcing arrangements, such as temporary promotions, also rest with departments. Monthly workforce management information is circulated by Department of Finance to departmental boards, including details of the number, reason and duration of temporary promotions to support departments in their resourcing decision-making.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance how the recruitment mechanisms in the civil service have adapted over the last year as a result of COVID-19; and what lessons have been learnt from the private sector which has had to adapt quickly their recruitment methods.

(AQW 16919/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Recruitment to the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) was paused for a short period immediately following the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown restrictions in March 2020.

The NICS worked closely with the service provider, HRConnect, and staff representatives to quickly develop and implement alternative methods of carrying out recruitment in order to mitigate any delays caused by these restrictions.

After a pause (mid-March to mid-July), recruitment competitions recommenced with online interviewing, proctored assessments (which means confirming candidate's identity and online invigilating) and adjustments to selection procedures for some competitions. These approaches are also being used by other public sector organisations and private sector employers.

The final phase assessment centre for the external recruitment to General Service staff officer and deputy principal posts has been paused due to the impact of the current pandemic restrictions on the external service provider HRConnect, and the nature of the assessment for this competition. It is not possible to move the assessments online because of the risk to the integrity of the presentation, written and verification tests.

The NICS continues to keep up-to-date regarding any changes to recruitment methods both in the private and public sectors, and considers all developments which may benefit the NICS recruitment processes and procedures.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether he will publish the details of his Department's most recent review of the non-domestic rating system.

(AQW 16973/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The review which commenced in May 2019 needs to be considered in the context of a completely different set of circumstances faced by our economy and business community, and also in the light of some £518 million of additional business rates support provided by the Executive in 2020-21 and now in 2021-22.

Significant progress has been made against issues raised in the public consultation. The overall high level of business rates was a major concern and in response I reduced the Regional Rate by 18% for 2020-21 and as you are aware have frozen the Regional Rate for 2021-22. As I advised you recently, I have also made two changes that had been sought to assist District Councils in relation to District Rates. I also plan to again extend the Small Business Rate Relief scheme and the Rural ATM scheme.

Department of Health

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many outpatient appointments have been cancelled by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 9657/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): From 1st April – 30th September 2020, 10,929 outpatient appointments were cancelled by the Northern HSC Trust. This includes cancellations for both new and review outpatient appointments. A significant number may have been cancelled for non-covid reasons, while many others would have been quickly rescheduled.

Between 1 July and 31 August this year Trusts had committed to delivering 130,419 outpatient consultations, and delivered 152,941.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many outpatient appointments have been cancelled by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust since the start of the pandemic.

(AQW 9822/17-22)

Mr Swann: From 1st April – 30th September 2020, 10,929 outpatient appointments were cancelled by the Northern HSC Trust. This includes cancellations for both new and review outpatient appointments. A significant number may have been cancelled for non-covid reasons, while many others would have been quickly rescheduled.

Between 1 July and 31 August this year Trusts had committed to delivering 130,419 outpatient consultations, and delivered 152,941.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Health what proportion of care homes in (i) the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust; and (ii) Northern Ireland, have implemented weekly COVID-19 testing for all residents and staff.

(AQW 11168/17-22)

Mr Swann: The regular programme of care home testing is undertaken through the National Testing Programme; known as Pillar 2 of the Northern Ireland testing arrangements.

All care homes are required to submit a daily return to the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) on COVID-19. As part of that return, care homes are asked to report if they have completed testing on that day. PHA has advised that a review of the information submitted by care homes to the RQIA has verified that all care homes across Northern Ireland are using the National Testing Programme (Pillar 2) for the regular programme of weekly testing of care home staff.

On the 3 November 2020, I announced there would be an increase to the frequency of the regular programme of COVID-19 testing for staff working in care homes, moving from fortnightly to weekly testing. All staff working in the care home on the day that the testing is undertaken should be tested as part of the regular programme of COVID-19 testing in care homes.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health what percentage of the clinically extremely vulnerable group, including people with cystic fibrosis, have received their first COVID-19 vaccination.

(AQW 14238/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is not possible to state with certainty the total number of clinically extremely vulnerable people vaccinated prior to Priority Group 4 by reason of their age. The member will be aware there will be overlap between age cohorts and the clinically extremely vulnerable.

However, to date, 46,131 people identified as clinically extremely vulnerable have been vaccinated with a first dose and 2,424 people have had their second dose.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health with regard to the membership of the Gender Identity Service Pathway Review Group, whether any of the individuals or organisations are also involved with the Gender and/or LGBTQ+ Social Strategies.

(AQW 14623/17-22)

Mr Swann: Currently, none of the members of the Review Group are involved with the gender and/or LGBTQ+ social strategies. However, recently a Service User Liaison Panel was established by the HSCB to assist the Review Group in taking forward this work. Some panel members are also members of organisations who are involved in the Gender and/or LGBTQ+ Social Strategies and two Co-chairs of the panel will be selected by the Patient and Client Council and they will also become members of the Review Group.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the training and qualifications that are offered to Health and Social Care workers in relation to eating disorders.

(AQW 14747/17-22)

Mr Swann: Staff working in Specialist Eating Disorder services are highly trained and multi-modal in their approach. Most therapeutic staff will have as a minimum training in at CBT-Enhanced and/or MANTRA as per NICE guidance. Many staff also have qualifications in Psychodynamic therapeutic approaches, Mentalisation based therapy (MBT), Dialectical Behaviour

Therapy (DBT), Interpersonal Therapy (IPT) or a scattering of other approaches. This allows for a degree of creativity and individualism in the approach whilst remaining within an evidenced management plan.

Each Health and Social Care Trust has developed its own training opportunities to Health and Social Care workers working outside of the specialism. The range across the 5 Trusts is too extensive to list but the most commonly used approaches are: the use of a course provided by the Clinical Education Centre; the provision of modules by Recovery Colleges; and training of medical students.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health, following his announcement in relation to rapid testing for Northern Ireland hauliers travelling to France, (i) how this process was set up; (ii) what procurement process was followed in purchasing the Lateral Flow Devices; (iii) when this process commenced; and (iv) how many hauliers have availed of this service to date.
(AQW 14771/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) Testing was made available following engagement involving the Department of Health and the Department for Infrastructure, which regulates the haulage industry, local Universities and representatives of the freight haulage sector.
- (ii) The Lateral Flow Devices used for testing are provided by the Department of Health & Social Care, London as part of the National Testing Programme.
- (iii) Testing has been available since 1st February 2021.
- (iv) 14 tests have been undertaken by HGV drivers as of 23 March 2021.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 13751/17-22, what arrangements are in place to introduce a replacement Cross Border Healthcare scheme, separate to the transitional arrangements.
(AQW 14808/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Cross-Border Healthcare Directive ceased to apply to the UK from 31 December 2020. However, transitional arrangements are in place to protect patients in prescribed circumstances allowing them to complete their treatment and seek reimbursement.

Historically there has been significantly more use of the Cross-Border Healthcare Scheme in Northern Ireland than any other part of the UK and I appreciate the interest in the continuance of a similar scheme.

I have asked my officials to rapidly consider the policy options to the principles of the Cross-Border Directive in this post EU Exit environment and consider any resulting consultation and legislative requirements.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to review the categories of those deemed clinically extremely vulnerable to COVID-19, including adding (i) young people; or (ii) those with non-severe asthma.
(AQW 14816/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are currently no plans to review the categories of those deemed CEV to Covid-19 to include young people or people with non-severe asthma.

People are included on the Shielded Persons List on the basis of their medical conditions. The intention from the outset has been that the list would be dynamic and that, where supportive evidence emerged, conditions could be added or removed from the list, subject to consideration of the four UK Chief Medical Officers.

There is no evidence that non-severe asthma renders a person clinically extremely vulnerable to Covid-19. Evidence from the Living Risk Prediction Algorithm (QCOVID) estimates that the risk of death due to Covid-19 is lower than average for women with asthma when other factors are taken into account whilst the mortality risk for men is not significantly different from the average.

The mortality risk is also lower for younger people.

In Northern Ireland, in addition to being added to the Shielded Persons List (SPL) by virtue of having one of the qualifying conditions, people can be added to the list based on the recommendation of their primary or secondary care clinician.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health what steps his Department is taking to implement a new scheme to replace the Cross Border Healthcare Directive.
(AQW 14830/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Cross-Border Healthcare Directive ceased to apply to the UK from 31 December 2020. However, transitional arrangements are in place to protect patients in prescribed circumstances allowing them to complete their treatment and seek reimbursement.

Historically there has been significantly more use of the Cross-Border Healthcare Scheme in Northern Ireland than any other part of the UK and I appreciate the interest in the continuance of a similar scheme.

I have asked my officials to rapidly consider the policy options to the principles of the Cross-Border Directive in this post EU Exit environment.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health what provisions are in place for, and what advice can be given to, those individuals working in GB and EU countries and have received communication regarding a COVID-19 vaccination and are registered in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 15049/17-22)

Mr Swann: Temporary NI residents, who are temporarily, i.e. less than 3 months, in GB should be encouraged to get their vaccination from their own GP. This will assist with planning for their 2nd dose as well as practice allocations. People from within NI who have stayed or are planning to stay in GB for more than 3 months should register with a new practice.

The safety and security of those working abroad is the responsibility of the local authority where they are. Those working abroad should, therefore, keep up-to-date with the latest advice for the country where they are currently working, and the requirements for their return home.

Those returning to NI should refer to the latest advice at the link below:-

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-international-travel-advice>

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health when his Department stopped using test, trace, isolate and support mechanisms when trying to locate the source of COVID-19 infection.

(AQW 15258/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Public Health Agency (PHA) continues to follow the Test, Trace and Protect Strategy approved by the Northern Ireland Executive in May 2020.

The Strategy can be accessed at:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/covid-19-test-trace-protect-support-strategy>

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health (i) for an update on the status of the Cross-Border Healthcare Scheme (EU Directive 24/2011 on Cross-Border Healthcare); (ii) to detail the number of patients who accessed the scheme in each of the last five years; and (iii) whether he has any plans to replace the scheme to allow patients access to care in the Republic of Ireland or elsewhere in the EU.

(AQW 15387/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- i The 2011/24/EU Cross Border Healthcare Directive Scheme closed down on 31st December 2020 as the EU Directive no longer applies to the UK. However transitional arrangements for patients from Northern Ireland whose treatment had been, applied for, authorised or commenced, on or before 31st December 2020 have been provided for and they will be able to complete their treatment and seek reimbursement.
- ii. The table below provides detail on the number of applications which were approved under the Cross Border Directive route in each of the last five years.

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020 (April-Dec)
Number of applications approved	139	409	918	1483	1148

Notes:

- 283 applications in the 2020/21 year are currently being processed and pending funding approval.
 - The nature and timing of treatment will depend on the patients clinical circumstances and may not take place in the same financial year as approval or may result in multiple treatments over different financial years.
 - Patients who have approval may not have proceeded with treatment outside Northern Ireland.
 - Patients may not submit receipts in the same year as approval.
- iii. The Directive 2011/24/EU scheme is linked to the free movement of services. It has always sat separately from the social security coordination rules that provide 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. However officials are currently considering the policy around an alternative scheme

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the top-up funding being made available for dentists in 2021/22; (ii) his plans for ensuring the security and sustainability of Health Service dental treatment in the next financial year, and long-term; and (iii) the number of dentist surgeries offering Health Service dental treatment for each of the last three years.

(AQW 15395/17-22)

Mr Swann: To support the sustainability of practices throughout the pandemic the Department established the General Dental Services (GDS) Financial Support Scheme (FSS), which provides an additional payment to eligible General Dental Practitioners (GDPs) each month based on the average gross (including patient contribution) monthly Item Of Service (IoS) payments received by a GDP in 2019-20. There has been approximately £47m FSS payments made since April 2020.

The FSS has been continued until the end of June 2021 and support beyond June remains under consideration.

The number of general dental practices offering a Health Service treatment is published by the Business Service Organisation on an annual basis. Tables 1.2 and 1.3 in the Annual Dental Statistical tables provide the requested information and are available via the following link:

<http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/services/3173.htm>.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health to detail each occasion he has meet with representatives of older people's groups and organisations since coming into post.

(AQW 15477/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information requested up to 3rd March 2021 is detailed in the tables below.

Meetings with representatives of older people's groups and organisations since coming into office.

11/02/2020	Meeting with Dunmurry Manor Relatives Group
14/02/2020	Meeting with the Service User Engagement Group as part of the Reform of Adult Social Care.
03/03/2020	Meeting with AGENI
11/03/2020	Meeting with Julieann McNally, Colm Gildernew MLA, Brian Heading Councillor Lisburn and Castlereagh Council and other relatives of Dunmurry Manor Residents
01/05/2020	Conference Call with COPNI on elderly care COVID related issues
06/06/2020	Meeting with Newington Day Centre to launch of the Carer Support Service.
10/06/2020	Conference Call with COPNI on elderly care COVID related issues
02/07/2020	Meeting with representatives from the Alzheimer's Society
29/07/2020	Catch-up Conference Call with COPNI on testing and visiting in care homes and other elderly care issues.
07/12/2020	Meeting with Carers NI to discuss the Carers UK report 'Caring behind Closed Doors'.
16/12/2020	Meeting with British Geriatrics Society.
27/01/2021	Meeting with COPNI to discuss issues facing older people and Dunmurry Manor Care Home
02/02/2021	Meeting with Carer Groups to discuss a one-off payment to carers.
02/03/2021	Conference Call with COPNI re Care Partners

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether staff redeployed to COVID-19 services will be given respite that is separate from their annual leave entitlement post-pandemic.

(AQW 15576/17-22)

Mr Swann: I would like to take this opportunity to again thank all our health and social care staff for the incredible effort over the last year. I continue to be amazed at the commitment, dedication and hard work of all our staff.

I have now asked our Trusts to proceed with developing rebuild plans, an important key principle of which is that our hard pressed staff are given the opportunity to take some well-deserved annual leave.

In addition, the Department has introduced a scheme whereby HSC Staff can voluntarily opt to receive payment for unused leave above the statutory minimum of 5.6 weeks. Therefore, it would not be appropriate to have a scheme for providing staff the option to sell back some of their excess annual leave, while offering additional leave.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the impact of the Mental Health Order 1986 as it relates to those under 16 years old.

(AQW 15591/17-22)

Mr Swann: Mental health legislation exists to protect some of the most vulnerable people in society. The Mental Health (NI) Order 1986 allows for the compulsory admission, detention and treatment of patients suffering from a mental disorder or mental illness. Without mental health legislation, care and treatment for those who need it would not be possible. As such the Mental Health Order is essential for the wellbeing of all people who suffer from mental ill health. The Mental Health Order is age neutral and applies equally to all persons, regardless of age.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the range and extent of medicines that are likely to be subject to reduced supply during the agreed period when there will be a phased process for implementing medicines regulations that takes place up to 31 December 2021, and then from January 2022, when adherence to EU medicines regulations is required.

(AQW 15675/17-22)

Mr Swann: An agreement between the UK Government and EU Commission was reached to give the pharmaceutical industry 12 months from 1 January 2021 to comply with regulatory requirements. From 1st January 2022 industry will have to supply medicines to NI that comply with the packaging and labelling requirements of the EU Falsified Medicines Directive and also comply with additional batch testing and certification on goods moving from GB to NI. The 12 month grace period appears, at present, to have broadly mitigated the immediate risk of companies reducing their products and portfolios available for supply to the NI market.

My Department has ongoing engagement with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) in England and the MHRA. As part of this process my officials have been notified of a small number of pharmaceutical companies who are planning to withdraw some of their products from the NI market. My Department is also liaising with DHSC who are developing guidance to inform the pharmaceutical industry of what action they need to take to be ready for 1st January 2022 and the possible mitigations the industry may need to put in place.

My Departmental officials have also been engaging with representatives from the pharmaceutical industry, including the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI) to discuss the industries plans for continuing supplies into NI from January 2022. At this stage, many pharmaceutical businesses are awaiting further guidance before making their final decisions. However, they have expressed concerns regarding the impact of regulatory differences for the continuance of the manufacturing and distribution of medicines into the NI market.

The pharmaceutical industry has also expressed concerns around the timeframe to implement any changes to their supply chain prior to January 2022. In February, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove wrote to the European Commission to seek an extension to the current 12 month grace period (for compliance with the new importation requirements for medicines) until at least 1 January 2023. The letter from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster also requested a long-term approach to ensure no barriers of any kind to the movement of medicines into Northern Ireland.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what further action he is taking to ensure that more care homes adopt the care partner approach.

(AQW 15746/17-22)

Mr Swann: With regard to the Member's Question, I would refer her to the answer to AQW 15380/17-22 provided on 12 March 2021 to Gerry Carroll MLA.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he has considered withholding payment to care homes who refuse to implement the care partner scheme.

(AQW 15882/17-22)

Mr Swann: Over £6.61m in funding has already been provided to Care Homes to help them implement visiting and the care partner scheme as set out in regional guidance. Trusts will continue to seek assurance from those homes, that this approach to visiting is maintained for residents.

Officials are continuing to engage with the sector to consider the future of the income guarantee scheme for care homes. This scheme is aimed at safeguarding the financial resilience of care home providers by guaranteeing a level of income. Where, as a result of COVID-19, a home's income reduces by greater than 20% below the previous 3 months' average, Trusts will block book 80% of beds at the regional tariff. Any continuation of the income guarantee may be linked to the implementation of appropriate visiting arrangements.

Trusts also maintain an escalation protocol and register as part of the governance framework for commissioned services (care homes and domiciliary care).

Where an individual care home reaches a level of escalation within this framework, the relevant Trust will take the appropriate action with the safety and care of the residents being the main concern.

Under the Regional Residential and Nursing Home contract there are a number of contractual actions that can be taken by a Trust, including suspension of new admissions, issue of performance notices, withholding of sums and termination of contract.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of (i) the impact on NHS patients in Northern Ireland of the slower rollout of the vaccination programme in the Republic of Ireland; and (ii) specifically the capacity of the Republic of Ireland to resume services which are offered on an all-Ireland basis.

(AQW 15996/17-22)

Mr Swann: All-island health services have not been impacted by the vaccination programme in the Republic of Ireland.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, pursuant of AQW 12533/17-22, whether the closure of beds in Holywell is included in the figure for the Northern Health and Social Care Trust as having 10 inpatient beds for people with addictions. (AQW 16071/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has indicated that it has no intention to close the 10 Addiction Beds in the Trust and that they are currently temporarily closed due to the impact of COVID-19.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many people have been detained under the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 in each of the last three years.

(AQW 16106/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information provided by Health and Social Care Trusts on the number of people detained under the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 in each of the last three years, is indicated in the table below.

Trust	Year			Total
	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	
Belfast	433	466	407	1,306
Northern	128	151	149	428
Southern	131	119	154	404
South Eastern	275	324	379	978
Western	87	88	79	254
				3,370

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Health whether patients and their families have been affected by “Do Not Resuscitate” consultations not being agreed fully.

(AQW 16548/17-22)

Mr Swann: Established clinical and professional guidance is in place to support clinicians in decision-making and providing quality treatment and care for people towards the end of life. This includes the General Medical Council’s ‘Treatment and care towards the end of life: good practice in decision making’ which outlines key principles and models to underpin decision-making, including decisions relating to cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and The British Medical Association, Resuscitation Council and the Royal College of Nursing guidance ‘Decisions relating to Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation’. In addition, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) Guidelines such as NG142 End of Life Care for Adults and NG31 Care of Dying Patients in the Last Days of Life also provide guidance for clinicians in providing care for people at the end of life.

A Regional Ethical Advice and Support Framework for Northern Ireland has been developed to assist and support clinical decision making during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Framework was developed by the regional HSC Clinical Ethics Forum, with membership drawn from a wide range of clinicians from health and social care, representatives from HSC Trust Clinical Ethics Committees, representatives from the Critical Care Network, Palliative Care in Partnership and the Frailty Network, as well as a range of lay members including hospital chaplains. The Forum also engaged with a number of interested parties (such as the Patient and Client Council and NI Ambulance Service) and reference groups (such as Disability Action and the Alzheimer’s Society) at different points in the development of the Framework.

The Framework sets out a series of ethical principles in a rights-based approach and applies at all levels of health and social care delivery in hospitals, care homes and the community. The Framework notes that clinical decisions should continue to be guided by the codes of professional practice as well as available evidence and provides links to relevant legislation on human rights, disability, equality and consent. Importantly, it re-emphasises that all clinical staff are required to act in accordance with professional guidance and with their legal obligations.

A link to the latest version of the Framework (September 2020) is provided below.

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/COVID-19-Guidance-Ethical-Advice-and-Support%20Framework.pdf>

It is important to stress that blanket decisions about cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) based solely on age, disability or a senior clinician’s view of quality of life are discriminatory and unethical. All treatment decisions, including decisions in relation to cardiopulmonary resuscitation, must be individual to each patient and follow the relevant professional and legal frameworks. This principle is set out in the professional guidance noted above and also in the regional Ethical Advice and Support Framework for Northern Ireland.

Decisions about cardiopulmonary resuscitation are best made as part of a holistic approach to advance care planning (ACP) which includes timely, honest and sensitive discussions with a person to identify their wishes, feelings, beliefs and values for their future care including, where they are content to discuss this, their wishes in relation to cardiopulmonary resuscitation in the event of a cardiac or respiratory arrest.

When a decision about future CPR is being considered there must be a presumption in favour of involvement of the person in the decision-making process if they are able to do so. If she or he lacks mental capacity or is unable to communicate what their wishes are, the senior clinician with clinical responsibility for the patient, in conjunction with the clinical team, has responsibility for making what are known as 'best interests' decisions about the person's treatment and care. Those close to them must be involved in discussions to explore the person's wishes, feelings, beliefs and values and whilst not the final decision-makers, have an important role in helping the healthcare team to make a decision that is in the patient's best interests.

Where a decision is made not to attempt CPR, this relates only to cardiopulmonary resuscitation - all other appropriate treatment and care for the person should continue.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health what discussions he has had with the Minister for the Economy on delivering 900 nursing and midwifery undergraduate places over three years as agreed in New Decade, New Approach.
(AQW 16585/17-22)

Mr Swann: I announced on 3 May 2020 that Executive funding had been secured for an additional 300 undergraduate nursing and midwifery student places, for the 2020/21 academic year, in line with the commitment made in New Decade, New Approach. These additional places were spread across the three local universities and across the nursing and midwifery fields of practice.

Commissioning numbers for 2021/22 and 2022/23, which will include the additional 300 places for each year set out in New Decade New Approach, have not yet been confirmed.

I have not held any specific discussions with the Minister for the Economy on this matter.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to ensure greater co-operation and synergy between addiction and mental health services; and for his assessment of the current working relationship between these two services.
(AQW 16607/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am fully aware that many mental health issues can be more complex and difficult to address where a person also has a dependency on alcohol or drugs, or vice versa. The treatment of co-occurring mental health and substance use problems, frequently called "Dual Diagnosis", is an issue that was raised prominently during the recent consultation on my Department's new Substance Use Strategy and on the early development of our new Mental Health Strategy.

Responses highlighted the need to develop a more holistic treatment system to provide patient-centred care structured around the needs of individual service users.

This is why the draft Mental Health Strategy, currently out for public consultation, contains an action to create a Managed Care Network for Dual Diagnosis. This has similarly been highlighted under the priorities section of the draft Substance Use Strategy. The aim being that those with mental health and addiction issues will get the best care and treatment available. It is anticipated that both these strategies will be finalised in the near future, following analysis of the consultation responses.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the vacant sites his Department owns in West Tyrone.
(AQW 16613/17-22)

Mr Swann: The requested information is provided in the table below.

Property	Current Position
Iona House, Derry Road, Strabane	Vacant but not surplus - a clear foreseeable health need, potentially for the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service.
The former Derg Valley Hospital Building, Donaghane Road, Omagh	Vacant but not surplus. The building, which is currently being considered for demolition by the Western Health and Social Care Trust owing to poor condition, is only a part of a 4.3 acre site. One section of the site (as opposed to the building) is leased until February 2024 for educational purposes, and another section of the site is currently occupied by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of GPs required per head of the population.
(AQW 16646/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is no single accepted ratio for the number of GPs required per head of the population given the wide range of variables that apply, such as the level of health need and socio-economic conditions.

The General Practitioner Workforce Planning Group Final Report – June 2015, recommended an increase in the number of commissioned GP training places, from 65 per year in August 2015 to 111 by August 2019.

I am pleased that my Department achieved this target in August 2019; an increase of 46 commissioned GP training places (71%) on the position in August 2015.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to introduce a General Practitioners service for Millisle.

(AQW 16647/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Health and Social Care Board is responsible for commissioning General Practitioner services. The HSCB has advised that it has no current plans to introduce a General Practitioner service in Millisle. Residents of Millisle can register with nearby GP practices in Donaghadee and Ballywalter.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health what consideration has been given to the reopening of support services for parents and families through development organisations such as SureStart.

(AQW 16652/17-22)

Mr Swann: A number of support services for parents and families have continued to operate throughout COVID-19. Childcare for example, has been available to vulnerable children and the children of key workers since the beginning of the pandemic, and all children since 29 June 2021.

All 29 Family Support Hubs also continue to be open for referrals during the pandemic. These Hubs are multi-agency networks of statutory, community and voluntary organisations that work with families who need support, including the provision of early intervention service. The networks use their knowledge of local service providers to signpost referred families with specific needs to an appropriate service. Parents can make a self-referral by contacting the appropriate coordinator in their area. A full list of Hubs and coordinator contact details is available at <http://www.cypsp.hscni.net/family-support-hubs/>.

All SureStart projects have continued to provide a level of support to parents and children throughout the pandemic. When they were required to stop providing group support on-site at certain points they continued to provide many activities online, including: breast feeding support groups; parents and toddlers sessions; sensory play; story and rhyme; tiny talkers; incredible babies; baby massage and healthy cooking. SureStart staff also carried out garden gate visits, provided one to one support in centre or by phone for vulnerable children and families, and supported families to access resources where appropriate. The Executive announced on 25 March 2021 that all SureStart services for children aged 0-4 could recommence with immediate effect.

I would encourage any parent or carer who could benefit from advice, support or guidance to contact Parentline NI either at parentline@ci-ni.org.uk or on 0808 8020 400. Alternatively, the website www.FamilySupportNI.gov.uk allows parents to search from a comprehensive register of family support services in their local area.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for an update on COVID-19 Personal Protective Equipment stocks.

(AQW 16690/17-22)

Mr Swann: Business Services Organisation (BSO) currently has in excess of 400 million items of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in stock in Northern Ireland. In order to maintain the security of ongoing supply, BSO has established supply lines for the six core PPE items; disposable aprons, FFP3 respirator masks, gloves, disposable gowns, type 2R facemasks and eye protection (visors).

I have not wavered from my commitment at the outset of this pandemic that the safety of health and social care staff is paramount and access to appropriate PPE, which is fit for purpose is key to that commitment.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Health, given the trade of some wheelchair parts is being disrupted by Brexit, whether there has been any disruption to the Health Service's supply of wheelchairs.

(AQW 16733/17-22)

Mr Swann: In January 2021, following the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, there was some disruption to the supply of wheelchair parts and wheelchairs to Northern Ireland, which resulted in deliveries being delayed by 2 to 3 weeks.

This issue has since been addressed by suppliers and manufacturers. There is now only an additional 2 days transit time for deliveries.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, given the continuing absence of quarantine arrangements for arrivals into the Republic of Ireland from high risk COVID countries, what measures are in place to protect Northern Ireland from such people moving into this jurisdiction.

(AQW 16748/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Republic of Ireland introduced managed quarantine on 26th March 2021 for international travellers arriving from 'red list' countries, regardless of whether they are transiting to Northern Ireland or another country. The quarantine period is 14 days, though this may be reduced if a negative PCR test result is returned at day 10.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health given the pressure that is already on the service, including the added pressure of long COVID and its implications on patient's mobility, whether his Department has undertaken an assessment on upscaling Occupational Therapy Services.

(AQW 16763/17-22)

Mr Swann: In acknowledging the additional pressures placed on services post Covid-19, the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) has been asked to initiate work in respect of the assessment of people who continue to experience long-term health effects as a result of Covid-19 infection.

This will include the development of costed proposals for an assessment service which will include a range of HSC professions including Occupational Therapy, in line with the NICE guideline and the specification for the multidisciplinary assessment clinics recently established in England.

The HSCB is currently finalising a proposal due to be submitted to the Department next month. Once this has been received and approved the service implications for Occupational Therapy will be assessed by the Chief Allied Health Professions Officer.

The Department has already carried out a series of AHP workforce reviews including Occupational Therapy to ensure the availability of an AHP workforce capable of meeting current and future service demands. These are living documents which are continuously reviewed to take account of additional requirements as needs arise including the impacts of Covid-19.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how the £220 million extra funding allocated for social care services will be used. (AQW 16779/17-22)

Mr Swann: While the NI Executive is to receive additional funding of some £220 million in 2021/22 as a result of the Barnett consequential of the recent £7 billion funding package announced for health and social care services in England, my Department will not receive any of this funding directly. Additional funding received from the Barnett consequential is unhypothecated and it will be for the NI Executive to decide how this funding is allocated.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health (i) to detail the reasons for the continued closure of SureStart; (ii) the estimated timeframe for the re-opening of services; and (iii) to detail the conversations he has had with other Executive Ministers regarding this issue. (AQW 16789/17-22)

Mr Swann: All SureStart projects have continued to provide a level of support to parents and children throughout the pandemic. When they were required to stop providing group support on-site at certain points they continued to provide many activities online, including: breast feeding support groups; parents and toddlers sessions; sensory play; story and rhyme; tiny talkers; incredible babies; baby massage and healthy cooking. SureStart staff also carried out garden gate visits, provided one to one support in centre or by phone for vulnerable children and families, and supported families to access resources where appropriate. On 25 March 2021, it was announced that all SureStart services for children aged 0-4 could recommence with immediate effect.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health when immunotherapy treatment for mesothelioma became available in Northern Ireland; and how many people received this treatment in the last year. (AQW 16828/17-22)

Mr Swann: The "NHS England interim treatment changes during the COVID-19 pandemic," was updated on 3rd August 2020 to include the following:

Option to give Nivolumab monotherapy instead of second line chemotherapy to reduce risk of immunosuppression in the treatment of mesothelioma.

Currently Nivolumab is the only immunotherapy included in the NICE 161 guidelines for the treatment of malignant pleural mesothelioma; there are no other immunotherapies recommended by NICE for mesothelioma. Further information can be found at: <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng161/resources/interim-treatment-change-options-during-the-covid19-pandemic-endorsed-by-nhs-england-pdf-8715724381>

The first patient was treated with Nivolumab for malignant pleural mesothelioma on 9th September 2020. In total 9 malignant pleural mesothelioma patients have received Nivolumab to date.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 14744/17-22, for a breakdown of the information in the table by referral jurisdiction. (AQW 16831/17-22)

Mr Swann: To avoid the risk of personal disclosure, a breakdown by jurisdiction is not available by year. However, between 2015/16 and 2019/20, there were 128 adult mental health referrals for England and there were 14 for Scotland.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 14744/17-22, for a breakdown of the information in the table by condition or required service. (AQW 16832/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Number of Adult Mental Health Extra Contractual Referrals (ECRs), broken down by Case Type, that are supported by HSCB* is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of Adult Mental Health ECRs by Case Type.

Case Type	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	Totals
ABI & Mental Health	-	-	0	0	0	-
Eating Disorder	14	10	-	-	-	45
General Mental Health	-	-	-	-	-	11
Personality Disorder	12	13	14	15	14	68
Schizophrenia	-	-	-	-	-	11
Severe OCD	-	0	0	0	-	-
Totals	35	31	26	25	25	142

Source: Health and Social Care Board

* Excluding assessments and any treatment which took place on an outpatient basis within Northern Ireland

' - ' represents a cell count less than 5 that has been suppressed in order to avoid personal disclosure. In addition, where a suppressed cell may be deduced from the totals, appropriate cells have also been suppressed.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of people that donated organs in each of the last three years. (AQW 16834/17-22)

Mr Swann: The NHS Blood and Transplant Service provided the tabulated information below on the number of people that donated organs in years 2018-2020.

Number of Organ Donors in Northern Ireland, 2018 - 2020.

Organ Donors	2018	2019	2020
Deceased Donor	47	39	54
Living Donors	62	72	37

Source: NHS Blood and Transplant.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of people that received an organ transplant in each of the last three years.

(AQW 16835/17-22)

Mr Swann: The NHS Blood and Transplant Service provided the tabulated information below on the number of Northern Ireland residents who have received an organ transplant in each of the years 2018-2020.

Number of organ transplants to Northern Ireland residents, 2018-2020.

Organ Donors	2018	2019	2020
Deceased Donor	106	94	166
Living Donors	59	65	30

Source: NHS Blood and Transplant.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many organ transplants have taken place in each of the last three years.

(AQW 16837/17-22)

Mr Swann: The information requested was not available within the Department. The NHS Blood and Transplant Service provided the tabulated information below on the number of organ transplants in each of the years 2018-2020.

Number of organ transplants in Northern Ireland, 2018-2020.

Organ Donors	2018	2019	2020
Deceased Donor	57	49	127
Living Donors	59	65	31

Source: NHS Blood and Transplant.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health for a breakdown of the religious background of staff at Band 4 and above employed by the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 16873/17-22)

Mr Swann: This information is not held by my Department.

Under fair employment legislation all employers, including Healthcare Trusts, are required, amongst other duties, to monitor the community composition of their workforce and of those applying, being appointed, leaving or being promoted; submit an annual monitoring return to the Equality Commission.

Health sector monitoring details are provided in the Equality Commission Annual Monitoring Reports

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health what mitigations are in place to protect the (i) jobs; and (ii) pay of Health and Social Care Trust employees currently on sick leave due to long covid.

(AQW 16894/17-22)

Mr Swann: In order to mitigate any risks of COVID-19 spreading across the HSC organisation it is important that staff with symptoms do not come into the workplace. Sickness absence related to COVID-19 does not currently form part of any absence triggers, and is not be viewed as such in relation to a member of staff's sickness absence record.

Staff should receive their full pay, that is, the pay they would have received had they been at work.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health whether the Health and Social Care staff recognition payment will extend to front line workers in the voluntary and community sector.

(AQW 16936/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Officials are working to finalise the details of the Scheme as quickly as possible. The scope of the scheme in respect of paid employees in independent sector health and social care provider organisations is being clarified, including eligible employees in private commercial as well as voluntary and charitable organisations who are contracted by the HSC to provide regulated social care services.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether unpaid carers can access the Clinical Education Centre Training; and who else has access to this training.

(AQW 16955/17-22)

Mr Swann: Funded by the Department of Health, the purpose of the Clinical Education Centre (CEC) is to provide in-service education to Nurses, Midwives and Allied Health Professionals.

The CEC is not commissioned to provide education to unpaid carers.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what support will be in place for those who are Clinically Extremely Vulnerable to return to workplaces, including monitoring of workplace safety measures for COVID-19.

(AQW 16958/17-22)

Mr Swann: Guidance issued by my Department states that from 26 December 2020, Clinically Extremely Vulnerable people who are working and are able to do so from home are advised not to attend the workplace. This advice will stay in place until 11 April 2021.

From 12 April 2021, if staff are Clinically Extremely Vulnerable they should continue to work from home where this is possible.

If it is not possible, they can attend their workplace, provided their employer has taken the proper measures to ensure social distancing in their place of work, and they can travel to work in a way which allows for social distancing. Within HSC, individual managers will be required to carry out a risk assessment prior to any CEV staff member returning to the workplace. The COVID-19 risk assessment has recently been updated to reflect the latest guidance and is designed to assist in evaluating risks and the identification of control measures to reduce risk within the workplace.

All employers have a 'duty of care' for staff and, in practice, this means taking all steps they reasonably can to support the health, safety and wellbeing of their staff.

This change in advice will be subject to ongoing review of the status of the virus in Northern Ireland.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the waiting times for driving tests; and (ii) the average waiting time for those seeking a driving test, broken down by each MOT centre.

(AQW 16192/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): As this is not a normal year, assessing the current demand for driving tests is very difficult and will continue to be influenced by a range of factors beyond the DVA's control, such as COVID restrictions. It is therefore not possible to accurately provide the average waiting time for those seeking a driving test at this time.

The delivery of practical driving tests is currently suspended following the Executive's decision to increase COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in December 2020. Resumption of testing will be dependent on the timescales set out by the Executive in relation to the easing of these restrictions, which are due for review on 15 April 2021. Motor cycle testing is unaffected.

It remains 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.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure why it is necessary to abandon a section of the Crockanboy Road, Greencastle, County Tyrone, as notified in her Department's draft abandonment order IN1-20-16002.
(AQW 16314/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Requests to abandon roads in rural areas are not uncommon and in general my Department is content to initiate the process if the road to be abandoned is lightly trafficked and there are reasonable alternative routes.

In February 2016 my Department received a request from Dalradian Gold Ltd to make an abandonment Order for a length of Crockanboy Road, Greencastle, in order to facilitate their Curraghinalt Gold Mine development.

A draft Abandonment Order was published in June 2016 and a large number of objections were received. To seek to address some of the key concerns raised, a modified draft Abandonment Order, which makes provision for the construction of an alternative road to replace the section to be abandoned, was published week commencing 15 March 2021.

The objections originally received in 2016 will be carried forward to the Public Inquiry for the modified draft Abandonment Order. Those who submitted representations/objections on the original proposed road abandonment have been advised in writing of the amended proposal.

The abandonment would only proceed if the goldmine receives planning permission, proceeds to delivery and the alternative road is in place.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the establishment of an independent public transport regulatory body.
(AQW 16337/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Following EU Directive 2012/34, which established a single European railway area and set out the need for a single independent economic regulatory body for the railways in each member state, the Railways Infrastructure (Access, Management and Licensing of Railway Undertakings) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 were introduced. I can confirm that these regulations appointed the Office of Rail and Road as the independent economic regulatory body for railways within Northern Ireland.

In respect of an independent regulatory body for the bus network, the Department has not to date carried out an assessment. I have asked officials, mindful of the pressures on the Department, to prepare a submission on this issue.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how many additional driving instructors have been recruited during COVID-19; and (ii) the estimated impact this would have on the driving test backlog.
(AQW 16339/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) currently has 37 full time driving examiners and 40 dual role examiners who conduct both vehicle and driving tests. To increase driving test capacity, the DVA is in the process of completing the recruitment of an additional 30 temporary and permanent vehicle examiners, which will free up the dual role examiners to conduct more driving tests.

This action will significantly increase capacity to help address driving test demand, when driver testing resumes.

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.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what progress she has made on delivering the York Street Interchange project, as committed to in New Decade, New Approach.
(AQW 16388/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I commissioned a short sharp review of the York Street Interchange project to determine the scheme's ability to deliver against my priorities. I want the scheme to maximise focus on wellbeing, sustainable travel, creating thriving liveable

places and communities, as well as responding to the climate emergency and connecting people and opportunities. I also want to ensure that the scheme aligns with the emerging policy context, for example, the Belfast Agenda, the Belfast City Council Development Plan Strategy and the emerging Transport Plans.

I have considered the outcome of this review and have accepted in full its six recommendations. As a result, before I make a decision on the next steps for the scheme, I have asked for some further work to be carried out, particularly around place making and to maximise ambition in terms of what can be delivered for communities, connectivity and the wider living places agenda. It is proposed that this work will also take into account the further development of the Bolder Vision for Belfast to reimagine how the city will look and feel in the future. The Strategic Advisory Group for the scheme will also be reconvened and the communications strategy updated to ensure local communities and other stakeholders are kept informed of future developments. I have asked the consultants to report in the autumn of 2021.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what concerns, if any, her Department has regarding the potential of an infrastructure project in the form of a bridge or tunnel connecting GB with Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16390/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister for Infrastructure, my priority remains to work on building a transport infrastructure that improves people's lives, connects communities, and tackles the climate emergency. You will be aware that the Chair of the Union Connectivity Review, Sir Peter Hendy, has advised in the Review's Interim Report earlier this month that he will commission a desktop feasibility review of a fixed link between Northern Ireland and Scotland.

I believe that a fixed link between Scotland and Northern Ireland, whether bridge or tunnel, will not provide us with the level of improvement to jobs or trade that some may expect, until we have addressed the longstanding issues within our existing transport network.

Should the planned assessment establish whether such a link is even feasible from an engineering perspective, I still believe the enormous costs of construction could be much better spent to improve infrastructure right across the North.

We already suffer a substantial infrastructure deficit, especially in the west of the region. The Executive and the British Government has given many promises to deliver schemes to address this deficit, not least those set out in the New Decade New Approach, but funding has still not appeared. I believe that these projects taken together will have a much more positive impact on connectivity right across the North, and at a much lower cost, than a bridge or tunnel.

I am not opposing better transport links between Scotland and Northern Ireland on principle. However, I cannot support a vanity project from Westminster when I can see that our own transport and water infrastructure networks are crumbling before our eyes, with previous funding commitments made by the Prime Minister still not honoured.

Transport is a devolved responsibility. If there is more money available from London to spend on transport infrastructure, then it should be spent on proven schemes that we already know will make a positive difference to people here and now. As I have demonstrated through my regular work with Ministers in the South, England, Scotland and Wales, I believe in partnership working across these islands. I am, however, determined that the people of Northern Ireland have a right to hold their own elected representatives accountable for transport decisions, through the processes agreed through devolution.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to expand the bus lane network in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16401/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is currently bringing forward the Transport Plan for the Regional Strategic Transport Network. Amongst other measures, this will consider improvements to our limited stop Goldline bus services and will explore options for the provision of additional bus lanes to avoid key traffic bottlenecks, in conjunction with better Park and Ride provision. The Draft RSTNTP is scheduled for full public consultation in late 2021, and I am determined to use these Transport Plans to help power our Green Recovery.

In addition, my officials are working pro-actively with local councils to develop Local Transport Plans, which will integrate with councils' own Local Development Plans. Local Transport Plans will seek to identify bus priority measures right across Northern Ireland to help reduce bus operating costs, while providing travel time savings for bus passengers over private vehicle users.

The past year has changed the way we work and travel, and I am keen that we continue to encourage commuters to use active travel and public transport, rather than use private cars for both the short and the inter-urban journeys. A whole-system approach to active travel and public transport, such as this, will encourage greater modal shift to sustainable transport, reduce carbon emissions and improve air quality.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the Public-Private Partnerships in which her Department is involved.

(AQW 16411/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department currently has four Public-Private Partnership (PPP) contracts, two in DfI Roads Division and two in NI Water.

- DfI Roads has entered into two long term operational PPP contracts for the Design, Build, Finance and Operations (DBFO) for some sections of the road network. The schemes have been awarded under two contract packages, known as DBFO Package 1 and DBFO Package 2.

- The DBFO Package 1 Contract was awarded in 2006 to Highways Management (City) Limited. This included the design and construction of capital improvements at M1/Westlink; M2 Antrim Hospital Slips; M2 Widening; and M22 Safety Barrier as well as the operation and maintenance of some 60 km of motorway and trunk roads including the M1 (north of Sprucefield), M2, M3, M5, M22, A12 (Westlink) and A8(M). The contract has an expiry date of 2036.
- The DBFO Package 2 Contract was awarded 2008 to Amey Roads (NI) Limited. This included the design and construction of capital improvements at A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue; A1 Junctions; A4 Dungannon to Ballygawley; and Annaghilla / Tullyvar as well as the operation and maintenance of some 125 km of motorway and trunk roads including the M1 (west of Sprucefield), A1 (Sprucefield to ROI border) and A4 (Dungannon to Ballygawley). This contract has an expiry date of 2038.
- NI Water entered into three long term operational PPP contracts. The schemes have been awarded under three contract packages, known as Project Alpha, Project Omega and Project Kinnegar.
- Project Alpha is a 25 year Public Private Partnership contract to upgrade, operate and maintain existing water treatment works at four locations across Northern Ireland. This PPP contract was acquired by NI Water in November 2017.
- Project Omega is a 25 year Public Private Partnership contract to upgrade, operate and maintain existing wastewater treatment works and wastewater pumping stations at locations across Northern Ireland, and to provide the sludge incineration facility in Belfast.
- NI Water has another small PPP contract with Coastal Clear Water Ltd. It was signed in April 1999 for the provision of sewage treatment which covered the upgrading of the Kinnegar Waste Treatment Works. The contract is for 20 years with an end date of April 2024.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure what categories of nature based solutions her Department is considering for future investment.

(AQW 16418/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My department's continuing investment in Blue Green Infrastructure is very much focusing on nature based solutions, in order to help address the climate emergency and improve the well being of people across the North.

For example, my Department's investment in 'Blue' infrastructure includes natural flood risk management when flood alleviation schemes are developed. The promotion of this type of work has been published in the 2015-21 Flood Risk Management Plans for Northern Ireland. The Connswater Community Greenway / East Belfast Flood Alleviation Scheme is a good example of the work undertaken by my Department, in conjunction with other key partners, to sustainably manage flood risk.

In addition, I recently consulted on "Living With Water in Belfast" which sets out a new approach to the provision of drainage infrastructure in Belfast by promoting natural, holistic and integrated solutions that achieve a wide range of benefits at reduced cost and reduced disruption. This includes delivering green drainage solutions such as sustainable drainage systems and river floodplain restoration works, alongside more conventional hard engineered infrastructure. This is a £1.4 billion investment over 12 years and provides a blueprint for future integrated water management, initially for Belfast, which will then be rolled out to other areas across the North.

NI Water is a key stakeholder in the Living With Water Programme and has been an active participant since it was created in 2015. The company is working closely with my Department to help sustainably manage water in a catchment through the integration of green and blue infrastructure (or nature based solutions) and conventional engineering.

Other examples of nature-based solutions which have been achieved so far, and that NI Water will continue to invest in going forward, include the creation of constructed wetlands, as well as technologies such as Aerofac and Phragmifiltre technology, aerated reed beds and granular sludge. There are also other treatment processes on the market that are being considered for pilot plants

As NI Water moves into the new Price Control period (PC21), waste water treatment sites that get funding for enhancement will be tested, and more sustainable option solutions will be considered, where possible. NI Water's PC21 target is to construct 4 sustainable wastewater treatment works (WwTW's) where the population served is greater than 250 population equivalent and 3 WwTW's serving less than 250 population equivalent.

NI Water has a dedicated Sustainable Catchment Area Management Planning (SCaMP) team working in partnership with a range of organisations to restore blanket bogs and undertake tree planting, both of which can deliver tremendous benefits to river water quality.

As well as investment in Blue Infrastructure, my Department is also committed to investment in 'Green' infrastructure. I recently announced a Greening of Alleyways initiative to fund local councils for interventions, such as planting, 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.

My Department is also working in conjunction with the Public Health Agency to examine potential use of planting to introduce a natural element in the urban environment, particularly on bridges on the Westlink, as part of the 'Relink the Westlink' initiative.

In addition to this Blue Green investment, Translink is undertaking work on nature based solutions focussing on several key areas:

- Carbon Sequestration - Translink's Climate Positive Strategy premise is to first reduce all emissions that they viably can, then go beyond offsetting the remainder and become climate positive. The use of 'off-setting' aims to neutralise a certain volume of greenhouse gas emissions through projects which create an equivalent reduction of greenhouse gases.
- Climate Resilience – Translink's rail network is regularly impacted by flooding and coastal erosion, particularly along the north coast and they will look at nature-based solutions for coastal and flood resilience.
- Well-being - new builds and refurbishment projects across the public transport network target civil engineering environmental quality (CEEQUAL) and Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) excellence with a greater focus on climate, biodiversity, and well-being.
- Water-management - Translink look to nature-based solutions for improved water-management through increasing infiltration and retention features such as permeable surfaces, filter strips, filter and infiltration trenches, green roofs, swales, detention basins, underground storage, wetlands and/or ponds.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure what steps her Department is taking in addressing male violence against women.

(AQW 16566/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Although none of my Department's functions directly assist in addressing violence in society, I believe strongly in supporting any initiative which will lead to women feeling safe.

As a result, I have brought forward a number of measures that should help reduce risks and incidents of violence against women and girls. For instance, I believe victims of domestic abuse should not have to worry about how they can get to shelter when fleeing a violent situation.

In July 2020 I announced in a joint statement with Minister Long, that free travel on Ulsterbus and NI Railways is now available for a person who has been provided with refuge or emergency accommodation through Women's Aid or the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

In September 2020 I also introduced the Safe Transport Team which is a six-month pilot that consists of a dedicated team of PSNI officers who collaborate with Translink and Local Neighbourhood Teams to help tackle crime and anti-social behaviour at public transport stations and on-board trains and buses. The aim of the scheme is to provide a visible reassuring presence for members of the public and help to keep everyone safe.

The Department continues to carry out a street lighting repair service, as a well-lit street has been shown to make women to feel safer. I will continue to work with other Ministers to improve women's safety by addressing negative attitudes, beliefs and behaviours wherever, and whenever, we can. These are the root causes of violence against women and girls and require robust action.

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the total level of COVID-19 related expenditure from her Department since 1 March 2020; and to provide an overview of each scheme or policy funded under this heading.

(AQW 16625/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The table shows COVID related funding received in 2020-21 (there were no COVID allocations during 2019-20).

Category	Overview	2020-21 £k
Resource	Lost Income - Translink	90,000
Resource	NI Water - Lost Income, Increased Costs & PPE	32,900
Resource	Lost Income – DVA	31,000
Resource	Taxi and Haulage Sector Support Scheme	22,000
Resource	Lost Income - Roads	7,533
Resource	Roads Winter Service	5,000
Resource	Airports - Belfast City Airport	2,192
Resource	Airports - City of Derry Airport	2,158
Resource	Translink PPE	1,500
Resource	Lost Income - Rathlin Ferry	600
Resource	Lost Income - Strangford Ferry	467
Capital	A6 Flagship	14,800

Category	Overview	2020-21 £k
Capital	NI Water - Acceleration of Works	15,000
Capital	Warrenpoint Harbour	1,500
Total		226,650

Mr Harvey asked the Minister for Infrastructure what steps her Department is taking to preserve the historical significance of the Boyne Bridge at Sandy Row.

(AQW 16631/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The plans for the Belfast Transport Hub were subject to public consultation and due process through the planning application process. Planning approval was granted on 29 March 2019.

There was significant engagement on this issue during the planning process and it cannot be revisited without significant impact upon the Belfast Transport Hub project.

My Department's officials and Translink will continue to liaise with Community Groups and Local Representatives.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much (i) resource; and (ii) capital budget she will allocate to active travel in 2021/22.

(AQW 16636/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A Final Budget has not yet been agreed for 2021-22 and therefore it has not been possible to take any decisions on budget allocations.

It is, however, my intention to continue to make progress on active travel and blue / green initiatives. Given the importance of active travel and the multiple health and environmental benefits it brings, I am aware of the need for significant investment in this area and will ensure schemes that promote active travel will be prioritised within my available budget.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to list all schools in North Down that are to have the speed limit reduced in their vicinity for the next financial year.

(AQW 16644/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As previously advised it is my intention to take forward a further tranche of part-time speed limits at schools. All schools across all council areas that do not already have part-time speed limits in place will be considered for inclusion in future programmes, the extent of which will be dependent upon the level of funding made available for works of this nature in the 2021/22 financial year and beyond.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the checks carried out on windfarms to ensure that all mitigations in their planning approval have been adhered to, both initially and throughout their operation; and (ii) how much consideration is given to the protection of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and historic monuments when approving windfarm planning applications.

(AQW 16659/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Conditions attached to any planning permission for windfarms generally reflect the parameters of the proposal and mitigation proposed by the developer via submissions including the Environmental Impact Assessment. As such, conditions should not pose any unfamiliar or unnecessary burden and compliance is therefore anticipated. It is the responsibility of applicants to implement their planning permission in accordance with the conditions stipulated. However, where breaches are apparent, either initially or throughout the operational period of a windfarm, enforcement action under the provisions of the Planning (Act) NI 2011 can be commenced.

Proposals for windfarms within Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and affecting historic monuments or their settings are assessed against the relevant policies in Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 2: Natural Heritage, PPS 6: Planning Archaeology and the Built Heritage, PPS 18: Renewable Energy and the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS).

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure in relation to planning decisions, to detail (i) the acknowledged detrimental effects of windfarms on residents living within an (a) five-mile; and (b) ten-mile radius; and (ii) the results of any research that has been carried out regarding noise pollution created by windfarms.

(AQW 16660/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) The impacts of windfarms on residents living within an (a) five-mile; and (b) ten-mile radius will vary from proposal to proposal. However, I can advise that each planning application for a wind farm is assessed on its own merits. In most cases such applications are accompanied by an Environmental Statement which addresses the likely significant effects

of the wind farm on sensitive receptors and the wider environment. These impacts are assessed against the relevant local area plan and planning policies before the determining authority reaches a decision on the planning application.

(ii) My Department is unaware of research results regarding noise pollution created by windfarms in NI.

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of the UK Government's recent financial package supporting the development of hydrogen fuel cell technology for buses, to detail what assistance her Department will provide to Wrightbus to pursue more efficient and low-cost public transport solutions in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16678/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Tackling the climate emergency is the single biggest global challenge we face and as Infrastructure Minister, I have made addressing climate change one of my key priorities. I have an ambitious vision for a low carbon future where we make low emission public transport accessible to people and communities across Northern Ireland.

Whilst my Department is not involved in direct support to Wrightbus in its development of hydrogen fuel cell technology, I can confirm that my Department is investing £66m in new low and zero emission vehicles for Translink which will be purchased from Wrightbus. This investment will provide our public transport network with 100 zero emission buses comprising 80 battery electric vehicles and 20 hydrogen fuel cell vehicles to be deployed with the Metro and Foyle Metro networks. There will also be 45 low emission buses for the Ulsterbus network. This is in addition to the new hydrogen buses operating within Belfast from January 2021 which were developed and manufactured by Wrightbus.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the total budget allocated for roads maintenance, including pot hole repairs, in South Antrim, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 16696/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not maintain a record of budget in the format required, however I can provide the member with Structural Maintenance outturn which is equivalent to budget for each of the last five years.

South Antrim as a constituency is mainly constituted of Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council and Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough Council areas. The table below provides details of my Department's capital and resource structural maintenance spend for these council areas.

Financial Year	Outturn £k	
	Lisburn & Castlereagh	Antrim & Newtownabbey
2015-16	3,097	3,674
2016-17	5,760	5,097
2017-18	3,032	3,251
2018-19	6,296	6,541
2019-20	6,587	5,246

Structural Maintenance activities include resurfacing and patching of carriageway and footpaths, surface dressing, carriageway refurbishment, structural drainage and structural stability.

Budgets for road maintenance is not allocated on purely a geographic basis, rather it is prioritised on the basis of need, using a range of weighted indicators tailored to each maintenance activity (e.g., resurfacing, patching, gully emptying, grass cutting etc.). DfI Roads will use these indicators when apportioning budget to ensure, as far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds across the whole of Northern Ireland.

Outturns will have been determined by budget availability and capacity in a given year.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the total spend on roads maintenance, including pot hole repairs, in South Antrim, in each of the last of the five years.

(AQW 16697/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not maintain a record of expenditure in the format required, however I can provide the member with Structural Maintenance outturn for each of the last five years.

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Budgets for road maintenance is not allocated on purely a geographic basis, rather it is prioritised on the basis of need, using a range of weighted indicators tailored to each maintenance activity (e.g., resurfacing, patching, gully emptying, grass cutting etc.). DfI Roads will use these indicators when apportioning budget to ensure, as far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds across the whole of Northern Ireland.

Outturns will have been determined by budget availability and capacity in a given year.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for her assessment of the lack of Taxi operators receiving support under Part B of the Coronavirus Business Restrictions Support Scheme, (ii) to address the concerns that such support is not adequate for the sector; and (iii) to reconsider her decision not to provide a sector specific support scheme, such as a similar scheme for bus operators, moving forward.

(AQW 16717/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Over the course of the last few months, I have written to the Economy Minister making a number of representations on behalf of the taxi sector regarding continued eligibility issues around Part B of the CRBSS. I have been assured by the Economy Minister that taxi operators can apply for support through Part B of the CRBSS provided other eligibility criteria are met and that any successful applications made to the scheme can be backdated to the period in which restrictions apply to them.

I fully appreciate the difficulties that the taxi sector, alongside many other workers and businesses, have faced during this last year and for that reason I have put in place a range of measures to assist the sector. However, as indicated during my meetings with the taxi industry, evidence provided by taxi operators indicated that they could and did avail of one or other of the grant support schemes introduced at the onset of the pandemic.

With regard to any future support, the Executive will need to consider how support and funding will be taken forward for all areas of the economy from April 2021.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the viability of the current NI Railways network and the available routes.

(AQW 16718/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, NI Railways carried almost 16 million passengers per year. As a vital economic driver the rail network has been both innovative and renowned for its high level of punctuality and service provision. In the five years prior to Covid, the passenger growth on the rail network has grown in excess of 26%, and with the introduction of new train carriages, and infrastructure projects such as the new North West Hub, I am confident that our rail infrastructure will play a key role in our green climate agenda, providing sustainable mass transit options.

Despite the reduction in passenger numbers during Covid the rail service continues to maintain a level of service which is critical for many essential and key workers. In anticipation for the easing in Covid-19 restrictions, and the return of large numbers of customers, my Department and Translink are planning a phased re-introduction of public transport services over the coming weeks and months in line with the Executive's pathway to recovery. This will help stimulate the economy, benefit the tourist market on the island of Ireland and provide commuters with the opportunity to return to the office and city centres.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the discussions she has had with the Irish Government regarding their commitment to provide funding of £75 million to the A5 by 2022; and (ii) what affect her decision to seek further consultation on the project may have on this funding.

(AQW 16720/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I welcomed the Irish Government's re affirmation of its £75 million commitment to the A5 project in 'New Decade, New Approach' and have had useful discussions with the Irish Government on delivering on our shared commitments.

It also was really good news that in October 2020 the Taoiseach announced that €500 million will be made available through the Shared Island Fund to deliver on the Irish Government's commitment to build shared island infrastructure, underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement. This funding is intended to contribute to the delivery of key infrastructure initiatives including the A5, the Ulster Canal, the Narrow Water Bridge and cross-border greenways.

I am committed to continuing to work with the Irish Government to ensure delivery for our citizens and I wrote to Minister Ryan, on 16 March, advising him on the next steps for the A5 project. In addition, I hope to have further discussion with Minister Ryan at the forthcoming NSMC Transport Sectoral meeting on 16 April.

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of increasing pedestrian numbers, including those travelling between home and nearby schools, whether she will consider the installation of a pedestrian crossing leading from the new Enler Village towards Comber on the A21 Comber by-pass.

(AQW 16731/17-22)

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.

I have asked my officials to carry out an assessment for a controlled crossing at this location that will be undertaken in the coming months and for them to advise you directly of the outcome.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 15228/17-22, to detail any other schools in East Londonderry being considered for a temporary speed limit reduction outside their premises, not including the 104 already identified.

(AQW 16737/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I was delighted to have been able to commit funding from the 2020/2021 capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at 103 schools. These measures 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 the original programme. I do intend to take forward a further tranche of part-time speed limits at schools and the remaining schools within your constituency will be considered for inclusion in future programmes, the extent of which will be dependent on the funding made available for works of this nature in the 2021/22 financial year and beyond.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the processes used to cumulatively assess the provision of windfarms in Northern Ireland; and (ii) at what stage would it be considered an over saturation for the relevant local environment.

(AQW 16738/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

Under the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) and Planning Policy Statement 18:

- (i) Renewable Energy, applications for wind energy development are required to demonstrate that the development will not have an unacceptable impact on visual amenity or landscape character, and that the development has taken into consideration the cumulative impact of existing wind turbines, i.e. those which have permissions and those that are currently the subject of valid but undetermined applications. The supplementary planning guidance 'Wind Energy Development in Northern Ireland's Landscapes' is also taken into account in assessing all wind turbine proposals. This document identifies landscape characteristics that may be sensitive to wind turbine development and provides guidance on the landscape and visual analysis process, and the indicative type of development that may be appropriate.

Information on landscape and visual impact and an assessment of cumulative impacts are generally prepared by the applicant and submitted to accompany a planning application, for example as part of an Environmental Statement. The Planning Authority will evaluate that information, carry out a site visit and reach its own consideration of the proposal.

- (ii) A planning application for a particular windfarm could be refused on the grounds that it would result in unacceptable adverse impact on visual amenity and landscape character by reason of the cumulative effects of the development in addition to other existing wind farms in the locality. However as each landscape is unique and has different characteristics, it is not possible to stipulate the stage at which a local environment could reach saturation point. Each proposal is considered on its own individual merits taking into account all material planning considerations, including planning policy.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department would consider the inclusion of (i) Glengormley Hill School; and (ii) Carnmoney Primary School in a future roll out of the 20mph school speed zone scheme.

(AQW 16746/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I was delighted to be able to commit funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at 103 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. However, I do intend to take forward a further tranche of part-time speed limits at schools and can confirm that Glengormley High School and Carnmoney Primary School schools will be considered for inclusion in future programmes, the extent and scale of which will be dependent on the funding available to me.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given the poor state of cleanliness of the Craigavon Bridge in Foyle and issue of bird droppings posing a public health risk, (i) whether her Department has any plans to facilitate cleaning the Craigavon Bridge; and (ii) whether her Department will explore ecologically friendly solutions to prevent birds roosting on the bridge.

(AQW 16764/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is aware of the problem of bird droppings on the lower deck of Craigavon Bridge and is actively seeking to find ways to address the ongoing problem. My officials will work in partnership with Derry City and Strabane District Council to arrange for the areas of concern to be cleaned.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of the finding in the most recent report of the Council of Europe Committee of Experts that obligations under Article 10.2.(g) of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages on the use of traditional and correct forms of place names in Irish are not being complied with, in addition to the earlier finding of the Committee under the Framework Convention for National Minorities which raised particular concerns regarding the lack of progress on bilingual road signs, to outline the steps she intend to take to rectify her Department's present monolingual policy in relation to road signs to bring it in line with these treaty based obligations.

(AQW 16765/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I assume you are referring to Committee of Experts Evaluation and Recommendations Report which was adopted on 22 March 2021. This has not been formally circulated to my Department but I expect it will be in due course.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what land valuation was given to NI Water for the Portavoe Reservoir site before the site was sold.

(AQW 16766/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has advised that the valuation, given by Land and Property Services (within the Department of Finance) for each of the six plots, before the sale of Portavoe Reservoir was:-

- a) Plot 1 - £17,800;
- b) Plot 2 - £4,700.00;
- c) Plot 3 - £33,800.00;
- d) Plot 4- £1,400.00;
- e) Plot 5 - £5,850.00; and
- f) Plot 6 - £4,025.00

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how many acres of land at Portavoe Reservoir site were sold by NI Water; and (ii) the breakdown of how many acres were bought by each buyer of the site.

(AQW 16767/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has advised

- (i) The total acres of land sold at Portavoe Reservoir site was approximately 76.23
- (ii) There were four purchasers of the Reservoir and the breakdown per acre purchased by each was approximately:
 - a) Mr and Mrs Cannon - 19.21 acres;
 - b) Portavoe Estates Ltd - 46.35 acres;
 - c) George Boy Mathews - 6.32 acres; and
 - d) Mr and Mrs Andrews - 4.35 acres

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many land valuations were given to NI Water for the Portavoe Reservoir site before it was sold.

(AQW 16768/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has advised that one land valuation was given for Portavoe Reservoir.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure who ultimately made the decision to agree to the selling price agreed for the Portavoe Reservoir site.

(AQW 16769/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has advised that the decision to agree to the selling price agreed between Land and Property Services and the agent working on behalf of the purchasers was taken by NI Water's Capital Investment Panel.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a breakdown of how much each of the three new owners of the Portavoe Reservoir site pay NI Water.

(AQW 16770/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has advised that Portavoe Reservoir was sold to four purchasers and the amount paid by each was as follows:

- a) Mr and Mrs Cannon - £17,800.00;
- b) Portavoe Estates Ltd - £39,900.00;
- c) George Boy Mathews - £5,850.00; and
- d) Mr and Mrs Andrews - £4,025.00

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on plans for the third phase of the Comber Bypass.

(AQW 16786/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Comber is situated within Ards and North Down Borough Council area, and as such its future transport needs will be considered as part of the new Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP). The BMTP will take account of the growth ambitions of the Councils in Belfast's catchment area.

The BMTP will consider a range of future options to meet local and regional objectives. These will include improved active travel and public transport provision, and improvements to local roads. Longstanding proposals such as a junction to connect the current A22 bypass which runs to the south and west of Comber to the A21 Ballygowan Road will be considered as part of this process.

The possibility of an additional phase of the Comber Bypass will therefore be considered in that Plan. However, as it will be integrated with the formal Local Development Plan processes, the timescales for the completion of the Draft Plan and its release for public consultation are still under review.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the replacement of Glenrandal bridge in Park.

(AQW 16795/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am pleased to be able to confirm that construction work on the replacement of Glenrandal bridge was completed in October 2020.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the future of the former Roads Service yard on the Castlegore Road, Castlederg.

(AQW 16796/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department uses the site on the Castlegore Road, Castlederg as a materials storage area and plans to do so for the foreseeable future.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many hard copies of the preliminary report of the archaeological Evaluation and Bridge Coring at Belfast Transport Hub were produced.

(AQW 16804/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There were five hard copies of the preliminary report of the Archaeological Evaluation and Bridge Coring at the Belfast Transport Hub.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the steps her Department took to make the public aware of the preliminary report of the Archaeological Evaluation and Bridge Coring at Belfast Transport Hub.

(AQW 16805/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As per condition 29 of the original planning application for the Belfast Transport Hub, the Archaeological Evaluation and Bridge Coring Report was recorded as being received by DFI Planning on 5th February 2020 and uploaded to the Planning Portal for public viewing on 10th February 2020.

Under Article 12 of the Planning (General Development Procedure) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 as amended, an application can be made to the council, or as the case may be, the Department for any consent, agreement or approval required by a condition imposed on a grant of planning permission. An application made under a planning condition is not subject to the

same legislative procedures for public consultation and comment and there is no requirement for the Planning Authority to notify third parties when such information is submitted.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many hard copies of the final report of the Archaeological Evaluation and Bridge Coring at Belfast Transport Hub were produced.

(AQW 16806/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has not received the final report of the Archaeological Evaluation and Bridge Coring at Belfast Transport Hub.

Five hard copies of the preliminary report of the Archaeological Evaluation and Bridge Coring at Belfast Transport Hub were produced and submitted to DFI Planning.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure what engagement she has had with Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council to pursue parklets as an option for local hospitality in the area.

(AQW 16819/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Officials from my Department have had discussions with Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council about a number of proposed Covid-19 recovery initiatives. The feasibility of providing parklets in Ballyclare, Antrim and Glengormley was discussed and my officials have agreed to advise the Council as to the suitability of any proposals for parklets which the Council brings forward to facilitate their placement where appropriate. No firm proposals have yet been received from the Council.

My Department has issued guidance on parklets to Councils, and Business Improvement Districts, to set out the process to be used. This guidance makes it clear that the success of parklets, or other similar interventions, requires full engagement in advance with all stakeholders and the wider community to ensure full support for the interventions being proposed.

My officials will be happy to engage with Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council on any proposals for parklets or other interventions to assist the hospitality industry, which the Council wishes to bring forward.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline restoration work currently being conducted by her Department on Northern Ireland waterways.

(AQW 16820/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Waterways Ireland, which my Department co-sponsors, is currently taking forward the restoration of the Ulster Canal from Lough Erne to Clones. Part of that stretch of the canal runs through Co. Fermanagh. The funding is provided by the Irish Government.

Waterways Ireland has commenced preliminary work in preparation for the rehabilitation of Carnroe Weir. It is planned that instream works will commence in spring 2022 with completion expected by autumn 2023.

My Department has a cyclical programme of inspections on designated watercourses. These inspections inform the maintenance activities of my operational teams and contractors. Works on open watercourses and the development of flood alleviation schemes also seek to utilise environmentally sensitive methods of working and have, on occasions, integrated with other projects to enhance bio diversity and the amenity value of the river corridor.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to increase the capacity of bike storage facilities on public transport within the context of increased uptake of cycling during the COVID-19 outbreak.

(AQW 16821/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As part of our Green Recovery for the North, I am committed to delivering green infrastructure to create active travel opportunities for local communities. My ambition to increase cycling journeys is reflected in the Programme for Government by increasing the proportion of journeys made by walking, cycling and public transport.

My aim remains to provide better infrastructure, behaviour change programmes, secure cycle parking at strategic public transport stops and the promotion of folding bikes to encourage passengers to consider using more sustainable forms of transport.

Over the coming months Translink will take receipt of a total of 21 new train carriages. Each of these new carriages will have the space for four bikes. I have also asked officials to consider whether there are opportunities for further increasing the capacity of bike storage facilities on public transport.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether old quarry permissions deemed to be operating under historic permissions from the 1960s are exempt from compliance with the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive and Regulations.

(AQW 16825/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The requirements of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Directive, in relation to land use planning, applied in domestic legislation from 1989, via the EIA Regulations. The Directive did not have retrospective effect, therefore planning permissions already granted, before the Directive applied, were not subject to review.

Councils have a range of planning enforcement powers available to them under the Planning Act (NI) 2011 where enforcement action may be considered necessary to deal with a breach of planning control. Councils also have powers under the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 to control nuisance noise emissions, blasting vibration etc. from quarries. Therefore, quarries operating under planning permissions granted before the Directive applied, are still subject to controls.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will adopt the approach of remote testing for driver theory tests that is offered in the south for certain categories of drivers.

(AQW 16838/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My officials are aware of the pilot initiative currently being undertaken by the Road Safety Authority in the south and are monitoring it closely. As advised in my answers to your previous AQW10733/17-22 and AQW16191/17-22, driving theory tests are currently delivered here via a network of six theory test centres; Ballymena, Belfast, Derry, Newry, Omagh and Portadown. Test centre staff are required to verify the identity of the candidate and their entitlement to take their test. Candidates are subject to a number of security checks to prevent prohibited items from entering the test room, and test sessions are invigilated in order to prevent misconduct. These requirements are designed to detect and prevent fraud, which has the potential to impact upon the integrity of the test.

The administration and delivery of the driving theory test is currently facilitated by a joint Authority contract with the Driver & Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) based in Great Britain. The Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) has been working in partnership with the DVSA on the replacement for the current theory test service contract. As part of that work the possibility of delivering the driving theory test via an online facility has been fully explored and assessed. Those explorations provided evidence that technology is not yet at the stage to provide the necessary assurance that security requirements could be met. However as previously advised, work is continuing to enable a move to online tests when the technology has developed.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of the Taoiseach's reiteration that he would seek to halt all North-South Interconnector work and sanction an independent review (i) how much money has been spent to date by her Department on the project; and (ii) how much further funding has been committed and wouldn't be retrievable if the project was cancelled.

(AQW 16840/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The North-South Interconnector and all associated costs are entirely a matter for the developer, SONI. My Department was only responsible for the determination of the planning applications.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 15545/17-22, (i) whether the bridge replacement scheme is still on schedule to complete in May/June 2021; and (ii) whether the adjacent footbridge will also be repaired as part of this scheme.

(AQW 16857/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My officials have just recently been advised by the main contractor for the Bracky Bridge scheme of a delay in appointing a piling sub-contractor. This matter is currently being addressed and it is hoped piling will commence on the site as soon as possible.

Unfortunately this will delay the completion of the scheme, however, my officials are working closely with the contractor in seek to minimise the delay. It is now expected that the earliest completion date will be July/August 2021.

The adjacent footbridge is in private ownership and is not the responsibility of my Department to maintain.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the steps her Department have taken to make the public aware of the final report of the Archaeological Evaluation and Bridge Coring at Belfast Transport Hub.

(AQW 16871/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Department has not received the final report of the Archaeological Evaluation and Bridge Coring at Belfast Transport Hub.

It is worth noting that Condition 29 of planning approval LA04/2017/1388/F will not be fully discharged until a revised cross-section of the proposed re-profiling of the Boyne Bridge has been submitted and approved by the Department (demonstrating preservation in-situ of the buried remains of the Saltwater Bridge).

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure why there are no contact details for responses to the report of the Archaeological Evaluation and Bridge Coring at Belfast Transport Hub.

(AQW 16872/17-22)

Ms Mallon: This report was submitted under Condition 29 of the original planning approval. There is no legislative requirement to consult with the public or for the public to respond before determining a discharge of condition application.

However if a member of the public wishes to discuss an application, they can do so by making contact via the planning office details contained on the Department's website at <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/topics/planning>.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on when Oak Country Manor, Crescent Link, Londonderry will be adopted.

(AQW 16877/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Oak Country Manor is being constructed under both Planning Permission A/2004/0897/F (granted on the 02/02/2006) and Planning Permission LA11/2017/0834/F (granted on 10/05/2018). It entails the construction of 331 dwellings, made up of detached and semi-detached houses, landscaping and car parking. The dwellings are being delivered in 8 separate phases. Construction on the first 5 phases began in 2017 and all carriageway and footway works are now substantially completed.

The developer still has some minor works to complete on the first 5 phases and has informed us he intends to have these works completed in the coming weeks. This will allow my officials to proceed with adoption of these phases.

Construction of the final 3 phases began in 2019 and works are now also substantially complete, however the necessary Street Lighting certification remains outstanding albeit the developer is currently addressing this. When this certification is complete, my officials will issue the Preliminary Adoption Certificates (90% reduction) with a view to the last 3 phases being fully adopted 12 months thereafter when the maintenance period has elapsed.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 9815/17-22, (i) whether a speed limit review has been conducted in the vicinity of The Cotton, Newtownards Road, Donaghadee; and (ii) when will this be carried out.

(AQW 16890/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As part of the speed limit assessment process there is a need to establish traffic volumes and speeds but as you will appreciate, these factors are currently being impacted by Covid restrictions and consequently are unlikely to be representative of those under more normal circumstances. It is therefore considered that initiating a review at this time would not be appropriate.

I can confirm my officials are committed to carrying out a speed limit review along this stretch of road however, to ensure the findings are accurate, it is important they do so at an appropriate time when restrictions will have eased. Once the review is completed I have asked my officials to advise you of the outcome.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail plans for the deployment of traffic attendants over forthcoming Easter public holidays at popular visitor destinations such as Helen's Bay.

(AQW 16892/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Due to the reduced traffic volumes using our roads, I took the decision to scale back the parking enforcement service during this difficult time. However, parking restrictions remain in place, and a small team of Traffic Attendants continue to be deployed on a priority basis to locations where they can contribute most to road safety and traffic progression. The Department has ensured there is flexibility in its approach and, if required, the number of Traffic Attendants can be increased. As a result, the level of parking enforcement in the Helen's Bay and Crawfordsburn areas increased from 15 March 2021, and this approach will continue during the Easter period.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether her Department will be returning any funding that had been allocated for the Bus and Coach Operators Scheme; and (ii) why was this money not spent.

(AQW 16895/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The cost of bus and coach scheme was expected to be able to be funded from the £25m provided in October 2020, of which £6m was allocated in January Monitoring. My Department has surrendered to the Department of Finance £1.5m of this funding.

The Department has not spent all of the allocated funding as fewer applications were received than expected, for both the taxi and bus operator financial assistance schemes, and some bus operators were ineligible for the first scheme as they were still profitmaking, despite a decline in business.

You will appreciate that in developing these schemes, my Department has to provide value for money and protect public funds, and therefore the key controls of making payments to lossmaking businesses only and having a maximum payment per bus have remained in place.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department plans to include more schools in the Greater Bangor area in the 20mph speed limit scheme.

(AQW 16906/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister I am committed to promoting and improving road safety, and working actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads, particularly near schools. The Department is currently completing works at 103 schools across Northern Ireland included within the first tranche of my part-time 20mph speed limits at schools programme. 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.

It is my intention for this programme to be rolled out over the coming years and other schools across all council areas, including those in the Greater Bangor Area within Ards and North Down Borough Council, will be considered for inclusion in future programmes, the extent and scale of which will be dependent on the level of funding available to me in the 2021/22 financial year and beyond.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to bring forward additional support to the transport sector to assist with COVID-19 recovery.
(AQW 16908/17-22)

Ms Mallon: While my officials and I will continue to work with the transport sector to monitor the impact of Covid-19 restrictions, the Executive will need to consider how support and funding will be taken forward for all areas of the economy from April 2021.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how is her Department is encouraging drivers to ensure their vehicles are in a roadworthy condition during the current restrictions; and (ii) whether her Department risk-assessed restricting access to MOT centres for such a duration.
(AQW 16912/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since late March 2020, the DVA has reminded customers of their legal responsibility to ensure that their vehicle is in a roadworthy condition in order for it to be driven on the public road, which is also the expectation of the PSNI and insurers. My department's advice to motorists is that they should continue to service their vehicle and carry out basic checks such as regularly checking tyre pressures and tread depths, looking out for brake wear, ensuring oil levels are maintained and that all lights are working properly. This is a motorist's responsibility at all times, not just during the exemption period afforded by a TEC.

Over the past few months, my Department has used a number of platforms and formats to convey this road safety message to customers. The DVA has made this clear in its direct communications with customers and this message has been reiterated in statements and press releases issued by the Department, and I have stated this in the Assembly on many occasions and asked Members to help share this message with their constituents. The emphasis on these messages will continue over the coming months and their frequency will be reviewed as appropriate.

On 11 February, I announced that existing TECs for qualifying vehicles will be extended by a further four months from the date the existing exemption ends. This applies to private cars, light goods vehicles and motorcycles aged 4-9 years, which will expire between 26 March 2021 and 25 March 2022.

To help mitigate the risk of restricted access to MOT testing, testing for older vehicles including all private cars, light goods vehicles and motorcycles that are aged 10 to 39 years has been brought forward to ensure these vehicles can be tested before their existing TECs expire, as statically these vehicles are more likely to fail their MOT.

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.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) to outline why increased numbers of staff in her Department have been acting-up above their normal role over the past year; and (ii) what actions are being taken to reduce the need for temporary promotions and to ensure permanent staff are in place.
(AQW 16920/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) Temporary promotions are routinely used across NICS Departments as cover for vacant posts where there is a clear business need and no immediate alternative available. My Department, which consists of around 3,000 staff, is no different in that regard.
- (ii) Temporary promotions are, as their name suggests, temporary arrangements which are only intended to be in place until a permanent appointment can be made. The DfI Departmental Board regularly monitors the number of temporary promotions across the Department. My officials are also working with NICS HR to do what is required to fill all affordable vacancies as quickly as possible.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the establishment of an Infrastructure Commission.
(AQW 16969/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I established a Ministerial Advisory Panel on Infrastructure in August 2020 to consider how an Infrastructure Commission for Northern Ireland might support more effectively the long term planning and development of relevant infrastructure here. The Panel undertook a short, sharp exercise and presented a report on their findings to me in the autumn.

I have shared the report with Executive colleagues, the Infrastructure Committee and the Speaker. I have also published the report on my Department's website.

Since then, I have been engaging with Executive colleagues to consider how we might establish an Infrastructure Commission to support the long-term planning and delivery of infrastructure particularly in the context of our recovery from Covid.

Department of Justice

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice to detail her Department's underspend in the last three financial years. (AQW 16410/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): My Department's underspend (including NDPBs) in the last three financial years is detailed in the table below:

FINANCIAL YEAR	Non Ringfenced Resource DEL £m	% of budget*	Capital DEL £m	% of budget*
2017-18	4.3	0.4	1.6	2.8
2018-19	5.8	0.6	3.2	3.5
2019-20	8.9	0.8	2.9	3.7

* Budgets as per January Monitoring round.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice to detail the total level of COVID-19 related expenditure from her Department since 1 March 2020; and to provide an overview of each scheme or policy funded under this heading. (AQW 16622/17-22)

Mrs Long: An estimate of the Department of Justice expenditure relating to COVID-19 since 01 March 2020 to 31 March 2021, and details of what the expenditure relates to, is set out in the table below. This information has recently been provided to the NI Audit Office for their second report on the Northern Ireland Executive Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The first report published in September 2020, can be found at the following link www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/publications/overview-northern-ireland-executives-response-covid-19-pandemic.

The Department's 2020-21 Annual Report and Accounts will also contain updated details of COVID-19 related expenditure.

Initiative	Description	Lead Organisation	Estimated Costs at 31 January 2021	Explanation	Status of Initiative at 31 January 2021 (active/closed)
Maintain Critical Services	Pressures in maintaining critical services; increased costs from contractors; and an increase to the levels of untaken annual leave as a result of the pandemic.	Police Service of NI	£22.9 million	To maintain critical services to the public – keeping people safe. To continue to prevent crime, detect offenders and protect the most vulnerable in our society.	Active
Maintain Critical Services	Potential loss of income as a result of the limitation of fee earning court business; additional court judiciary recovery costs will be incurred to clear the backlog of cases; additional cleaning costs; and additional Covid-19 related costs on capital projects.	NI Courts and Tribunals Service	£10.5 million	Under Covid-19 guidelines, Court Hearings were required to cease earlier in the year which impacted on fee income, and also additional costs have been incurred to deal with the backlog of cases once courts resumed business.	Active

Initiative	Description	Lead Organisation	Estimated Costs at 31 January 2021	Explanation	Status of Initiative at 31 January 2021 (active/closed)
Maintain Critical Services	To maintain critical services: overtime; hygiene requirements; adjustments to the prison estate; additional resources for prisoners; IT equipment for remote working; and an increase to the levels of untaken annual leave as a result of the pandemic.	NI Prison Service	£8.8 million	To protect both prisoners and staff a number of measures had to be put in place to maintain a frontline service, provide stability and mitigate disruption.	Active
Maintain Critical Services	PPE across the DoJ (including Agencies and Arm's Length Bodies) to ensure staff and public safety.	DoJ and associated NDPBs	£6.5 million	PPE required to keep staff and the public safe.	Active
Project Dignity NI Temporary Resting Place	Providing a dignified temporary resting place with additional body storage capacity, to cope with the risk that the number of deaths caused by the pandemic would exceed normal capacity.	DoJ	£3.8 million	Public Health issue – to ensure sufficient storage is available in case of need.	Active
Maintain Critical Services	Mainly for IT costs to enable remote/home working; additional cleaning and hygiene requirements; overtime and additional staff costs to maintain frontline services; and risk of provider failure, despite interim payment scheme implemented in Legal Services Agency; and an increase to the levels of untaken annual leave as a result of the pandemic.	DoJ and associated NDPBs	£2.8 million	Interventions to maintain a range of critical services throughout the Department of Justice.	Active
		Total	£55.3 Million		

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice to detail her Department's underspend in the last financial year. (AQW 16645/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department's underspend (including NDPBs) in the last financial year, 2019-20 was:

Financial Year	Non Ringfenced Resource DEL (£m)	% of budget*	Capital DEL (£m)	% of budget*
2019-20	8.9	0.8	2.9	3.7

* Budgets as per January Monitoring round.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice to confirm (i) the total level of COVID-19 related expenditure from her Department since 1 March 2020; and (ii) to provide an overview of each scheme or policy funded under this heading. (AQW 16677/17-22)

Mrs Long: I refer the Member to the response to AQW 16622/17-22.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Justice (i) to quantify the extent of illegal drugs use; and (ii) to confirm the monetary value to the criminals involved in the smuggling of illegal drugs.

(AQW 16689/17-22)

Mrs Long: It is difficult to quantify the full extent of illegal drugs use or misuse of prescription medication, although official data can provide an indication.

The Department of Health (DoH), which is represented on the Organised Crime Task Force Drugs Subgroup, is leading on the development of a cross sectoral strategy to reduce the harm relating to alcohol and drug misuse. DoH statistics on drug use can be found at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/drugs-statistics>.

Data from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency shows that drug related deaths have doubled over the last ten year period, with 191 drug-related deaths registered in Northern Ireland in 2019: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/news/drug-related-deaths-northern-ireland-2009-2019>

The PSNI has advised that the monetary value of drugs to criminals depends on drug type, quantity and purity. It is therefore difficult to quantify the exact value, as this depends on the number and type of seizures, whether drugs were sourced locally or abroad, the cost-price value and the likely income for those involved. There was a total of 8177 drug seizure incidents during 2019/20 and a breakdown is provided in the Organised Crime Task Force Annual Report and Threat Assessment: <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/octf-annual-report-and-threat-assessment-2019-20>

My Department remains committed to working with all partners to protect our communities from the harms of illegal drugs and drug misuse. This includes collaboration through the Organised Crime Task Force and Policing and Community Safety Partnerships, and liaising with DoH on the strategic approach towards substance use.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 10639/17-22, (i) for an update on her engagement with Executive colleagues on a way forward to introduce a ban on smacking in Northern Ireland; and (ii) whether she will introduce a legislative ban on smacking in the current Assembly mandate.

(AQW 16699/17-22)

Mrs Long: As you know, I am fully supportive of taking steps to remove the defence of reasonable chastisement in Northern Ireland. The current law creates uncertainty; it can provide shelter to abusive parents and fails to provide equal protection to children. I also appreciate that some people have concerns that the removal of this defence may lead to the prosecutions and potential criminalisation of parents.

The current law on the physical punishment of children is based on the concept of "reasonable chastisement". Article 2 of the Law Reform (Miscellaneous Provisions) (NI) Order 2006 has the effect of restricting the grounds on which the defence of reasonable chastisement can be used.

In essence, if a parent or adult smacks a child and is prosecuted, they can defend themselves in terms of "reasonable chastisement" but only provided that the harm is minor. Anything which causes more than transitory or minor discomfort is unlawful and can result in prosecution.

The availability of a reasonable chastisement defence means that there can be uncertainty as to what constitutes a minor harm and potential child abuse cases may be missed.

It is important to note that any change to the current law will require fresh approaches to supporting parents, extend well beyond the reaches of the criminal justice system. A change to the law will require broad Executive agreement, recognising that its ramifications would, of necessity, extend to areas such as health, parenting strategies and family law.

Engagement with key Executive colleagues who share policy responsibility for this issue has not progressed as I would have liked. I understand and appreciate that the response to the pandemic has taken priority. However, the issue of physical punishment of children is not a trivial matter and I will continue to press for key Executive colleagues to engage on this important issue.

I am currently developing legislative proposals as part of the Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. These proposals will require Executive approval and I intend to seek this in the coming months.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 14197/17-22, whether an economic appraisal of implementing Section 28 of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 has been commissioned.

(AQW 16700/17-22)

Mrs Long: Yes.

The economic appraisal is being progressed in two stages. A Strategic Outline Case is currently in development within the Department. This will substantively address the issue of repercussive risk and identify a preferred way forward on implementation.

Depending on the outcome of the Strategic Outline Case, an Outline Business Case will then be prepared that will analyse the available options for implementation.

Work on the appraisal is proceeding according to schedule, and it remains my intention to commence Section 28 of the Act alongside the provisions on the domestic abuse offence, provided that it is safe to do so.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice to detail the PSNI budget for each of the last three financial years.
(AQW 16711/17-22)

Mrs Long: The PSNI budgets for Non Ringfenced Resource DEL (RDEL) and Capital DEL for each of the last three financial years, as at the January Monitoring round, are outlined in the table below:

	Non Ringfenced RDEL	Capital DEL
2020-21	£780.0m	£55.0m
2019-20	£745.4m	£48.9m
2018-19	£695.0m	£44.1m

Non Ringfenced RDEL notes:

The 2019-20 budget has increased from the 2018-19 budget mainly as a result of an uplift for increased employers pension contributions of £30.5m and additional funding for EU Exit costs of £12.9m.

The 2020-21 budget has increased from the 2019-20 budget mainly as a result of receiving £10.0m of funding from the NI Executive for COVID-19 related expenditure and £22.9m of funding for pay and price increases and a contribution towards PSNI pressures.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) what services are offered by Women's Aid across Northern Ireland on behalf of her Department; and (ii) the financial support provided by her Department to Women's Aid, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 16729/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department engages the services of Women's Aid across Northern Ireland through a number of programmes and projects, including some through the Policing and Community Safety Partnerships.

These include development, delivery and evaluation of awareness raising sessions, conferences and workshops, training delivery, design and development of a domestic and sexual violence app, the publication of promotional material as well as support and liaison officers. Support is also provided for potential victims of modern slavery and human trafficking.

Through various funding mechanisms payments made over the last five years from my Department to Women's Aid is noted in the table below.

2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21*
£269,000	£306,000	£408,000	£234,000	£412,000

*2020-21 figures are subject to year-end review.

Figures above are based on date payment was made.

Funding is also provided to Women's Aid by other Departments, primarily the Department for Communities.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice to detail the budget allocated to the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service in each year, for the last 10 years.

(AQW 16756/17-22)

Mrs Long: The final year end budget allocated to the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service in each year, for the last 10 years is as follows:

Year	Net Resource DEL £m	Net Capital DEL £m
2011-12	49.1	4.1
2012-13	53.6	2.3
2013-14	49.6	1.8
2014-15	47.4	2.0
2015-16	51.2	2.2
2016-17	51.0	2.2
2017-18	47.5	1.1

Year	Net Resource DEL £m	Net Capital DEL £m
2018-19	49.5	3.7
2019-20	54.3	4.9
2020-21	62.7	3.1

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Justice whether she anticipates an increase in the duties or workload of the Public Prosecution Service or the Crown Court should the committal reform legislation pass in its current form.

(AQW 16848/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill seeks to expand the use of direct committal, as provided for in the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, to all offences that, as an adult, are triable only on indictment and to remove the need for oral evidence at the committal hearing, for those offences not yet directly committed.

As a result, it is anticipated that less work will be undertaken in the magistrates' court and there will be different operational processes for criminal justice agencies involved in the prosecution of cases in the Crown Court, including the Public Prosecution Service (PPS), to support effective case management.

The final Bill will provide a firm foundation for relevant criminal justice organisations, including the PPS, to develop and agree new operational processes and associated Crown Court rules. This work is being taken forward via a multiagency Committal Reform Programme and will allow resource implications for relevant criminal justice organisations to be modelled. This will form part of a business case that will be completed before the new measures are introduced.

Department for the Economy

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the Tourism Recovery Steering Group, including: (i) how often the group meets; (ii) how many times in total the group has met; and (iii) any recommendations that have been made thus far.

(AQW 9454/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I established the Tourism Recovery Steering Group, which I chair, to help our hard pressed tourism and hospitality industry deal with the many challenges presented by COVID-19. Membership of the Steering Group is comprised of relevant Government Departments, Tourism NI, Tourism Ireland, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and tourism and hospitality industry representative bodies. The Steering Group is supported by a Tourism Recovery Working Group which is chaired by Tourism NI. The Tourism Recovery Steering Group met in May, June and September 2020 and, most recently, on 24 February 2021. The Steering Group (supported by the Working Group) developed Phase One of the Tourism Recovery Action Plan which has been instrumental in securing additional funding to help the tourism and hospitality industry deal with the impact of COVID, in terms of supporting business survivability, improving industry resilience and driving essential visitor demand. Progress in respect of implementing Phase One has included:

- (i) implementation of "We're Good to Go";
- (ii) focussed marketing on the domestic, GB and Republic of Ireland markets to drive visitor demand;
- (iii) targeted grant support aimed at a wide range of tourist accommodation providers;
- (iv) support for wet pubs;
- (v) capital grant support to develop new (and upgrade) existing visitor experiences to meet post COVID consumer expectations;
- (vi) grant to support tourism businesses to develop their websites to secure future business through online bookings;
- (vii) grant support towards the cost of consultancy support to assist businesses plan their response to the COVID pandemic;
- (viii) support for NI tourism businesses participating on international virtual sales platforms to secure business from international tour operators in 2021 and 2022;
- (ix) support for event promoters;
- (x) support for international tour operators and Destination Management Companies to programme and promote Northern Ireland as a tourism destination to international consumers for 2021 and 2022;
- (xi) supporting the conference sector in retaining conference activity planned for Belfast in 2020 but postponed due to COVID, and in securing post COVID business in what will be a very competitive market; and
- (xii) marketing grant support for businesses to help with the cost of their own marketing in NI and the Republic of Ireland alongside Tourism NI's marketing campaigns.

In addition, other Departments have also played important roles in supporting businesses in the tourism eco-system, for example the Department of Finance's support for Northern Ireland's airports and the Department for Infrastructure's support for coach operators. I am very aware that 2021 will be another challenging year for our tourism and hospitality industries, albeit one where we can start to get back on track and begin recovery. I have, therefore, tasked the Tourism Recovery Steering Group with developing a draft of Phase Two of the Tourism Recovery Action Plan.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what engagement she has had with the Irish Government in regards to Northern Ireland universities continuing to participate in the Erasmus Programme.

(AQW 12341/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department is aware of the Irish Government's plans to support full-time Northern Ireland Higher Education students to allow them to continue to access the Erasmus+ programme through Irish institutions. The Irish Government did not notify the Department that they intended to publically announce the proposed arrangements prior to doing so.

The progression of these proposed arrangements is a matter for the Irish Government and my Department has not contributed to their development. The Irish Government has indicated that they will liaise closely with Departmental officials on the more precise details of the proposed arrangements as they continue to be developed, so that any implications for Northern Ireland can be considered.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy whether sports clubs, operating licensed premises as part of their wider operation, will be eligible for support under the Wet Pubs Business Support Scheme.

(AQW 12360/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In order to qualify for the Wet Pubs Business Support Scheme a business must be in receipt of the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS).

Eligibility criteria for the LRSS states that a sports club that operates, or contracts in the operation of, its own clubroom, bar or restaurant within their sporting premises – in other words, not a licensed facility operated by an independent business – is not eligible for support under the LRSS scheme.

A completely separate business that operates a licensed bar or restaurant independently of a sports club, but from within the grounds of a club, may be entitled to support from the scheme. Likewise standalone social club premises, 'working man's clubs', or other similar businesses or establishments (that may or may not have a sporting club name affiliation or not) will be eligible to apply for support under the LRSS scheme and therefore will be eligible for the Wet Pubs Business Support Scheme.

The Wet Pubs scheme was established to offer support for those traditional pubs that faced increased restrictions last summer, sports clubs with bars within their premises that are used to supplement the income of clubs fall outside the policy intent of this scheme and these clubs have been entitled to support from schemes operated by the Department for Communities.

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: I will, of course, fulfil my functions in accordance with my Ministerial responsibilities and Ministerial Code and in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland and our local economy. I have however also made it clear that in my view, the protocol has created friction within the UK internal market, which, many businesses tell me, has caused them significant economic harm. As I seek a permanent and complete fix to those frictions, I will consider all matters on their individual merits, not taking any actions that would compound the problems created by the protocol or disadvantage the Northern Ireland economy.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister for the Economy what her Department can do to encourage more courses to the Ulster University's Coleraine campus

(AQW 14888/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I met with the Vice-Chancellor of Ulster University and some of his Executive Deans on 24th March, to discuss the University's strategic plans and to consider its proposals for future growth at all of its campuses. I was reassured that the University is still committed to all of its campuses and that as the new Belfast campus will already be at capacity when it opens, future growth will be delivered through its Coleraine and Magee campuses.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will set up an expert advisory panel to advise on a green economic recovery and ensure Northern Ireland maximises all opportunities in this area.

(AQW 15205/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As part of the development of the new Energy Strategy, an expert advisory panel has already been established to support the Department's work. This panel is providing advice on a range of energy policy areas, including those which will

help to contribute to a green economic recovery. My Department is also leading on the development of a Circular Economy Strategic Framework for Northern Ireland. Officials are currently in the process of establishing an expert advisory panel to facilitate engagement and garner the wealth of subject matter knowledge and expertise necessary to inform the framework development process. Key stakeholders will include local government, business, academia and the third sector. Those invited to contribute will be well positioned to represent the breadth of sectors and organisations working in, developing and delivering aspects of the Circular Economy within Northern Ireland or internationally. There are number of complementary work streams in progress across government that will deliver on the Executives ambitions of a green economy, climate change action and delivery of sustainable economic growth and I welcome the close working relationships that have developed with colleagues in other departments to date.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy, in relation to the Limited Company Director's Support Scheme, to detail the number of applications (i) submitted; (ii) approved; (iii) approved and paid out; (iv) rejected; and (v) still to be processed.
(AQW 15610/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Limited Company Directors Support Scheme closed to new applications on 4 March 2021, as of 23 March 2021: (i) 6,169 applications had been submitted to the LCDSS. (ii) 647 applications processed (iii) 136 payments issued (iv) 4 applications rejected (v) 5,780 remain to be processed I fully appreciate how important this grant support is, however, in the rolling out of the Limited Company Director's Support Scheme, a potential issue was identified relating to the tax treatment of the proposed grant. In order to prevent retrospective difficulties for applicants, the decision was taken to pause the processing of applications until a solution to the tax treatment issue was identified. Whilst I appreciate that this delay is frustrating for applicants it was considered the best approach to reduce the overall administrative burden and delay of payments. After taking advice from relevant stakeholders, including HMRC, a solution to allow payments to proceed has been identified. Invest NI, who manage the scheme on behalf of my Department, has written to all relevant applicants providing an update and seeking all relevant additional information to enable processing of applications to proceed. The first payments under the scheme were issued 19 March 2021 and to date £476k in support has been provided. Invest NI remain committed to assessing and verifying all outstanding applications, and processing payments, to eligible applicants as quickly as possible.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy whether she expects that students from this jurisdiction will have the option to access either or both the Erasmus+ and the UK Turing scheme.
(AQW 15811/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Eligible Northern Ireland organisations, including the Universities, University Colleges and Further Education colleges, will be able to apply for funding through the new Turing Scheme for the purposes of allowing students registered at their institutions to take part in periods of mobility abroad through the Scheme. The Irish Government has proposed to facilitate continued access to Erasmus+ for Northern Ireland Higher Education students by allowing them to temporarily register at an Irish institution for the period of their Erasmus mobility. The Department has not contributed to these plans and we are working on the basis that the progression of the arrangements is a matter for the Irish Government. The Irish Government has however committed to keeping my officials and I up to date as the precise detail of the proposals is developed, so that consideration can be given to the potential implications from a Northern Ireland perspective. Subject to consideration of the emerging detail of the Irish Government's proposed arrangements, at present my expectation is that eligible Northern Ireland organisations will have the option to access funding for their students through either or both the Turing scheme and the proposed Irish Government arrangements.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy given the need for increased childcare provision to enable parents to return to work, increase employment levels and grow the economy, why the childcare sector is not referenced in her Economic Recovery Action Plan.
(AQW 16172/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Economic Recovery Action Plan sets out the actions which can be taken forward by my Department and our Arm's Length Bodies in response to the devastating economic impact of COVID-19. The publication of my Plan is the start a wider and more detailed conversation regarding our recovery journey to test with stakeholders if the steps laid out in this document are the right ones. The outputs of this conversation will enable my Department to provide a comprehensive input into the wider Executive work on recovery.

Policy responsibility for childcare sits with the Education and Communities Ministers, and I welcome the work that has been progressed by my Executive colleagues in supporting parents and the child care sector throughout the ongoing crisis. For example, between April and December 2020 some £20.5m was provided by the Department of Education to support the childcare sector, and I welcome the recent announcement by the Education Minister that this support has been extended until March 2021.

The Department of Communities has also been active in this space, and I welcome the development of a range of new employability initiatives including a proposal to expand the Adviser Discretion Fund. This expansion includes making help available to eligible persons through a non-repayable grant of up to £1,500 to those for whom upfront childcare costs are a barrier to employment.

We cannot underestimate the role childcare plays in economic and social development, and I look forward to the resumption of the Executive's Ten Year Childcare Strategy, which will provide a longer-term framework with the dual aims to improve child development and promote parental employment.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the number of inquiries received by Invest NI for foreign direct investment, by constituency in each month from January 2019 to March 2021; and (ii) how her Department and Invest NI are marketing Northern Ireland as a location with a competitive advantage over Britain and the Republic of Ireland since the introduction of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16209/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- i) Enquiries received by Invest Northern Ireland from potential investors are in response to its promotion of a 'whole of Northern Ireland' value proposition based on a talented and loyal workforce, advanced telecoms infrastructure, a pro-business environment, competitive operating costs and proximity to major markets, not at a parliamentary constituency level.
- ii) Our efforts to promote NI in international markets as a prime location for international investors continue, and we evolve our proposition as new selling points are identified e.g. remote operating models, resilience through Covid etc. Dual market access may present an opportunity to further augment an already compelling investment proposition to international investors.

Potential investors assess the aforementioned value proposition as an overall package when determining the optimum location for their international operations, rather than any individual factor being considered in isolation when evaluating our attractiveness relative to other competing locations.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) any concerns she has that businesses with limited or no income, and with furloughed employees, may not be able to pay the obliged contributions such as National Insurance and pension contributions and that this could lead to redundancies, particularly to younger workers with fewer years accrued; and (ii) what conversations she has had with the Minister of Finance and HM Treasury regarding this issue.

(AQW 16360/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I, along with my fellow Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly members, of course have concerns regarding any circumstance that could lead to potential redundancy scenarios for local workers, regardless of age or experience. That is why the Executive and UK Government have implemented an unprecedented range and volume of financial support packages since March 2020, with the primary aim of preventing businesses from closing and retaining jobs for their employees. My own Department has led in the delivery of more than £40million of financial support to more than 30,000 businesses and individuals, and, along with other Executive Departments, is currently delivering millions of pounds to tens of thousands more. The Coronavirus Job Retention (Furlough) Scheme is a UK Government initiative, administered via HMRC, and despite representations made to the Chancellor on this issue by myself and Executive colleagues, unfortunately, we have been unable to affect the desired changes to this UK wide scheme. My focus now is on the re-opening of the economy as I firmly believe that the best way to support all of our local businesses, and protect employees, is to enable people to commence working and trading, as soon as possible, in line with the Executive roadmap steps and health regulations. My Department's recently published 'Economy Recovery Action Plan' sets out the actions to be taken over the next 12-18 months to support the rebuilding effort. This includes the delivery of a High Street Stimulus Scheme and a Tourism 'Staycation' voucher. It is intended that both will provide a financial boost and injection of expenditure into our local villages, towns and cities throughout Northern Ireland during 2021. Looking to the medium term future, and the creation of new job opportunities, the 'Action Plan' also includes the development of a flexible skills fund and widening access to apprenticeships by removing the current age cap.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has a strategy for improving the 4G network in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16361/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As telecommunications policy is a Reserved matter, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is leading on improvements to 4G in rural areas across the UK. My Department maintains regular contact with DCMS on all telecommunications matters.

I fully appreciate the importance of good mobile connectivity, particularly in rural areas of Northern Ireland. With this in mind I met with Mobile Network Providers (MNOs) and Mobile UK (the trade association for the UK's mobile network operators) to discuss the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on mobile services, and the future development of Northern Ireland's mobile networks. My officials continue to engage with MNOs and Mobile UK on an ongoing basis.

As you may be aware, the Shared Rural Network (SRN) will see Vodafone, O2, Three and EE jointly invest over £500m to increase 4G mobile coverage throughout the UK.

A recent SRN press release announced plans for O2, Three and Vodafone to build and share 11 new mobile masts in Northern Ireland to improve 4G coverage in rural areas. These masts will be built in the Council areas of Mid Ulster, Derry City and Strabane, Newry, Mourne and Down, Fermanagh and Omagh and Causeway Coast and Glens. This work is due to be completed by June 2024.

Mobile Operator EE has also recently announced its SRN plans to upgrade 4G in 38 areas across Northern Ireland by the end of 2021. These improvements will be carried out through upgrades to existing telecoms infrastructure, requiring no additional masts being built.

As part of the legally binding commitments set out within the SRN, mobile coverage in Northern Ireland will reach 98% from at least one operator, and 85% from all four operators compared to 97% and 75% respectively today.

My Department fully understands the need to embrace mobile technology, and is currently leading on the development of a Mobile Action Plan (MAP) for Northern Ireland. This is a key target in our Covid Business Plan. Amongst other things, the MAP will identify the main issues that impact on the roll-out of mobile technologies and provide solutions that aim to remove these barriers, allowing us, amongst other things, to maximise the benefits of the SRN for citizens, businesses and visitors across Northern Ireland.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has met with the major mobile phone networks regarding rural 4G network improvement.

(AQW 16362/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As telecommunications policy is a Reserved matter, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is leading on improvements to 4G in rural areas across the UK. My Department maintains regular contact with DCMS on all telecommunications matters.

I fully appreciate the importance of good mobile connectivity, particularly in rural areas of Northern Ireland. With this in mind I met with Mobile Network Providers (MNOs) and Mobile UK (the trade association for the UK's mobile network operators) to discuss the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on mobile services, and the future development of Northern Ireland's mobile networks. My officials continue to engage with MNOs and Mobile UK on an ongoing basis.

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Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy what engagement she has had with the UK Government and the Irish Government regarding improving the 4G mobile phone network in rural areas.

(AQW 16363/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As telecommunications policy is a Reserved matter, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is leading on improvements to 4G in rural areas across the UK. My Department maintains regular contact with DCMS on all telecommunications matters.

I fully appreciate the importance of good mobile connectivity, particularly in rural areas of Northern Ireland. With this in mind I met with Mobile Network Providers (MNOs) and Mobile UK (the trade association for the UK's mobile network operators) to discuss the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on mobile services, and the future development of Northern Ireland's mobile networks. My officials continue to engage with MNOs and Mobile UK on an ongoing basis.

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As part of the legally binding commitments set out within the SRN, mobile coverage in Northern Ireland will reach 98% from at least one operator, and 85% from all four operators compared to 97% and 75% respectively today.

My Department fully understands the need to embrace mobile technology, and is currently leading on the development of a Mobile Action Plan (MAP) for Northern Ireland. This is a key target in our Covid Business Plan. Amongst other things, the MAP will identify the main issues that impact on the roll-out of mobile technologies and provide solutions that aim to remove these barriers, allowing us, amongst other things, to maximise the benefits of the SRN for citizens, businesses and visitors across Northern Ireland.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the work her Department is undertaking to improve 4G mobile signal in rural areas.

(AQW 16364/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As telecommunications policy is a Reserved matter, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is leading on improvements to 4G in rural areas across the UK. My Department maintains regular contact with DCMS on all telecommunications matters.

I fully appreciate the importance of good mobile connectivity, particularly in rural areas of Northern Ireland. With this in mind I met with Mobile Network Providers (MNOs) and Mobile UK (the trade association for the UK's mobile network operators) to discuss the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on mobile services, and the future development of Northern Ireland's mobile networks. My officials continue to engage with MNOs and Mobile UK on an ongoing basis.

As you may be aware, the Shared Rural Network (SRN) will see Vodafone, O2, Three and EE jointly invest over £500m to increase 4G mobile coverage throughout the UK.

A recent SRN press release announced plans for O2, Three and Vodafone to build and share 11 new mobile masts in Northern Ireland to improve 4G coverage in rural areas. These masts will be built in the Council areas of Mid Ulster, Derry City and Strabane, Newry, Mourne and Down, Fermanagh and Omagh and Causeway Coast and Glens. This work is due to be completed by June 2024.

Mobile Operator EE has also recently announced its SRN plans to upgrade 4G in 38 areas across Northern Ireland by the end of 2021. These improvements will be carried out through upgrades to existing telecoms infrastructure, requiring no additional masts being built.

As part of the legally binding commitments set out within the SRN, mobile coverage in Northern Ireland will reach 98% from at least one operator, and 85% from all four operators compared to 97% and 75% respectively today.

My Department fully understands the need to embrace mobile technology, and is currently leading on the development of a Mobile Action Plan (MAP) for Northern Ireland. This is a key target in our Covid Business Plan. Amongst other things, the MAP will identify the main issues that impact on the roll-out of mobile technologies and provide solutions that aim to remove these barriers, allowing us, amongst other things, to maximise the benefits of the SRN for citizens, businesses and visitors across Northern Ireland.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy to outline what support is available to start up a small business.

(AQW 16409/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There is a wide range of support, financial and advisory, available from Invest NI and other organisations, for people considering starting a business.

The Northern Ireland Business Start Up Programme (NIBSUP), promoted under the Go for it (<https://www.goforitni.com/>) brand and delivered by Northern Ireland's 11 councils, is available to all potential new start businesses. The programme provides one-to-one support from an experienced business advisor, with help to develop a practical business plan and referral to follow on support options.

Besides Invest NI's role in NIBSUP, it provides a wide range of support, financial and advisory, to new start businesses:

- Propel Pre-Accelerator: delivered by IGNITE, a UK-based start-up support and investment network. The programme offers workshops, tutorials, networking opportunities, mentoring, financial support and access to investment.
- Start Ups with export potential: Such businesses can also access support for product development, skills development, market development, strategy development and well as support for job creation. High potential start-ups may also apply to five equity and debt funds as part of Invest NI's Access to Finance (<https://www.investni.com/support-for-business/funding-through-loans-and-equity>) portfolio.

Invest NI also works closely with other partners such as:

- Techstart: Proof of concept: providing grant support for entrepreneurs to explore the viability and commercial potential of an innovative concept.
- Catalyst: CO-founders: is open to individuals and teams who are interested in product development and start-ups, focused on science, technology and engineering.

Information on the wide range of support available to start ups is available through Invest NI's Business Support team on 0800 181 4422 or enquiry@investni.com.

Invest NI also provides a comprehensive range of information on www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk. Two parts of the website are particularly helpful for start-up businesses - My New Business (<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/my-new-business>) and Starting a business A to Z (<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/starting-business-z>).

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 15385 17-22, to outline the practical steps she has taken to reduce frictions, and their outcomes to date.

(AQW 16421/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Customs remains a reserved matter and is the responsibility of the UK Government to reduce frictions arising from customs controls.

I continue to engage with local businesses to identify issues and press the UK Government for solutions. The reintroduction of the VAT Margin scheme and the resolution of the issue on tariffs for steel imports are examples where my interventions created a positive outcome for our businesses.

I will continue to engage with the UK Government and our businesses to seek resolutions to ongoing and emerging issues regarding the movement of goods from GB to NI. Furthermore, my Department will continue to provide guidance and support to businesses navigating the new trading environment.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for the Economy what schemes are available from her Department to support improved rural broadband speeds.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy what the ramifications of the recent Supreme Court ruling in Uber BV and others (Appellants) v Aslam and others (Respondents) will have on local precarious workers.

(AQW 16505/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Employment status is a complex area of employment law and I welcome the Supreme Court judgment which should provide some clarity for the affected workers.

Employment status is important because it determines the rights that an individual gets, and the taxes that they and the business they work for must pay. Where worker status is confirmed, this has important consequences for the impacted individuals and the businesses for which they work. Workers are entitled to be paid at least the national minimum wage, to receive annual paid leave and to benefit from certain other protections. It is therefore extremely important that individuals fully understand their employment status and obtain the correct remuneration and other benefits to which they are entitled. It is perhaps even more important that employers fully understand and fulfil their obligations to those they employ.

These high profile cases highlight the importance to employers of ensuring that they are complying with employment legislation provisions. I encourage all employers to treat all staff fairly and respect the rights of those who work for them.

It will be necessary to consider this judgment carefully. 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.

My officials will continue to liaise with colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on the issue of employment status.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy how the role of the natural environment was considered in the development of her Economic Recovery Action Plan.

(AQW 16550/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Protecting and investing in the natural environment falls within the remit of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. However I recognise that we all have a part to play. As I have previously stated, it is the intention that my Economic Recovery Action Plan starts a wider conversation about whether the actions set out are the right ones as well as relative priority of delivering these actions. This work will feed into the wider cross-departmental Recovery work being taken forward by the Executive Office.

Building a Greener Economy is one of the 4 pillars in my Economic Recovery Action Plan. The actions under this pillar outline my intention to promote a greener economy and future through development in areas such as clean energy, energy efficiency and green innovation.

Furthermore, they recognise that a sustainable and environmentally responsible recovery will not only benefit the natural environment, but create opportunities to build resilience; increase productivity; create jobs and strengthen our competitiveness.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy how her Economic Recovery Action Plan will prioritise investment in nature based solutions.

(AQW 16551/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Protecting and investing in the natural environment falls within the remit of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. However I recognise that we all have a part to play. As I have previously stated, it is the

intention that my Economic Recovery Action Plan starts a wider conversation about whether the actions set out are the right ones as well as relative priority of delivering these actions. This work will feed into the wider cross-departmental Recovery work being taken forward by the Executive Office.

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Furthermore, they recognise that a sustainable and environmentally responsible recovery will not only benefit the natural environment, but create opportunities to build resilience; increase productivity; create jobs and strengthen our competitiveness.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy whether the economic benefit of investing in nature restoration, in terms of job creation and further investment, was considered as part of her Economic Recovery Action Plan.

(AQW 16552/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Protecting and investing in the natural environment falls within the remit of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. However I recognise that we all have a part to play. As I have previously stated, it is the intention that my Economic Recovery Action Plan starts a wider conversation about whether the actions set out are the right ones as well as relative priority of delivering these actions. This work will feed into the wider cross-departmental Recovery work being taken forward by the Executive Office.

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Furthermore, they recognise that a sustainable and environmentally responsible recovery will not only benefit the natural environment, but create opportunities to build resilience; increase productivity; create jobs and strengthen our competitiveness.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy what action her Department has taken to ban zero hours contracts, as committed to in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 16577/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I would refer the Member to the reply I gave to AQW 16284/17-22.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy pursuant to AQW 16030/17-22, to provide a breakdown of the reasons for ineligibility.

(AQW 16589/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In my response to AQW 16030 / 17-22, I provided information against the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (Parts A and B) as at 11th March 2021. At this point in time, I reported that 924 applicants, across both elements of the CRBSS, had been rejected. In the tables below I have outlined the reject reasons for these 924 applicants by scheme.

Part A Reject Reason - 11th March 2021	No of Applicants
Did not provide the required evidence to demonstrate that you meet the requirements of the scheme.	28
The business may be eligible for support under the LRSS or CRBSS Part B.	111
The evidence provided did not confirm you are a business required to close or cease trading as a result of the Health Protection Regulations.	300
The income lost as a result of your business having to close or cease trading was not your main source of income and did not account for more than 50% of your income.	2
You did not provide the required evidence within the stipulated timeframe.	1
You failed to provide the required evidence despite a number of requests.	41
Your business is eligible for support under the Local Restrictions Support Scheme.	139
Overall - Total	622

Part B Reject Reason - 11th March 2021	No of Applicants
Did not provide the required evidence to demonstrate that you meet the requirements of the scheme.	72
The business may be eligible for support under the Local Restrictions Support Scheme or CRBSS Part A.	170

Part B Reject Reason - 11th March 2021	No of Applicants
The evidence provided did not confirm you are a business which supplies goods or services to a named business in the regulations or are dependent on a named business in regulations being open and fully operational.	59
You have not submitted all of the requested documents required to process your application.	1
Overall - Total	302

Whilst reject reasons are unique to each individual applicant, you should be aware that for the purposes of reporting, they are grouped in broad themes for analytical and interpretative purposes.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of University and College Union's decision to take industrial action.

(AQW 16591/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am disappointed that the University and College Union has decided to take industrial action. While I recognise its right to do so, it is only through the negotiations which had been taking place between Trade Union Side and the College Employers' Forum, through the Lecturers' Negotiating Committee structures, that a successful resolution to this dispute can be achieved.

I recognise and value the important contribution which lecturers in our further education colleges make to building our economy and improving the skills and life outcomes for learners, including many of the most vulnerable in our society. I would encourage both the trade unions and the colleges to continue to engage constructively in the negotiations in order to limit any impact on learners.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what consideration has been given in regards to Invest NI contributing its expertise to mainstream Executive Departments, to assist with good practice on the implementation of programmes and project management, as recommended in the Non-Domestic RHI Scheme Inquiry Report.

(AQW 16595/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As you are aware, the recent focus of both my Department and Invest NI (INI) has been dealing with the huge impacts on our economy of both the COVID pandemic, and EU Exit. Clearly, this will continue to be the case in the foreseeable future. Notwithstanding that, all of the recommendations arising from the Non-Domestic RHI Scheme Inquiry Report that fall to my Department to deliver are clearly very important, and we will look to implement them in due course, subject to other work priorities.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the amount of energy, in cost and power, bought by Northern Ireland from peat-powered power plants based in the Republic of Ireland in each of the past five years.

(AQW 16656/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Single Electricity Market (SEM) is the wholesale market for the trading of electricity on the island of Ireland. All generators with an output above 10MW operating in Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland must participate in the SEM where their electricity is traded. Suppliers in both NI and the Republic of Ireland then purchase their energy in this same market.

Given the nature of these arrangements, electricity bought by individual suppliers in the market is not broken down and attributed to individual generators.

The most recent statistics from the 2018 Electricity Supplier Fuel Mix indicated that 5% of the total electricity generation in the SEM was produced by peat generation. The last peat burning power station in Ireland, Lough Ree power plant at Lanesborough on the Longford-Roscommon border, ceased production on 18th December 2020.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the percentage of the overall green energy target for Northern Ireland to which windfarms contribute; and (ii) how this figure is anticipated to change in future under current plans.

(AQW 16657/17-22)

Coronavirus Business Restrictions Support Scheme: Taxi Drivers

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for the Economy to outline her plans to address the lack of taxi operators accessing support under part B of the Coronavirus Business Restrictions Support Scheme.

(AQW 16716/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department for Infrastructure is the lead department for the taxi industry in Northern Ireland, and the Infrastructure Minister has introduced two Taxi Driver Financial Assistance Schemes during the course of this pandemic, the second of which closed to applications on Friday 26th February 2021.

Since the launch of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS), I have urged all business owners who believe they are eligible for either Part A or Part B to visit the [nibusinessinfo](http://nibusinessinfo.gov.uk) website, check their eligibility and submit applications where appropriate.

Those in the taxi industry who have met the eligibility criteria for CRBSS Part B have been supported, but others have been deemed ineligible, and many of these will have been eligible for support through the Taxi Drivers Financial Assistance Scheme.

Owners of taxi depots may also have been eligible for previous business support grants from my Department, and many others in this industry will have availed of the UK Government Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS). The Chancellor has recently announced that further grant payments under this scheme will be payable up until September 2021.

Looking forward, I believe that the best way to support all of our local businesses is to re-open the economy and enable people to commence working and trading as soon as possible, and in line with the Executive's published roadmap and the associated health regulations.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) whether the 705 businesses contacted to make an application to the Wet Pubs Business Support Scheme represents an exhaustive list of those that were considered eligible; (ii) the criteria used to create this list; (iii) how many of the 565 applications for the scheme were successful; (iv) the reasons why the unsuccessful applicants were deemed ineligible; and (v) what other efforts were made to encourage wet pubs to apply for the scheme.

(AQW 16734/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In order to qualify for the Wet Pubs Business Support Scheme (WPBSS) a business must first have been in receipt of Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS). My Department has a Data Sharing Agreement in place with Land & Property Services and the verification team were provided with all properties who identified as a wet pub and were successful in their LRSS application. Departmental officials also conducted an investigation of LRSS data to identify any potential applicants who may have indicated that they were in a different sector.

The criteria for eligibility, after it had been established that a business was in receipt of LRSS, was that the business must have been actively trading before they were forced to close due to the COVID-19 regulations and the business had to have been closed for at least one full week during the eligible period, 4 July to 22 September 2020. Once the verification team were satisfied that a business had met this criteria they were included in the list of businesses who were invited to apply.

To date my Department has received 577 valid applications with 412 payments made. There are various reasons why an application would be deemed ineligible and to date for this scheme there have been the following:

- Ceased trading,
- Unwilling to provide supporting evidence,
- Unable to provide completed supplementary information form and supporting evidence,
- Applicant believed they are ineligible,
- Continued to trade / beer garden/ restaurant,
- Did not provide bank statements,
- Do not permit entry to non-members,
- Does not wish to receive support for period in question,
- Failed to provide sufficient evidence,
- No longer leaseholder,
- No response,
- No wish to proceed/ application withdrawn,
- Not eligible for LRSS,
- Not trading prior to lockdown,
- Rejected as closure period was under previous owner,
- Unable to provide evidence of trading pre-covid.

Whilst this scheme was an invite only application process, the industry were made aware of the WPBSS through the announcement I made on 18 December 2020 which received extensive media coverage. In addition, my officials engaged with sector representatives from Hospitality Ulster to raise awareness of the scheme amongst their membership. Details of the scheme were also published on the NI Business Information website with contact details provided for any enquiries.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) how often reviews are carried out to ensure that Northern Ireland is meeting the objectives of the purpose of installing windfarms; (ii) in particular with regard to driving consumer costs down; and (iii) the level of savings passed on to the consumer from windfarms.

(AQW 16790/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The installation of windfarms supports the objective of increasing the percentage of electricity consumption from renewable sources. The Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO) has been the main support mechanism for

renewable electricity generation in Northern Ireland. The scheme is technology neutral and there are no objectives explicit to windfarms.

Progress towards meeting (and exceeding) the target of having 40% of electricity consumption from renewable sources has been reflected in quarterly reports on Electricity Consumption & Renewable Generation, published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

Domestic electricity prices in NI are lower than in Great Britain and Ireland, and lower than the EU median. Similarly, industrial and commercial electricity prices remain competitive and lower than in Great Britain.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy what is the annual cost benefit breakdown of an average windmill farm, including payments made to the (i) landowner; (ii) local council; (iii) local government; and (iv) that received by the investor from OFGEM.

(AQW 16791/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation is a market based scheme that operates on the basis of trading Renewable Obligation Certificates (ROCs) across all regions of the UK. It is not a grant support scheme.

The price that individual station operators receive for their ROCs and details of capital and operational costs is commercially sensitive information which is not held by the Department.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy whether further education colleges can (i) actively recruit overseas students; and (ii) advertise the services and courses they provide in other countries.

(AQW 16851/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) Yes, further education colleges can actively recruit overseas students if they hold a Tier 4 licence;
- (ii) Yes, further education colleges can advertise the services and courses they provide in other countries.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what support is available for small manufacturers to adapt to the COVID-19 Pandemic; and (ii) whether she is planning to bring forward further support.

(AQW 16922/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Executive and UK Government have responded to COVID-19 with an unprecedented range of financial support for businesses, individuals and families since March 2020. The Department for the Economy (DfE) has made payments totalling over £400million to more than 30,000 businesses via a number of schemes, and continues to pay millions of pounds to thousands more, including those in the manufacturing sector.

The combination of this financial help and support has been designed to mitigate against the worst impacts of the pandemic, to prevent businesses from closing and protect people's main jobs and livelihoods.

The Finance Minister has recently announced a four month rates holiday for businesses across all sectors until July 2021, and a further £178 million in new business support grants. The manufacturing sector has been identified as one of the key sectors which will benefit most from these new grant payments, subject to eligibility.

Moving forward, my focus will be on the re-opening the economy, as I believe that the best way to support all of our local businesses, employers and high streets, is to make a full and safe return to trading as soon as possible in line with the health regulations and the published roadmap 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions'.

Finally, it will be for the Executive collectively to determine how any new or additional Covid-related funding will be allocated as we move out of restrictions and to support a sustained and successful economic recovery moving forward.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has considered providing a financial scheme to caravan owners who have to pay site fees during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

(AQW 16932/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Whilst I have sympathy for caravan owners who have to pay site fees during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is not for my Department to intervene on this matter.

This is a contractual issue between the caravan owners and the owners / managers of the caravan park on which they are sited.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) how many jobs have been created; and (ii) how many promised, in each council district in the 2020 calendar year as a result of financial assistance from InvestNI.

(AQW 16977/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI tracks the number of additional jobs created each year from KPI data collected from businesses it works with. As this process is still being finalised for 2020 we are currently unable to provide this information in response

to your question. This information is normally available after the end of the financial year, once it has been collated and validated.

We have interpreted the number of jobs 'promised' to mean those that a company intends to create at the start of a project. We are unable to release this information at this time as it is due for release in official publications at the end of the 2020-21 financial year.

Job creation is only one element of the support Invest NI provides to businesses to help them grow. Its support ranges from expert advice and guidance to a wide portfolio of financial support towards productivity improvement, skills development, strategic planning, job creation, Research & Development, technical capability and exporting.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 9 April 2021

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Ms Hunter asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will consider releasing to the public the medical and scientific data they base COVID-19 lockdown decisions on.
(AQW 15786/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): A range of medical and scientific evidence has informed the decisions taken by the Executive, much of which is publicly available. Papers from SAGE are published on a publicly available data repository, and reports of Independent SAGE and original scientific publications are also considered along with other evidence.

The Department of Health has also published a significant body of evidential material, which is available at www.health-ni.gov.uk/covid-19-scientific-evidence.

Ms Mullan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the projects of capital funding within the Urban Village Initiative in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area.
(AQW 16240/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: A number of capital projects in the Derry-Londonderry Urban Village area with an investment of £915k have been completed, including Destined Learning Disability Centre, Fountain Playpark and Abercorn Road Environmental Improvement Scheme. The refurbishment of Cathedral Youth Club is also nearing completion.

The planning application for Newgate Cultural Centre was recently approved by DCSDC. This project will involve the redevelopment of the existing centre with the addition of a new performance space. Design work has also commenced for a new build extension to the Gasyard centre. In addition, DCSDC is carrying out early feasibility work to advance The Realm capital proposal. The business case for the transformational Meenan Square development project is currently with the Department of Finance for approval.

Costs are subject to change throughout the lifetime of capital projects but the total estimate for the capital portfolio across the Bogside, Fountain, Bishop Street Urban Village is likely to be in the region of £14 million.

Mr Lynch asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their Department's input into the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.
(AQO 1520/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Joint Committee is responsible for the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, while DAERA has responsibility for fulfilling the Executive's obligations in relation to Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) checks. We have attended and will continue to attend the meetings of the Joint Committee to ensure that our position on the implementation of the Protocol is communicated to the EU, Vice President Maros Sefcovic and CDL. Departmental officials attended meetings of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Specialised Committee.

We are continuing to work to address the impacts of the end of the transition period as they arise, and to engage with the UK Government, the Irish Government and industry in order to find solutions.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of whether existing local circular economy jobs may be displaced or lost should the ARC 21 Incinerator proposal be approved.
(AQW 16864/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Whilst energy recovery can be necessary in certain circumstances, my Department is committed to applying the waste hierarchy in accordance with Article 4 of the Waste

Framework Directive. Where waste cannot be prevented, reuse should be encouraged. If reuse is not suitable or the item has reached the end of its useful life, recycling should be undertaken. Only once these options have been exhausted should energy recovery or landfill be considered. Having reached 50% recycling target, we have set a new target of 65% recycling which will reduce waste going to landfill or energy recovery.

I believe we need to continue the promotion of circular economy jobs within Northern Ireland and save our business, customers, and suppliers money whilst capturing more value from our materials and resources. In 2020 Northern Ireland exported almost 126,000 tonnes of Refuse Derived Fuel (RDF) outside of the UK. My focus is therefore on increasing the quality and quantity of recycling to realise the maximum economic benefit to Northern Ireland and prevent lost opportunity.

I have not made any assessment on whether existing local circular economy jobs may be displaced or lost should the arc21 Incinerator proposal be approved.

Department of Finance

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance what budgetary provision he has made for a £500 COVID-19 payment for all students in further education colleges and not just those on Degree Courses; and whether he has the budgetary capacity to meet a future bid for a £500 COVID-19 payment for all students in further education colleges made by the Department for the Economy.

(AQW 16429/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): ANSWER

I would support a bid in this regard but the Department for the Economy has advised that it has no plans to give FE students a £500 Covid-19 Disruption payment or make a future bid for same.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance to detail the number of (i) vacancies in the Civil Service at grade (a) 7; (b) 6; and (c) 5, broken down by Department; and (ii) staff absences at these grades that have persisted longer than two weeks, broken down by Department.

(AQW 16896/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Details of the total vacancies in each department is not held centrally by my Department. However, for recruitment planning purposes, individual departments notify DoF of vacancies that they wish DoF to proceed to fill. The DoF caseload of active vacancies it is proceeding to fill at Grades 7, 6 and 5 at end of February 2021, is set out in the tables below:

General Service Grades

Department	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Total	Staff in Substantive Grades 5,6 and 7 (at month ending February 2021) FTE
DAERA	2.0	14.0	11.0	27.0	130.5
DE		1.0	2.0	3.0	62.08
DfC	1.0	7.0	3.0	11.0	166.9
DfE	6.0	5.0	9.0	20.0	140.1
DfI		1.0	2.0	3.0	73.4
DoF	1.0	8.0	21.0	30.0	170.2
DoH	5.0		5.0	10.0	91.6
DOJ	1.0	11.0	25.0	37.0	113.3
PPS			1.0	1.0	10.5
TEO	5.0		22.0	27.0	58.0
Total	21.0	47.0	101.0	169.0	1,016.6

As well as General Service jobs, the NICS also has a wide range of professional and technical jobs (e.g. vets, engineers, etc.) across all grades. The table below provides the vacancies across Grades 7, 6 and 5 for specialist jobs in the NICS

Department	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Total	Staff in Substantive Grades 5,6 and 7 (at month ending February 2021) FTE
DAERA		2.0	8.0	10.0	185.7

Department	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Total	Staff in Substantive Grades 5,6 and 7 (at month ending February 2021) FTE
DE					51.9
DfC	1.0			1.0	11.8
DfE					12.0
DfI		1.0	2.0	3.0	53.8
DoF		9.0	30.0	39.0	229.1
DoH	3.0	4.0		7.0	15.2
DOJ		2.0	8.0	10.0	52.1
PPS					66.4
TEO			2.0	2.0	10.9
Total	4.0	18.0	50.0	72.0	688.9

A 'spell of sickness absence' is any episode of sickness absence with a defined onset and termination. An individual may have multiple spells of sickness absence within an analysed time period. The number of absence spells lasting more than 10 working days (over the period 1st April 2020 - 31st December 2020) is set out in the table below:

Department	Grade 5+	Grade 6	Grade 7	Staff in Substantive Grades 5,6 and 7 (at month ending February 2021) FTE
DAERA	*	0	19	316.2
DE	*	*	*	114.0
DfC	0	0	8	178.7
DfE	*	0	10	152.1
DfI	*	5	9	127.2
DoF	*	13	25	399.3
DoH	*	0	*	106.8
DOJ	*	*	10	165.4
PPS	0	*	*	76.9
TEO	0	n/a	5	68.9

Note: to protect possible identification of an individual, data has been suppressed (*) for occurrences <5

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Finance to detail the (i) number; and (ii) value of procurement contracts awarded for the supply of Personal Protective Equipment since February 2020.

(AQW 17022/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Since February 2020, Construction and Procurement Delivery within the Department of Finance, has awarded on behalf of departments and arms length bodies a total of 24 contracts with an estimated value of £61,557,291.56. This is an estimated value as not all contracts include a guaranteed volume of demand.

Details of contracts awarded are set out in the table in Annex A

Annex A

Contracting Authority	Title	Awarded value
Department of Finance	PPE Masks and Filters for CPD	£6,509.40
Department of Health NI	Department of Health Supply of Pandemic Related Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)	£60,000,000.00
Department for Communities NI	DfC Sport NI – Supply and Delivery of Face Masks	£240,000.00
Department for Communities NI	DfC Sport NI – Supply and Delivery of Face Masks	£10,000.00

Contracting Authority	Title	Awarded value
Sport NI	DfC Sport NI – Supply and Delivery of Hypochlorous acid (HOCl or HClO)	£10,000.00
Sport NI	DfC Sport NI – Supply and Delivery of Hypochlorous acid (HOCl or HClO)	£44,611.50
Department for Communities NI	DfC Sport NI Supply and Delivery of Gloves	£70,000.00
Department for Communities NI	DfC Sport NI Supply and Delivery of Gloves	£10,000.00
Sport NI	DfC Sport NI – Supply and Delivery of Infra red thermometers	£10,000.00
Sport NI	DfC Sport NI – Supply and Delivery of Infra red thermometers	£25,112.50
Department for Communities NI	DfC Sport NI – Supply and Delivery of Fluid Repellent Apron	£40,000.00
Sport NI	DfC Sport NI – Supply and Delivery of Hand Sanitiser	£250,000.00
Sport NI	DfC Sport NI – Supply and Delivery of Hand Sanitiser	£100,000.00
Sport NI	DFC SPORT NI - Supply & Delivery of Hand Sanitiser Dispenser and Trigger Spray Bottle - Wall Mounted Hand Sanitiser Dispenser	£90,000.00
Sport NI	DFC SPORT NI - Supply & Delivery of Hand Sanitiser Dispenser and Trigger Spray Bottle - Wall Mounted Hand Sanitiser Dispenser	£10,000.00
Sport NI	DFC SPORT NI - Supply & Delivery of Hand Sanitiser Dispenser and Trigger Spray Bottle - 750ml Trigger Spray Bottle	£20,000.00
Forensic Science NI	PPE products	£525,000.00
Department of Justice	PPE products	£35,100.00
Department of Justice	PPE products	£6,900.00
Department of Justice	PPE products	£8,145.36
Department of Justice	PPE products	£7,584.80
Department of Justice	PPE products	£14,752.50
Department of Justice	PPE products	£6,835.50
Department of Justice	PPE products	£16,740.00

Department of Health

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health to detail the cost to the public purse of the Keep Your Distance COVID-19 badges. (AQW 16377/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): The total cost of the Distance Awareness Scheme is estimated at £200,000, covering costs for the production and distribution of approximately 300,000 badges and other physical promotional materials, as well as a public awareness campaign to promote the scheme.

An allocation of £11,800 was made to the Patient Client Council with respect to their work on the Scheme. The remainder of the costs have been met by the Public Health Agency from within their existing resources.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health to detail the total level of COVID-19 related expenditure from his Department since 1 March 2020; and to provide an overview of each scheme or policy funded under this heading. (AQW 16537/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has incurred expenditure on COVID-19 of £555.1m – this covers the period from March 2020 until January 2021 which is the most up to date information on expenditure available.

This figure consists of £513.1m Resource and £42m Capital expenditure.

Further to the expenditure noted above the Department will also have incurred Covid related expenditure which have been absorbed by mainstream budgets – at January 2021 this was estimated to be £33m.

Resource expenditure has been incurred in responding to the pandemic across a number of areas for example in respect of the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), increased workforce costs, costs relating to the delivery of services, equipment & supply costs, digital health & communication costs, the provision of support to Hospices, the revenue costs associated with infrastructure, support costs such as car parking and cleaning, and the increased costs of annual leave when holidays could not be taken as a result of the pandemic.

Capital Expenditure has been incurred on a range of medical equipment including ventilators and other equipment reflective of multiple organ diagnostics, equipment to support new ways of working across the HSC, the provision of funding for PPE Storage, a 2nd nightingale hospital at Whiteabbey, increased medical oxygen supplies, IT solutions to enable the HSC resume services through new ways of working to protect patients and staff and capital works to allow the Health Service to reset and rebuild in a Covid safe environment.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health whether shielding will be paused from 1 April 2021 in line with the UK Government's announcement for England; and when clinically extremely vulnerable people may be advised to return to work. **(AQW 16619/17-22)**

Mr Swann: Shielding for Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) people was paused at the end of July 2020. Since then, advice for CEV people has been kept under continual review by a dedicated cell in the Department of Health which is overseen by the Chief Medical Officer.

On 16 March, advice for CEV people was reviewed in line with the wider review of restrictions. The current advice for CEV people not to attend the workplace has been extended to 11 April. However, from 12 April, a graduated easing of advice will commence, subject to ongoing review of the epidemiology and the status of wider restrictions.

From 12 April, CEV people should continue to work from home where this is possible. If it is not possible, they can attend their workplace, provided their employer has taken the proper measures to ensure social distancing, and they can travel to work in a way which allows for social distancing.

Updated advice has been placed online at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-and-vulnerable-people>.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for an update on the review into the clinically extremely vulnerable guidance due to occur on 16 March 2021, including (i) whether the advice has changed; and (ii) when this will be made public. **(AQW 16628/17-22)**

Mr Swann: Advice for CEV people was reviewed on 16 March, in line with the wider review of restrictions.

The current advice for CEV people not to attend the workplace has been extended to 11 April. However, from 12 April, a graduated easing of advice will commence, subject to ongoing review of the epidemiology and the status of wider restrictions.

From 12 April, CEV people should continue to work from home where this is possible. If it is not possible, they can attend their workplace, provided their employer has taken the proper measures to ensure social distancing, and they can travel to work in a way which allows for social distancing.

Updated advice has been placed online at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-and-vulnerable-people>.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health how many people (i) under; and (ii) over the age of 18, in each Health and Social Care Trust, were diagnosed with ADHD in the last five years, broken down by gender. **(AQW 16670/17-22)**

Mr Swann: The number of ADHD diagnoses is not held by my Department, or routinely collected by the Health and Social Care Trusts. Therefore, to provide the requested information would require a manual trawl through hundreds of files at a disproportionate cost.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of people on the organ donor register. **(AQW 16836/17-22)**

Mr Swann: Information on the number of people on the organ donor register has been provided by the Public Health Agency (PHA). As at 30 December 2020, there were 913,388 Northern Ireland residents on the Organ Donor Register.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 8366/17-22, for an updated table on planned legislation with indicative dates for introduction. **(AQW 16882/17-22)**

Mr Swann: The table that was provided in AQ 8366/17-22 remains extant, with some updates as detailed below:

(i) primary legislation

Reform of Health and Social care Bill	The Bill reached second stage 16 March, and is currently with the Health Committee for scrutiny.
Adoption and Children Bill	Work has progressed with the intention to circulate an Executive Paper during April, and potential introduction of the Bill in May, subject to business case approval.
Organ Donation Bill	A 10 week consultation closed 9 February. Drafting work on the Bill is progressing, with the intention to introduce the Bill shortly.
Medicines & Medical Devices Bill	The Health Committee supported the Legislative Consent Motion (LCM), which Assembly agreed on 30 November 2020.

(ii) secondary legislation

The Healthy Start Scheme and Day Care Food Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020	The Health Committee considered the SL1 14 January and agreed with the proposal to introduce a Statutory Rule to provide for an increase in the Healthy Start voucher value to maintain parity with England and Wales.
The Mental Health Capacity (2016 Act) (Commencement No. 1) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020	This SR postponed the commencement date for the offence of unlawful detention under the Mental Capacity Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 from the 2 December 2020 to 31 May 2021, in recognition of the extreme pressures on colleagues in the Health and Social Care Trusts. It was made on 10 November 2020.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what work has been done to expand the elective treatments that can be administered by GPs.

(AQW 16917/17-22)

Mr Swann: The focus of our health service will continue to be on resetting all elective services in an environment that is safe for both staff and patients. Health and Social Care Trusts are working with clinicians and the Health and Social Care Board to prioritise the care needs of patients who have been referred into the HSC and also to ensure that all available capacity is utilised as effectively and equitably as possible across the region.

The Elective Care Plan, which sets out the plan for the transformation and reform of elective care services, includes the expansion of capacity and capability in primary care. The continued development of pathways and services within primary care are strategically important in the management of waiting lists.

A range of pathways have been designed to facilitate patients being managed more appropriately in primary care without the need to refer to hospital services. The pathways provide primary care capacity and also support an improved approach to demand management via peer support, peer review, peer education, self-management and self-directed care at a population level within GP Federations.

Current services provided and activity to date include:

- Dermatology: to safely manage a range of routine dermatological conditions in a primary care setting; At the end of January 2021, a total of 4,052 (including dermatology surgery) patients were seen face to face as well as a further 933 patients managed remotely;
- Gynaecology: to safely manage a range of routine gynaecological conditions (Coil fitting, Long-Acting Reversible Contraception) in a primary care setting. A total of 2,538 patients were seen and treated and a further 1,007 remote consultations provided;
- Vasectomy: to safely deliver non-scalpel procedures in a primary care setting. A total of 1,479 patients were treated;
- Musculo-skeletal/Pain: to safely manage a range of routine MSK conditions in a primary care setting. A total of 2,302 were seen in clinic and a further 233 patients managed remotely;
- Minor Surgery: to safely manage a range of routine minor surgical procedures (lipoma excisions, sebaceous cysts, dermatofibroma, excisions for diagnostic purposes) in a primary care setting. A total of 548 patients were treated.

These services reduce elective waiting times for patients and the current elective backlogs across the relevant specialities. It is planned that these services would continue into 2021/22 with planned expansion across the HSC and the introduction of new specialties in primary care, including Cardiology, Photo Dermatology and Gastroenterology, subject to funding.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health what actions he is considering to help reduce waiting lists, particularly for diagnostics, endoscopy and imaging, including in conjunction with the independent sector.

(AQW 16946/17-22)

Mr Swann: The impact of Covid-19 on elective waiting times has been profound and will undoubtedly be long lasting. Addressing the backlog will be challenging given the reduced operational capacity across the HSC.

In 2020/21, approximately 6,000 endoscopic diagnostic tests and 35,000 imaging examinations were procured from Independent Sector Providers for HSC patients. Given the increasing waiting lists and current capacity gaps, it is expected that similar volumes will be required in 2021/22.

The HSC has been working with a range of IS providers to secure additional capacity for 2021/22 and patients have already been scheduled for April. Subject to the financial allocation, capacity will be secured for a 12-month period.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Health how much funding was allocated to the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust for the PrEP service for the year 2020-21.

(AQW 16953/17-22)

Mr Swann: £73,000 was allocated to the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust for the PrEP service for the year 2020-21.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Infrastructure what consideration her Department has given to the expansion of the rail network and the viability of routes.

(AQW 16719/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I have huge ambitions for our rail network and am keen to do all that I can to explore how we can progress rail improvements to better connect communities, businesses and address regional imbalance while tackling the climate crisis.

My Department is currently bringing forward the Transport Plan for the Regional Strategic Transport Network (RSTNTP) and, amongst other measures, this will consider improvements to our rail network. 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 the practicalities of expanding the network. The Draft RSTNTP is scheduled for full public consultation in late 2021, and I am determined to use these Transport Plans to help power our Green Recovery.

In addition to this work and to address the lack of rail services to the North West, I have commenced a new feasibility study to get the Phase 3 upgrade of the Derry to Coleraine railway back on track. I have also commissioned a separate study to explore the option of halts and associated park and ride facilities at Strathfoyle, Eglinton/City of Derry Airport and Ballykelly. This new study will also examine the possibility of introducing half hour services on the Derry to Belfast line.

I have also agreed to provide financial assistance to Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, for a feasibility study to examine whether the former track bed between Portadown and Armagh is suitable for restoration. Early scoping work into this rail extension has already been undertaken, which indicated this may be a viable option. I am keen to see the findings of this feasibility report.

I am also committed to working East West and North South to improve our rail network and I continue to engage with, and make representations to, the British Government to honour the commitments made in New Decade New Approach to 'turbocharge infrastructure' including a high speed rail link between Belfast, Dublin and Cork.

Building on that commitment in New Decade New Approach, I have reached agreement with the Transport Minister, Eamon Ryan TD, to extend the feasibility study into high speed rail between Derry-Belfast–Dublin–Cork to a Strategic All Island Rail Review that will allow us to consider our rail connectivity across the island. This Review will consider how we connect our rail network and will critically examine where we can make the greatest impact.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much has been spent on the new A5 project in each year since its initial launch.

(AQW 16721/17-22)

Ms Mallon: From commencement of scheme development in 2007 to the period ending February 2021, £83.4 million has been expended on the A5 dual carriageway project. The table below provides a breakdown of annual spend to date.

Financial Year	£k
2007-8	869
2008-9	8,350
2009-10	14,601
2010-11	11,400
2011-12	10,329

Financial Year	£k
2012-13	12,330
2013-14	8,338
2014-15	5,083
2015-16	1,713
2016-17	3,884
2017-18	2,612
2018-19	761
2019-20	1,270
2020-21	1,867
Total	83,407

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the actions arising from the public petition presented on 16 February in relation to the adoption of Ravensbrea Waste Water Treatment Plant, Garrison.

(AQW 16787/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have considered the public petition and I am sympathetic to the depth of public concern over this matter. I am very much aware of the problems at this private wastewater treatment works at Ravens Brae in Garrison. However, these issues have been caused by the developer failing to maintain the wastewater systems for which he is responsible.

Despite this, my department has continued to offer advice to the residents, and NI Water had agreed to meet with the residents, in early March, to inspect the private wastewater treatment works, with a view to providing a snag list which would detail the work that would need to be carried out before the sewerage infrastructure could be considered for adoption.

Unfortunately, NI Water staff were unable to gain access to the private wastewater treatment works to carry out the inspection.

If NI Water was able to upgrade the waste water treatment works at Garrison, the developer, or those wishing to connect to NI Water's sewerage system, would still need to provide a pumping station and rising sewer main, to facilitate connection to the wastewater treatment works.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number of parking fines issued in Ballymena from March 2019 until February 2021, broken down per month.

(AQW 16808/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Details of the number of Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) issued in Ballymena from March 2019 until February 2021, broken down per month, are provided in the table below:

Date	PCNs issued per month
Mar 2019	417
Apr	335
May	428
Jun	381
Jul	349
Aug	394
Sep	381
Oct	460
Nov	479
Dec	348
Jan 2020	282
Feb	374
Mar	278
Apr	0

Date	PCNs issued per month
May	0
Jun	18
Jul	318
Aug	303
Sep	324
Oct	315
Nov	243
Dec	234
Jan 2021	114
Feb	59

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for Infrastructure when her Department will be resurfacing the Kensington road area of Londonderry.

(AQW 16878/17-22)

Ms Mallon: It is acknowledged that Kensington Road is in need of resurfacing and I am pleased to be able to confirm that a scheme to resurface it will be included in the resurfacing programme for the Derry City & Strabane District Council area for the 2021/22 financial year. Until this programme is finalised and discussions have taken place with contractors around the timing of the various schemes included within the programme, it is not yet possible to be more specific in relation to the timing of the actual works.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) her Department's responsibility and enforcement role over on-street parking issues; (ii) who is responsible for enforcing illegal parking on double yellow lines; and (iii) whether her Department has furloughed traffic attendants across Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16886/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) The Traffic Management (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 gives my Department the power to use Traffic Attendants (TAs) to enforce parking contraventions by issuing Penalty Charge Notices. The legislation was amended in 2015 to enable the enforcement of Moving Traffic Offences in bus lanes. It also grants the powers needed to allow my Department to deal with representations and appeals, and to clamp and remove vehicles.
- (ii) In 2006, following the decriminalisation of on-street parking including waiting and loading restrictions, my Department assumed responsibility from the PSNI for the enforcement of parking restrictions including double yellow lines. However, certain offences, such as dangerous parking or parking causing an obstruction, have not been decriminalised and the PSNI is therefore still responsible for some enforcement.
- (iii) The Department does not directly employ the TAs, as the parking enforcement service is delivered through a contract with NSL. In response to the Department's reduced requirements for parking enforcement, NSL furloughed about 70% of their TAs. The Department has ensured there is flexibility in its approach and, if required, the number of TAs can be increased.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 16250/17-22, to detail when each road was added to the list.

(AQW 16891/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that the list of projects which I supplied under AQW 16250/17-22 contains details of resurfacing schemes identified as a result of requests from the public or elected representatives, and by my officials, for example, during cyclical maintenance inspections

Information on when each road was identified and added to the list has not been recorded therefore the information requested is not available.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the reinstatement work of the footpath at Chippendale Vale, Bangor, carried out by BT contractors using tarmac to cover trenches cut through paving stones, meets her Department's standard.

(AQW 16905/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Firstly may I explain that, under Streetworks legislation, utility companies have a legal right to place and maintain their services in the footway and carriageway but in doing so are required to adhere to certain standards including in respect of reinstatements.

Given the extensive scale of the current programme of works being undertaken by BT, the Department does not have sufficient resources to upgrade / resurface the affected footways once the utility works are complete. However any footways impacted by works will be considered for inclusion in future footway resurfacing programmes.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many taxi drivers did not receive the full support payment as a result of taking an insurance break over the past twelve months.

(AQW 16909/17-22)

Ms Mallon: All of the eligible taxi drivers that applied for support received the full payment they were entitled to under the financial support schemes. Over the two schemes there were a total of 5170 individual applicants, of whom 4,538 received the full support payment of £3,000 (88%), while the remaining 632 (12%) were entitled to less than £3,000 owing to a break in their insurance.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 16396/17-22, to outline the technical nature of the enforcement action and why this was necessary.

(AQW 16967/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Planning permission was recently granted for dredging in specific areas of Lough Neagh. The 2021 enforcement notice restricts dredging activities outside this approved area or during specified times within this approved area. The 2015 enforcement notice also restricted these same activities. The enforcement notices differ in the period to which they apply. This was necessary due to the unique way minerals developments are treated within the planning system.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the criteria for the allocation of funding for capital structural maintenance was last updated.

(AQW 16970/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In distributing the resources available for capital structural maintenance, allocations to the four DfI Roads Divisions are made on the basis of need, using a range of weighted indicators tailored to each maintenance activity. Divisions also use a range of indicators when apportioning across District Council areas to ensure, as far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds based on need.

While the broad indicators remain the same year on year, information included in the allocation process is updated each year to reflect changes to the network and surface condition.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will publish the criteria for the allocation of funding to local councils concerning capital structural maintenance.

(AQW 16971/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In distributing the resources available for capital structural maintenance, allocations to the four DfI Roads Divisions are made on the basis of need, using a range of weighted indicators tailored to each maintenance activity. Divisions also use a range of indicators when apportioning across District Council areas to ensure, as far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds based on need.

The table below sets out the main activities comprising capital structural maintenance and the associated indicators and weightings currently used to distribute capital structural maintenance allocations to the four DfI Roads Divisions.

Category	Indicator	Weighting
Resurfacing	Traffic	30%
	Condition	30%
	Carriageway Area	40%
Footway Resurfacing	Traffic (using population)	30%
	Condition	30%
	Footway Area	30%
	3 year Average spend	10%
Structural Drainage	Road Length	50%
	3 year Average spend	50%

Category	Indicator	Weighting
Surface Dressing	Traffic	30%
	Condition	5%
	Rural Road Length	35%
	3 year Average spend	30%

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will publish the Project Assurance Review Report into the York Street Interchange.

(AQW 16972/17-22)

Ms Mallon: For a Project Assurance Review to be effective and of value, exchanges between interviewees and the panel need to be open, frank and confidential in nature. As such, in line with the guidance attached to DAO (DoF) 02/20 (Section 8)

<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dfp/DAOf0220att.pdf>, I do not plan to publish this report.

I have, however, published the six recommendations of the review which can be found at <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/news/mallon-announces-outcome-review-york-street-interchange-scheme> and I have asked for further work to be carried out on the recommendations, the outcome of which is to be reported to me in the autumn of 2021.

Department for the Economy

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for her assessment of the impact the restrictions on non-essential retail, hospitality and close contact services have had on student income, who often rely on these sectors for part-time employment; and (ii) whether she will bring forward a support package for students.

(AQW 12780/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy):

- (i) Since the lockdown in March 2020 the economic impact of COVID-19 has been unprecedented, with the burden on young people (aged 16-24), of which students make up a significant percentage, particularly high due to the closure of sectors in which this group is significantly represented.

Evidence of this can be seen in the latest Labour Force Survey estimates, which show that the claimant count in November 2020 remains more than double the number recorded in March 2020. Added to this, the latest unemployment rate among young people has also doubled over the same period to just under 12%, while the employment rate has decreased by over 13% in this group, more than any other age group over the same period.

- (ii) My Department continues to provide support to students who are facing genuine financial hardship for whatever reason, including because of difficulties with their accommodation contracts. In recognition of these difficulties and the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, I have bid for an additional £10m of funding, increasing the total amount available for student hardship to £16 million in the current financial year. These funds are distributed by the Universities, who have been directed to publicise and promote the availability of these additional funds heavily, to ensure that they reach eligible students as quickly as possible, and to consider whether any requirements set by their institution for students to access funds can be relaxed or removed.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy how many taxi operators and wedding chauffeur operators have (i) applied for Part B of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme; and (ii) been approved for Part B of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme.

(AQW 15092/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) As of 15th March 2021, Invest NI report that 44 applications have been submitted to Invest NI under CRBSS from taxi operators; and 28 applications have been submitted from wedding cars, chauffeur and limousine services.
- (ii) Of the 44 applications submitted from taxi operators, 6 have been successfully paid, 4 have been rejected and 34 are being assessed to establish their eligibility.

Of the 28 applications submitted from wedding cars, chauffeur and limousine services, 14 have been successfully paid, 2 have been rejected and 12 are being assessed to establish their eligibility.

Minutes of Proceedings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 15 March 2021

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Matter of the Day

2.1 Death of Sarah Everard

Miss Rachel Woods, under Standing Order 24, made a statement on the death of Sarah Everard. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

3. Assembly Business

Motion: Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Gary Middleton replace Mrs Pam Cameron as a member of the Business Committee.

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr Robin Newton

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

4. Executive Committee Business

4.1 **Statement: Public Expenditure: Additional Business Support Schemes**

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, made a statement regarding Public Expenditure: Additional Business Support Schemes, following which he replied to questions.

The Speaker took the Chair.

5. Private Members' Business

5.1 **Second stage: Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 15/17-22)**

Mr Paul Givan moved the Second Stage of the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 15/17-22).

Debate ensued.

The Assembly was suspended for Question Time.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

6. Question Time

6.1 Education

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir.

6.2 Finance

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy.

7. Question for Urgent Oral Answer

7.1 Oxford-AstraZeneca Vaccine: Roll-out

The Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Mr Colm Gildernew.

The Speaker took the Chair.

8. Assembly Business

8.1 Motion: Extension of Sitting on Monday 15 March 2021 under Standing Order 10(3A)

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 15 March 2021 be extended to no later than 9:00pm.

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**.

9. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

9.1 Second stage: Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 15/17-22) (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The sitting was suspended at 6.51pm.

The sitting resumed at 7.02pm.

The Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 15/17-22) passed Second Stage (Division).

10. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 8.23pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

15 March 2021

Northern Ireland Assembly

15 March 2021

Division

Second stage: Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 15/17-22)

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 48

Noes: 12

AYES

Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Ms S Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Ms Hunter, Mr Irwin, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyons, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs Barton, Mrs D Kelly.

NOES

Mrs Bailey, Mr Beattie, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Ms McLaughlin, Mr Muir, Mr O'Toole, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Bradshaw, Miss Woods.

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result:

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, 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 Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

The Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 15/17-22) passed Second Stage.

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

Ms Armstrong voted for Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw [Teller, Noes], Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mrs Barton [Teller, Ayes], Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt and Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, 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 Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Mr McGrath voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly [Teller, Ayes], Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty and Mr O'Toole.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 10 March 2021 to 15 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

Victims and Survivors Service Limited Annual Report and Accounts for year ended 31 March 2020 (Victims and Survivors Service)

Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service Trust Statement for the year ended 31 March 2020 (Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service)

5. Assembly Reports

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2021/58 The Social Security Revaluation of Earnings Factors Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)

SR 2021/59 The Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)

SR 2021/60 The Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (General Levy) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)

SR 2021/61 The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period in Schedule 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for the Economy)

SR 2021/62 The Bus Operator (Coronavirus, Financial Assistance) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2021/63 The Agricultural Commodities (Coronavirus)(Income Support) Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

SR 2021/64 The Social Security (Claims and Payments, Employment and Support Allowance, Personal Independence Payment and Universal Credit) (Telephone and Video Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)

SR 2021/65 The Sea Fish Industry (Coronavirus) (Fixed Costs) Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

For information only

Explanatory memorandum for SR 2021/54 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

Business Rates 2021/22 - COVID-19 (Minister of Finance)

Fiscal Council and Fiscal Commission (Minister of Finance)

8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 15 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 15 March 2021:

Andy Allen	Liz Kimmins
Martina Anderson	Naomi Long
Caoimhe Archibald	Gordon Lyons
Rosemary Barton	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	Philip McGuigan
Jonathan Buckley	Maolíosa 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	Matthew O'Toole
Órlaithí Flynn	Edwin Poots
Colm Gildernew	George Robinson
Paul Givan	Emma Rogan
Deirdre Hargey	Pat Sheehan
Harry Harvey	Emma Sheerin
David Hilditch	Christopher Stalford
Cara Hunter	John Stewart
William Irwin	Mervyn Storey
Declan Kearney	Robin Swann
Dolores Kelly	Peter Weir
Gerry Kelly	

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 16 March 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 Second Stage: Health and Social Care Bill (NIA Bill 18/17-22)

The Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, moved the Second Stage of the Health and Social Care Bill (NIA Bill 18/17-22).

Debate ensued.

The Health and Social Care Bill (NIA Bill 18/17-22) passed Second Stage.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

3. Private Members' Business

3.1 Motion: Welfare Support

Proposed:

That this Assembly highlights the need for a fair and sustainable welfare system in Northern Ireland; notes with concern the deep economic impact of the pandemic and resulting restrictions; stresses the need to meet any related increase in eligibility for, or uptake of, benefits and other forms of financial support for those made redundant or suffering ill-health, as part of the recovery from Covid-19; expresses grave concern that the review of welfare mitigations measures provided for in New Decade, New Approach has not been taken forward as a priority by the Department for Communities; and calls on the Minister for Communities to accelerate that review and to ensure that appropriate and ongoing welfare support is made available to households hardest hit by the effects of the pandemic as the Executive charts a course toward recovery.

Ms Paula Bradley

Mr Alex Easton

Mr Robin Newton

Amendment

Proposed:

At end insert:

'to overturn the recent withdrawal of funding for advice centres and to reallocate the money to allow for the continuation of vital advice services.'

Mr Gerry Carroll

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 1.01pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

4. Question Time

4.1 Health

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

5. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

5.1 Motion: Welfare Support (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made**.

The Question being put, the motion as amended was **carried**.

5.2 Motion: Supporting Students

Proposed:

That this Assembly welcomes the recent announcement of a £500 Covid Disruption Payment for students studying full-time higher education courses; believes that the exclusion of full-time students studying further education courses and students studying higher education courses in the Republic of Ireland or in Britain is unfair; acknowledges the difficulty of part-time students facing financial hardship also needs to be addressed; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to address these inequalities and ensure that all students who are currently excluded from the Covid Disruption Payment receive the £500 payment.

*Mr John O'Dowd
Dr Caoimhe Archibald
Ms Nicola Brogan
Ms Emma Sheerin*

Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after the first 'courses;' and insert:

'notes with regret the absence of legal powers in the Department for the Economy to extend this support to all full-time students studying further education courses and students studying higher education courses in the Republic of Ireland or in Great Britain; acknowledges the difficulty of part-time students facing financial hardship also needs to be addressed; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to raise with her counterparts in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland the desire to ensure that all students who are currently excluded from the Covid Disruption Payment receive comparable and much-deserved support.'

*Mr Christopher Stalford
Mr Gary Middleton*

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **negatived**.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

The sitting was suspended at 4.23pm.

The sitting resumed at 4.51pm, the Speaker in the Chair.

6. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

6.1 **Statement: Executive's Pathway out of the COVID-19 restrictions**

The First Minister, the Rt Hon Arlene Foster, made a statement regarding the Executive's Pathway out of the COVID-19 restrictions, following which she replied to questions.

7. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

Ms Paula Bradshaw spoke to her topic regarding Post-Primary Education Provision in South Belfast.

The Assembly adjourned at 6.34pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

16 March 2021

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 16 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
Livestock and Meat Commission Annual Report and Accounts 2019-2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)
5. Assembly Reports
Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Thirtieth Report of Session 2020 – 2021 (NIA 86/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)
6. Statutory Rules
SR 2021/66 The Automatic Enrolment (Earnings Trigger and Qualifying Earnings Band) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)

SR 2021/67 The Universal Credit (Extension of Coronavirus Measures) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as 16 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	10/12/21					
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	16/03/21						

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	15/03/21						

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 16 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 16 March 2021:

Andy Allen	Liz Kimmins
Martina Anderson	Naomi Long
Caoimhe Archibald	Gordon Lyons
Rosemary Barton	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
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
Arlene Foster	John O'Dowd
Órlaithí Flynn	Michelle O'Neill
Colm Gildernew	Edwin Poots
Paul Givan	George Robinson
Deirdre Hargey	Emma Rogan
Harry Harvey	Pat Sheehan
David Hilditch	Emma Sheerin
Cara Hunter	Christopher Stalford
William Irwin	John Stewart
Declan Kearney	Mervyn Storey
Dolores Kelly	Robin Swann
Gerry Kelly	Peter Weir

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 22 March 2021

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Matter of the Day

2.1 Murders in Newtownabbey

Ms Paula Bradley, under Standing Order 24, made a statement on the Murders in Newtownabbey. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

3. Public Petition

3.1 Ban Conversion Therapy

Ms Paula Bradshaw was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition to Ban Conversion Therapy.

4. Assembly Business

4.1 Motion: Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Gary Middleton replace Ms Paula Bradley as a member of the Committee on Procedures; and that Mr Gary Middleton replace Mr Paul Givan as a member of the Committee for the Economy.

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mrs Pam Cameron

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

4.2 Motion: Extension of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 response

Proposed:

That this Assembly agrees that, unless it previously resolves, the time frame for the existence of the Ad Hoc Committee, appointed by the Assembly on 31 March 2020 for the purpose of receiving oral statements from Ministers on matters relating to the COVID-19 response and questioning Ministers on such statements, be extended by six months until 30 September 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**.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

5. Executive Committee Business

5.1 Motion: The Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Proposed:

That the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be affirmed.

Minister for Communities

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

5.2 Motion: The draft Energy Performance of Buildings (Certificates and Inspections) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Proposed:

That the draft Energy Performance of Buildings (Certificates and Inspections) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

Minister of Finance

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

6. Private Members' Business

6.1 First Stage: Climate Change Bill (NIA Bill 19/17-22)

Ms Clare Bailey introduced a Bill to enable the mitigation of the impact of climate change in Northern Ireland; establish a legally binding net-zero carbon target for Northern Ireland; provide for the establishment and powers of the Northern Ireland Climate Commissioner and Northern Ireland Climate Office; guarantee existing environmental and climate protections; and for connected purposes.

The Climate Change Bill (NIA Bill 19/17-22) passed First Stage and was ordered to be printed.

The Speaker took the Chair.

6.2 Motion: Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises there has been a failure of leadership to deal with issues that arise around flags, identity, culture and tradition in Northern Ireland; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to publish the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition report, and to bring the report recommendations to the Executive for review, to provide funding and to take forward in order to ensure leadership on these issues and to move Northern Ireland forward together as a united community.

Ms Paula Bradshaw

Mr Andrew Muir

Mr Chris Lyttle

Amendment**Proposed:**

Leave out all after 'review,' and insert:

'to honour their commitments within New Decade, New Approach and establish the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression without delay, and to provide the necessary funding for these outcomes to re-commit ourselves to reconciliation, peace and stability.'

Mr Colin McGrath

Mr Matthew O'Toole

Mr Patsy McGlone

Debate ensued.

The debate stood suspended for Question Time.

7. Question Time

7.1 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.

7.2 Infrastructure

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon.

The Speaker took the Chair.

8. Question for Urgent Oral Answer

8.1 Abortion Services

The Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Ms Paula Bradshaw.

9. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

9.1 Motion: Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the amendment was **made**.

The Question being put, the motion as amended was **carried**.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

9.2 Motion: JobStart and the Impact of the Pandemic on 16 to 24 year olds**Proposed:**

That this Assembly recognises the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people, their personal and professional development, mental health, and career prospects; recognises that 16 to 24 year olds have been among the most disproportionately affected by the pandemic and lockdown restrictions; expresses deep concern that the Minister of Finance has not provided certainty that funding commitments for the JobStart scheme in Northern Ireland can be honoured in the next financial year; and calls on the Minister for Communities to commit to the implementation and roll-out of the JobStart scheme without further delay to address serious youth unemployment challenges.

Ms Paula Bradley

Mr Paul Frew

Mr Robin Newton

Mr Alex Easton

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

10. Adjournment**Proposed:**

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.49pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

22 March 2021

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 17 March 2021 to 22 March 2021

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
Climate Change Bill (NIA Bill 19/17-22)
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
Charitable Donations and Bequests Accounts year ending March 2019 (Department for Communities)
5. Assembly Reports
Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Thirty First Report of Session 2020 – 2021 (NIA 89/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)
6. Statutory Rules
SR 2021/68 The Travel Agents (Coronavirus, Financial Assistance) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (The Executive Office)

SR 2021/69 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

SR 2021/70 The Housing Benefit (Persons who have attained the qualifying age for state pension credit) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 22 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 22 March 2021:

Andy Allen	Dolores Kelly
Martina Anderson	Gerry Kelly
Caoimhe Archibald	Liz Kimmins
Rosemary Barton	Naomi Long
Roy Beggs	Gordon Lyons
John Blair	Séan Lynch
Cathal Boylan	Chris Lyttle
Paula Bradley	Nichola Mallon
Sinead Bradley	Declan McAleer
Paula Bradshaw	Fra McCann
Nicola Brogan	Daniel McCrossan
Thomas Buchanan	Patsy McGlone
Jonathan Buckley	Colin McGrath
Joanne Bunting	Philip McGuigan
Robbie Butler	Maolíosa 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
Sinead 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

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 23 March 2021

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker, in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

Points of Order, Standards of Debate

The Speaker made some remarks about the proper use of Points of Order, the overall standards of debate the previous day, and highlighted the authority of the Chair which is not to be challenged.

Royal Assent

The Speaker advised Members that Royal Assent had been signified on 22 March 2021 to The Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021.

National Day of Reflection

The Speaker advised Members that, as part of the designated National Day of Reflection, the sitting would be suspended at 11.50am to make preparations to mark the day, and that at 12.00 noon, he would invite Members to join him in observing a minute's silence to remember all those who have lost their lives during the pandemic and to show support for the many thousands of people who mourn the loss of their loved ones.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement: Civil Justice Modernisation

The Minister of Justice, Mrs Naomi Long, made a statement regarding Civil Justice Modernisation, following which she replied to questions.

3.2 Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Proposed:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

Minister of Health

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 11.50am to enable Members to observe a minute's silence on the National Day of Reflection for those who have lost their lives to coronavirus.

The sitting resumed at 12.05pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

The sitting was suspended at 1.03pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.

4. Question Time

4.1 Justice

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Justice, Mrs Naomi Long.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

4.2 Assembly Commission

Questions were put to, and answered by, Members of the Assembly Commission.

5. Committee Business

5.1 Motion: Review of the Assembly's Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members: Stage 1

Proposed:

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee on Standards and Privileges on its Review of the Assembly Members' Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members: Stage 1 [NIA 82/17-22], laid in the Business Office on 25 February 2021; affirms its commitment to high ethical standards and to the Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members; agrees that the Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members should be amended in accordance with the Annex to the Report; and further agrees that the amended Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members should come into effect on Monday 12 April 2021.

Chairperson, Committee on Standards and Privileges

Debate ensued.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

6. Private Members' Business

6.1 Motion: Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy

Proposed:

That this Assembly condemns violence against women and girls in all forms; notes with concern that Northern Ireland is the only place on these islands that does not have a specific strategy to tackle gender-based violence and abuse; regrets that the Executive is failing to meet its international obligations in this regard; and calls on the Minister of Justice and the First Minister and deputy First Minister to take immediate action to eliminate gender-based violence in our society by introducing a Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, underpinned by legislation and resourcing which includes a commitment to legislate to make misogyny a hate crime and prioritises early intervention in schools to erode sexist attitudes and build lifelong positive relationships.

Ms Sinead Bradley

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Ms Cara Hunter

Amendment**Proposed:**

Leave out all after 'regard;' and insert:

'and calls on the Executive to take immediate action to eliminate gender-based violence by introducing a Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy that is fully resourced and underpinned by legislation to make misogyny a hate crime, and to introduce standardised, comprehensive Relationship and Sexuality Education in our schools to eradicate sexist attitudes and build lifelong, positive relationships.'

Miss Rachel Woods

Ms Clare Bailey

Debate ensued.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made**.

The Question being put, the motion as amended was **carried**.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

7. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

Mr Keith Buchanan spoke to his topic regarding Road Safety at Schools in Mid Ulster.

The Assembly adjourned at 6.10pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

23 March 2021

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 23 March 2021

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

The Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

The Food Safety Promotion Board (Safefood) Annual Report 2019 (Department of Health)

Loughs Agency Annual Report and Accounts 2019 (Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

5. Assembly Reports

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Thirty Second Report of Session 2020 – 2021 (NIA 90/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

6. Statutory Rules

Draft SR The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Change of Expiry Date in section 32(1)) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for the Economy)

For information only

SR 2021/55 The Pneumoconiosis, Etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

8. Consultation Documents

9. Departmental Publications

The Coronavirus Act 2020 Educational Continuity Direction (No.4) 2021 (Department of Education)

The Coronavirus Act 2020 Educational Continuity Direction (No.5) 2021 (Department of Education)

The Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No.27) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Education)

The Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No.28) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Education)

The Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No.29) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Education)

The Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No.30) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Education)

The Provision of Youth Services (Northern Ireland) Temporary Continuity Direction (No.1) 2021 (Department of Education)

The Provision of Youth Services (Northern Ireland) Temporary Continuity Direction (No.2) 2021 (Department of Education)

10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as 23 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	10/12/21					
The Damages (Return on Investment) Bill (NIA Bill 16/17-22)	01/03/21	09/03/21	06/05/21					
Budget Bill (NIA Bill 17/17-22)	01/03/21	02/03/21	/	/	08/03/21	09/03/21	09/03/21	23/03/21
Health and Social Care Bill (NIA Bill 18/17/22)	08/03/21	16/03/21	13/05/21					

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	22/03/21
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	15/03/21	12/05/21					
Climate Change Bill (NIA Bill 19/17-22)	22/03/21							

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 23 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 23 March 2021:

Steve Aiken	Declan Kearney
Andy Allen	Dolores Kelly
Martina Anderson	Gerry Kelly
Caoimhe Archibald	Liz Kimmins
Rosemary Barton	Naomi Long
Roy Beggs	Gordon Lyons
John Blair	Séan Lynch
Cathal Boylan	Chris Lyttle
Paula Bradley	Nichola Mallon
Sinead Bradley	Declan McAleer
Paula Bradshaw	Fra McCann
Nicola Brogan	Daniel McCrossan
Keith Buchanan	Patsy McGlone
Thomas Buchanan	Colin McGrath
Jonathan Buckley	Philip McGuigan
Joanne Bunting	Maolíosa McHugh
Pat Catney	Sinead McLaughlin
Alan Chambers	Justin McNulty
Stewart Dickson	Andrew Muir
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
Sinead 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

Northern Ireland Assembly

Thursday 1 April 2021

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speakers Business

2.1 Royal Assent

The Speaker advised Members that Royal Assent had been signified on 23 March 2021 to The Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2021.

3. Private Members' Business

3.1 Motion: Breaches of Executive COVID-19 Messaging by Ministers

Proposed:

That this Assembly acknowledges the pain endured by families across Northern Ireland who have experienced loss during the COVID-19 crisis; expresses its sincere condolences to those who, in periods of trauma and loss, were unable to say goodbye to loved ones; further expresses its gratitude to those who have followed the public health guidelines and played their part in keeping their neighbours, communities and the health service safe; regrets the actions of those in positions of elected office who breached the Executive's public health messaging and undermined efforts to prevent transmission of the virus; and condemns the deputy First Minister and the Minister of Finance for their actions which have caused immense hurt and undermined the Executive's public health message.

Ms Nichola Mallon

Mr Colin McGrath

Ms Clare Bailey

Mr Doug Beattie

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

4. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 2.01pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

1 April 2021

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 24 March 2021 to 1 April 2021

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

The Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2021

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

Livestock and Meat Commission Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2019 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

Livestock and Meat Commission Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2018 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

Livestock and Meat Commission Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2017 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

Quarterly Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service October 2020 - December 2020 (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency)

Scheme Defining the Categories of Financial and Other Interests that are Registrable by Ministers and Special Advisers, Including Gifts and Hospitality (Department of Finance)

Financial Services Bill Memorandum (Department of Justice)

Minute on the Direction of Accruing Resources (Department of Finance)

CJI Follow up Review of the 2018 Without Witness inspection which examined the handling of sexual violence and abuse cases by the criminal Justice system in Northern Ireland (Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland)

5. Assembly Reports

The Code of Conduct and The Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members (NIA 85/17-22) (Committee on Standards and Privileges)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2021/71 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

SR 2021/74 The Business Tenancies (Coronavirus) (Restriction on Forfeiture: Relevant Period) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2021 (Department of Finance)

SR 2021/75 The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Certain Relevant Periods) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for the Economy)

SR 2021/81 The Licensing (Designation of Outdoor Stadia) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)

SR 2021/82 The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)

SR 2021/83 The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)

SR 2021/84 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 10) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

SR 2021/85 The Education (Student Fees and Support) (Amendment) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for the Economy)

SR 2021/86 - The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus) (Industrial Business) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Finance)

SR 2021/87 - The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus) (Business Support) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Finance)

SR 2021/88 - The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus) (Large Business) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Finance)

SR 2021/89 - The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus) (Soft Play Businesses) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Finance)

SR 2021/90 - The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus) (Airports) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Finance)

SR 2021/91 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

For information only

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2021/69 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2021/71 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

SR 2021/73 The Employment Rights (Increase of Limits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for the Economy)

SR 2021/72 The Energy Performance of Buildings (Certificates and Inspections) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Finance)

SR 2021/76 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Crumlin) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2021/77 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Londonderry) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2021/78 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Carrickfergus) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2021/79 The Parking Places, Loading Bays and Waiting Restrictions (Coleraine) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2021/80 The Road Races (Knockagh Hill Climb) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2021/92 The Pensions Increase (Review) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Finance)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

Public Inquiry into Hyponatraemia Related Deaths Implementation Programme (Minister of Health)

Infected Blood Financial Support (Minister of Health)

2020-21 Public Expenditure Allocations (Minister of Finance)

Decisions of the Executive on COVID-19, 25 March 2021 (The Executive Office)

Update on 2021-22 Final Budget (Minister of Finance)

8. Consultation Documents

Consultation on reforming the UK packaging producer responsibility system and the introduction of a deposit return scheme in England, Northern Ireland and Wales

9. Departmental Publications

Memorandum on the Third Report from the Public Accounts Committee Mandate 2017-2022 (Department of Finance)

Provision of Youth Services (Northern Ireland) Temporary Continuity Direction (No. 3) 2021 (Department of Education)

10. Agency Publications

Northern Ireland Local Government Commissioner for Standards Annual Report 2019-20 (Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman)

Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Ombudsman Annual Report 2019-20 (Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman)

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Proxy Voting Notices – Thursday 1 April 2021

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Thursday 1 April 2021:

Steve Aiken	Dolores Kelly
Andy Allen	Gerry Kelly
Jim Allister	Liz Kimmins
Martina Anderson	Naomi Long
Caoimhe Archibald	Gordon Lyons
Rosemary Barton	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
Keith Buchanan	Philip McGuigan
Thomas Buchanan	Maoliosa McHugh
Pam Cameron	Sinead McLaughlin
Pat Catney	Justin McNulty
Alan Chambers	Gary Middleton
Stewart Dickson	Andrew Muir
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
Sinead Ennis	Edwin Poots
Arlene Foster	George Robinson
Órlaithí Flynn	Emma Rogan
Colm Gildernew	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

Northern Ireland Assembly

Thursday 8 April 2021

The Assembly met at 11:00am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Private Members' Business

2.1 Motion: Support for the Rule of Law

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes with concern the violence on our streets over recent days and condemns without equivocation those involved; sends best wishes to those police officers attacked or injured whilst protecting the community and extends its sympathy to those members of the public who have suffered distress, loss or damage as a result; reaffirms its full commitment to support for policing and for the rule of law; recognises that leadership comes with responsibility; recommits to upholding a culture of lawfulness in both actions and in words; and calls for an immediate and complete end to this violence.

Mrs Naomi Long

Mr Stewart Dickson

Ms Nichola Mallon

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

3. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 12.49pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

8 April 2021

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 2 April 2021 to 8 April 2021

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

3. Orders in Council

Legislative Consent Memorandum: Pension Schemes Bill (Department for Communities)

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

South West College Annual Report and Financial Statements for year ended 31 July 2020 (Department for the Economy)

5. Assembly Reports

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2021/93 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

SR 2021/94 The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus) (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Finance)

For information only

SR 2021/73 The Employment Rights (Increase of Limits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for the Economy)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

Decisions of The Executive on COVID-19, 1 April 2021 (The Executive Office)

8. Consultation Documents

Consultation on Proposals to extend the Modifications of Educational Duties (No. 31) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Education)

9. Departmental Publications

Minute on One-off Award to HSC Charitable Trust Funds (Department of Health)

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Proxy Voting Notices – Thursday 8 April 2021

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Thursday 8 April 2021:

Andy Allen	Declan Kearney
Jim Allister	Dolores Kelly
Martina Anderson	Gerry Kelly
Caoimhe Archibald	Liz Kimmins
Rosemary Barton	Naomi Long
Roy Beggs	Gordon Lyons
John Blair	Séan Lynch
Cathal Boylan	Chris Lyttle
Paula Bradley	Nichola Mallon
Sinead Bradley	Declan McAleer
Paula Bradshaw	Fra McCann
Nicola Brogan	Daniel McCrossan
Keith Buchanan	Patsy McGlone
Thomas Buchanan	Colin McGrath
Robbie Butler	Philip McGuigan
Pam Cameron	Maolíosa McHugh
Pat Catney	Sinead McLaughlin
Alan Chambers	Justin McNulty
Stewart Dickson	Andrew Muir
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
Sinead 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

