



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

Volume 138
(12 April 2021 to 3 May 2021)

Table of Contents

Assembly Members	v
Principal Officers and Officials of the Assembly	vi
Ministerial Offices	vii
Office of the Official Report (Hansard).....	viii

Official Report (Hansard)

Assembly Sittings

Monday 12 April 2021

Assembly Business

Standing Order 20(1): Suspension.....	1
Tributes to His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh.....	1

Tuesday 13 April 2021

Assembly Business

Committee Membership.....	13
Standing Order 20(1): Suspension.....	13

Ministerial Statement

Health and Social Care Trust Rebuild Plans	13
--	----

Executive Committee Business

The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period in Schedule 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021	24
The draft Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Change of Expiry Date in section 32(1)) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021	26
The Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill: First Stage	26

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	27
Communities	33
Economy.....	39

Monday 19 April 2021

Assembly Business	47
--------------------------------	----

Matter of the Day

NI Senior Women: UEFA Women's Euro 2022 Qualification.....	48
--	----

Committee Business

Damages (Return on Investment) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage.....	52
Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage.....	54
Health and Social Care Bill: Extension of Committee Stage	55

Private Members' Business

Brexit: EU Card Transaction Fees	56
--	----

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office	63
Education	69

Private Members' Business

Brexit: EU Card Transaction Fees (<i>continued</i>)	75
---	----

Tuesday 20 April 2021

Ministerial Statements

2020-21 Further Funding Allocation	79
Neurology Recall: Cohort 2 Activity and Outcomes Report.....	85

Private Members' Business

Conversion Therapy	91
--------------------------	----

Oral Answers to Questions

Finance	99
---------------	----

Private Members' Business

Conversion Therapy (<i>continued</i>)	106
Cancer Services: COVID-19 Recovery Strategy	112

Adjournment

A5 Dual Carriageway.....	123
--------------------------	-----

Monday 26 April 2021

Assembly Business

Public Petition: St Conor's Primary School, Omagh: Additional Parking and Traffic-calming Measures	132
--	-----

Ministerial Statements

British-Irish Council: Misuse of Substances	132
Wildfire in the Mourne Mountains	136

Executive Committee Business

Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill: Second Stage	143
---	-----

Oral Answers to Questions

Health	146
Infrastructure	152

Executive Committee Business

Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill: Second Stage (<i>continued</i>)	159
--	-----

Private Members' Business

'Academic Selection and the Transfer Test'	161
--	-----

Tuesday 27 April 2021

Assembly Business

Ministerial Statement

2021-22: Final Budget.....	177
----------------------------	-----

Private Members' Business

Programme for Government: Inclusion of End-of-life Outcomes	183
Antisemitism: International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's Working Definition.....	194

Oral Answers to Questions

Justice	197
---------------	-----

Private Members' Business

Antisemitism: International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's Working Definition (<i>continued</i>).....	204
---	-----

Adjournment

Downe Hospital, Downpatrick: Resumption, Retention and Development of Health Services.....	212
--	-----

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

Ministerial Statement: The Executive Office CR 1

Written Answers

Friday 16 April 2021

The Executive Office WA 1

Friday 23 April 2021

The Executive Office WA 7

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs WA 18

Department for Communities WA 23

Department of Education WA 25

Department of Finance WA 36

Department of Health WA 44

Department for Infrastructure WA 67

Department of Justice WA 84

Department for the Economy WA 86

Friday 30 April 2021

The Executive Office WA 99

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs WA 108

Department for Communities WA 121

Department of Education WA 133

Department of Finance WA 143

Department of Health WA 150

Department for Infrastructure WA 165

Department of Justice WA 184

Department for the Economy WA 191

Journal of Proceedings

Minutes of Proceedings

Monday 12 April 2021 MOP 1

Tuesday 13 April 2021 MOP 5

Monday 19 April 2021 MOP 13

Tuesday 20 April 2021 MOP 19

Monday 26 April 2021 MOP 29

Tuesday 27 April 2021 MOP 37

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, Maoliosa (West Tyrone)
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
McLaughlin, Ms Sinead (Foyle)
McNulty, Justin (Newry and Armagh)
Mallon, Ms Nichola (North Belfast)
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)

W

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

Principal Officers and Officials of the Assembly

Speaker	Mr Alex Maskey MLA
Principal Deputy Speaker	Mr Christopher Stalford MLA
Deputy Speakers	Mr Roy Beggs MLA Mr Patsy McGlone MLA
Clerk to the Assembly/Chief Executive	Mrs Lesley Hogg
Director of Corporate Services	Mr Richard Stewart
Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services	Ms Tara Caul
Director of Parliamentary Services	Dr Gareth McGrath
Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support	Mr Robin Ramsey
Clerk Assistants	Dr Kevin Pelan Dr Frank Geddis Mr Paul Gill
Editor of Debates and Head of Public Engagement	Mr Simon Burrowes
Examiner of Statutory Rules	Ms Angela Kelly

Ministerial Offices

The Executive Committee

First Minister	Mrs Arlene Foster
Deputy First Minister.....	Mrs Michelle O’Neill
Minister for Communities.....	Ms Deirdre Hargey
Minister for Infrastructure.....	Ms Nichola Mallon
Minister for the Economy.....	Mrs Diane Dodds
Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	Mr Edwin Poots
Minister of Education	Mr Peter Weir
Minister of Finance	Mr Conor Murphy
Minister of Health.....	Mr Robin Swann
Minister of Justice.....	Mrs Naomi Long

Junior Ministers

The Executive Office	Mr Declan Kearney Mr Gordon Lyons
----------------------------	--------------------------------------

Office of the Official Report (Hansard)

Staff

Editor of Debates..... Simon Burrowes

Deputy Editors..... Martha Davison
Patrick Marsh

Assistant Editors..... Bronagh Allison
Tom Clarke
Brendan Doherty
Phil Girvan
Gail Nicholl
Catherine Roberts
Carina Rourke
Alison Webb

Parliamentary Reporters..... Glenn Frazer
Luke Gibbons
Keith Gilmore
Linda Hare
Sharon McCabe
Shauna McCloskey
Jenny McCullough
Rosie McDonald
Colm McNamee
Katrina McNeill
Aimée Muirhead
Nicola Murphy
Fintan Murray
Patrick O’Hanlon
Rónan O’Reilly
Simon Shaw
Jack Smith
Pam Smith
Stephen Todd

Administration..... Conor McCourt

Official Report (Hansard)

Assembly Sitings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 12 April 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Standing Order 20(1): Suspension

Mr Speaker: Members will have been saddened to learn of the passing of His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, last Friday morning. As a mark of respect, the Business Committee has agreed to adjourn today's sitting after Members have had an opportunity to pay their respects. A formal item of business, as listed in the Order Paper, is required for the adjournment. The motion will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 12 April 2021. — [Mr Butler.]

Tributes to His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh

Mr Speaker: We will commence with today's single item of business: tributes to Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. As I mentioned at the start of the sitting, all business originally scheduled for today has been deferred so that Members can pay tribute to Prince Philip and extend their condolences to the Queen and the royal family.

Under normal circumstances, I would invite Members to sign a book of condolence. However, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the royal household has requested that there should be no physical books of condolence. Therefore, an online book of condolence has been set up on the royal website. Members who wish to send a personal message will find a link to the online book of condolence on the Assembly website. I wish to thank all parties for their cooperation with the Speaker's Office and officials on Friday afternoon to ensure that arrangements were put in place for the Assembly to pay its proper respects.

I want to say a few words about His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, who passed away last Friday morning. Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá ar an Phrionsa Pilib a fuair bás an tseachtain seo caite.

It is, of course, impossible to do justice to such a long and full life within a few short minutes, but it is worth reflecting that, even for those of us from the older generation in the Assembly, Prince Philip's lifetime of public duty had already begun before we were even born. That is a record of public service to which few will ever be able to compare.

Much has been said about the multitude of experiences, achievements and interests of Prince Philip's life, particularly in his earlier years. I am sure that Members will reflect those during our tributes today, including his 56 local visits. I will therefore touch on just a number of elements briefly in my remarks. Members will know that it is a personal priority for me, as Speaker, and other Members to have a youth assembly established, as a way of empowering young people and providing them with experiences and opportunities. In many ways, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme has been doing that for some 55 years. It has become a household name, to the extent that many people may not appreciate the massive reach of the programme across the world. The 27 organisations that deliver the programme locally cover every aspect of our society, including Churches; uniformed organisations such as the Boys' Brigade, the Girls' Brigade, the Scouts and the Army Cadet Force Association; the Gaelic Athletic Association; and Féile an Phobail. The Duke of Edinburgh's Award does not just bear

his name. Prince Philip clearly took an active personal interest in the programme right up until very recent years. For example, he was instrumental in establishing the partnership between the programme and Gaisce: Gradam an Uachtaráin — the Irish President's Award — to allow participants the choice of which certificate they receive for their endeavours. His priority was to open the door for young people to participate, whatever their background. The ability of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award to reach disadvantaged young people is particularly to be admired. Of course, that is typical of the very significant role in recent years played by senior members of the royal family in reconciliation efforts in our society and these islands, and it is right that we record our appreciation for that today.

From all the accounts and tributes that have been paid over the weekend from across the globe, it is clear that the Duke of Edinburgh was a significant historical figure not just in the UK but internationally. It is true that, throughout the 99 years of his life, we have all been on such a journey of change and tumult, challenge and opportunity, domestically, in these islands and globally. Of course, there will be many other days to reflect and dwell on all of that. At this time, we remember that a family has lost a husband, a father, a grandfather and a great-grandfather. In particular, none of us can appreciate the sense of loss that there must be after 73 years of marriage, love and steadfast support through an extraordinary life. There can be no truer example of the term "life partner". On behalf of the Assembly, I express our sincere condolences to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth and the wider royal family. I hope that they will take comfort from the warmth of the reaction since the news of His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh's passing. *Suaimhneas síoraí air. May he rest in peace.*

The Business Committee has agreed to allow around an hour and a half for tributes. As is customary, I will first invite party leaders or their nominated representative to speak for about five minutes. I will then call other Members who have indicated that they wish to speak or who rise in their place. I do not intend to impose strict time constraints, but I encourage Members to take no more than the allocated three minutes, in order to allow as many Members as possible to speak in the time allocated for tributes.

Mrs Foster: The life of Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh was shaped by history, consciously and unconsciously. The ramifications, disruptions and consequences of the First World War resulted in his family's exile from Greece. In his childhood, he was effectively alone. He was taken under the care of the Mountbatten family, principally Lord Mountbatten, someone of whom, of course, he was robbed later in life by a PIRA bomb. Such momentous disruption could easily have led that young child to withdraw from life, but each burden was borne on his young shoulders. As he came of age, the world entered its second war. He joined the fight against fascism and put into practice the values that he would exemplify for the rest of his life: duty, loyalty and service.

He served with the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean, the North Sea and the Far East, even being present at the Japanese surrender. After the war, romance blossomed with his life partner, Queen Elizabeth. He was her bedrock as they served us, our country and our Commonwealth. All of this was carried out with dedication, humanity and humour; a sometimes blunt humour, which we got to

appreciate here on the many occasions when he visited Northern Ireland.

In this era, too many too readily pour scorn over the traditional values that he exemplified. When you see what his values achieved throughout his life, you see how traditional values can shape a better world. He showed, of course, that you can believe in the best of tradition and in the inevitability of change at the same time. He redefined the role of a royal, working with hundreds of different causes and organisations, with younger people, service and driving British innovation at the centre of his efforts. His work with the World Wildlife Fund was literally decades ahead of its time, and over two million young people have gained a Duke of Edinburgh's Award. Proudly, Northern Ireland boasts the highest participation levels in the award scheme in the United Kingdom.

So, there is a true intergenerational legacy to our youth, our United Kingdom and the world's environment. Yet, as we remember our much loved monarch and her family in our prayers, our nation's deepest gratitude is for what His Royal Highness did on 2 June 1953 and every day until his death. When Her Majesty was crowned in Westminster Abbey, Prince Philip pledged to:

"become your liege man of life and limb and of earthly worship, and faith and truth I will bear unto you, to live and die against all manner of folks, so help me God."

He fulfilled his pledge, he kept his word, and we are all the better for it. That is our common debt to him. His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh truly had a life well lived to the full.

In closing, Mr Speaker, I welcome the respectful way in which you and the parties have responded to the passing of His Royal Highness, the Duke of Edinburgh. I think that the unity of spirit has been evident. So, let us all harness and channel that spirit moving ahead as the Assembly and Executive work through the very real and significant challenges that face us. The Duke of Edinburgh demonstrated the desire for a better future, particularly for our younger generation. Let us embrace his legacy to positive effect as we all go about the job of seeing Northern Ireland reach its full potential in the century ahead of us.

Mrs O'Neill: I start by extending my sincere condolences to Queen Elizabeth and to her family on the death of her husband, Prince Philip. Over the past two decades, there have been significant interventions by the British royal family to assist in the building of relationships between Britain and Ireland. It is appropriate that this contribution to the advancement of peace and reconciliation is rightly recognised. I have acknowledged the sense of loss that will be felt in our community and across these islands by those of a unionist tradition and a British identity and those who value and cherish the royal family. Given Prince Philip's long service of duty to the monarchy, a tapestry of memories remains for the British people, which, over the days since his passing, has been shared through the media.

During the course of this decade, from 2012 to 2022, we are marking the centenaries of seminal events that have shaped modern Irish history over the past century. These events have defined our relationship over the past 100 years, too. It is a relationship that has been characterised by colonialism, partition and political division but towards

peace, reconciliation and renewed cooperation. I was reflecting over the weekend on events, recalling that, in 2012, the late Martin McGuinness, as a leader of republicanism, met Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip in Belfast. That marked a very important step on our journey to reconciliation on this island and between our islands.

12.15 pm

Then, in 2014, the state visit to Britain by the President of Ireland, Michael D Higgins, occurred. That was the first state visit of a president of Ireland to Britain. As part of that, Martin McGuinness and I travelled to London's Royal Albert Hall to take part in the Ceiliúradh (Celebration) concert, where we met Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip. Since those important and historic moments, the political landscape has changed. Brexit has unfolded over the past five years, testing British-Irish relations. Its implications for both islands are far-reaching. I hope that we can overcome those challenges through the efforts of us all, and, not least, by the two Governments working closer together, which is something that I believe is undoubtedly required at this moment.

Saturday past marked the twenty-third anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, and, despite the challenges along the way, there is no denying that huge progress has been made over that time. While we have an imperfect peace — it is a work in progress, if you like — the agreement has provided an alternative to conflict. I acknowledge that the Queen, Prince Philip and their family were directly impacted by the conflict and, regrettably, endured sorrow and pain as a result of their personal loss and bereavement. Each of us knows that the tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering for so many families, which we are still trying to confront and address. Yet, having endured such personal loss, the royal family set about working towards advancing peace and reconciliation. I have been witness to those efforts and to their example of leadership in recent years. Just as the Queen and Prince Philip did, we in the Chamber, 23 years on from the Good Friday Agreement, must redouble our efforts to achieve reconciliation as we forge a path together, giving a new generation of young people hope that opportunity and a brighter future exists.

Ms Mallon: As deputy leader of the SDLP, I begin by expressing my sincere condolences and those of our party to Queen Elizabeth and her family on the loss of a loved husband, father, grandfather and great-grandfather. My thoughts are particularly with the Queen, who has lost her husband of 73 years. To wake up without your steadfast companion of that length of time must be heartbreaking and, for many of us, is unimaginable. This is an immensely difficult time for them all, and it has been compounded by the restrictions, which have made saying goodbye so difficult for families and people across our islands. I also send my sincere condolences to people in communities across Northern Ireland who feel a special connection and affinity with Prince Philip and the royal family. This is a sorrowful time, and our thoughts are with you.

It is a feature of commemorating significant or historic figures that we often reduce them to their best or, depending on your perspective, worst features. It is especially easy in the age of 280 characters to simplify the contribution of a lifetime into a quick turn of phrase. It is fair and important to say that the uncharitable and mean-

spirited online commentary by some about Prince Philip in particular diminishes us all.

I do not intend to reflect on his life's history. I will leave that for others to discuss, save to say that Prince Philip was a complex individual who was shaped by loss in early childhood and who refused to be pigeonholed or placed in a box. While we across the House hold different views on the monarchy, his was a life of public service to a family that he clearly cherished and to people who held him in the highest regard. In 2014, as Lord Mayor of Belfast, I welcomed the Queen and Prince Philip to Belfast and hosted them for lunch in City Hall. While my interaction with Prince Philip was brief, the occasion was friendly, warm and very memorable.

The people of these islands are joined together by our common history and shared experiences of historic conflict. It would be remiss of us to fail to acknowledge that Prince Philip and his family were deeply affected by the conflict on this island and between these islands. We should also reflect on the role that he played alongside Queen Elizabeth in building relationships, setting aside enmity and promoting reconciliation, most visibly during their recent visit to Ireland.

He had a part to play in sustaining the new bond of shared endeavour across these islands.

It will be a difficult week for many in our community. It is important that we all respect that and continue to work together to heal the divisions of our past and build a more united community.

Dr Aiken: I join in the tributes to His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. At the outset, I send my and our party's condolences to Her Majesty The Queen and the other members of the royal family. We all share in Her Majesty's grief and sense of loss for her husband. He was her constant companion, supporter and muse, and, after 73 years of being together, through momentous times of change, that sense of loss must be profound. The grief and mourning that she and the rest of the royal family feel are echoed by many not just across our nation but across the Commonwealth and beyond, from the many thousands of young people who found a new sense of purpose through the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme to those who welcomed his keen interest in science, technology and education, his long commitment to the environment and his early championing of the crisis of climate change, and his support of the families of the many who have served across all aspects of public life, a support to which he brought his own unique, witty and emphatic style. Rarely has someone who never sought the limelight but decided to sacrifice himself for duty, for support and for the stability of the institution that he and we most treasure garnered so much respect and affection.

While I feel that sense of loss and, indeed, the sense of the passing of an era, I thank, in particular, the deputy First Minister and members of the SDLP for their recognition of that loss. May I state how welcome your remarks were? Whilst we may disagree on much, those were welcome sentiments. I appreciate your sympathy and reaching out to those of us who hold the Union and the monarchy dear. Thank you.

I had the privilege of meeting Prince Philip on many occasions during my service in the Royal Navy and, later, in my role supporting the British-Irish business

environment. His humour has been much and frequently remarked on, although it was in the naval environment that he felt fully at home and where his anecdotes were very much more of the salty kind. He had respect for what many tried to achieve in difficult circumstances and used his wealth of experience to understand. As someone who fought with distinction in the Second World War and saw the global winds of change at first hand in what is now the Commonwealth, he brought insight to Her Majesty through the good and, sometimes, not so good times; indeed, I know that, as a great friend to Northern Ireland, he was saddened by the horrors of the Troubles and wished only for peace. The murder of Lord Mountbatten had a profound effect, but he never allowed animus against those who committed so much violence, from whatever quarter, to prevent him reaching out to support the peace process. During the Irish president's state visit to the United Kingdom in 2014, I had the privilege of seeing at first hand how much pleasure he saw in the improving relationships across these islands and amongst our nations.

The man himself leaves the most abiding memory. At the 100th anniversary of the Submarine Service in Westminster Abbey, he spent his time talking to the families of those who were serving at sea and had been away for months. He never forgot to thank them for their service and sacrifice. He put them at ease, reminisced and gave them comfort, often with a wry but always affectionate sense of humour. At his core, he was always a Royal Navy officer who never forgot the lore of the sea and those who served on it.

On Friday, in many ways, we lost an unsung inspiration and the biggest supporter of Her Majesty. His loss to her and to all of us is most keenly felt. Our nation mourns, but his life and example give us hope for the future of our United Kingdom and the Commonwealth. I say finally, the words of the Royal Navy hymn:

*"Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm has bound the restless wave".*

May you, Prince Philip, rest in peace.

Mrs Long: I extend my thoughts and prayers and those of the Alliance Party to the royal family at this sad time. My condolences go in particular to Her Majesty The Queen, who has lost her husband, constant companion and support of over 73 years. No matter what your role or how public your life is, that is a devastating thing to experience.

The Duke of Edinburgh lived a remarkable life. After years of distinguished service in the Royal Navy, including in wartime, he left behind the naval career that he loved and in which he excelled to support the Queen when she became monarch. He became the longest-serving royal consort in British history, leaving four children, eight grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren. Throughout that time, whether by her side or the customary two steps behind, he demonstrated in practice what it means to be a supportive husband to a powerful woman. Speaking on their golden wedding anniversary, the Queen said of Prince Philip:

"he has, quite simply, been my strength and stay all these years, and I, and his whole family, and this and many other countries, owe him a debt greater than he would ever claim, or we shall ever know."

Of course, His Royal Highness Prince Philip, as the first royal consort since the days of Prince Albert and Queen Victoria, had to carve out a role for himself in the life of the country, the royal family and the Commonwealth. He did that successfully over the last 73 years. He was a reformer and moderniser of the royal household, much in the way that Prince Albert was in his day, as he encouraged more informality and less protocol in engagements and promoted the use of new technology, particularly television, as a way to let people have greater insight into the life and work of the family and as a way to encourage industry to flourish. His work spanned his patronage of many charities at home and abroad. His passion and concern for the environment and conservation were evident long before such things were part of the popular discourse. His commitment to the World Wildlife Fund was unstinting, as its first UK president from its foundation in 1961 to 1982 and then as president of the World Wildlife Fund International from 1981 to 1996, continuing as president emeritus and patron until his passing on Friday. Vitally, his commitment to supporting young people to build their resilience, skills and confidence and, crucially, their commitment to public service led to the founding of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme. That scheme and associated schemes such as the President's Award in Ireland have encouraged millions of young people from over 140 countries across the globe to work to improve themselves and their communities and is perhaps his best and most enduring legacy.

Prince Philip's was a long life well lived. I pray that the 73 years of happy memories and that life well lived will bring some comfort, in the difficult days and months ahead, to Her Majesty The Queen, the wider family circle and all those who loved him.

Miss Woods: I too extend my condolences to the royal family on the death of the Duke of Edinburgh.

There have been many stories and anecdotes about Prince Philip since his death on Friday, many of which have been shared in the Chamber and through the media. I was not aware of the adversity that he had faced in his younger life and was interested to learn that he had described himself as a refugee after his family was exiled from Greece when he was an infant: from a child refugee to the Queen's consort and a member of the royals. It got me thinking about the way that Prince Philip was. Perhaps his passing should be a reminder to challenge the negative perceptions that we have of people.

The Duke of Edinburgh was a father to four children and had eight grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren.

I am of an age to remember him as an older man. I think of him in his role as a grandfather and as the founder of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, for which I had to traipse up and down the Mourne with a backpack a number of times. I have many fond memories of meeting new and interesting people in my community and of being able to give something back through that scheme. I achieved the bronze and silver awards and got halfway through the gold. I will remember him for that.

12.30 pm

Who can forget the images of him walking alongside William and Harry at the funeral of their mother? The relationship between a grandparent and grandchildren

can be so precious, and he will be dearly missed by his grandchildren, particularly those who grew up with him being there. Many of us, too, miss our grandparents at this time. Our families cannot hug them or visit them inside their houses. The Duke's passing reminds us to appreciate and treasure our grandparents and families while we can.

Ms Sugden: Mr Speaker, thank you for your kind and respectful comments at the outset. As I am someone who will always consider herself British as well as Irish, they are much appreciated.

On behalf of East Londonderry, I offer my condolences to Her Majesty The Queen, the royal family, the United Kingdom and to all those who knew and loved His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. Prince Philip visited my constituency many times. On probably his final visit to the area, I had the pleasure of meeting him; indeed, he was the first royal that I met in my role as MLA. He was interested, he gave his time, and he was witty. I am delighted to say that I have my own story of his wonderful sense of humour. He questioned whether my life experience — in 2014, I was a very fresh 27-year-old MLA — qualified me to be an elected representative. I wish that I had been as quick in responding to him, but I stood there with my mouth open, so I suppose that, in some ways, he was right. Seven years later, with more experience and more life, I reflect on Prince Philip's work throughout his 99 years, and I do not think that any of us, even if we are fortunate enough to live as long as he did, will have the life experience that he had, because his life was truly remarkable.

Since learning of the Duke's death, I have been most affected by the end of the partnership of the Queen and her prince. Theirs really is the greatest partnership in British history, a love story that lasted a lifetime and inspired generations. I am so sad for Her Majesty. He was her hero, and he was her man — and what a man he was. He sacrificed so much to serve his Queen, to love his wife unconditionally and to fulfil his duty to country and Commonwealth. Physically, he walked two steps behind, but he was never really behind; he was his own man, and he carved his own path. That is particularly so in relation to young people, in whom he invested so much. Given the difficult past weekend and the images that we saw across Northern Ireland, we can learn from his example of investing in young people not just by giving them schemes and jobs but by understanding and listening to what interests them and how we can provide them with opportunities.

I watched a documentary about Prince Philip at the weekend and was so impressed by his sense of duty and his service to people. He said:

"If I can make life marginally more tolerable for those who come after us, I will be delighted."

Wherever he is, I am sure that he is delighted, because he had a life well lived. Since his passing on Friday, there have been a number of quotes. The one that has stuck with me and that others have mentioned is from the Queen. Describing Prince Philip, she said:

"He has, quite simply, been my strength and stay all these years".

I know that some do not understand my appreciation and affection for the royal family, but those words reflect what they mean to me. They have been a "strength and stay" for

me all these years. They have been part of my life, and I recognise that Prince Philip was part of that. May he rest in peace. He will be sorely missed.

Mr Allister: As with any death, whether from lowly or high estate, our first thoughts are properly with the immediate family. My condolences and those of my party, first and foremost, go to our Queen, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, to whom, as consort, Prince Philip was such a rock and a support for so many years, and then, of course, to his grieving family: his children and their children and all in that wider family. They will all grieve as we do when we lose one so close. There will be no difference to their grief. They will feel the same emptiness, the same pain and the same suffering. Now, after 73 years of married life, Her Majesty must face her public and private life without her rock. There will be difficult, tough days for the Queen in all of that, particularly for someone who is herself of advanced years. I pray that she finds the strength to carry on in the remarkable era that has been her rule over us.

Today, however, we also celebrate a remarkable and incredible life of service to country and to people, from Prince Philip's service in the armed forces to his decades of service as consort and his dedication to that cause and to the people whom it served, filtering down throughout our society through the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme, which reached and empowered so many. Everything else apart, that is a lasting legacy of particular note. Yet he was a man who, although in that elevated position, refused to allow the position that he held to mould him. Despite his exalted position, his willingness to speak his mind brought a stamp of authenticity and sometimes, indeed, a smile to our faces. That is a characteristic that is often lost in public life, but not with the Duke of Edinburgh.

Prince Philip was not immune, of course, from pain and suffering in his life. Indeed, something that marks an affinity with so many in the Province was the brutal murder of his 79-year-old uncle, blown to bits by the IRA with other relatives and friends: a wicked act of the calibre that left so many in the Province also bereft of friends and relatives at the hands of terrorism. Today would have been a good day for the republican movement to unequivocally say, "Sorry", but, of course, the deputy First Minister does not do "Sorry". At most, all that Sinn Féin can muster is what journalist Jenny McCartney aptly described as a:

"carefully calibrated mixture of dogged justification and fuzzy regret".

Today, we remember a great — a giant in our lifetimes — whose contribution to our national life has been immense but whose life inevitably, in the mortality that denotes us all, has run its course.

Our nation and our people are the richer for his living, so today, on behalf of my constituents and my party, I join in mourning his passing, and, in grateful memory of the life of His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, I convey the deepest sympathy to Her Majesty and record thankfulness for the lifetime of service and devotion to our monarch, our nation and our people.

Mr Poots: As a representative of the constituency most visited by Her Majesty The Queen and her late husband, the Duke of Edinburgh, I express my sympathies, and those of the people of Lagan Valley, to Her Majesty on the death of her dear husband. Their home in Hillsborough

Castle is a place that they visited so many times over the years, and that brought them very close to the hearts of the people in that community.

The Duke of Edinburgh was a very special character. I had the privilege of meeting him, along with Her Majesty, a number of times, whether that was at Downshire Primary School, Lagan Valley Island or, latterly, the South West Acute Hospital, a facility that the Queen opened. He was known for his toughness and resilience. The royal family has had many ups and downs over the years — those have been well-documented — and he was a rock during them. He was also known for his sharp mind, wittiness and incisiveness, but that sometimes got him into trouble, and his quips could become gaffes, and the media loved to play on that. As someone who occasionally behaves similarly, I can appreciate the quandary that he found himself in, because you want to engage with people and lighten an atmosphere, but sometimes it just does not work. On his visit to the South West Hospital, the duke remarked to me that he thought that he had come to open a hospital but instead had come to open a hotel, given the quality of the building. That was him. He liked to make a witty remark, and he liked to lighten the atmosphere.

The example of Her Majesty and he as a couple, and the love and devotion that they had for each other over those 73 years, is remarkable. It is an example to us all. He showed how he could reach out. Some people's perception is, "They're royalty. What do they know about being working class?". His example of reaching out through the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme, which is aimed at helping young people find a path in life out of the difficult circumstances in which many find themselves, is something that will last long beyond his passing. He has laid down a great example for us all of hard work, honesty, reaching out and loyalty, and we would all do well to reflect on that.

One thing that we cannot let go today is the effort that Her Majesty and the Duke of Edinburgh made towards reconciliation. Their visit to Ireland in 2012 and the president's subsequent visit to Windsor Castle in 2014 were of huge significance. He did not allow the cruel death of his uncle to prevent him from reaching out the hand of friendship. There is a lot for all of us to learn from that. If there is anything that the House could do well to reflect on, it is on how he and Her Majesty sought to heal wounds. Over the past couple of weeks, we have seen how things can go wrong in this country. We could do well to learn from Her Majesty and the Duke of Edinburgh on how we can heal wounds, not open sores, and how we can make things better, not worse.

12.45 pm

Mr Catney: I give my condolences to Queen Elizabeth and her family, who are grieving the loss of a husband, father, grandfather and great-grandfather. Suffering a loss during these times, when families cannot come together to support each other in the grieving process, is something that many in our community have had to go through. It is not something that you would wish on anyone. This comes down to the common decency of humanity, where we like to comfort those in this situation by talking about 99 years as being a good innings, a life well lived and all anyone could hope for. In 99 years, you build up a huge community of human connections, lives touched and people who have lost a pillar of their own lives. The sense

of loss is deeply felt by those for whom Prince Philip was a constant companion over his long life. This is no more so than for someone like Prince Philip, who devoted his life to public service, made his presence felt across the world and devoted himself to the development of our young people with his Duke of Edinburgh's Award.

My own mother passed away just a year ago, before her ninety-fourth birthday. She was the one constant in my life, whose wisdom and courage I was able to rely on for as long as I have had my memories. We all have family members who are no longer with us, and we all continue to grieve for them.

I speak out of a common sense of human decency; it is something that we have been completely lacking in here over the last few weeks. Twenty-three years after the Good Friday Agreement, we have entrenched ourselves in the old nonsense, talking about points and stereotypes of the past. I am a nationalist and no supporter of the monarchy, but, from an early age, every Remembrance Sunday, I went to the war memorial in Moira. The Prince's house, used when he came to visit Northern Ireland, is in that constituency. My Uncle Laurence's name is on the memorial. He died on a ship bringing munitions to South Africa. This false dichotomy of Protestant or Catholic, unionist or nationalist, us or them has always been false. We are not one side or the other. Our personal histories are intertwined, connected and eternally bound in the one community that we are all trying to survive in.

In recent months, I have been struck by the conversations that I have had with loyalist and republican ex-prisoners, because they have both told me the exact same thing. They have said that the old "us and them" politics does not speak to their beliefs or needs. It does not speak to the young men in their communities who are dying every day from suicide. It does not speak to the lack of educational standards that prevents their communities from prospering and developing. It does not speak to the overbearing deprivation that leads the young people in their communities to feel like there is no future, except for the old ways of the past.

When I was elected, I was asked what it was like to be the only nationalist elected in Lagan Valley. I spoke of the need to represent and work for the one community of Lagan Valley and to help face and tackle the issues that we all feel, regardless of background. This is truer today than ever. We have listened, rightly, to all sides of this Chamber express condolences in unison. Now let us move forward together and do the job that our communities so desperately need us all to do.

Mr Beattie: I was very fortunate to have met His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh on two occasions. The first occasion was in 1992 or maybe 1993. I was in my previous employment. I was a young sergeant at the time, working at the Northern Ireland training advisory team, training major and minor units to come to Northern Ireland to deal with the issues that we had here.

I did a capabilities brief and talked to him about what we were doing and what we were trying to achieve; I explained that to him. What struck me was how much interest he had, not necessarily in the capabilities that I was explaining to him but more in the young soldiers — men and women — whom we were sending over here and his concerns for them and the families that would be left behind when

they were sent over here. He had a genuine concern and a real compassion. The conversation, however, was about far more than that, because he had real concern about the people of Northern Ireland — both communities, all corners, every faction. He expressed a real desire to see peace in Northern Ireland and to see us live in peace together. That was absolutely genuine, and it gives a sense of the man to whom I was speaking.

The second time that I met him was about six years later at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst (RMAS). I was a colour sergeant then and an instructor at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. It was slightly more informal; it was a bit of a meet-and-greet, grip-and-grin session. He walked around and met people, and we all had a conversation with him. He came to our table, and I remember the conversation that we had. We had a conversation about this tie. Yes, this tie is that old. It is as old as you, Jonny Buckley [*Laughter.*] He asked me, “What regiment is that?”, and we had a conversation about my tie, which is a not a regimental tie but an instructor’s tie that you are given when you complete your selection course to be an instructor at Sandhurst. By the way, it is the only thing from that time that still fits me. We then talked about the knot in my tie. For those who do not know, if you are not an officer, you are not allowed to have a Windsor knot in your tie. You have to have a different knot — I do not know what it is called — because you are not allowed a Windsor knot. When he said, “What sort of knot is that?”, I remember saying to him, “Well, it’s not a Windsor knot; I’m not allowed it”, and he said, in colourful language, “Well, that’s ridiculous”. It is a Windsor knot now, by the way.

The point that I make is this: sometimes we forget about the man and look at the position; sometimes we look at the privilege and do not focus on the person who gave so much of his time and helped and supported over 800 charities. He was one of the World War II generation, and we have to remember that. Those wee quips that I have given — they are quips; they are just small things that speak to a man, a father, a grandfather, a great-grandfather and a husband — give you a sense of the person. While remembering that Her Majesty The Queen has lost her husband and a family has lost a father and grandfather, today, I just remember him for who he was: a person who showed real compassion, real understanding and real empathy and who wanted to do the best that he could for everybody, particularly those here in Northern Ireland.

Mr Dickson: I want to add a few words to the tributes that have been paid today. First and foremost, I pay tribute to His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh for the public service that he gave not only to our nation but to many countries around the world. This is also about the personal loss of a husband, a father, a grandfather and, indeed, a great-grandfather.

His Royal Highness had a long and extremely eventful life, with a tempestuous beginning, as others have referred to, just after the First World War, escaping and finding his way to London through the turmoil of his family at that time, to marry a princess in 1947. Since that time and since becoming consort to Her Majesty The Queen, he provided steadfast support to her and was always at her side.

It is important that we share some of the anecdotes and achievements of that incredible life. He is well remembered for his contribution to the World Wide Fund for Nature and for his early contribution to the National Playing Fields

Association, an organisation that brought me, in part at least, into the life of my community. I spent 30 years as a leader in the Boys’ Brigade, helping young men and others to reach bronze, silver and gold level in the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award scheme.

I remember the first time that I saw the Duke of Edinburgh. It was a wet day, and, as an 11-year-old schoolboy, I was standing in Carrickfergus when the Queen and Prince Philip arrived into the harbour. I do not think there has been a wetter day since in Northern Ireland, and it sticks out in my mind. I will fast-forward to 2016, when I had the incredible privilege of being invited to Buckingham Palace to attend a reception to mark 50 years of the Winston Churchill fellowships. Her Majesty The Queen entertained 100 of us in the palace that evening, and members of the royal family were present. In the line-up was Her Majesty The Queen, and by her side was Prince Philip. As the evening progressed, people broke into small groups, and, of course, those of us from Northern Ireland tended to stand together. Individual members of the royal family came round the groups and chatted to us. The thing that struck me was his interest in and knowledge about everybody who was in the room that night. He was engaging. He reminisced with us about Winston Churchill, which was fascinating. He was also inquisitive about what we had done and the contribution that we had made through our Churchill fellowships. That evening of 18 March 2016 will stay with me for a very long time.

On behalf of the Alliance Party and of my constituents in East Antrim, I express my deepest condolences to the royal family, to Her Majesty The Queen and to the wider family circle as we engage in a week of mourning and progress towards a funeral this coming weekend.

Mrs Dodds: On behalf of my constituents in Upper Bann and in common with the sentiments expressed in the Chamber, I reiterate that our first thoughts and prayers are with Her Majesty The Queen, who, after 73 years of marriage, has lost her strength and stay of all these years. Surely the void that she spoke about must be great and deep.

In extending our sympathy to the Queen and the royal family, we are conscious that this is the passing of a much-loved husband, father, grandfather and great-grandfather as well as of a statesman and towering national figure. Most people have grown up with the reassuring presence of Prince Philip by the side of the Queen. He has been part of our lives as well as of the nation’s life. He will be greatly missed as someone who, while totally loyal to the Queen and a pillar of the royal family and the United Kingdom, was not afraid to be himself and to break the mould. As many have said in the Chamber today, his humour and bluntness were legendary. However, as Her Majesty herself said:

“I, and his whole family, and this and many other countries, owe him a debt greater than he would ever claim, or we shall ever know.”

He leaves a tremendous legacy in his own right. His distinguished service in the Royal Navy meant that his sacrifice to be at the Queen’s side when duty called was all the greater.

His creation of the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award scheme has helped millions of young people over many years. He was, quite rightly, proud of the fact that Northern Ireland

has among the highest number of scheme participants per head of population in the United Kingdom. As an early pioneer and visionary in the world of conservation and the environment, he helped to found the World Wildlife Fund in 1961, leading it as president from 1981 to 1996.

1.00 pm

Prince Philip's frequent visits to Northern Ireland earned him the respect and affection of people here, and he will always have a special place in our hearts. I recall particularly the visit to the grounds of Stormont for the celebration of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 2012, when tens of thousands of people were able to gather to show their admiration.

As Her Majesty, his close family and the people of the United Kingdom face into the future without his familiar presence, we know that, at this time of sorrow, God will give grace, courage and strength.

Ms McLaughlin: I wish to add my condolences on the death of Prince Philip. His engagement with young people right across our communities provides an example to our society that should be recognised, especially at this dangerous moment. Despite losing his uncle to an IRA bomb, he continued to visit here on many occasions in the spirit of friendship and reconciliation. That culminated in the successful state visit by the Queen, accompanied by her husband, in 2011. That is the spirit of reconciliation that all in the Assembly and in society can recognise as being of enormous value as we continue to emerge from the dark shadow of our past. It is a past that it seems that we have yet to escape from.

People not only from the unionist tradition but across much of our society are in mourning for Prince Philip's death. Across this island, in the South as well as the North, people have paused to consider the life of Prince Philip in its historical context and how much has changed in our society during his lifetime and, indeed, ours. Prince Philip has had a full and controversial life but not always a happy one. We remember him as a fellow human being, a man who was greatly loved and whom we mourn together. We are all mortal. We have a shared experience of life and death. As the poet John Donne said:

*"send not to know
For whom the bell tolls,
it tolls for thee."*

Despite our differences, today, we offer our respect and thoughts together. We are one society whatever our differences. We can come together in sadness, dignity and also hope — the hope that we have embodied in the Good Friday Agreement and that we need to reflect on at this dangerous time. The Queen and Prince Philip helped to solidify the peace achieved in the Good Friday Agreement *[Inaudible due to poor sound quality.]*

Mr Speaker: We will give it a few seconds. *[Pause.]* I will move on and call Rosemary Barton.

Mrs Barton: Today is really the end of an era, with the passing of His Royal Highness Prince Philip. His was a lifetime in which so much happened and so much changed. However, our thoughts and prayers are with Her Majesty The Queen, who has lost her husband of 73 years, and her family at this very sad and difficult time for them.

Prince Philip dedicated his extraordinary life to selflessly supporting the Queen, who, in turn, affectionately described him as her bedrock. Over the weekend, we learnt so much about Prince Philip as a "dear papa", a role that we so rarely heard about. He was a father who was always available to sit down and listen to the woes of his family and always around to offer support and guidance, not only to his children but to their partners.

However, it is through the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme that he will be forever remembered, with the encouragement that he gave to young people in building their resilience and increasing their confidence through the scheme. It was through the scheme, as an assessor, that I had the pleasure of meeting him several times. I found the duke to be very jovial. He always showed a great interest in my work and was always keen to learn of the experiences of the young participants in the scheme. He visited Hillsborough every year, from the foundation of the award in 1956 until 2017, to present the gold awards. While we celebrate an incredible life of dedication and devotion to his family, the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth, on behalf of my constituents in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, I extend their sympathy and condolences to Her Majesty The Queen and her family.

Mr Weir: I start where the previous Member ended, in passing on the condolences and sympathies of my constituents in Strangford, and my own, to Her Majesty The Queen and the royal family on their sad loss.

We meet rightly today to pay tribute to a great man. Someone who, throughout his 99 years, did not simply talk the talk but was prepared to walk the walk. There will be some, not in the Chamber today, who will be keen to lecture the rest of us on fascism, for example, but do little of practical benefit otherwise. We should remember that in his early life, before he married the Queen, the Duke of Edinburgh was actually on the front line of fighting fascism directly, in the Second World War. He was somebody who, truly, walked the walk.

I had the opportunity and the great privilege of meeting him in 2002 when he came to meet Assembly Members at Stormont. On that occasion, amongst countless others over a period of seven decades, he was there to give support to his wife, the Queen. Today, therefore, we see a void in the life of the nation, but particularly a void in the life of the royal family and particularly the Queen. To lose her rock after 73 years — our hearts must go out to the Queen and, indeed, to Prince Philip's children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

He has not simply left a void; he has left a lasting legacy. Mention has been made of his contribution to the environment, industry, technology and wildlife, but it will be most keenly felt in the contribution that he made to our young people through the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme, now 65 years old. Its four elements of volunteering, physical contribution, skills and expedition — or, as the Duke of Edinburgh himself put it with typical wit and bluntness, a "do-it-yourself growing-up kit" — have touched the lives of so many throughout the generations.

Five years ago, I was privileged to go to an event in Ballyclare High School that celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme. The two hours of that ceremony, with the duke being represented by the Earl of Wessex, gave a small snapshot

of the contribution that the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme was making. That snapshot was of a single year: multiply that by the generations who have done it; multiply that by the fact that this was simply the region of Northern Ireland; multiply it throughout the whole of the United Kingdom; and, indeed, multiply it throughout the world, where 130 countries have been involved with the scheme. In Northern Ireland alone, in the last full year, over 3,000 young people received awards and over 6,000 started a course. Over the last seven years, around 16,000 young people have received awards in Northern Ireland. Throughout the UK, that figure is 6.7 million, and there are many more spread across the world.

There is a saying in some parts of the world that you are never truly dead until all those whose lives you have touched have also died. With his lasting legacy — the ongoing legacy — particularly amongst our young people, the Duke of Edinburgh will be with us for many decades to come.

Mr Nesbitt: I had the pleasure — I do mean pleasure — of meeting the Duke of Edinburgh on a small number of occasions, and the first was a memorable day for me. I had been asked to present the Duke of Edinburgh's Award gold awards at St James's Palace in London, and the role was to try to keep the young people amused until he arrived and then to stand back with a couple of other people while he engaged with them. He would then speak to us and leave, and I would then hand out the certificates. From the moment that he entered the room, he had those young people in the palm of his hand. There were smiles and giggles and, towards the end, a great roar of laughter as he was clearly sharing one of his racier stories with them.

Then he came over to us. The first person to whom he was introduced was a teacher who, from my memory, was in his twenty-ninth year of encouraging pupils to undertake the Duke of Edinburgh's Award. The duke was totally animated and engaged, and he wanted to know everything, such as whether the teacher was still in touch with the pupils and whether the award had helped them to develop their character and helped them in their careers. Then he turned to the second person, who was introduced as a businessman. The businessman, I am afraid, made the schoolboy error of trotting out a pre-rehearsed speech eulogising the Duke of Edinburgh and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award. As we have heard constantly since Friday, that was the last thing that Prince Philip wanted to hear. Suddenly, he started pointing at this man's lapel and saying, "Well, in that case, where is it then?". The poor fella had to say, "I am sorry, sir, where is what?". He said, "Your badge. Where is your Duke of Edinburgh badge?". The poor fella had not even done the bronze award. *[Laughter.]* That was him blown out of the water.

Then he turned to me, and somebody introduced me. He said, "Ah, you are the broadcaster", and I had to say, "Well, I was, sir". He said, "Really? Well, what are you doing with yourself now?". I said, "Well, I am into politics, sir". Time stopped, and he looked at me with a twinkle in his eye. He looked at me from my head down to my feet and back up again. He took a breath, shook his head, let out a sigh and left the room. *[Laughter.]* It was pure theatre. He roasted me. In those few short minutes, I saw so much of the prince's character: his dedication to duty, his determination to help young people to fulfil their potential, his utter intolerance and refusal to accept flattery and his wicked sense of humour.

On my behalf and on behalf of the people whom I represent in the constituency of Strangford, I send my condolences to Her Majesty The Queen and to the royal family.

Mr Buckley: I rise to give thanks for the life of His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh and to tender my deepest and heartfelt sympathies and those of the people of Upper Bann whom I represent to Her Majesty The Queen and the entire royal family.

His Royal Highness was an incredible man in his own right. His life was devoted to public service. Many words come to mind when people think of the contribution of Prince Philip: strength, duty, freethinker, forthright, service. An incredible life, I think, we can all agree.

His early years are like something from an award-winning film. He was born on the island of Corfu into a world of severe and life-threatening circumstances.

He arrived in Britain in a crib made from an orange box via a British warship sent by his future wife's grandfather, King George V, and went on to a flourishing naval career. Like many of his generation, he fought with duty and courage in the Second World War. In Britain's darkest hour, he was among those who participated in the Allied invasion of Sicily.

1.15 pm

For the Duke of Edinburgh, service came first: service to his nation and its people and, most importantly for him, service to Her Majesty The Queen, spanning some 73 years. At the Queen's coronation in 1953, the Duke of Edinburgh swore to be Her Majesty's:

"liege man of life and limb".

That service has been paid in full. Her Majesty summed up that life of service in her own words:

"He has, quite simply, been my strength and stay all these years, and I, and his whole family, and this and many other countries, owe him a debt greater than he would ever claim, or we shall ever know."

I cannot begin to comprehend what Her Majesty The Queen and the royal family are enduring today. They grieve as all families do, but they grieve in the full glare of the media. It is difficult to quantify the depth of devotion and servitude demonstrated by the Duke of Edinburgh for his country and Commonwealth in a life spanning over 99 years. He accompanied Her Majesty The Queen on all 251 of her overseas tours, and he reigns as the longest-serving consort in British history.

Prince Philip had a genuine interest in Northern Ireland's affairs. His association with these shores lasted 73 years — the first example taking place with Her Majesty in 1949 — despite the difficulty of the tragic and barbaric death of his uncle and mentor, Lord Louis Mountbatten. How difficult that must have been, and yet he was never afraid to reach the hand of peace across the divide. Through his distinctive presence and unique sense of humour, he put ordinary people at ease, engaging with all whom he encountered.

On Friday past, the nation lost a giant. As with any death, his passing will leave a huge void for his family, friends and loved ones, whose lives were touched by his presence.

In time, we will be able to celebrate and fully understand the legacy that he has left and rededicate ourselves to the values to which he devoted his extraordinary life. I know that Her Majesty The Queen will take great comfort in scripture. I particularly draw comfort from the words of Matthew 25:23:

“Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Mr Chambers: I add my thanks, Mr Speaker, to those of other Members to you for facilitating this tribute.

Nothing much can be added to the heartfelt and touching tributes that have been paid to the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Philip, in the House today. He was a faithful and loyal royal consort, a husband, a father, a grandfather and a war hero. He never tried to overshadow the Queen. Nevertheless, he used his position to do so much for the nation, for the Commonwealth and, in particular, for generations of young people. My personal sympathy and the sympathy of all those whom I represent in North Down go out to our grieving Queen and her family at this sad time.

Mr Stalford: I offer my heartfelt condolences to Her Majesty The Queen, the Prince of Wales and the entire royal family on what must be an immense personal loss for them. I hope that they can take some comfort from knowing that their mourning is shared by millions of people across this country and by billions across the Commonwealth and the globe.

Seneca the Younger said:

“Life, if well lived, is long enough.”

Nobody can be in any doubt that the life of the Duke of Edinburgh was not only long but well lived, with a vast range of accomplishments in many fields. After a difficult and often traumatic childhood, His Royal Highness spent his entire life in the devoted service of this country. During World War II, he served with distinction in the Mediterranean and Pacific fleets. He was present for the surrender of the Japanese empire and was mentioned in dispatches for service at Cape Matapan. He married the Queen in 1947 and subsequently gave her 73 years of absolute loyalty, support, devotion and love. He was a tireless campaigner for conservation and environmental causes, and, in that, he truly was a visionary and was years ahead of the rest of society.

It has been mentioned that a lasting legacy of the Duke of Edinburgh is the award scheme that bears his name. I participated in that scheme and, like the Member for North Down, got my bronze and silver; alas, I was not able to finish the gold element of the scheme. The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme is a magnificent legacy that he will leave.

Prince Philip was of the greatest generation in this country's history — the generation that defeated Hitlerism and fascism — and I believe firmly that he would have succeeded in any walk of life. He more than succeeded in the path that he decided to walk in this life. He has gone to his reward. Matthew 25:21 says:

“His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.”

God bless those who mourn. God save the Queen.

Mr Beggs: On behalf of my constituency of East Antrim, I offer heartfelt condolences and sympathy to Queen Elizabeth II and the royal family following the passing of His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. The royal family is in our thoughts and prayers.

The United Kingdom, the Commonwealth and, indeed, the world mourn the passing of the longest-serving royal consort. He was the supporting husband to Her Majesty for a remarkable 73 years and was her strength and stay. His life was one of public service, first as a gallant royal naval officer actively serving during World War II and then in his role of selflessly supporting Her Majesty The Queen. He also became patron to many charities, including the World Wildlife Fund, which he served for over 50 years, including time as the active president. His was a life well lived.

As a serving Boys' Brigade officer, I can vouch for the value of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme. As a parent, I saw how it benefited my three children. The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme has positively helped to shape the lives of tens of thousands of young people locally and throughout the Commonwealth. Young people are required to volunteer in their communities to help others — it is a great thing to instil that sense of caring at a young age — to learn a new skill and to undertake an expedition. I remember meeting an exhausted group of Raloo BB and GB members who were wet, tired and weary. They had walked for three days, carrying their tents and food on a cross-country trek from Ballycastle to Broughshane. What struck me was their determination, the effort that they had made to be successful and their sense of achievement at having made a trek that they probably thought they could not do. In this day and age, few young people face such challenges, but it is a great achievement when they train and are successful. The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme equips our young people with new skills and increased confidence and resilience and enables them to make the most of their life. The young people who have benefited from the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme will be his greatest legacy.

The Queen has rightly insisted that the COVID regulations should be followed. I urge anyone who wants to pay tribute by sending a message of sympathy to take some time out to visit the royal website and sign the online book of condolence. Prince Philip will be remembered for the selfless role that he played in supporting Her Majesty The Queen and for how he benefited young people in particular in our community.

Mr Middleton: On behalf of my constituents in Londonderry and the wider Foyle constituency, I pass on my deepest sympathies and condolences to Her Majesty The Queen on the sad passing of His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh.

It has been 68 years since Her Majesty and His Royal Highness stood in Guildhall Square in Londonderry as part of a visit following the coronation. Over the weekend, I heard from many constituents about their fond and cherished memories of that visit and of being there with their parents and grandparents. Over the many decades that have followed since that visit, the duke served with immense dedication and a tireless commitment to public service, and that is evident to us all not just in the United Kingdom but across the Commonwealth and worldwide.

His Royal Highness took part in over 22,000 solo engagements. When he retired in 2017, he was said to have been a patron, president or member of almost 800 organisations. He had visited 143 countries in an official capacity. That is a significant lifetime of service. One of his many lasting legacies is the Duke of Edinburgh's Award. I, like many others, have benefited from that award, and I have been inspired listening to the many stories from across the UK and the world about young people whose lives were transformed by the award. I trust that it will be very much a positive, lasting legacy of His Royal Highness.

In the 99 years of his life, Prince Philip saw many world-changing events. He saw leaders come and go, but his service went on. The impact of his service and legacy will live on for many years to come. Of course, when it is all stripped back, Prince Philip was a devoted father, grandfather, husband and great-grandfather. Her Majesty The Queen, when speaking about her husband, stated:

"He has, quite simply, been my strength and stay all these years".

Her Majesty The Queen is very much in my thoughts and prayers as she continues to reign over us in the times ahead. We have lost a tremendous public servant who served his queen and country for decades. We send our heartfelt condolences to Her Majesty and the royal family.

Mr Humphrey: I rise on behalf of my constituents in North Belfast and as chair of the Northern Ireland Assembly Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to extend deepest sympathy to Her Majesty The Queen and to offer condolences to her and her family on the sad passing of the Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh.

Prince Philip of Greece and Denmark was born on 10 June 1921. He was evacuated from Corfu with his family at the age of 18 months in an orange box. He became a distinguished naval officer and a war hero in the fight against the evil of Nazism during World War II; indeed, I had two uncles who served with him on HMS Ramillies, and I remember them fondly telling me stories of when he was on board. He married Princess Elizabeth in November 1947 and became consort to the Queen, a role he carried out with distinction and in an exemplary manner for some 73 years.

Prince Philip was a keen sportsman, and he was president or patron of 780 organisations until his retirement from public life and royal service in August 2017. The duke completed 22,000 royal duties and delivered nearly 5,500 speeches. Passionate about world conservation, Prince Philip was president of the WWF from 1981 until 1996, but, undoubtedly, one of the Duke's most lasting legacies — there are many — will be the establishment of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award 65 years ago.

As a lifelong Scout, I commend the vision, foresight and immense leadership of that programme. In our United Kingdom alone, some 6-7 million young people have benefited from the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme. Today, I proudly wear my Duke of Edinburgh's Award diamond challenge award, which was presented to me by the Earl of Wessex.

1.30 pm

Prince Philip was a much loved and respected figure, not just at home but across the world and throughout

Her Majesty's Commonwealth. He was a real character with a sharp wit and intellect. I was privileged to meet him on a number of occasions while serving as High Sheriff and deputy Lord Mayor of this great city. It was always a pleasure. The outpouring of grief and affection since Prince Philip's passing on Friday across the United Kingdom and the world demonstrates the love and respect that the British people had for Philip. Indeed, I saw that yesterday when I and other members of my family laid flowers at Hillsborough; a stream of people came along to do just that.

We live in very difficult days for our country. He gave leadership. He showed us how to behave in public life; he did so for such a long time. He has left a legacy that will never, and should never, be forgotten. We mourn today and respect the traditions that the House of Windsor has set out, but we remember that there is a family in mourning. I hope, wish and pray that the presence of God will surround the royal family at this time and that, in the days ahead, God will save the Queen.

Mrs Cameron: I am very grateful for this opportunity to pay tribute to Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, who has died aged 99, having given, quite literally, a lifetime of service to his country and the wider Commonwealth. One of the saddest things when it comes to someone passing away is that it is only when they have gone that we offer the deserved words of celebration and recognition of a life well lived. It is only then that we set the record straight with a narrative that is much more reflective of the person rather than the headlines written about them. That is why, over the past few days, it has been an absolute joy to hear from those who knew him best about exactly what type of man the duke was. He achieved more in his lifetime than most of us ever will. He was a war hero, a pilot, a naval commander, a top-class sportsman, a pioneering champion of wildlife and nature, an author and a philosopher. He was a man who, despite seemingly having no barriers to what he might achieve in his chosen career, made the choice to step back and instead devote his entire life to serving Queen and country, knowing full well all that that would entail for his ambition and complicated family history.

It was fascinating to learn that that seasoned war hero was also the first to offer support to the younger generations who followed him into a royal life of service. He was the first to provide comfort to William and Harry on the death of their mother, Diana. Remarkably, shortly after the assassination of President Kennedy, it was Prince Philip who was found on the floor of the White House playing with the slain President's infant son, who had become upset because he had no one to play with any more. Those are wonderful qualities that show that, at heart, he was, in private, a man who cared deeply for those around him, even if, sometimes, his public manner suggested otherwise. His ability to care for younger generations was no doubt the driving force behind the incredible scheme that bears his name and which has changed the lives of hundreds of thousands of young people.

Perhaps, in his passing, the Duke of Edinburgh offers a final lesson to those of us who serve in public office: there is no greater privilege than to serve. He has provided the template and set the standard for all those who do likewise. As he might have pointed out, with a little more directness than I, we might learn not to wait until we are 99 years of age before being able to speak some kind words

about one another. My thoughts and prayers today are with the Queen and the royal family as they mourn their great personal loss.

Mr Robinson: Last Friday, we learned of the death of His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. It is, first, correct that our sincere sympathies and condolences are extended to Her Majesty The Queen, who has lost her much loved husband of 73 years. He was her pillar of support and ever-dependable adviser for all those years as she carried out duties here and throughout the world. Prince Philip's children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren are now left without the role model whom they all looked up to and sought wise advice from. They are all in our thoughts and prayers at this most difficult of times for all the family.

We cannot ever underestimate the lasting positive impact on young lives that Prince Philip had during his long and fulfilling life and, indeed, will have for generations. That is true not just in the United Kingdom but on a global scale. This is a hard-earned but thoroughly justified way for the prince's long life to be remembered. Generations of young people, including many here in Northern Ireland, will continue to be helped thanks to the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme.

The prince was always a great supporter of the armed forces, which he served with during World War II and beyond, and he was among the last of the war veterans and deserves the greatest respect for his service. The prince was a man of great intellect, and, in the days since his death, we have heard of his deep interest in and influence on engineering, sport, ecology and theology. All of us today can learn a lesson from the prince's life in public service. We all will mourn with his family, who are enduring tremendous loss. Again, on my behalf and on behalf of my East Londonderry constituents, we offer our sincere condolences and sympathies to the Queen and family on the death of the duke.

Mr T Buchanan: Like others around the Chamber, on behalf of the constituents of West Tyrone, I tender my sincere sympathy to the Queen and to the royal family and its household at this time. Friday 9 April 2021 will be a date that is etched in all our memories as we remember when the news filtered through of the death of a great man who was loved by so many, His Royal Highness Prince Philip. It is one of those occasions in life that we will remember where we were, what we were doing and who we were with when the news broke. Although he was a few weeks short of his 100th birthday, we never really expected the suddenness of his death because of the fact that this man had lived such an active life.

Prince Philip, as others said, was not only a dedicated husband of 73 years but a dedicated father, grandfather and great-grandfather. Despite all those responsibilities, we see how he gave himself to a full life of service to country and to Commonwealth. He was forthright, intelligent and forward-thinking, serving as patron to some 800 organisations and leaving the most lasting legacy through the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme, which so many of our young people have taken part in. Those who are older today and who passed through it over the past 65 years can testify to how they benefited from it.

Throughout his life, Prince Philip exemplified the qualities of duty, service and sacrifice to country and

Commonwealth with great humour, humility and, indeed, humanity. There is no doubt that he has left us all with a great example to follow. I remember the day, which my colleague Edwin Poots referred to, when the Queen and Prince Philip came to open the new South West Acute Hospital in Enniskillen, and I remember the humour that Prince Philip presented that day. As I was reflecting on those things this morning, I remembered the words of Jonathan to David in 1 Samuel 20:18. David was taking his leave from the king's table, and Jonathan came to him and said onto him:

"thou shalt be missed, because thy seat will be empty."

As we reflect today on the loss of Prince Philip and extend our sincere Christian sympathy to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and the entire royal household, we think of a chair that is now empty. We think of a voice that is now silent. We think of words of wisdom that are no longer there. Today, we sincerely pray that the royal household and Queen Elizabeth will know the strength, comfort and blessing of God in the days, weeks and months to come.

Mr Speaker: Members, that concludes tributes to the late Prince Philip.

Adjourned at 1.40 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 13 April 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that, as a mark of respect, the Business Committee agreed to defer all non-essential business scheduled for this week. Yesterday's Assembly and Executive business, including Question Time, will be taken today.

To enable business to flow more smoothly today, a business motion to suspend Standing Order 20(1) has been tabled that will, if agreed, allow Question Time to commence as soon as all other Executive business has been disposed of. There will be no lunchtime suspension, and the Business Committee will meet immediately after the Assembly adjourns. I encourage Members and Ministers to keep a close eye on proceedings to ensure that they are in the Chamber when their business is reached.

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, the motion on Committee membership will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Mervyn Storey replace Mr Gordon Dunne as a member of the Committee for the Economy. — [Mr K Buchanan.]

Standing Order 20(1): Suspension

Mr Speaker: The motion to suspend Standing Order 20(1) will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 13 April 2021. — [Mr K Buchanan.]

Ministerial Statement

Health and Social Care Trust Rebuild Plans

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health that he wishes to make a statement on trust rebuild plans. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members in the Chamber that, in light of the need for parties to observe social distancing, 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 ensure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. Members present in the Chamber must also do that. They may do so by rising in their place as well as by notifying the Business Office or Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions. In accordance with long-established procedure, points of order are not normally taken during the statement or in the period for questions thereafter.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Mr Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to speak.

Before I move to the substantive content of my statement, I pay my respects to the late Duke of Edinburgh. Prince Philip was a truly extraordinary individual. A distinguished veteran of the Second World War, he was someone who dedicated his entire adult life to selfless public service. He was at the helm of the royal family for longer than most of us have been alive. He was an anchor of steadfastness, and it is clear that he had a total and unwavering dedication and devotion to his country — his charitable interests included being patron of a number of health organisations — and, most importantly, to his wife, Her Majesty The Queen. His immense contribution can never be overstated.

My motivation in making today's statement is twofold. First, I would like to update the House on our immediate plans for rebuilding health and social care services. Today, I am publishing the trust rebuild plans for the months of April, May and June.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, I would like to provide an update on some of my longer-term rebuilding initiatives. I will focus on cancer services, the long and growing waiting lists, and on the significant constraints that I face in tackling those.

Our health service prides itself on being available to all and free at the point of access. I contend that we are still in grave danger of undermining this essential feature of our health service. With ever-growing waiting lists, I question whether all of our citizens have adequate access to the health service that they need.

The people of Northern Ireland deserve better than having to wait months or, in many cases, years for access to elective healthcare. Many suffer pain and discomfort while they wait. We simply cannot let the situation continue to deteriorate. I am absolutely determined to put this right. However, as I will argue today, I cannot do this alone. If we are to address our absolutely dire waiting lists, I need the support of the House and my Executive colleagues.

Before I delve further into that issue and cover the trust rebuild plans, I will set the scene by briefly outlining how recent history has led to where we find ourselves today. The pandemic has highlighted serious, long-established fragility in our health and social care system, especially in staffing capacity. Our health and care system was under immense and growing pressure long before the pandemic. Ten years of financial stringency and short-termism had undoubtedly taken its toll. During the last decade, our health system has been repeatedly documented as being out of date and failing.

Sir Liam Donaldson's 2015 report, 'The Right Time, The Right place', referred to Northern Ireland having an "ossified model of care", with specialist staffing resources "too thinly spread". Similarly, the 2016 Bengoa report, which was endorsed by the Northern Ireland Executive and the other parties in the House, referred to the model of care as "outdated" and:

"not the one that Northern Ireland needs."

It also stated:

"the current configuration of acute services is simply not sustainable in the short to medium term."

The following year, an expert panel assessed our adult social care system, and its report, 'Power to People', concluded that it was "collapsing in slow-motion."

The decade of chronic underfunding has had consequences, not least of which is the failure to build greater capacity and resilience. We have some of the best staff and most innovative treatments in the world. Northern Ireland should simply not have the waiting times that it has. They have been intolerable for some time and have grown worse. The time for words of concern has passed. I firmly believe that we require a period of firm action now. The hundreds of thousands of people who are on a waiting list deserve no less.

Undoubtedly, the pre-existing fragility in our system also hampers our response to the pandemic and underlines the particular need for caution in Northern Ireland as we emerge from lockdown.

It is in that context that I am today publishing trust rebuild plans for April to June 2021. The publication of those plans comes as we emerge from the severe third COVID wave, which has further depleted the resilience of our health and social care system. Over the winter, our health and social care services have been under pressure like never before. I am pleased that we are now coming out of the latest COVID-19 wave, and, while there is no time for complacency, the highly successful roll-out of the vaccine is giving real hope.

I am aware that our hard-pressed health and social care staff, especially those who have worked in the most challenging roles over the past 13 months, are in need of rest, and that is reflected in the trust rebuild plans.

However, I also know that they wish for nothing more than a return to their normal duties, delivering the care that they are expertly trained to do. I am hopeful that the publication of the plans signals a gradual return to normal duties for our staff.

The trust rebuild plans are based on five principles, which are, first, that we de-escalate ICU as a region; secondly, that staff are afforded an opportunity to take entitled annual leave; thirdly, that elective care is prioritised regionally to ensure that those who are most in clinical need, regardless of place of residence, get access first; fourthly, that all trusts seek to develop green pathways with the aim of maximising theatre throughput; and, fifthly, that the Belfast City Hospital Nightingale facility is prioritised for ICU de-escalation in order to increase regional complex surgery capacity as quickly as possible.

For that fifth principle, I can confirm that the Belfast City Hospital Nightingale facility is now closed, with the last remaining ICU patients vacating the site on Friday 9 April. I am also pleased that the trust rebuild plans reflect our many regional initiatives, not least my action to ensure that all elective surgery is prioritised in line with greatest clinical need and is not dependent on a patient's postcode.

Alongside the trust rebuild plans that have been published today, a data annex has been included that sets out the trust activity projections for the three-month period of April to June 2021. The activity projections for May and June are indicative at this stage and will be reviewed in early May. That reflects the ongoing high degree of uncertainty that we continue to face, but it is also because I want to make sure that, if it becomes clear over the coming weeks that trusts can do more, I expect them to do that, even in the context of many competing challenges and uncertainties. I still want to see as much activity delivered as quickly as we can.

Having published the immediate trust rebuild plans, I want to spend some time on our growing waiting lists and waiting times. There is no doubt that the pandemic has had a devastating impact on our hospital services and particularly on elective care. The downturn in elective surgery, while deeply regrettable, reflects the unprecedented pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not right that any patient should wait longer than is clinically appropriate for surgery. I fully understand the distress and anxiety that long waiting times cause, particularly when patients are suffering pain and discomfort.

Staff were redeployed to help to manage the high number of patients who were being admitted to our hospitals and to allow the system to increase critical care capacity. For the past year, rightly and unavoidably, our priority has been urgent and emergency care and providing ICU care to those who needed it. It was not lockdown that added to waiting lists and led to much-needed operations being postponed; it was the virus. Our system, like systems all over the world, simply could not maintain a normal service, given the surge in patients who required life-saving and immediate interventions.

Staff had to be redeployed, and agonising choices had to be made. That was not about prioritising one condition over another but about providing care to the sickest patients quickly. It was about maintaining ICU care for everyone who required it, COVID and non-COVID patients

alike. Despite those challenges, a number of actions have been taken to maintain elective services as much as possible. We have also pushed ahead with important reforms of our urgent and emergency care services. Those initiatives demonstrate that, despite the pandemic, we have continued to deliver much-needed reform of services. I will now turn to some of those initiatives in more detail.

10.45 am

On actions to maintain elective services and to reform services, we have created Northern Ireland's first regional day-procedure centre at Lagan Valley Hospital in the South Eastern Trust. The day-procedure centre has been providing support for the region, particularly for urgent cancer diagnostic work. Similarly, surgeons from across Northern Ireland have been travelling to the South West Acute Hospital (SWAH) in Enniskillen to provide surgery that could not be provided at other sites owing to the rising number of COVID-positive inpatients.

I have also announced a new regional approach to orthopaedic surgery. It involves developing a networked regional system of dedicated hubs.

As I have mentioned, I have also established a new regional approach to the prioritisation of surgery. That will ensure that any available theatre capacity across Northern Ireland is allocated to the patients most in need, both during a surge and in the future. It includes fully maximising all available in-house Health and Social Care (HSC) and independent sector capacity. While that may mean that patients will need to travel further for their surgery, I would rather see the highest-priority treatments delivered across Northern Ireland than lower-priority treatment delivered locally. The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) also continues to work closely with independent sector providers to increase the capacity available to provide elective care in the coming months. Access to the independent sector will also be managed on a regional basis.

I have also pushed ahead with the much-needed reform of our urgent and emergency care services, and fantastic progress has been made. That not only puts us in a stronger position for the future but has allowed us to manage the impact of COVID-19 more effectively; indeed, I intend to publish for consultation in the near future further proposed steps to reform that important service.

Despite all those initiatives and the incredible dedication of all our Health and Social Care staff, we face a burning platform. The pandemic has had a significant impact on our already appalling waiting lists. Arguably, the greatest strategic challenge facing my Department and, indeed, the Executive as a whole is the urgent need to address those waiting lists.

Prior to COVID-19, the trend in demand for hospital-based elective care services had been increasing, largely because of the fact that we have a growing, ageing population with a greater prevalence of chronic health problems. That increase in demand was not matched by the corresponding increase in health service budgets necessary to increase our capacity. Patient demand for elective care services continues to exceed capacity across a range of specialities. As a result, even before the pandemic, the number of people waiting longer than the target waiting times was increasing. Our inadequate

capacity includes well-documented and significant staffing pressures in many parts of our system. Underinvestment in staffing in the past decade is the exact opposite of what was required. On top of that, our outdated configuration of services means that staffing resources and expertise are too often stretched too thinly across the system.

The latest available figures on our waiting lists suggest that, at the end of December 2020, more than 320,000 patients were waiting for their first consultant-led outpatient appointment; more than 105,000 patients were waiting for inpatient or day-case treatment; and around 145,000 patients were waiting for a diagnostic test. To address that issue, I can today announce that I intend shortly to publish an elective care framework. The purpose of the framework is to set out both the immediate and long-term actions and funding requirements needed to tackle our waiting lists. Bringing our waiting lists down to an acceptable level is a long-term effort, requiring a recurrent funding commitment.

I appreciate that many Members have specific concerns about our cancer services. My Department has much activity under way to stabilise and improve diagnosis, treatment and life chances of cancer patients here. Staff in health and social care trusts have worked hard to ensure that systemic anti-cancer therapies and radiotherapy have been protected throughout the surge, and those treatments have been offered as an alternative to surgery whenever possible.

In June 2020, 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 those services as much as possible throughout the pandemic. Taking into account existing capacity constraints and the ongoing threat of COVID-19, on 7 October 2020, I published a policy statement setting out my Department's approach to the rebuilding and stabilisation of cancer services. That included a stabilisation plan 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. At present, trusts are keeping the position under daily review and are reinstating red-flag surgery and rescheduling patients as quickly as possible. Fortunately, the vast majority of patients who experienced a delay from January to March 2021 have since had their treatment completed or have a confirmed plan in place.

The COVID-19 pandemic has, undoubtedly, had a devastating impact on cancer services. I understand the worry and concern that long waiting times can cause for patients and their families. I am committed to dealing with that problem. Therefore, I am finalising a cancer recovery plan: "Building Back: Rebuilding Better". The plan seeks to make recommendations to redress the disruption to cancer services caused by the pandemic. The cancer recovery plan is also fully aligned with the short-term recommendations in the cancer strategy and will focus on the three-year period until March 2024. The recommendations cover 11 key areas from screening through to palliative care and have been co-produced with

the Health and Social Care Board and colleagues from across the health and social care trusts.

Substantial costs are associated with the delivery of the recovery plan and the strategy. In addition, cancer charities struggle to continue to deliver current services and develop new services to people suffering from cancer, while managing the impact of falling income streams. To support cancer services, I have used both transformation and COVID-19 funding to set up two grant schemes. The first used transformation funding of £600,000, which covered the period from December 2020 to 31 March 2021 and enabled charities to deliver a range of key services to support people living with cancer during the pandemic. I hope to announce further details of the second scheme, which will be aligned with the three-year time frame of the cancer recovery plan, later this week. I am pleased to confirm that it will be accompanied by an important mental health support scheme, one that will be appropriately resourced to produce greater levels of mental health supports and interventions. The final details of both funds are being concluded. I hope that, once they have been announced in the coming days, they will demonstrate the importance that I place on recovering and strengthening those crucial services and supporting the organisations that will be central to that.

It is widely recognised that addressing the waiting-list backlog and reforming services to ensure future sustainability is a complex and long-term issue and one that requires recurrent funding commitments. Let me make it clear: one-off COVID funds have been essential for health and social care over the past 12 months. However, as I have repeatedly stressed, one-off non-recurrent funds cannot provide the long-term fix that our health service requires. Nevertheless, they have been vital during the emergency that we have faced during the pandemic. I will continue to utilise such funding to the best of my ability for as long as it is available.

In recent weeks, I have been able to allocate one-off funds to specific priority areas. The debt that the health service and wider society owe to unpaid carers, for instance, cannot be overstated. Without the care provided by family members and friends, many vulnerable people would have been plunged into full-scale crisis over the past 12 months. I have allocated £4 million to a new carers' support fund that will provide support for charities working for and with carers. The support fund will provide practical support and acknowledgement to what is such an important sector.

All those allocations, such as the additional grant support to the air ambulance and a range of our community and voluntary sector organisations, as well as the major funds that I hope to be able to announce this week, have been made possible as a result of the one-off COVID funds made available to Northern Ireland during 2020-21. I would, of course, love to allocate further recurrent funding to all those areas, but, as ever, the available recurrent funding is not keeping up with the levels of demand and need.

As Members will be aware, the Executive's Budget has now been announced by the Finance Minister. I recognise that the 2021-22 Budget allocation was disappointing for all Departments and that the scale of pressures significantly exceeds the funding available. From my perspective, the Budget is extremely disappointing. Tragically, as it stands, I cannot make any substantial inroads into improving the waiting list position that I have just outlined. That said, I

welcome the £52 million for Agenda for Change pay, which will enable pay parity with England to continue in 2021-22. Likewise, the announcement that £20 million for safe staffing will now be funded from Barnett consequentials is a positive move.

It has to be recognised that, while the additional resource allocations in the Budget are to be welcomed, the non-recurrent nature of much of the funding means that I will still face some difficult decisions. The present funding model that we operate within is not fit for purpose. What is really needed is a multi-year Budget, and, unfortunately, the Executive have not received that from Westminster. One-off COVID funding cannot be effectively deployed in rebuilding services as that requires us to make multi-year commitments to training places and to appoint people to permanent posts in order to attract and retain staff. We require major sustained investments to rebuild our services. In particular, increasing the capacity of our elective care system, whether in-house or in the independent sector, requires a significant recurrent funding commitment. Only with such a commitment can we begin to invest in the staff and infrastructure required to make progress. At a minimum, a recurrent source of earmarked funding agreed in advance is needed to close the capacity gap and to address the patient backlog. An incremental year-on-year increasing allocation will be required, and it could take five to 10 years to return waiting times to an acceptable level. Longer-term surety of funding at a significant scale will enable innovations in-house and with independent sector providers.

Mr Speaker, I again thank you for the opportunity to speak today. At the heart of my address is a genuine concern for the people of Northern Ireland, the hundreds of thousands of people on our elective care waiting lists and the many more who will need access to those services in the future. Failure to tackle the elective care waiting lists will impact not just on those who are currently waiting but on all those who will need access in the future. The issue affects us all. Such a failure would also be morally reprehensible, as we must not lose sight of the fact that, for the last five to six years, despite all the advances in medication and technologies, growing numbers of people have come to harm because they have not received the treatment that they deserve. Who does not have a loved one, a friend or a relative who, at some point now or in the future, will need to access an elective procedure? As a House, we owe it to all our citizens to now tackle the elective waiting lists.

To address that burning issue, in the near future I will publish for consultation a cancer recovery plan, an elective care framework and the urgent and emergency care review. Our great staff want us to be ambitious about the future of Health and Social Care. They want us to build back better and to learn the lessons of the pandemic regarding capacity, resilience and investment. I share that ambition 100%, and I believe that the people of Northern Ireland do too. However, I fear that, without a significant and recurrent funding commitment from the Executive, we will be severely restricted in our ability to deliver and will be fighting the scourge of waiting lists with at least one hand tied behind our back.

I ask Members and my Executive colleagues to reflect on what I have said today. I look forward to having further constructive discussions about how we collectively address this most serious issue. I conclude by appealing

for unity on waiting times across the House. We must start to put it right. It is a long-term task that needs long-term recurrent funding. It cannot be done on the basis of money that is here today, gone next year.

To put waiting lists right, we will need more staff in our health service, but how can you recruit additional people to the workforce if there is no certainty that you will have the money to keep paying them next year? How do you sign up more young people for the required years of training on the basis of single-year funding?

11.00 am

I recognise that there are many pressing rival demands on the public purse in Northern Ireland and that huge issues face every Department, and I fully accept that the Executive have limited room for manoeuvre in budget terms — decisions are taken in London, and we have to play the cards that we are dealt — but I cannot think of a more pressing issue facing us than waiting times. It cries out for action. It is a daily rebuke to the standing of the House and to the reputation of politics. It leaves thousands and thousands of our people — our fellow citizens and neighbours — in avoidable pain. We owe it to them to do much, much better. Mr Speaker, I commend the statement to the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: Can we, please, bring Colm Gildernew on screen? [*Pause.*] I will give him a few seconds. [*Pause.*] We will try to return to Colm Gildernew. I call Pam Cameron.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Health Minister for his statement. I welcome any ramping up of services and reform of our health service. There are many people waiting for cancer operations or diagnostic tests to detect cancer and other potentially fatal diseases, but there are also many people waiting for routine elective surgery. Those people are living in agony, and some have been waiting for a year for the vital healthcare that they so require. In the plan for an elective care framework, how does the Minister envisage elective care being given significant enough recurrent funding to effectively reduce waiting lists and meet targets to bring the numbers to more acceptable levels?

Mr Swann: I thank the Deputy Chair of the Health Committee for her question. I apologise for not being able to brief her and the Chair prior to making the statement, as has been my normal practice, due to an Executive meeting this morning.

One of the things that we have done during the pandemic is establish the elective care centre in the Lagan Valley Hospital. That is proving to be a great asset to our health service across Northern Ireland. It is about establishing that centre as part of the long-term solution to reduce the number of people waiting for elective care, but, as I said in my statement, it must be done through a regional approach. We must look at treating patients faster rather than closer to their homes. Treating patients closer to their homes would be the ideal position, but, due to the size of Northern Ireland, the footprint of our health service and our staffing specialities and pressures, the regional approach, which we are seeing in Lagan Valley and in the other areas in which those changes have been made, is paying dividends. It is about investing in staff and the processes that allow that regional approach to work.

One benefit that we have seen over the past year is the breaking down of silos across our trusts. Those silos were not intentional or created by anyone in particular, but they grew up over time. We now see our health service colleagues working across sectors, trusts, primary care, community pharmacy and secondary care. It is about building on that for the future so that the people who need to be seen can be seen as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement. I note and share the Minister's concern around elective care waiting lists. As he rightly points out, those are concerns for us all, particularly the, approximately, 145,000 patients who are waiting for a diagnostic test. Such a wait puts further pressure on those individuals and, potentially, the health service, due to the increased treatment that will be needed.

We have seen good examples of considerable partnership working on rebuilding and reconfiguring services, including cancer services, particularly breast cancer, and strokes. I note that several plans are to be published on emergency departments, elective care and cancer recovery. I am somewhat concerned to see in the reference to the cancer strategy that it has:

“been co-produced with the Health and Social Care Board and ... the health and social care trusts.”

That is a fairly minimal approach, and, basically, it does not include some other very important sectors. What commitment can the Minister give that these plans were developed with staff and patients in the genuine spirit of co-production and partnership working, as promised in the Bengoa report and ‘Delivering Together’?

Mr Swann: I thank the Chair for his statement. As he is aware, many of the plans announced today have been a long time in the cooking and development from the Bengoa report, ‘Transforming Your Care’ and ‘Power to People’. They have all been done with that co-production and co-development phase throughout their entirety, especially with regard to our long-term cancer strategy, which has been co-produced and co-chaired and will keep those people who need these services most right at the heart of what we do. That co-production has also been done in the review of our elective care model, which has been a long time in the development. It is about keeping patients at the centre of what we do, but it is also about making sure that we get the ultimate utilisation of our footprint and our staff across the entirety of our service.

This is not about redesigning or closing hospitals or paying staff off. This is about actually indicating that we need every spare square foot of capacity that we have; we need more, and we need more staff to actually do that. As the Chair well knows, I regularly meet our trade union side and the chairs of all my arm's-length bodies to make sure that they are fully embedded in and have sight of everything that we are doing as well, and also to provide the accountability that the Committee requires in our producing these plans and programmes and in coming forward with them for scrutiny and assessment.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister for his statement this morning. I know that he shares my commitment to improved mental health services, and I welcome that, in

the statement, he mentioned the cancer recovery plan being accompanied by mental health support for patients on waiting lists. My question today refers to mental health waiting lists specifically. More broadly, as we emerge from the pandemic, mental health support will be necessary, now more than ever. Can the Minister give an update on crisis intervention services to support those on mental health waiting lists, should they need it, and does he see improved support for these critical services as part of a longer-term rebuilding of services as a whole?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member, and I think that the Member is fully aware of my commitment to improving our mental health services across the entirety of Northern Ireland. That is why, even during the height of the first wave of the pandemic, I went ahead and published the mental health strategy and the consultation plan in relation to that. In the coming days, I hope to make further announcements about additional moneys that will be allocated to mental health support for people who need it across our society, especially as we come out of the pandemic. It will be accessible to a number of organisations and individuals that it had not been previously available to. The detail of that is being worked through, and I look forward to publishing that and giving the Member and the Committee a fuller briefing later this month.

Mr Chambers: I certainly welcome the comprehensive statement from the Minister this morning. During the pandemic, a phrase that kept coming up was “we are in this together”. If ever there were challenges facing the House, where we need to be in it together, they are the challenges that the Minister highlighted this morning. Going forward, party political considerations need to be set aside.

Tackling our waiting list position should be a key objective for the entire Executive. To put our system on a long-term sustainable footing, it desperately needs financial certainty of more than a 12-month budget. Nevertheless, in the meantime, can the Minister confirm that his Department and the Health and Social Care Board are utilising the interim COVID funds to increase capacity as much as possible, including in the independent sector, both inside and outside Northern Ireland?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I think that all in the House have, at some time, spoken about the need for long-term financing for Health and Social Care and the need for a Budget that is not simply year-on-year. No matter which Minister or Department has been to the House, they have indicated the challenges that not having that brings, no more so than in Health, because it does not allow us to give that firm, long-term commitment that we need to invest in not only our staff but our facilities.

On the utilisation of the independent sector, we have engaged with it, and that is a necessary part of our recovery plan to try to drive down some of the waiting lists that we have. Our independent sector and healthcare providers have, during 2021-22, completed more than 7,000 procedures, and endoscopic diagnostic tests have been carried out by them, all paid for by the health and social care system. In addition, as a result of Health and Social Care having access to theatre capacity in the three local independent sector hospitals, approximately 4,750 cancer or time-critical patients were treated by HSC consultants, again, paid for by the health and social care system.

It is about utilising, as I said, every square foot of our health service and the independent sector across Northern Ireland as we tackle what will be a long-term commitment, which, as the Member indicated, has to be party-political-free. Bengoa set the tone for that. New Decade, New Approach, in its commitments to reducing our waiting lists, set the tone for that. Now, we as a House and as a society need to follow through on that commitment: health needs to be a priority for all, irrespective of faith, favour or party political alignment.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for your statement this morning. I share the Chair of the Health Committee's concerns about the fact that you talk about pushing forward with reform and then coming back and consulting with the wider public on that, but I will not labour the point.

The Minister talked about there being 145,000 patients waiting for a diagnostic test. Obviously, cancer is key area for that. I chair the all-party group on cancer. I was not aware that the Department of Health was at an advanced stage in taking forward the recommendations from the various work streams. Can the Minister provide us with an update on the investment needed for better diagnostic testing and whether consideration is being given to putting some of those resources into primary care and possibly even the community and voluntary sector?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her statement about how we tackle this and for her support through the work that she does as chair of the all-party group on cancer. Cancer is one of those diseases that has touched every family across Northern Ireland and those in the House. As I said, we will make further announcements about additional funding that will be supplied for the three-year cancer recovery fund. That is being produced and worked on with a number of community and voluntary sector organisations that specialise in that area. We want to make sure that that funding is utilised in the available time commitment and that it supports everyone across the voluntary and community sector and the health service. It is not simply there to plug a gap; it is there to do additional work over that three-year period.

The Member will be aware, as the chair of the all-party group on cancer, of the co-production and co-design of our cancer strategy over many years. That was paused this time last year because of the pandemic. That ingrained work, through co-production and co-chairing with service users, was, I think, crucial in getting us to where we are at this stage. We can take the opportunity and investment to try to redress some of the inequalities, especially in cancer diagnostics and cancer services, that we have seen on a postcode basis across Northern Ireland.

We need to be honest with the people of Northern Ireland: this will not be about having everything on your doorstep. That is the easy cry; it is the easy political campaign. It is about rebuilding our health service so that people can be seen as quickly, efficiently and safely as possible and get the service, the diagnosis and the diagnostic tests that they need so that they can, if necessary, get on to a treatment path as quickly as possible, not as close as possible.

11.15 am

Mr Buckley: This is a bleak statement from the Minister, and it is clear that the current situation cannot continue. It

is unsustainable. For many of our constituents, the COVID pandemic has, sadly, become a healthcare pandemic that has rocked the very principles of the NHS that he outlined: available to all and free at the point of access. I share the Minister's concern wholeheartedly, and I want to see the same vigour from the Executive in engaging on this issue as we have seen in the fight against COVID-19.

Will the Minister indicate the shortfall in the recurrent funding that would be required year-on-year to implement the strategy that he outlined in the statement? We know that waiting lists will not be dealt with immediately and that that requires a long-term strategic plan. However, capacity — both staffing and space — is an issue, so engagement with the independent sector will be crucial in the immediate term. Will the Minister outline the engagement that will happen immediately with the independent sector?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his comments. Again, he highlights the challenges.

The National Health Service is precious to me. It is precious to me not just as Health Minister but because of the support that my family has received from it, like many families in the House and across Northern Ireland. The core strength of our National Health Service is that it is free at the point of need, free at the point of care and free at the point of delivery, no matter the ailment or stress.

It is a question of how we build capacity not just in staffing but in our recurrent footprint. The Member highlights — I thank him for his support — the challenges that not having a recurrent budget in health presents. It does not allow us to face the long-term challenge and make the long-term change that we need to see in the health service across the entirety of our system.

On the utilisation of the independent sector, we have engaged with it extensively over a number of months, even from the first wave of the pandemic. The biggest challenge that we have in working in partnership with our independent sector is the inability to give it a long-term funding commitment. When we buy services from the independent sector, it is for a 12-month period. We cannot buy a number of thousands of operations or diagnostic tests on the basis of a long-term commitment, so the independent sector faces the same challenges as we do as a health service. If they know that we are able to give them £35 million this year, they can spend it, but they are then under the same staffing pressures as we are: how do they staff up, knowing that, in 12 months' time, the Department of Health may not have the money to keep the services and staff that they have invested in? It is about how we get over that hurdle of the recurrent budget.

That is not a criticism of my Executive colleagues. Every one of my ministerial colleagues is under the same pressure. However, the system that we now have pushes additional challenges on to, in particular, the Departments who spend the majority of our funding on our staff, such as my Department and the Department of Education. That ongoing need is always there and always will be there until we can get over that hurdle. It is about investment for the future.

There used to be a great phrase in politics in Northern Ireland: "Invest to save". Nowhere is that key principle of invest to save more important than in our National Health Service. Invest now. Invest now in the health of our young people. Invest in diagnostic tests so that we do not get to the pressures that come in future years but can intervene

before we get into a worse scenario with increased waiting lists and more serious conditions to deal with and support.

Ms Ni Chuilín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis. I thank the Minister for his statement.

Minister, you will be aware that, at the end of January this year, more than 20,000 people were waiting for a neurology appointment, with 13,000 of them waiting for over 52 weeks. What are you doing to support those people?

Will the additional funding for mental health services include investment in people who have mental health crises and addictions — people who are commonly referred to as having a dual diagnosis? Ask any trust, and it will tell you that it has seen a massive increase. We have seen it in north and west Belfast.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. The challenges in neurology are well documented. It goes back to long-term investment in specialists, especially in critical procedures and critical areas, which we have not seen for years. In an awful lot of specialities, there was no succession planning. We need to see that now and make more investment. However, in a number of those specialities, it takes years to train consultants and to bring them on board. Attracting consultants from abroad requires an attractive package. There needs to be long-term sustainability. Those consultants need to know that their post will be there and that their staff will be there to support them. That is one of the challenges that we have seen in neurology and in a lot of other specialities in Northern Ireland.

With regard to post-pandemic mental health support, we have seen work being undertaken in primary care through our multidisciplinary teams. It is about how we strengthen those so that, in mental health, we see people closer to home. That is one area in which that can be done and you do not need to go into a theatre or a diagnostic room. I will make announcements on funding for talking therapies and to support the voluntary and community sector. Volunteers have carried such a heavy load over the past 12 months, and we must make sure that there is funding for them. Again, all that I have in my purse is short-term funding. Short-term non-recurrent funding is all that I can give. However, it is about making investment in those people so that they can pay back into communities.

The Member knows well that, if we can engage with people who are starting to struggle with mental health issues, that can prevent the problem becoming a more serious long-term issue. It can prevent the challenge coming onto their friends and family. It is about making sure that we invest in community organisations and the voluntary and community sector and support them in what we will need them to do over the next number of years as we combat the challenge of the mental health stresses coming out of COVID.

Mr McGuigan: I welcome the Minister's statement, in which he rightly identified that staff were essential to the delivery of our health services. It is welcome that one of the five principles in his rebuild plan is ensuring that staff have the opportunity to take their entitlement of annual leave. However, that would need to be the very minimum in supporting and retaining our staff. Following on from that point, what progress has been made with the COVID-19 recognition payment for staff? How many staff have received that award so far?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I will tell him that no staff have received that payment so far. One of the two asks that I was given was to make sure that the payment was tax-free and did not affect benefits, especially for lower-paid staff in our healthcare sector workforce. Since we made the initial announcement, additional work has had to be done, and that continues. Thanks to the Member's colleague in Finance, we were able to increase the package so that that £500 should not incur the majority of its tax implication. We have also been working with the Member's colleague in Communities, who has engaged with her colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions to see how we can make the payment so that it will not have an effect on any supplementary benefit payments either. That has been a bigger challenge. We are now working to ensure that, if that £500 is paid over a staggered period to individuals who are also on income support payments, it will not adversely affect any other benefits that they are gaining.

It is complex work that covers many thousands of staff not only within but outside the health service. It has taken more time than I would have liked, but I want to make sure that we get as much of that money as possible into the pockets of the people who have worked for it and deserve it. We are working with our trade union side to make sure that it is on board. One of the asks that it made of us was to try to make the payment to as many people at the same time as possible, rather than paying it piecemeal and causing anxiety to people who may think that they are not getting it or are not entitled to it. It is challenging work. It is a massive workforce to cover with a number of financial commitments, but that acknowledgement payment is one of the pieces of work for which I have had full support from my Executive colleagues. It is more complicated than it sounded initially, but I want to make sure that people get as much of that money in their pockets as possible by working with my Executive colleagues.

Mr McNulty: I am delighted to say that, this morning, I got my first COVID vaccination. It was at the South Lake Leisure Centre in Craigavon, and I was mesmerised by the teamwork, the positivity, the professionalism, the friendliness, the warmth of the welcome, the camaraderie, the organisation and the efficiency. It was heart-warming. Well done to all the health carers and management involved and to you, as Minister, for overseeing the deployment of the vaccinations. I give a special mention to Linda Willis, who put the needle in my arm, and to Sharon Kerr. The most important thing is that the energy, enthusiasm and teamwork on show there was incredible. It can move mountains.

Minister, in your statement you referred to 570,000 patients who were waiting for their first consultant-led outpatient appointment, for inpatient day-care treatment or for a diagnostic test: that is more than half a million people. That is a third of our population. You talked about it being five to 10 years before waiting lists got back to acceptable levels. That will not provide much comfort to patients and their families. Can you say anything today that will provide some comfort for those patients and their families?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his acknowledgement of the vaccine service. I have visited a number of sites. I got my vaccine through community pharmacy and our GPs, who are delivering it as well. One of the most emotive visits is to visit one of those vaccine centres. I

was in the Ballymena centre in the Seven Towers Leisure Centre yesterday. The majority of the staff on duty were volunteering and working on their days off to deliver vaccines, because they see it as such a psychological lift for them and for the people of Northern Ireland. They are providing part of the relief and part of the way out of what has been a terrible 14 months. Those staff — some of whom have come back from retirement, and some of whom are trainees — have energy, commitment and drive. I spoke yesterday to physiotherapists, speech and language therapists and dieticians, all of whom had come forward to be part of the vaccine programme because they see it as such a positive thing that our health service is doing. It is such an emotive one as well. Talking to the centre manager, I learned that one of the things that they did not prepare for when they established the centre was putting boxes of hankies in each vaccination booth. The manager said that the number of people who burst out in tears because of the relief of getting the vaccine was immeasurable. I have used this story in the House before as well: I think it was in the South Eastern Trust that a lady receiving her first vaccine thanked the vaccinator for holding her hand, because that was the first human touch that she had felt in nearly a year. Those releases that the vaccinators and those who are vaccinated are getting are immeasurable.

I am glad that the Member has got his vaccine, and I am glad that he will get his second one as well. I encourage everyone in the House who is in an eligible age group to go forward —

Mr Buckley: Give it a wee bit of time.

Mr Swann: I will try to get to you as quickly as possible, Jonny.

It is part of the solution. I put on record my thanks to all the people who are working across the system and delivering it. The Member thanks me, but there is nobody who deserves more thanks and praise than Patricia Donnelly, who has brought the entire process together.

With regard to the people who are on the waiting lists, that is what today's statement is about. That is why I am not sugar-coating it. I am not saying that everything is perfect or that, in another couple of months, we will be back to acceptable levels, because it would be disingenuous and dishonest of me to do that.

This is a challenge. I say this to the people of Northern Ireland: you have a highly dedicated and highly professional health service, with people working in it who want to get back to their day job and see you as quickly and efficiently as possible. That will mean changes and will mean challenges for many of us as politicians.

11.30 am

In the past year, I have seen a willingness from our health service staff to go somewhere else to deliver a service. Belfast surgeons have been operating in the SWAH. Two years ago, people would have said that that would never happen. People have travelled from one side of Northern Ireland to another to get a procedure, because they know that that is where they will get it. Our health service has moved outside the challenge of being local. Many of our patients have moved outside the challenge of being treated locally. The next challenge for us as politicians is to allow our health service to take a regional approach and allow patients to get the service that they need delivered where it

is going to be. I am now looking at that regional approach, and I have used the phrase many times. That is why we have set up the hub-and-spoke model for orthopaedics in Lagan Valley Hospital. It is about how we provide a holistic health service to all the people of Northern Ireland using a regional footprint. That will bring challenges, and the biggest challenge that it brings to us as politicians is to accept that things will have to be done differently.

Mr Speaker: Following on from what the Minister said, I am pleased to advise the House that I had my second vaccination this morning at the Ulster Hospital. You can now call me “Two Jabs Alex” *[Laughter.]* I call Robbie Butler.

Mr Butler: Mr Speaker, it is a while since you have been called “Two Jabs Alex”, perhaps back in your boxing days.

Mr Durkan: When he was a councillor and an MLA *[Laughter.]*

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his statement this morning. It is a statement of hope, but you are right, Minister, to tinge it with reality when it comes to funding. I also welcome the indication of further support to be announced in the coming days, particularly for mental health services. You are the Minister who has put mental health to the fore in everything that he does. Do you envisage that this will increase the provision of crucial counselling and talking therapy services?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I again acknowledge that one of the first initiatives that the Executive took was to establish the Executive working group on mental well-being, resilience and suicide prevention. That set the tone and tenor for what we were going to do about mental health and for how the Department was able to move forward. I have said before that, no matter how bad the first pandemic was, we still moved ahead and launched the mental health strategy. It was something that we had committed to doing, that we were going to do and that needed to be done. That is why we went ahead and appointed our first interim mental health champion: to make sure that we recognised mental health and the challenges that it presents to the people of Northern Ireland and got it the recognition that it needs in our health service, this place and the Executive, so that mental health services could get the support — practical, financial and political — that they need to address many of the challenges that they have long faced across Northern Ireland.

To answer the Member’s specific question about potential funding, as I said to Ms Ní Chuilín, the allocation will be made to the voluntary community groups, charity organisations and specialist organisations that have experience and knowledge of how to address the issue at a community level, to challenge what needs to be challenged and to address what needs to be addressed. The challenge that I have is that the funding is non-recurrent. It is not long-term funding, and that puts additional stress and strain on the people who are already doing that work and will continue to do it.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for his statement. I agree that the time for words of concern has now passed. I say that as someone who comes from the Western Trust area. On top of all the legacy issues, we have struggled to attract and retain staff.

Minister, I very much welcome the additional funding for carers’ charities and organisations. What reassurances

can you give those who have been left to cope in their own home that statutory respite services will resume safely and equitably?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. The phrase that she used was “attract and retain staff”. That puts the challenge back on us, as politicians. There is nothing so great as a good health campaign coming up to an election. I remember that, when I had not long been in the House, a chief executive of a local trust pointed out to me that one thing that puts pressure on the recruitment and retention of staff is for a hospital or service to be continually in the press, with people saying that it will close. Nobody wants to move to a service that is publicly said to be under threat even if, in reality, it is not under threat. It is the same as the old adage that it is never the Education Authority (EA) that has to close a school: there is a rumour that the school will close, and the parents start to move the pupils out. The same narrative can easily start around the attractiveness of a facility and its ability to retain staff.

This is about long-term commitment to the staff and to the footprint of what needs to be a regional service. I applaud some of the examples that have come from the Western Trust. The example that I used was the excellent facilities in the South West Acute Hospital, which were underutilised for a long time. Now, the majority of surgeons across Northern Ireland would gladly go there because it allows them to see their patients. They know that it is an appropriate use of facilities and that it is a place that can provide the care and attention that they need. This is about how we make sure that that continues over the next 12 months.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for his statement. As with any statement outlining waiting lists, I fear that it is just the tip of the iceberg. I know of people who have been hesitant to go to their GP, whether because of fear of putting the health service under strain or fear of contracting the virus.

As the Minister outlined, one of the key ways of dealing with waiting lists is through financial investment. What financial allocation does the Minister feel he needs in this financial year to be able to start dealing with the waiting lists? Have any allocations or bids in monitoring rounds been refused thus far?

Mr Swann: We have just started a new financial year, and I have £35 million for tackling waiting lists. That is what, we have assessed, we can use in this calendar year. It is a calendar-year budget, a 12-month budget. New Decade, New Approach allocated £50 million to the Executive collectively for tackling waiting lists. That was last year’s money. That money came, and it has gone. We also used it for some of the utilisation of the independent sector. That is where we are with regards to that. That £35 million is for utilisation of the independent sector.

It is about long-term, continued investment to improve the services that we have. It is about upgrading the theatres and ICUs in our hospital capacities to make sure that we can progress and process as many operations as possible. We saw that there was a need for a massive number of ICU beds because of the long-term COVID patients who were in them. We have funded 75 ICU beds across Northern Ireland. Today, there are, I think, 68 or 69 people in ICU beds with non-COVID conditions, so we are already getting near to the capacity of our funded allocation of ICU beds.

COVID has shown us that we have to escalate and move into our surge model in relation to ICU beds. That is where

we have had to bring in staff — ICU nurses, anaesthetists and all the rest — from across our system. That is why yesterday's announcement by the Belfast Trust about the de-escalation of the Nightingale, which I reaffirmed today, is such a positive step. We can use that facility and ensure that it is a green-list site for a regional approach for more complex operations.

This is about how we approach the challenge of getting all those pieces to fit. I said that we had seen the breaking down of silos, and it is now about making sure that they produce. We are in the early days of the Budget in regard to bids, funding, what we will need to spend and what we can spend. It is about having a recurrent budget, so that I can give surety to staff, hospital trusts and the independent sector that the commitment that we make today will still be there in five to 10 years' time and that they will still get that financial support.

Mr Boylan: Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement. Minister, I believe that you are serious about tackling waiting lists, but I will ask my question in this context: in the statement, you talked about taking a regional approach to the prioritisation of surgery and the use of the independent sector to restart services and reduce waiting lists. If we are serious about waiting lists, does that regional approach include the utilisation of cross-border services? What discussions have you had with your counterpart in the South about a regional and cross-border approach to addressing the issues?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. Part of the independent sector that we are engaging with, have utilised and will use is the independent sector in the Republic of Ireland. The issue is where we can get a service at all. The Republic of Ireland has its own waiting lists, as, I am sure, the Member is fully aware, so it is an illusion to think that it will accept patients from Northern Ireland simply to reduce our waiting lists. Its focus will be elsewhere. It is about using the independent sector in the Republic of Ireland and elsewhere to get people seen as quickly as possible.

There are cross-border initiatives that are still being utilised. In children's cardiac services, the majority of our children who need heart surgery are being seen in Our Lady of Lourdes in Dublin. That is a great initiative. Cancer services are being provided for the entirety of the north-west, meaning Donegal as well as Londonderry, in Altnagelvin. There is a memorandum of understanding on kidney transplants between the Belfast Trust and the Beaumont Hospital in the Republic of Ireland. It is about all those services that we can deliver cross-border and utilising the specialities on either side of the border. The ability to simply utilise the health service in the Republic of Ireland to address our waiting lists is not a reality, but the utilisation of the independent sector there is something that we are and will continue to be engaged in.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his statement. I very much welcome it. Will the Minister give his view on what I and many consider to be an entrenchment of a two-tier healthcare system? Those who can afford to go private will do so, and those who cannot will languish on lists while their physical and mental health deteriorates, with many of them getting into debt to pay for treatment. Can any steps be taken to eradicate the perverse situation in which a consultant at a hospital can tell someone that they will have to wait four years for an operation but he can see them next month if they are willing to pay and go private?

Mr Swann: The Member highlights the duality of our health service in Northern Ireland, which, as I mentioned, challenges me. One core principle that I hold dear as a unionist is our National Health Service, which is free at the point of use, free at the point of delivery and free at the point of care, irrespective of your ability to pay or your need. Due to underinvestment in the service and staff over the long term, the independent sector is meeting the needs of those who can afford to pay. It is as simple as that.

What we need to do and what my statement is about is invest in our National Health Service: invest in the people who work in it, in its footprint, in its equipment, including its diagnostic equipment, and in its theatres so that the demand on and the opportunity for the independent sector is not as great. Due to the underinvestment in our National Health Service over the last 10 years, the independent sector is there and is meeting the need. If surgeons are capable of working in both systems, I am not in a position to prevent them. We have used the same surgeons to bring down our waiting lists when we have utilised procedures that we need in the independent sector. It is about meeting the demands of our patients as quickly as possible.

Mrs Barton: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. I welcome the successful roll-out of the regional day procedure centres at Lagan Valley Hospital and the ongoing utilisation of the lists at the South West Acute Hospital in Enniskillen. Minister, do you believe that, compared with only a short time ago, there is a new outlook not only among patients but among clinicians and that people are now prepared to travel slightly further if it means receiving or delivering treatment much sooner?

11.45 am

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. The Member mentioned the South West Acute Hospital, and I thank her for the invite. It seems like a long time since I visited the SWAH and one of the COVID centres in her constituency.

It is about that challenge, and, as I said in answer to an earlier question, we have seen that professionals and healthcare staff are willing to travel. It is not just surgeons; the entirety of the team — anaesthetists, ICU nurses and everybody who makes up the surgical delivery team — are willing to travel to access theatre capacity, recovery beds and ICU beds for their patients. The professionals in our health service very much see people as their patients.

People are now willing to travel. Realistically, Northern Ireland is not a big place, especially if you need a surgical procedure. We have seen that people are now willing to travel, as I said in an earlier answer. The challenge is no longer for health professionals or patients; the challenge is for us politicians to let the clinical demand be met by the clinicians, who can deliver a service, no matter where it is, on a safe site, using the green lists and regional priorities so that those who are in most clinical need are seen more quickly than by using the postcode in which they live or want to be treated.

One of the outworkings of the pandemic has been the breaking down of silos across the entire health service. From primary care hospitals to community pharmacy, everyone working in the healthcare family has pulled together and pooled the resources. That will serve Northern Ireland well because the staff want to get back to the day-to-day work of seeing and treating patients.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister for his statement. I go back to his remarks about staff not applying for jobs because of rumours about hospital closures. Likewise, the removal of services from hospitals and quiet buildings can fuel that. Will the Minister make a commitment that the full estate of the health service will be used to address the trust rebuilding plans and deal with the problems we have? Will facilities such as the Downe Hospital in Downpatrick be used to their fullest capacity to retain jobs and to attract jobs in the future as thriving centres for health?

Mr Swann: As I have said before, we will need to utilise every square foot that we have. Each hospital may not provide every service that it has in the past. The challenge of the regional approach is to put an orthopaedic surgeon in one centre where he can see more patients than can be seen in three orthopaedic services doing a lesser degree of work in a number of other capacities.

I thank the Member for his commitment. I believe that some of his councillors have started a campaign for a long-term commitment to the Downe and Daisy Hill Hospitals. Again, it is that sort of language that unnerves staff. There is nothing more unnerving for people working in our health service than social media campaigns about saving their hospital when it is not under threat. Therefore, I ask the Member and some of his party colleagues to step away from the party political campaigns and support the staff who are working in the hospitals to deliver the entirety of the services in those facilities. As I have said, we do not have enough staff. We need more staff, so no one will be done away with. We do not have a big enough footprint, and we need every square foot that we have. It may not be that everyone gets every service that they want delivered on their doorstep, and that has to be the reality, if we are to address the waiting lists that we are talking about today. It also has to be about a political commitment from all in the House to Bengoa and all the other reforms that have been talked about. Now is the time to implement those changes and stop talking about them. We had three years when we were unable to meet the challenges and make the transformations that were needed. Now is the time, as we come out of the pandemic, to serve the people of Northern Ireland by addressing all their health needs equally and equitably.

Mr Allister: I hear what the Minister says about tackling waiting lists, but I have been in the House for 10 years and have heard every successive Health Minister make similar affirmations. Yet, we are where we are. During those same 10 years — indeed, during the entirety of devolution — almost 2,000 beds and all the necessary staff who go with them have been removed from our health service. What reason is there to believe that today's affirmations will be any different? Is the Minister confident that the Executive are prepared to reverse the disastrous policy that denoted the previous Executives that were made up of the same parties?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I have been in the House for as long as he has; I think that we came in on the same election. The difference is that I am standing here now. We took this position when many other parties in the House passed on it because we knew that there was a job of work to be done.

The Member referred to the decreasing number of beds. That is commensurate with the decrease in investment in staff that we have seen. There is no point in buying a bed if you do not have the staff to support it. It is the same process as the Member talked about. I am sure that he

listened to my statement in detail. I highlighted our need to invest in our staff. There is no point in having the facility if you do not have the staff to look after the people who need the care. It is about investment. We have started that investment with our 300 trained nurses this year, next year and the following year. That is not enough. It will not recoup the losses of years of the wrong policy of disinvestment in our National Health Service. The health service was one of the things that were seen as easy to cut money from because it made up nearly 50% or more of the Budget. It is not easy to do that; once you do that, the easy place becomes the challenging place.

The major expenditure in the Department of Health is on staff. That is the first place that is looked to for cuts, whether it be bursary placements, staff training places or nursing training places. That is why the safe staffing investment that I mentioned in my statement is so critical. Until a few weeks ago, that was being hived off into a monitoring round bid. It is now there; it is now secured. That is what I argued for and got to make sure that we put that investment into our safe staff. We increase our bed numbers when we increase our staff numbers. That allows us to challenge the waiting lists that we have.

The Member knows me well enough. I will not come here with empty promises or platitudes. I could have flowery-ed up today's statement and told everybody that it was going to be great tomorrow: I did not. I told everybody about the challenges that we have in the health service and politically in the House. It is not just about the Executive parties getting behind me, as Minister of Health, or the health service but about everyone in the House getting behind the health service and those who work in it. I know that the Member has that at his heart. I know how much he writes to me and the number of cases that he raises with me in regard to his constituents. I ask him to support me politically in the House and outside of it when it comes to the work that I need to do and the challenges that I face.

Mr Carroll: Thanks to the Minister for his statement. I am concerned that there appears to be a continuation of relying on the independent and private sector to tackle waiting lists. What efforts are being made to increase the number of staff? We are understaffed, as he stated. Before the pandemic, we were 2,000 or 3,000 nurses short. What efforts are being made to increase the number of staff in our health service? Specifically, what work is he doing with his Executive colleagues to remove the barriers that currently prevent refugees or asylum seekers who have healthcare training, including those who are trained nurses and other healthcare workers, from working due to the racist and reactionary immigration policies that we have?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I do not think that racist and reactionary policies sit within my Department, nor does it take such an approach. In the community pharmacy where I received my vaccine a couple of weeks ago, there was a pharmacist from Romania who had recently come to Northern Ireland and got accreditation on the certification and professional list. She was working in that pharmacy delivering vaccines because she was a trained vaccinator. So, there is no reactionary approach.

The Member will know well about the international recruitment of nurses, which continues to be progressed by my Department to make up much of the skill set that has been lost. It takes time to train a nurse. We need to fill those slots now, so we have been proactive in the

international market, and we intend to keep working to fill many of those slots. However, it is simply not possible to fill nursing positions overnight. I cannot knit nurses. They have to be trained, they have to be invested in, and they have to be recruited. I am thankful for the support of the Executive for the additional places that we secured when this place was restored over a year ago. That commitment was vital. It was unfortunate that we got to a place in Northern Ireland where our nurses and our Health and Social Care staff had to take to the picket line to indicate the reality of how underfunded the health service had been over the past 10 years. We need to address that now, and, with the support of all Members in the House, I am intent on putting it right.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. I, for one, will support you. I know how difficult it is, and I know about the policy of “Not in my back yard”. When I applied for my vaccine, I went to Ballymena because that was the first place that was offered. Everything about it was efficient.

Mr Speaker, like you, I have my little card to show that I have had two vaccinations. I know that my features are a little more rugged than yours. If you want to be known in the boxing arena as “Two Jabs Alec”, I will be known as “Two Pokes Pat”.

On a serious note, Minister, I look at the work that is ongoing at Lagan Valley Hospital, where that old Victorian facade opens out. I was treated in the day-procedure centre there. I congratulate the Department and the trust on the work that is being carried out at the day-procedure centre at Lagan Valley. Minister, will an overall assessment be made of the increased number of visitors to the hospital and how that will impact on the traffic and parking issues along the Hillsborough Road? It is great to welcome what is coming in, but we have to look at how successful it is. Will you call for some sort of investigation of parking around the hospital?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I congratulate him on getting his second jab and on travelling to Ballymena to get it. That is a double bonus for the Member.

I will look at the parking issues around Lagan Valley. That has not come across my desk, but, now that the Member has raised it, I will raise it with the trust and see what can be done.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Minister.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. Members, please take your ease for a moment or two.

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

12.00 noon

Executive Committee Business

The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period in Schedule 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The next items of business are motions to approve two statutory rules that relate to the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020. There will be a single debate on both motions. I will ask the Clerk to read the first motion, and I will then call the Minister to move it. The Minister will commence the debate on both motions. When all who wish to speak have done so, I will put the Question on the first motion. The second motion will then be read into the record, and I will call the Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on that motion. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I beg to move

That the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period in Schedule 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That the draft Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Change of Expiry Date in section 32(1)) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed that there will be no time limit on the debate. I call the Minister to open the debate on the motions.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I seek the Assembly’s approval of two statutory rules (SRs) that are being made under powers in the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020. The overarching objective of the Act was to provide businesses with the flexibility that they needed to continue trading during this difficult time. The measures were designed to help companies and similar entities by easing their regulatory burden and helping them to avoid insolvency during that period of economic uncertainty.

The Act introduced greater flexibility to the insolvency regime, allowing companies an opportunity to explore options for rescue so that they have the optimum chance of survival. It also temporarily suspends parts of insolvency law to help directors to continue trading through the emergency without the threat of personal liability and to protect companies from aggressive creditor action.

The pandemic has had a longer and deeper impact on the economy than had been envisaged when the legislation was passed last summer. The regulations that I am asking the Assembly to approve today are the latest in a series of statutory rules that I have presented to extend some of those temporary provisions. The first statutory rule is a set of regulations to extend the period during which schedule 8 to the Act applies, from 30 March 2021 until 30 September 2021. The regulations were made on 9 March

2021 and must be approved by the Assembly within 40 days of that date.

A new moratorium procedure established by the Act gives companies in financial difficulty the opportunity of a breathing space, free from creditor pressure, to explore options for rescue. Schedule 8 to the Act facilitates easier entry to the moratorium during the coronavirus crisis by temporarily relaxing some of the eligibility conditions. It also contains a set of temporary administrative rules that are needed to work with the primary legislation until permanent rules can be made.

The second statutory rule also takes the form of regulation. The purpose of that rule is to keep in place until 29 April 2022 a general power that allows my Department to make temporary amendments to corporate insolvency or governance legislation for reasons relating to the effects of coronavirus on business or the economy. Providing for temporary legislative change in that way will mean that the insolvency and business rescue regime may quickly react and adapt to deal with significant and unexpected future challenges presented by the impact of the pandemic on businesses.

Temporary amendments to legislation may be framed to give protection to companies that would be viable but for the effect of the pandemic and to provide the regulatory support needed for their survival rather than their being forced to enter insolvency proceedings. That power, which had been due to expire on 30 April this year, has already been used to replicate legislation made in the rest of the United Kingdom. I consider it prudent to keep that general power for a further limited period. It will provide my Department with the flexibility to respond quickly to any urgent or emerging issues that will help local business owners avoid insolvency and continue to trade through the current crisis.

The content of the two sets of regulations and the dates to which the provisions are being extended correspond to what is being done in the rest of the United Kingdom. Both sets of regulations have been agreed by the Economy Committee, and the Executive were advised prior to the debate.

To conclude, it is essential that measures to assist companies that are struggling financially as a result of the pandemic be kept in place for as long as is necessary. It is vital that local business owners be afforded the same easements, and for the same periods, as the rest of the United Kingdom. The extensions to be made by the two sets of regulations will ensure that that happens.

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I support the motions on behalf of the Committee.

As the Minister indicated, the regulations to amend the relevant period in schedule 8 to the Act extend the period during which the Department can exercise its power to make regulations under section 28 of the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 that amend or modify the impact of corporate insolvency or governance legislation.

The Committee considered and approved the SL1 for the regulations at its meeting on 3 March, with members agreeing the SR itself at the Committee's meeting on 23 March 2021, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules' report. On behalf of the Committee, I support the motion to approve the regulations.

As the Minister indicated, under section 32(1) of the Act, the power that the Department or the British Secretary of State has to make regulations under section 28 is set to expire on 30 April. Section 32 includes provision to make regulations that substitute a later expiry date for the one currently specified. It specifies that the new date has to be within the period of one year from the current date, and must be within the two-year period following the date on which the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act was passed, which was 25 June 2020.

The Committee considered and agreed the SL1 for the draft regulations at its meeting on 23 March 2021. The Committee has not, however, considered the draft regulations in the Order Paper today. They are scheduled to be considered by the Committee at its meeting tomorrow. As the Committee has not considered the statutory rule, I am therefore not able to support the motion on its behalf. The Committee has no view, and, on that basis, I will not be opposing the motion.

I will now make a couple of comments as the Sinn Féin economy spokesperson. As the Minister said, the SRs are two of a number of regulations being made in respect of the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act that we have supported. Obviously, businesses need the flexibility to respond, and we are cognisant of the impact that the restrictions are having on businesses. The crisis has continued a lot longer than many of us, and this legislation, had anticipated. We therefore continue to support the extensions, in order to give businesses and the Department the ability to respond appropriately.

Mr Stalford: On behalf of my party, and her party, too, I welcome the action that the Minister has taken in bringing the motions before the House.

The measures are clearly designed to enable companies to operate under the strictures that have been placed on them through the various COVID-related restrictions that the House has passed. It is important that we do that in order to protect businesses and companies and to allow them to trade once this period passes so that they are in the best possible shape to do so. It is my sincere hope that this will be the final time that the Minister has to come to the House to seek approval for such measures. It is my hope and my conviction that the Executive should be doing all in their power to open up as much of our economy as possible in order to allow our people to get back to work, to stimulate economic growth and to create prosperity.

The Minister will agree with me when I say that, hopefully, this will be the final time that she will have to come to the House to seek support for such measures and that we can get back to work in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I invite the Minister to conclude the debate on both motions.

Mrs Dodds: I thank those Members who have indicated their consent to the making of the statutory rules. I say to my colleague that the economy has gone through a very dark period because of COVID-19 and the restrictions placed on it. I look forward to that time, in the very near future, when we are rebuilding and recovering our economy and when the restrictions and regulations are no longer needed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period in Schedule 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

The draft Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Change of Expiry Date in section 32(1)) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Resolved:

That the draft Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Change of Expiry Date in section 32(1)) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved. — [Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise to the Minister and to the House for the rude interruption of my phone. If only I could be silenced as quickly as the mute button on my phone works, some would think that that would be of great benefit to many people. I apologise to all concerned in the House.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I thank the Member for acknowledging and recognising the error. I ask that all Members take care and ensure that their phones are on mute.

12.15 pm

The Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill: First Stage

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I beg to introduce the Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill [NIA 20/17-22], which is a Bill to amend the Horse Racing (Northern Ireland) Order 1990 to allow for payments to be made from the Horse Racing Fund to horse racecourse operators; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments to allow others to join us for Question Time.

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Fishing Vessels: Customs Declaration

1. **Mr Beattie** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether fishing vessels leaving local ports are required to complete a customs declaration on return. (AQO 1834/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): As you may be aware, customs formalities are not a devolved issue, although my Department has been liaising with HMRC to seek clarity on those issues. The HMRC advice states that for fish caught in UK territorial waters, the EU's view is that there is the need for customs and regulatory requirements, including the submission of safety and security declarations by the fishers on each landing. That potentially means that there is the need for additional control for the landing of goods — that is, fish, at Northern Ireland fishing ports — which would be extremely burdensome and totally unworkable for most of the smaller vessels, as some of the requirements mean that they have to land in a port that is under customs control, which may be a considerable distance from their home port.

The UK Government (UKG) have provided us with a different legal interpretation of those customs formalities and have advised that Northern Ireland vessels will be required to meet only pre-existing obligations, such as those in the fisheries control regulation, when landing into ports in Northern Ireland until further notice. That is in line with the approach that has been taken to the implementation of the protocol more broadly where there is the need for pragmatism as traders and fishers adapt to new requirements.

The UKG have assured me that they would robustly defend that approach should any challenge to it be raised by the European Union, although it is important to note that that has been the subject of engagement between the UK and EU during Joint Committee proceedings. It is accepted that that approach will require further discussions with the EU. However, the UK's position is clear that Northern Ireland vessels should not be subject to any new customs requirements until further notice.

My Department has been working through a number of Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol issues in the recent UK/EU negotiations that relate to fish being landed in Northern Ireland ports by NI registered vessels, and two of those issues have been successfully resolved through those negotiations. The outstanding unresolved issues relate to illegal, unreported and unregulated regulations and the application of EU customs formalities on the fish landed by our vessels into our ports. I have been pressing the UKG on those matters since early last year —

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

Mr Poots: — when I made it clear that my desire was to have those obligations carved out in a way that is similar to what was provided for in the sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) and tariff issues through the negotiations.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind the Minister that he has two minutes and that, if he requires additional time, he can request an extra minute.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister for that fulsome answer. I absolutely appreciate that the matter is outside his control. I know that he is working hard on it. However, he will agree with me that it is absolutely ridiculous that the waters around Northern Ireland can be classed as a third country when fishermen go into them. It is one of the ludicrous aspects of the protocol.

My question spins off slightly from that. What influence does the Minister have to ensure that Northern Ireland's fishermen get their full quota from the new quota system and extra fishing quotas post-Brexit?

Mr Poots: Obviously, I was not happy with the deal that was initially arranged by the Prime Minister and the European Union. We should have obtained much greater quota volumes under Brexit, but the UK Government settled for less. However, we will revisit that in 2025. With regard to the quota as it was awarded, we had extensive discussions and correspondence with the UKG on the matter. They arrived at the circumstance at which they arrived, which did not give us the uplift that we would have wanted, albeit we have, on average, a 10% uplift across the fleet. Therefore, in that respect, fishermen are considerably better off after Brexit, but it could have been much better again, had the UK Government negotiated a tougher deal with the European Union.

Ms Anderson: Given the devastating impact of Brexit on fishermen and fisherwomen, what exactly is the current position for fishing vessels that go from the North to the South, and vice versa?

Mr Poots: First of all, I do not accept that there has been a devastating impact on fishermen as a result of Brexit. As I indicated, they will be able to catch more fish, and, were it not for the COVID situation, the value of those fish would be considerably higher than is the current situation.

As the Member is probably aware, there was a voisinage agreement between ourselves and the Irish Republic. Under the Fisheries Act 2020, all EU vessels that fish in UK waters must be licensed by the UK. Similarly, all UK vessels that fish in EU waters must be licensed by the EU. Reciprocal access to the Ireland/Northern Ireland zone of nought to six nautical miles under the existing voisinage neighbourhood agreement means that we must license each other's vessels. That is being progressed urgently. Vessel lists have been exchanged. We are waiting on confirmation that licences will be issued to Northern Ireland vessels before we can respond. We are very keen to ensure that Northern Ireland fishermen can continue to fish in Irish waters and that Irish fishermen can continue to fish in UK waters under the previous agreement. It worked extremely well. If there is any holding back on that, it is not coming from the Northern Ireland side.

Mr McNulty: What is the Minister's assessment of the additional quota that has been allocated to the local fishing industry as an outcome of Brexit?

Mr Poots: It is better than it was before Brexit but not as good as it could have been had the UK adhered to tougher negotiation with regard to regaining the waters that we have been deprived of for many years. The opportunities that exist are not what they could have been. However, I

hope that we will take the opportunities that exist now and that, in future negotiations, we will gain considerably more opportunities for our fishermen.

Agricultural Policy

2. Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the development of a future agricultural policy. (AQO 1835/17-22)

Mr Poots: In 2018, DAERA undertook an engagement exercise, gathering a broad range of stakeholders' views on future agricultural policy. Those views and further stakeholder engagement have been central to developing my vision for future agriculture in Northern Ireland.

My Department is now at an advanced stage in the development of a draft policy framework portfolio, which I hope to publish in the coming months. The framework has been defined around the four key outcomes of increased productivity, improved resilience, environmental sustainability and improved supply chain functionality. As that work continues in the years ahead, we will continue to engage with our farmers, land managers and environmental stakeholders to co-design new agricultural policies.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, will you outline your intention on entitlements? Will you continue those in the development of a future agricultural policy?

Mr Poots: Before I arrive at any fixed positions, I want to engage with the industry and, indeed, the Assembly and the Committee. We should have a fit-for-purpose agricultural payment policy. We will also need to reflect that in our climate change policy and ensure that farmers who may lose some of their grazing lands because we need to wet peatlands etc are adequately compensated. We need to look at the support that is provided for hill farmers, in particular, to keep suckler cows and sheep and to ensure that those hills are well utilised. We also need to consider whether we want to support suckler cows on lowlands or whether, because of sexed semen, for example, the beef would come from the dairy herd and there would be no requirement to incentivise farmers to keep suckler cows on the lowlands.

Those are all issues for discussion and debate. I do not have fixed positions on them. It would be wrong to have those before identifying the views of the public and, indeed, the Assembly.

Mrs Barton: Minister, have you determined a change in the departmental policy on the final decision-making power of the DAERA appeals process yet?

Mr Poots: Legally, it would appear that it ends with the Minister, but I have made it very clear that this Minister has no intention of overturning the views that have been expressed by an independent panel. Unfortunately, that was not the case for many years, and quite a number of appeal cases that went to the independent panel were overturned. I disagree with that. There is no point in having an independent panel and the Minister then being lobbied by officials and overturning the views of the independent panel. It is a much fairer process if someone goes to an independent panel and makes their case and argument and it is accepted that the Minister will accept the decision of that panel.

Mr Blair: Minister, will future agricultural policy involve significant further investment in sustainable farming systems? Those will be key not just to a COVID recovery but to a green recovery.

Mr Poots: Yes, absolutely. I have asked my officials to work up a bid to be made to the Department of Finance. If we are serious about tackling climate change, we need to recognise that it will involve making a significant investment. We will seek the Department of Finance's support in making that significant investment and supporting the farming community, in particular, to engage, where they can, in activities that will significantly reduce the carbon footprint and increase carbon capture. It is critical that we work across the Executive on that course of work.

Mr McGlone: We have worked through a number of threads in the responses. Will the Minister confirm whether there will be a specific Bill that is tailored to Northern Ireland? He mentioned that a number of policy areas will be looked at, but will there be a specific Bill for that purpose?

Mr Poots: That would be a decision for the next Minister, after the election, whoever that happens to be. Timewise, I do not think that we would be able to introduce an agricultural Bill during the lifetime of this Assembly, which runs to May 2022.

12.30 pm

Roe Valley Country Park

3. Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the completion of his Department's project at the Roe Valley Country Park. (AQO 1836/17-22)

Mr Poots: My officials have confirmed that there is no further update at this time, following the information provided pursuant to AQW 10099/17-22 and the Member's freedom of information request, DAERA/20-334, which was received on 12 December. My officials have again confirmed that the project, which relates to the reinstatement of the hydroelectric scheme at Roe Valley Country Park, cannot be completed until permission is granted by an adjacent landowner for access to their lands in order to allow works to proceed. As previously advised, departmental officials have confirmed that a comprehensive proposal has already been made to that adjacent landowner through their legal representatives. Whilst officials have been notified that the landowner in question considered that proposal unacceptable, departmental officials still await details of what elements of the existing proposal they object to. The landowner concerned is aware of that. To date, no further contact has been received by officials from the landowner, or an appointed legal representative, regarding those details.

Mr Robinson: I thank the Minister for his answer. I fully appreciate that there is a long-running difficulty with the project. It has caused the adjacent landowner great physical and mental distress since 2013, and, according to information received through the landowner's request under freedom of information, it has cost the taxpayer a lot of money. In the interests of everyone, will the Minister undertake to see whether a speedy resolution can be found to bring this worthy project to a conclusion? Would it be acceptable to have a site meeting or an online meeting

with departmental officials, the landowner, the Minister and me?

Mr Poots: I cannot give the Member an answer to his last question, because the issue is being dealt with through the Departmental Solicitor's Office, and the landowner has their legal advisers. I am not unwilling to do it, but we will await advice on it. I recognise that it is a worthy project, and it is one that we want to take forward, but we need the cooperation of the landowner. If the landowner has issues, we need to identify what those issues are and see whether we can reach agreement with the individual.

Mr Durkan: The intrinsic value of our country parks, open spaces and forests has been amplified over the past year. Will the Minister commit his Department to continuing work with Derry City and Strabane District Council to facilitate the repair or reinstatement of the footbridge in Muff Glen forest, outside Eglinton, which was destroyed by floods in 2017, thus making that tremendous asset more accessible and increasing the number of people who can enjoy it?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I believe that that is beyond the Roe valley, but the Minister may wish to respond.

Mr Poots: I am unaware of the particulars of the case, as I was not forewarned. However, we have been working closely with councils across Northern Ireland to improve our forest parks. We have seen some fantastic projects being carried forward, where DAERA has supported the local authorities, and access for families and the disabled has been improved. We are happy to look at the issue that the Member has raised around Muff Glen.

Islandmagee Gas Storage Project

4. **Mr Stewart** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the marine licensing process for the Islandmagee gas storage project. (AQO 1837/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have received a portfolio of documents on the Islandmagee gas storage proposals. My Department is the competent authority on the marine licence, and I am also considering review documentation for the other two DAERA licences that were issued back in 2014 — a water discharge consent and a water abstraction licence. The documentation is comprehensive and will therefore take some time to be considered fully.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for his response. The Minister will be aware that the gas caverns project has been, and remains, contentious, particularly in Islandmagee. I am interested in getting more detail on the advice that he has received on the full marine licensing review and on the abstract licence and consent to discharge. Is the Minister minded, on the back of legal advice, to refer the issue to the Executive? Will he support calls to instigate a local public inquiry?

Mr Poots: I received the documents on this just recently and will give them full consideration before making a decision. I recognise that the proposed development is unpopular with some local residents. That in itself does not mean that it is controversial under the legislation on Executive referral. While it may be controversial locally, that does not necessarily mean, in terms of the measures for a Minister to have to take it to the Executive, that it is controversial. I can assure you that I am considering the

option of Executive referral. I am mindful of my duties under the ministerial code and the option of holding a public inquiry. As you can appreciate, I am unable to comment further at this stage until I have given it full consideration.

Mr Dickson: Does the Minister agree that a public inquiry is inevitable, given the outcry about the project and, indeed, that it is a cross-cutting matter for the Executive and not one solely for his Department?

Mr Poots: Our scientists have been working on this and identifying the issues. Public inquiries are called on the basis of facts, not noise. While I sincerely appreciate the concerns of residents, given that it is a very pleasant and beautiful area, right out to Browns Bay, which I go to on occasion, and that local residents will therefore want to keep it as it is, all these things have to be given full and appropriate consideration. I am in a situation in which there is huge potential for whatever decision I make to be judicially reviewed by either the applicant or the residents. Therefore, I have to be very careful about what I say, and, before arriving at a decision, I have to give this my absolute careful consideration. We have the papers, and progress is being made on arriving at a decision. We are working on that at this stage.

Dr Archibald: Does the Minister agree that, in light of his recently published proposals for a climate change Bill and the green growth framework, it is inappropriate to proceed with further investment in fossil fuels rather than focusing on meeting our renewable targets?

Mr Poots: It certainly is a consideration. Responsibility for energy lies with the Department for the Economy. We have been looking to receive advice from that Department on its future expectations. Gas is a clean energy, but it is still a fossil fuel. It certainly has a much lower impact than coal or oil. Consequently, if it is identified that gas will be used for a considerable part of the foreseeable future, that would lead you to a point at which the gas caverns are beneficial from an energy point of view but not necessarily an environmental point of view. However, if Economy points to providing the energy resource from other means as opposed to gas and a significant upgrade in renewable energy, that would take you away from the gas caverns. I should say that the Department for the Economy has set a target of 70% for renewable energy by 2030. Beyond that, we would need to develop widespread large-scale offshore electricity generation, and that takes about 10 years to plan. That issue in itself will have its controversies. Whatever you do in all those areas, there will be controversy, and we need to respond to that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I should have advised Members earlier that question 7 has been withdrawn.

Veterinary Education Facility

5. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the options analysis for a veterinary education facility. (AQO 1838/17-22)

Mr Poots: There is an increasing acceptance that the Northern Ireland agri-food industry requires a more assured supply of veterinarians than is available from the existing sources. However, there are a number of possible options for meeting that need. In my absence in early

March, Minister Gordon Lyons met the vice chancellors of Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast. He proposed an analysis of the options for the supply of veterinarians and a more-detailed consideration of the various delivery models, structures and locations in order to inform a business case for a facility for veterinary education in Northern Ireland. It was agreed with the two university vice chancellors that the Strategic Investment Board would be asked to carry out that analysis as soon as possible. It has now been commissioned to undertake it, and it will go forward over the next six to nine months, with input from staff from the two universities and the support of DAERA officials.

Mr M Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, as you rightly said, recent developments have highlighted the shortage of vets across Northern Ireland. Will the Minister's Department provide a brief to the AERA Committee as soon as possible outlining progress? I have raised that issue at the Committee and in the House, and I am keen to see progress be made.

Mr Poots: The Department will be happy to update the Committee, and, indeed, the Member, as we go along. We have commissioned work from the Strategic Investment Board, and I would like to see that work completed as quickly as possible and a way forward identified.

Clearly, we have a shortage of veterinarians. As a consequence, veterinarians come from other countries to help sustain our agri-food sector. Our agri-food sector is worth some £5 billion to our economy, so it is critically important that we achieve the number required. It would be much better, however, to have the appropriate number of veterinarians educated here in Northern Ireland. We would then have less leaking of young people who take up a veterinary course on the United Kingdom mainland, in Europe or, indeed, in the Irish Republic.

Mr McGuigan: The Minister stated the fact that we have a shortage of vets here in the North. Over and above that, perhaps the Minister can outline the benefits of having a veterinary school here for animal health and welfare and for the agri-food sector.

Mr Poots: We have an excellent research facility in Northern Ireland in the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, and, indeed, other sources. We have some large pharmaceutical companies in the agri-food sector as well, so we are a country that is moving forward on all those things. A tie-up between a university that specialises in veterinary courses and the agri-food sector and the pharmaceutical sector for agri-food would therefore be hugely beneficial for research and for encouraging young people to take up a locally available veterinary course.

It is an expensive course to undertake, so universities have to take all those things into account when bringing one forward. Nonetheless, it would be hugely beneficial for Northern Ireland as well as for whichever university or collaboration of universities took up the opportunity.

Dr Aiken: Has the Northern Ireland protocol, particularly the Trade and Cooperation Agreement when it comes to the recognition of qualifications, increased the pressure on the availability of veterinary services and vets in Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: The protocol has certainly created pressure, because, if things do not change, between DAERA and

local council staff, we will require around 600 officials at ports. We would be looking at needing close to 200 vets, and they just do not exist. You do not train vets in six months. You train vets over five years, so the vets do not exist for that job.

The problem is this: if we draw vets from other services, are we damaging animal welfare? Are we taking away from practices vets who are out on farms or vets who are engaged in small practices? We are left in this ridiculous position in which vets would be checking food that has come here for years without being subject to checks and is going to be consumed in Northern Ireland, leaving them unavailable to do things that are required for animal welfare. It therefore certainly does have a very significant impact.

12.45 pm

Rural Policy Framework: Update

6. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the rural policy framework. (AQO 1839/17-22)

Mr Poots: There has been significant stakeholder engagement and consultation in developing the draft rural policy framework. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact that it has had across rural areas, we have been reviewing the draft of the rural policy framework document to ensure that it reflects the ever-changing context, before going to public consultation. It has always been the intention that the rural policy framework will be a living document that is intended to be flexible and adaptable to change. Subject to securing the necessary approvals, I hope to launch a public consultation later this spring. It is anticipated that the rural policy framework proposals will be available for an eight-week online consultation period. Officials continue to deliver a range of schemes to support rural communities and businesses, with just over £20 million having been invested in rural development programmes in the financial year just finished.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister will be aware that the community renewal fund was launched by the British Government as a main plank of the Shared Prosperity Fund. Can the Minister provide any information on that fund and whether there will be a consultation on trying to protect rural communities and giving them opportunities to access that scheme?

Mr Poots: I certainly hope that there will be the opportunity for consultation on the Shared Prosperity Fund. Obviously, that is a scheme that is being delivered directly by the Westminster Government. Unlike others, I do not complain about it, because, ultimately, it is additional money for Northern Ireland. It is additional money for the people whom we represent. I will not decry it just because it is not us distributing it, just I did not decry the EU money when it was coming. This money will replace some of the structural funds etc that came from the European Union. I welcome that and will seek to influence it as best I can for the benefit of my constituents.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of our period for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Climate Change Bill: Consultation

T1. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to confirm whether, when developing his proposals for a climate change Bill, he consulted environmental experts other than the Climate Change Committee. (AQT 1161/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Climate Change Committee is the expert independent panel set up by the UK Government. They have appointed independent experts to give that advice. Our Department works closely with all the bodies and NGOs involved in environmental issues. We provide them with significant financial support, and we listen to what they have to say and engage with them on the issues. I suggest that the evidence that the Department has taken is much greater than the evidence of those behind the private Member's Bill. I wish that the Members who support that Bill would indicate to me and the general public in Northern Ireland what independent evidence they want to bring to the table. Saying that Scotland is doing it by 2045 is not evidence; it is an indication of what another country can achieve. By the way, the Climate Change Committee supports that and recommends it, while recommending something different for Northern Ireland. I would be interested in the evidence, and I await the Members' evidence coming forward.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister's proposals do not commit us to net zero by 2050. There is a wealth of expert advice that the North is capable of reaching true net zero by 2050 without unfairly affecting sectors such as agriculture. Given the severity of the climate crisis, does the Minister think that it is appropriate that we do the legally required minimum when more ambitious alternatives exist?

Mr Poots: I do not believe that it is appropriate that we do the minimum; I believe that it is appropriate that we do the maximum. I note that the Member says that there is "a wealth" of evidence. I look forward to hearing the evidence as opposed to people pontificating about its existence without actually producing it.

Pet Vaccinations

T2. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given that Great Britain is opening up to receive visitors and tourists and the fact that the holiday period is coming, whether the current mitigation for the vaccination of pets will be extended beyond June and into July and August to allow people from Northern Ireland who wish to travel with their pets to enter into and return from GB. (AQT 1162/17-22)

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for her question. I welcome the fact that the mitigation was introduced in January and gave us those six months. I was not looking for six months to allow us time to prepare, although some people were; I was looking for six months to negotiate away the nonsense of pets having to be treated for conditions that do not exist in the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland. The British Isles is free from those diseases; therefore, we are imposing on pets and animals something that is not required. It is a medicinal practice that they do not need, and we have to resist it as firmly and as strongly as possible. That is what I am doing.

Mrs Barton: Thank you, Minister. Now that we are talking about the issues with the protocol etc, will you give an update on the regulations that are in place for importing pedigree cattle into Northern Ireland? Is there any movement there?

Mr Poots: Again, we have a significant problem with the importation of cattle and sheep. As a consequence, a large number of blackface sheep — blackface sheep in particular but not exclusively — are in Scotland. They were bought in September, and the farmers cannot get them home. The EU has been rigid about that thus far in spite of our requests. We need to get some flexibility. There are farmers in the Antrim hills, the Sperrins, the Mourne and so forth who have invested heavily and are not getting their animals brought home.

As well as that, the pedigree industry has been badly affected. Previously, farmers were taking bulls and heifers to Scotland and, indeed, to the north of England for some of the large sales. Because of the six-month standstill, they are not prepared to take that risk because, if they do not sell the animals, how can they ensure their welfare in how they are treated on a farm in Scotland or England? They are high-value animals. It will be devastating for the pedigree industry in Northern Ireland if the issue is not resolved. It is a ludicrous issue in terms of securing the single market. It has no impact whatever on the single market, and the European Union needs to back down on it, wise up and treat Northern Ireland with a degree of respect.

Climate Change Bill: Consultation

T3. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the independent scientific advice that his Department received when drafting its proposed climate change Bill, given that he will be aware that climate change is an issue that concerns us all. (AQT 1163/17-22)

Mr Poots: As I indicated to Ms Dolan, we have been taking advice from the Climate Change Committee, which is a panel of independent experts. I recently received a letter from the chair of that committee. It indicated that the committee's

"analysis has not produced a scenario for the UK net zero in 2050 that sees Northern Ireland reach net zero in the same year. We are not therefore able precisely to calculate the costs of Northern Ireland reaching net zero, but they will almost certainly be higher than those of the 82% reduction target by up to £900 million a year by 2050. If engineered removals technologies are used, the context of a net zero 2050 target for the whole of the UK is also important".

That is what we need to focus on as one country moving forward to a net zero target. That is wholly achievable, and Northern Ireland can make a significant contribution to that.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for his response. The Minister has set it out that his Bill will set targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 82% by 2050. Others have suggested reaching net zero by 2045. What impact would that have on Northern Ireland, and is it a realistic target?

Mr Poots: I believe that Mr Aiken, who is to my right, thinks that we can do it by 2035. I am not sure where his expertise comes from, but the climate change experts say that a larger reduction in output from the Northern Ireland

livestock sector would be required, compared with the rest of the UK. Even our most stretching tailwind scenario, which entails a 50% fall in meat and dairy production in Northern Ireland by 2050 and significantly greater levels of tree planting on the land that is released, is not enough to get Northern Ireland to net zero emissions by 2050. Without a corresponding reduction in the consumption of such produce, this would simply shift emissions overseas.

I want to listen to climate change experts, but I suspect that there are a lot of climate change experts in the Chamber to whom I would be slightly less inclined to listen. I prefer to listen to the Climate Change Committee, which has some expertise and background in these matters. We would do well not to destroy the Northern Ireland economy and put 50,000 families — there are 100,000 people involved in agri-food — into unemployment because we want to grab a headline.

Carbon Sequestration

T4. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what scientific work his Department is doing to recognise the importance of carbon sequestration in our soil, hedgerows and trees etc. (AQT 1164/17-22)

Mr Poots: I want to engage closely with the Assembly on that work. We have significant opportunities for carbon storage in our peatlands, but that will involve wetting those peatlands. As a consequence, the farms that are closest will most likely lose the ability to graze their lands, certainly for as long as they are currently able to. Therefore, those farms need to be adequately compensated. The opportunity to tap into a new single farm payment scheme that is not restricted by the European Union gives us the opportunity to do that.

I also want to look at the opportunity of having more structured management of our hedgerows. Hedgerows are superb capturers of carbon. If we bring a requirement into the single farm payment scheme that farms have a structured plan for their hedgerows, it will enable and encourage them to grow those hedgerows for longer periods. One of our biggest assets is our hedgerows, and, if we grow them a metre higher or a metre wider, they will capture massive amounts of carbon.

We can work through a lot of this together without inflicting the massive pain that I referred to in my response to the previous Member. That is what must be done. We must identify the means to ensure that our carbon footprint is reduced, but we must not destroy our farms in the process by doing illogical things.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for that response. I am sure that the Minister agrees that we need to be ambitious about what we do to reduce our carbon footprint and that the role of carbon sequestration and an understanding of that role are really important to the public discourse on this when it comes to recognising farmers' support of the environment. I am sure that the Minister also agrees that we need to ensure that there is adequate knowledge transfer —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Could the Member come to her question?

Dr Archibald: — and that we encourage farmers to do these types of schemes on their land and, as you have referred to, that we reward them appropriately.

Mr Poots: Farmers recognise that they have a contribution to make and are engaging positively in making that contribution. It is for the Assembly to engage positively with them, and, therefore, I think that the Assembly would be much wiser to follow the path that I recommend in relation to climate change legislation, because it will work with the farming community. "At least 82%" means "at least", and it could be significantly more than that, if that is achievable. As the science develops and we identify, for example, what level of carbon capture exists in our grasslands and how it can be greater in hilly areas because more of that grass, which has captured carbon from the atmosphere, gets tramped back into the soil, then, perhaps, we can move forward with something more significant. We need to give ourselves a degree of latitude as opposed to enforcing something fixed that will not give us that latitude and will inevitably cause massive harm to our farm families, taking away their livelihoods and the jobs in the industries that are associated with farming. That would be a hugely unacceptable position for me as the AERA Minister and as the Assembly's spokesperson for that sector.

1.00 pm

Food Strategy Framework

T5. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the future food strategy framework. (AQT 1165/17-22)

Mr Poots: We have done considerable work on that, and we are at the point of making an appointment to take that forward along with the Economy Minister. That is being progressed and will be announced next week. Given the sad death of the Duke of Edinburgh, we do not propose to make the announcement this week.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response. Perhaps he can give us some indication of the role that Departments can play in supporting Northern Ireland food producers.

Mr Poots: Our Department is clear that we want to see Northern Ireland at its best. Many of our farmers are at their best, are achieving really great things and are world leaders. Others are somewhat behind, so the benchmarking of good quality, identifying what is achievable and encouraging people to be progressive in their agricultural practice are all very important.

How we use the climate change agenda to develop new interests on our farms is also important. Can we take our excess of farm nutrients and develop them into something that is sellable to other parts of the world that lack those nutrients? We have a surplus and they have a deficit, so can we invest in capturing those materials in a way that enables us to sell them as a product and have a win-win situation for the environment and the agri-food sector?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That ends the time for questions to the Minister. I ask Members to take their ease for a few minutes until our next period of questions, which are to the Minister for Communities.

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

Communities

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 12 has been withdrawn.

Gambling Regulations

1. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister for Communities, following her Department's public consultation on the regulation of gambling that closed on 21 February 2020, for an update on the intended way forward on gambling regulations. (AQO 1849/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): An outcome report on the consultation was published on the departmental website in November 2020. There was overwhelming support for reform of the gambling legislation, and I am on record as saying that that reform is long overdue. Given the scale of reform that is needed, I am keen to bring forward proposals for some regulatory change in this mandate and have advised the Committee for Communities of my intention to do so in the schedule of legislation. As soon as I am in a position to do so, I will make an announcement on the way forward as quickly as possible.

Mr Frew: Minister, thank you for your answer. Your commitment to legislate in this mandate is really appreciated.

Article 168 of the Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 prohibits promotional non-skill prize draws linked to a product. Will the legislation take into consideration the fact that UK-wide companies undertake promotional prize competitions linked to the purchase of a product and that Northern Ireland consumers will be disadvantaged as they will not be involved?

Ms Hargey: Yes, those issues were picked up on in the ongoing consultation and engagement, and part of that will come forward in changes in the time ahead.

Mr Butler: I welcome the Minister's points. I want to give the Minister the opportunity to join me in wishing our football team the very best of luck tonight as they face Ukraine and try to defend a 2-1 lead and, hopefully, do even better.

Will the Minister's proposals ban the gambling practices that are most likely to cause harm? Is she considering practices such as free bets, free spins, VIP schemes and reverse withdrawal functions?

Ms Hargey: Yes, all those options are being looked at and their impact considered. I am looking at the health implications and the services around gambling addiction. When the consultation went out, there was a recognition that reform was definitely needed in those areas.

Of course, I wish the team well tonight. Hopefully, they will come home with a victory.

Ms Mullan: Minister, will you support the establishment of an independent gambling regulator?

Ms Hargey: Yes, I would support that.

Mr Durkan: Can the Minister outline what steps or actions, if any, government here or even elsewhere can take to ensure the tighter regulation of online betting sites?

Ms Hargey: That issue is being looked at. Obviously, because of the nature of social media and the opportunities for online gambling that are presented to people, it is a growing issue. Of course, we are proactively looking at ways to engage. We are discussing the health impact that it has at the other end. We want any legislation to look at prevention before it gets to the critical point where people need assistance with their addiction. We are in regular engagement on those options and will lay them out in the time ahead, taking into consideration the increasing issue of online gambling.

Centenary of Northern Ireland

2. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the plans in place in recognition of the centenary of Northern Ireland. (AQO 1850/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Thank you for your question. As outlined in previous statements by my Department, we have no plans in place to mark the centenary. However, a £3 million fund to mark the centenary has been set up by the British Government and includes £1 million of funding to be distributed through the National Lottery Heritage Fund, with the NIO in the lead.

That aside, PRONI, in line with its statutory remit, will facilitate access to archival records in its care that are relevant to the centenary by individuals, organisations and the media. PRONI will also launch an A-level educational resource titled 'Ireland 1900-1925: Crisis, War and Revolution' in May 2021. It will comprise a range of archival material covering the period, including sources relating to the establishment of the Northern Ireland state and the opening of the Northern Ireland Parliament.

Plans have been in place for some time across a number of our arm's-length bodies (ALBs) and other funded organisations to make the centenary. I have asked my officials to write to the Member separately to provide him with an update on their plans.

Mr Buckley: Sadly, the Minister's answer today confirms verbally what she confirmed to Mr Allister in written format, which is that the Department for Communities will not fund the centenary celebrations in Northern Ireland. Many people in Northern Ireland will rightly view her callous snub of the centenary as a recurrent and running theme in Sinn Féin: first, there was the centenary stone, and, now, a Department that has so much responsibility is not putting forward any funding. When will the Department for Communities — "Communities" plural — step up and respect the cultural aspirations of a significant community in Northern Ireland?

Ms Hargey: There is nothing callous in my approach, and I say that to the Member right now. It is unfortunate that he is trying to use those remarks in terms of the question.

I was extensively involved in the decade of centenaries in Belfast City Council during my time as a councillor. We managed to agree a programme that looked at all the events in the context of one having an impact on another, whether it was the formation of the Northern state or the different perspectives on partition. They are sensitive issues. For some, it is a celebration, but, for others, it is an event that has negative connotations. We need to be responsible and sensitive in how we address all the issues. I would prefer us to do that by sitting down

collectively as an Executive. It is not just my responsibility as Communities Minister; we need to approach the issues sensibly. We need to look at all the events in their widest context, how one has an impact on another and how we then communicate that to the public.

We live in a contested society. We see issues emerging at our interfaces as things rupture. Anything that we do when looking at all the issues has to be planned and considered. As I said, my experience in Belfast City Council was that that worked well. All the political parties, most of which are represented in this Chamber, sat down in a coordinated and structured way to plan events. That has not happened. The NIO, of course, is running forward with events. Some of my arm's-length bodies, such as PRONI, are doing events. However, if we are serious about looking back at the past and learning from that in terms of building forward for the young people whom we saw on the streets of Belfast and beyond over the past week, we need to be mature about it rather than saying that we are acting callously. We need to look at all the issues in the round in terms of how they reflect across the community. Of course, the centenary is held dearly by some people —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Minister.

Ms Hargey: — in our society, but there is also the issue of partition —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Minister.

Ms Hargey: — and its ramifications. We need to look at all of that in the round.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Several other Members are listed. I ask Members to be direct in their questions and the Minister to be direct in her answers; otherwise, this may well take up the entirety of Question Time.

Mr Sheehan: Following on from the Minister's answer, does she agree that many people in the North find nothing to celebrate about partition and what followed it and that it is important that any centenary events reflect the different narratives of the past here?

Ms Hargey: We have a layered and complex history, and we have a responsibility to lead. Obviously, we come from a contested and divided society. We are trying to build reconciliation and give our young people hope for the future. Those historic events could cause issues to rupture again. We need to do it sensitively and collectively. We need to look at how the issues knit into one another and have an impact on communities as a whole. I am willing to engage in such a process, and I ask others to do the same.

Mr Allister: The title that the Minister holds in the House is "Minister for Communities". She knows that, for the unionist community, the centenary of Northern Ireland is very important. However, consciously and deliberately, she did not seek one penny for her Department's budget. It does not have money for unionist community groups —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question.

Mr Allister: — or organisations that want to celebrate the centenary.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Allister: When is the Minister —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. I appreciate the depth of feeling around these issues. Mr Buckley tabled

his question, and I gave him some leeway. The entirety of Question Time will be taken up by this issue if we have long preambles to questions. I appreciate that this is a sensitive and important issue, but it is important that questions and answers are short, sharp and focused.

1.15 pm

Mr Allister: On this issue, when is the Minister going to start being the Minister for all communities and not just the Minister for the Sinn Féin community, despite her pious words?

Ms Hargey: First, we are in a decade of centenaries, and I have not brought forward proposals on any of the issues. The NIO, under the auspices of the British Government, has given a commitment to mark the centenary of the formation of this state. As I said, I would have preferred a programme that looked at all the centenaries holistically. My focus as Minister for Communities is on delivering vital services right across the community, be they in Sandy Row, Donegall Pass, the Market, where I live, Springfield Road or the Shankill. My focus is on issues such as housing, inequality and the income that people have. That is certainly where my focus has been over the past year, and it has particularly been on addressing issues relating to the pandemic. That has been done right across the community, because I see it as one community that may have different traditions. My focus, however, has been on delivering for all those communities, and I think that many in the Chamber and outside it will accept that I have done that in a respectful manner.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister very much for her comments so far, and, indeed, I welcome the remarks made by the deputy First Minister about HRH Prince Philip, which were much respected by our community and, indeed, across Northern Ireland. In view of that, in the spirit of reconciliation, can she and her party not see a way forward to agreeing to having even just a centenary stone here in the grounds of Stormont? Agreeing to that would say just as much.

Ms Hargey: As I have said before, and as you as a party leader will know, we all have a responsibility to look at the community as a whole. We are coming from a divided society, and we know that anything around symbols can cause tension. I think that the best way and the mature way is for the parties to sit down collectively. I know that my party is willing to do that, and I am willing to do that as a Minister. We need to sit down and address the issues so that everyone feels that their issues and what is important to them are addressed in a collective manner.

I have given a good example of how that was done on Belfast City Council, where we looked at the issues of home rule, the covenant and the 1916 rising and then started to look at the more recent centenaries that were approaching. That was done in a collective way, with the principles of looking at all the issues, and I think that that is the best way forward. It has been practised on Belfast City Council, and the sky did not fall in. Every party around that table that is represented in this Chamber welcomed the approach that was taken.

If people are serious about looking at the whole community and about looking at the aspirations of individual identities and needs, sit down collectively around the table. Sit down and work. I am willing to do that to look at all the events,

because the centenary is important for a good section of the community here, but so too is looking at the issue of partition and the ramifications that that had. Again, I accept that people will have different perspectives on that, but let us sit down and see how we can mark all those events collectively rather than trying to rip each other down. What example is that sending out to the young people who were out on the streets of Belfast and beyond over the past few weeks? We need to be seen to be providing leadership on those issues, and I would welcome that. That leadership has to come from across the Chamber and from all the Executive parties, and I will play my part in that.

Ms Sugden: I appreciate that the Minister and others do not wish to recognise the centenary, but is this not a lost opportunity to look forward for all in Northern Ireland by perhaps investing in youth and doing so in the name of NI100? For me, the centenary is about looking forward, and there is a real opportunity to do that. For all the issues that the Minister has raised, I think that we have to look at how we unite Northern Ireland moving forward. There is an opportunity to do that through NI100.

Ms Hargey: First, I do recognise the centenary. I recognise that it is a historic event that happened that still has an impact on our society here today, on what way you look at that society and on what your hopes are going forward. My view is that partition happened and that it was a reality that also had an impact. We need to look at all those issues in the round. We need to address and organise programmes that can be bought into right across our communities and across society and to do that in a coordinated and structured way. If we do not, it becomes a free-for-all, a fight and an argument. I do not think that that is good for young people or for society as a whole.

I have seen, in good practice, how it has worked. We need to look at examples such as those that I have cited and build on them in the time ahead. However, that involves all parties in the Assembly. Are they willing to buy into that? Are they willing to sign up to principles that look at all those events from the varying perspectives? I attended covenant events, and I attended dinners to mark the battle of the Somme and other events. Some people chose not to do that at that time. That is the type of responsible conversation and leadership that we need. I am willing to engage. The question is whether everybody else is.

Housing Waiting List: North Lurgan

3. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Communities what action the Housing Executive is taking to address the growing waiting list for housing in north Lurgan. (AQO 1851/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I have set out an ambitious, long-term plan to increase the supply of social and affordable housing and to reduce housing stress. However, those plans will take time to come to fruition. Whilst I share the Member's concerns that the number of applicants for social housing and those in housing stress continues to grow, the projected outcome of my plan is to ensure that the supply of social homes can meet the increasing demand. Crucial to that is protecting the social homes that we have and ensuring that they can be maintained, ultimately by the ability of the Housing Executive, in a revitalised form, to access borrowing to sustain itself and to build again.

In the shorter term, the new-build programme is the key action that we can take. One of my priorities is to enhance investment and increase new social home starts. Once the budget for the 2021-22 housing development programme has been finalised, I will announce further detail on the new social homes that will be started very soon.

I am aware from the Housing Executive that the current projected housing need for north Lurgan is for a further 168 new social homes between now and 2025. The Housing Executive is committed to working with the housing association sector to bring forward new social housing proposals to address that need. I understand from the Housing Executive that housing associations have been forwarding a high volume of proposals for the north Lurgan area over the past 12 months. I am pleased to advise that new social housing schemes providing 39 units are due to be completed in the area later this year.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for her answer and welcome her plans for social and affordable housing. I also thank her for agreeing to meet me on housing issues in north Lurgan and in rural areas in my constituency. The waiting list continues to grow. Will the Minister undertake to keep up the pressure on the Housing Executive and social housing providers to ensure that housing is provided in areas of most need?

Ms Hargey: Yes, definitely. As part of the housing statement last year, there are strands of work on housing supply, the social housing development programme and ring-fencing in the areas of greatest need. I will bring forward proposals in a number of areas in the short term. I have also made a commitment to the overall revitalisation of our housing sector and to ensuring that we meet those critical demands. I will present those plans to the Executive. They will be costed and timetabled before the end of the Assembly mandate.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Deputy Chairperson of the Communities Committee.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I support the Minister's commitment to social housing. Will she assure the House that she is committed to shared housing? We have recently seen disgraceful actions in Carrickfergus. Will she dedicate herself to providing shared housing where people from all cultures and backgrounds can live together and to ensuring that we stop enabling housing zones that exclude people based on religion, culture or race?

Ms Hargey: The reports of recent days are really unfortunate. Those actions need to be condemned, as I know that, in the community, they have been. Housing is a fundamental right. It is the basic thing that somebody needs and that is needed for society to function. People, particularly those in critical need, must have a home. As part of the housing transformation, I am committed to that.

It is about building suitable, affordable and sustainable housing for those who need it, where they need it. It will include shared housing. We are working on a number of programmes, and we will look at that as part of the housing mix. I am more than happy to discuss that with the Member as a follow-up.

Mr Catney: Minister, will you give me an update on the abolition of the right-to-buy scheme? The house sales scheme in the housing associations has been abolished.

Since the passage of legislation last year, what action has the Minister taken to extend that policy to NIHE properties?

Ms Hargey: Work is ongoing on bringing forward a consultation on the future of the Housing Executive house sales scheme. That will be brought forward in the coming weeks.

Mr Newton: Will the Minister respond to a report in yesterday's 'Belfast Telegraph' that indicated that, as it stands, in 20 years' time, we will still not have met the housing need?

Ms Hargey: The report is reflective of statements that were made in the Chamber by my predecessor, Carál, while I was off, and subsequently by me when I came back. That is part of the reason why a vital statement was brought forward in November on the revitalisation of the Housing Executive. One of the biggest issues is about dealing with the historical debt. I am glad to say that we have already dealt with corporation tax exemption. That is really good, but we need to get the Housing Executive to build again. There are supply issues, and we are bringing forward a housing supply strategy to look at those. We are also looking at homelessness and revising our response to it. Some good learning has come out of COVID-19 on how we can work proactively and better with Health on homelessness prevention and on sustaining tenancies for people so that they do not repeatedly become homeless.

All those issues are part of the revitalisation agenda. We are bringing forward some work on the house sales scheme, because I recognise that, on average, we build 1,800 homes a year and that nearly 500 of them are being sold off through the house sales scheme. We need to fundamentally deal with that in order to prevent depletion of the social housing stock. That is one of the areas that I will look at. Whilst we can be more ambitious with the housing development programme, 1,800 homes a year is not enough, and we need to have better ways of developing. Land is an issue, and we are looking at the land and supply strategy as well. We are —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Minister, I am afraid that you are out of time.

Ms Hargey: — trying to work with councils on that. I am happy to share more information on that programme.

Miss Woods: The Minister touched on corporation tax in her answer to Mr Newton. On 3 March, she stated:

"the Housing Executive has paid almost £58 million in Corporation Tax. This is money that could have been invested in their homes for the benefit of their tenants."

Will the Minister tell us how change is made to corporation tax structures and how financial savings stemming from it will be measured? Will savings be reallocated to address housing waiting lists, housing quality and added benefits for people?

Ms Hargey: Part of our plan is for those funds go into maintaining the existing stock. There have been huge challenges. It is a part of the revitalisation agenda. If we do not make changes urgently now — we have been talking about this for over a decade, and change needs to happen now — we are going to lose half the stock that the Housing Executive has. That is the hard reality and is part of the cost analysis that we are carrying out.

It is really good and significant that the corporation tax issue has been resolved. We want those funds to go directly back into maintaining existing properties. We can then look at new models of enabling the Housing Executive to borrow so that we can have a more ambitious housebuilding programme.

COVID-19 Charities Fund: Allocations

4. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the allocations she has made through the COVID-19 charities fund. (AQO 1852/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am pleased to say that 887 grant awards have been made for a total of £16 million. I know how important the charities sector has been in helping us through this crisis. My wish was for charities to claim all the £20.5 million that was available, but I am satisfied that the money claimed has met the urgent financial need and kept charities afloat. I am grateful to our delivery partners, the National Lottery Community Fund and Community Finance Ireland, for the swift and agile way that they administered the fund and to NICVA for the support that it provided to the sector throughout the process.

1.30 pm

Obviously, it is not possible to name all the charities that were supported through the fund, but I will just give an idea of their diverse nature. We supported charities that deal with chronic illness, such as Action Cancer; animal welfare and environmental charities such as the Kids Pony Foundation; religious groups such as Dunderod Presbyterian Church; homeless charities such as Extern; community groups such as Limavady Community Development Initiative; and many other charities that have relied on this essential funding to keep them going.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for her response and for her leadership on this issue. Indeed, that investment will come as a relief to a lot of charities whose traditional means of fundraising have been curtailed as a result of the pandemic. Will the Minister agree with me that charities play a huge role in our community and our society and that they will need our ongoing support and assistance to rebuild as we move towards the recovery phase?

Ms Hargey: Yes. Charities play a huge role, and we saw that, particularly at the height of the pandemic. No charity looks the same as another. Charities range from the large scale down to the very local, and a wide range of activities take place. Part of our engagement around COVID and around this fund has allowed us to look in more detail at the nature of the charity sector, and, going forward, as we look at the social recovery phase and the economic recovery phase, we want to keep that engagement going to ensure that we have a charities sector that is fit and able to deliver the services that it needs to deliver and that we can mitigate any future shocks, whether economic or health shocks, and learn the lessons from the most recent pandemic.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, will you give us an update on the total allocation from the two tranches of funding for the charities fund? Welcome as it was, you said that £16 million was disbursed, and I think that £11.7 million was the second tranche, announced in December by Minister Ní Chuilín. It would be helpful if you could give us an update on exactly how much was allocated and how much was actually spent.

Ms Hargey: During phase 1, which opened last year, there were 501 successful applications totalling £8.8 million. Phase 2 opened in January this year, and there were 386 successful applications and a total fund of £7.18 million. Community Finance Ireland's administration fees were attached to the overall cost as well. The total funding expended was £16.3 million, and that includes the administration costs.

Mr Allen: At the outset, I declare an interest as I am charity trustee. The Minister and Members across the House will no doubt be aware of the vital work carried out by charities right across Northern Ireland and further afield. Minister, can you advise what work the Department is undertaking to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on charities moving forward, and what tailored programmes will be coming in the future to continue to support and sustain those charities?

Ms Hargey: First, there is the impact of COVID. We are starting to ease out of restrictions, and, hopefully, there will be more announcements on Thursday. We will keep a watching brief on the immediate issues that charities are facing. This funding was until the end of the financial year, so we will continue to keep abreast of that and look at that, just as we look at other funds that have been administered.

As I say, there has been good learning. The pandemic has allowed the Department to re-engage with charities in a way that, maybe, has not been done in a while, by looking at the needs and impact of the charities. There has been learning from the pandemic as well because it has exposed the vulnerabilities of certain sections and groups in society, and there are also issues with the capacity and vulnerability of the organisations themselves, in the sense of how a shock to society impacts on their organisation.

Officials in the Department are writing up that learning at the moment, and we want to move forward to see how we can support the charities, looking at the relationship that we have established with the lotteries, with Community Finance Ireland and with NICVA, who have done some excellent work in supporting those charities, particularly around building the resilience of volunteers who are involved. We will also look at mental health programmes that have been run through the Warm, Well and Connected programme. We want to build on all that in the time ahead and have a co-design approach to any future provision that we make.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes the time for tabled questions. Before we move on to topical questions, I say that it is a shame that we managed to get only to question 4. It is a disservice to other Members who have tabled questions and to the public who are looking in that we were able to discuss only four issues in tabled questions today. The Lord above knows that there is nobody more windy than me at times, but I appeal to Members, please, in future, to try to focus their questions so that we can get through more issues and allow the people who are watching to get more answers to those issues. Fortunately for Mr Lyttle, who was to ask question 5, he is the first person on the topical list, so he will get to ask his question if he wishes to.

Subregional Stadia Programme for Soccer: Funding Update

T1. Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Communities, after wishing the Northern Ireland women's football team every success in tonight's Euro 2022 second leg play-off against Ukraine, which will bring a historic victory and a major tournament qualification for the green and white army, for an update on funding for the subregional stadia programme for soccer. (AQT 1171/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I reiterate that the subregional stadia programme is part of New Decade, New Approach. My officials undertook a robust, up-to-date, evidence-based exercise and a working group was established, involving councils, the Irish Football Association (IFA), Sport NI and others, including the Northern Ireland Football League (NIFL). We are coming to the conclusion of that exercise and officials are collating all that information. By the end of this month and going into the start of the next, I hope to bring forward recommendations on the way forward to Executive colleagues.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for her update on the long-overdue funding for football. What budget will be allocated to that much-needed funding for facilities for football?

Ms Hargey: The amount of funding that was set aside is the same: £36.2 million. If there is a need or an overarching demand for more, that would have to go to the Executive for approval. The amount that was set out in the Budget is £36.2 million.

Sports Clubs: COVID Relief Funding

T2. Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for Communities for an update on her plan to support the over 70 sports clubs with bars and restaurants that were either not eligible for the localised restrictions support scheme (LRSS) or the COVID restrictions business support scheme (CRBSS) or, indeed, missed out on the sports sustainability fund because they were waiting on clarification about their LRSS application, before they are no longer sustainable. (AQT 1172/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The sports sustainability fund had already opened when those issues arose, so I was not able, at that point, to pause the fund, make changes or allow any new applications to be received when the fund closed. Some concerns have been expressed, and I have had some engagement on them. The sports sustainability fund allowed clubs to make applications where they operated a bar and could show that those lost earnings had had an impact on their sport.

I had a meeting with the Minister of Finance to look at the issue, and I know that officials were discussing it. The difficulty is that the fund has closed. We have administered the funding that was available, and, if clubs did not apply for it, I cannot change that. However, we will be looking at that to see whether there are any new funding opportunities, whether we could look at another round of sports funding or whether the LRSS could be amended. I do not know whether it could be amended, because one of the concerns was that, if the grant was made on the basis of rateable value, a smaller sports organisation could receive more than a huge hotel and there would be a disparity around some of those issues.

Nevertheless, we are keeping a watching brief. I have not been inundated with requests from sports organisations raising concerns directly. I know from some of the dialogue that there have been issues and we have raised them. The difficulty was that clubs did not apply to the scheme and, had they done so, they would have received the funding. We are keeping a watching brief for any additional COVID moneys that may be available to see whether we need to make a further bid to the Executive via the Finance Minister, coming into the new financial year, alongside charities and other bodies that have been funded.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, will you provide me and the House with a commitment that you will open a new scheme to support those clubs? Coagh United Football Club, in my area, is one of them, and, no doubt, everyone else will know of numerous clubs in their areas that need support. Will you commit to opening another scheme to support them? Those clubs will not be here otherwise.

Ms Hargey: I can give a commitment that I will engage and look at it, but I cannot give a commitment right now that I will open a scheme without looking at an assessment. There is no funding in my budget at the moment. Any funding would have to come through the COVID funding, and my priorities would be considered against those of the Department of Health, the Department of Education and other priorities. However, all those issues are being actively looked at, particularly as we look at the recovery period and at making sure that things can open. So, we are keeping a constant view of all that, and I am more than happy to engage with the Member on that issue.

Housing: Out-of-district Placements

T3. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Communities to explain the policy and practice behind housing placements, given that although he fully appreciates the efforts made and challenges faced by the Housing Executive to ensure that everyone here has a roof over their head, particularly over the past year, there is a growing concern in his constituency, which her party colleagues will bear out, not about the number of people from other districts being placed in temporary and emergency housing in Derry but, sadly, the nature of some of those people, with a number of offences having been committed, including a sexual attack on a girl last week by people from elsewhere who have been placed in housing in Derry. (AQT 1173/17-22)

Ms Hargey: We try to map out accommodation where it is needed. Primarily, the accommodation strategy is a matter for the Housing Executive. I know that it is being looked at. Obviously, COVID has presented a really big challenge for people who have been made homeless through no fault of their own over the last year. Trying to keep to the public health advice while trying to house people as quickly as possible, where accommodation is available, has been challenging.

Unfortunately, sometimes, that accommodation may not be available in the area that people are looking at or in the area that they need, so they have to be placed in other areas. There have been issues pertaining to the Derry area, and there has been communication with my Department. We have engaged proactively with the Housing Executive to overcome those issues.

We are looking at a homelessness strategy because we recognise that more needs to be done and that the need is not being met. We are also looking at a supply strategy for the accommodation that is on offer, and I hope to bring forward proposals in the time ahead. I am more than happy to sit down with the Member or to have a meeting with representatives in his area to look at the issue and to engage the Housing Executive.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for that answer. In case anyone is in any doubt, I place on record that Derry is an extremely welcoming city. We have opened our arms, our hearts and our doors to people from all over the world who are seeking refuge and a better way of life.

Will the Minister confirm that she will commit to working with the Housing Executive, the PSNI, other agencies and, extremely importantly, communities to ensure improved management to minimise risk when it comes to rehousing known offenders?

Ms Hargey: I concur that Derry is a lovely city. It is very welcoming. Any time that I have been there, I have been welcomed by the community across the board. I am more than happy to meet and to sit down with the Housing Executive, with the communities and others to discuss any of those issues. If a request to meet comes in, I will be more than happy to accept it.

Arts Funding: Regional Inequalities

T4. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for Communities how she intends to tackle regional inequalities in the allocation of arts funding across the North. (AQT 1174/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much for the question. That issue was raised recently by you and by the previous Member to speak. I had a meeting with artists from Derry and elsewhere in the north-west, and the issue of regional disparity came up. I agree with most of what was in the paper that they put forward, and I know that it is reflective of organisations in other parts of the North.

We will look at a renewed culture and arts strategy. For me, equality of access and participation and the issue of how public funding is spent will be important considerations as part of that strategy. I gave a commitment to taking a co-design approach with organisations, the sector and the community on the ground in devising that strategy.

1.45 pm

Ms Anderson: As the Minister will know, for me, it is always about standing up for Derry. There is a lot of goodwill for all that she has said about our constituency. As Members for that constituency, we thank her for a very positive meeting with the arts sector. There are fantastic community arts organisations. I know that the Minister has met Studio 2 and the Nerve Centre, for instance, and many others, not to leave anyone out. Compared with Belfast, Derry receives less than £21 per head of population in the allocation of arts funding. Will the Minister ensure that there is a robust and dedicated strategy to tackle that stark inequality?

Ms Hargey: As I said, I recognise the brilliant work that arts organisations do, both at grassroots level and strategically, to build communities and the contribution that that makes to the economy and in giving people

an outlet and offering to engage in arts activities and programmes. It is my commitment that, as part of the review and strategy, the equality issue around access and participation with regard to public funding will be one of the strategy's key considerations.

Riverine Project: Update

T5. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the new Riverine community project in Strabane and Lifford. (AQT 1175/17-22)

Ms Hargey: In the past number of weeks, it was announced that funding of €8.9 million has been granted. My Department played a role in that funding. The project is a cross-border community park that links the Strabane and Lifford areas, with cultural trails that look at the history of peace and reconciliation. It physically connects the communities who live there and allows them the opportunity for open green space. It is an excellent project. I have engaged on that amazing work through the press and a video. The project has been over a decade in the making. I gave a commitment that, once the regulations allow me to do so, I will go down and visit the project to see it for myself. I look forward to that.

Mr Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, Minister. I thank the Minister for her commitment to the project and her Department's significant investment. I went to school in the border village of Caledon. During that entire time, we were effectively cut off from Glaslough, just a mile or two on the other side of the border, with the result that I know very few people from that community even though we are side by side. Does the Minister agree that projects like that are crucial because the border has artificially stunted the potential of the communities that straddle it?

Ms Hargey: Yes, 100%. We know how many people cross the border every day. For them, it is seamless; they live on one side and work on the other, and vice versa, or they go across for medical treatment or education. The more that we can build connections between communities, physically and through programmes, to promote cohesive communities, reconciliation and peacebuilding, and also, vitally, to deliver essential services, be they education, health or other services, is a good thing. Whether it is in border constituencies or where inner city communities feel disconnected from town and city centres, restitching and reconnecting those communities back together is critical. I want to look at that area more closely with regard to regeneration and the Peace programme.

Independent Advice Sector: Appeals

T6. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Communities, given that she will be aware of the impact that budget cuts in the independent advice sector will have on people who are vulnerable, in poverty or who have mental health issues, to outline whether her Department has conducted an impact assessment on the number of appeals that are awaiting a hearing. (AQT 1176/17-22)

Ms Hargey: There are no cuts to the advice sector. I have already made it clear that that budget will be protected in the incoming financial year. My Department carried out a full equality impact assessment pertaining to that budget. Obviously, one reason for the timescale for appeals is the pandemic. Business essentially had to stop overnight, and that has had an adverse impact on

appeals. The Department is working with the appeals service to look at what we can do about the impact that the situation is having on people. Assessments have been done on the timescales and impacts, and we are trying to develop a programme that will look at those again. We will be working with the appeals service, which just after Christmas, following the announcement on the regulations, suspended all appeals until the start of April, as was its right. I do not have a say over that.

We are therefore engaging proactively with the appeals service, which wants to reduce the number of appeals as soon as possible. We will bring that forward in the time ahead. We have already started listening and are giving opportunities for telephone and online appeals, but we know that the majority of people like face-to-face contact. The restrictions that are in place limit what we can do. We are looking at a programme to try to bring down the waiting list as quickly as possible, when it is safe to do so.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I will allow a 10-second supplementary question and a 10-second answer.

Miss Woods: That is fine, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for her answer. How much funding has been allocated and ring-fenced in this year's budget for tribunal representation?

Ms Hargey: I do not have the exact figure in front of me, but the budget will be the same as what it was in the previous financial year. We are still agreeing the final budget, and I am signing it off, but there will be no change from what there was previously.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister for Communities. Members may take their ease for few moments. We will then move on to questions to the Economy Minister.

Economy

'Energy governance for the Northern Ireland energy transition'

1. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the finding in the 'Energy governance for the Northern Ireland energy transition' research report, conducted by the University of Exeter's energy policy group and funded by the Executive, that her Department's statutory duty to promote the gas industry creates a risk of asset stranding. (AQO 1863/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I thank the Member for her question. The finding in the University of Exeter report is solely the opinion of the authors and is based on a small number of interviews. It is correct that there is an obligation on the Department and the Utility Regulator to promote the natural gas industry. Natural gas is an important element of the energy mix in Northern Ireland, facilitating significant carbon reduction as businesses and households switch to gas from more polluting fossil fuels. To date, over 285,000 consumers have connected to gas, but, with two thirds of households here still using oil as their main source of heating, further gas connections can contribute greatly towards reducing carbon emissions in Northern Ireland on a continuing basis.

Looking forward, my Department's consultation on policy options for a new energy strategy states that our gas networks, which are more modern than those in Great Britain and are expected to be able to accommodate zero-carbon gas without requiring extensive upgrades, can have an ongoing role to play in contributing to net zero carbon energy. Consideration is being given to how biogas and hydrogen injections to the gas grid could be facilitated to ensure that our gas network remains a valuable asset on the energy decarbonisation pathway to 2050.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Ms — I beg your pardon, did I call Miss Woods for a supplementary? No? I am terribly sorry. I call Miss Woods.

Miss Woods: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Minister for her answer. When I asked the deputy First Minister about this report, she said that the outworking of such a report had to have more Executive discussion. Will the Minister confirm whether she has brought, or intends to bring, the key findings and recommendations to the Executive, and what decisions and plans she has had to make regarding the implementation of the recommendations, after having had roughly six months to review them?

Mrs Dodds: Of course, I am entirely happy and at ease with forwarding the report to Executive colleagues for their information. However, the most important parts of the Department's energy development strategy are the consultation that has just been issued, the responses to the consultation that will be evaluated and the new energy strategy, which, of course, will have the imprimatur of the Executive when it is published later this year. That is the most important document that we will deliver in our energy strategy for Northern Ireland; a document that will lead us on a pathway to decarbonisation, to net zero by 2050 and also to a green economic recovery that will dovetail with my economic recovery action plan.

Ms McLaughlin: Minister, would it not be prudent for your Department to suspend the promotion of fossil fuels at this particular time? Such fuels have been devalued in our long-term development plans. We need to lead Northern Ireland to that green new energy and to meet the commitments of the 2015 Paris agreement on climate. Are we not really wasting time now promoting those fossil fuels? Should we not be moving much more quickly to green new energy?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I fear sounding repetitious from the previous round of questions, but we might get more answers if we had short, sharp, focused questions.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. She has written many questions on this particular issue to the Department. I understand her concern in this matter, but we are where we are. Gas is an important transition fuel as Northern Ireland transitions to decarbonisation by 2050. In Northern Ireland, two thirds of households still use oil and heavily polluting fossil fuels, so we need to use what we have in the meantime.

However, there is excellent news in Northern Ireland's story so far in relation to renewables. Almost 50% of electricity generated in Northern Ireland comes from renewable sources, and we are continuing to make progress with that. We have said that, as a starting point for the new energy strategy, we want not less than 70% of electricity to be generated through renewable sources. Those are important

targets on our way to 2050, and I look forward to working with the Deputy Chair of the Committee and, indeed, the whole Committee on this very important issue, where I think Northern Ireland can be a world leader.

Dr Archibald: Minister, you will be aware that, amongst other things, one of the statutory objectives of the Utility Regulator is to protect the long-term and short-term interests of consumers.

In the context of the new energy strategy, have you considered an additional duty to promote decarbonisation? Investment will obviously be required in renewable energy, and that is absolutely imperative to decarbonisation.

2.00 pm

Mrs Dodds: Thank you. We have had some preliminary discussion with the Utility Regulator about a whole range of areas where his remit might be strengthened, including not just decarbonisation but, indeed, gas and a wider range of areas. We plan to take that forward in consultation with the regulator, as we think that it is important. A core value of our strategy is that we want energy that is affordable and has the consumer at its heart.

Mr Dickson: Minister, you have launched a review of the energy strategy in Northern Ireland, but do you agree that it has perhaps had a rather inauspicious start, given the alleged reports that certain critical lines in the report from the University of Exeter were removed at the request of your Department?

Mrs Dodds: I absolutely do not accept that. I presume that what you are talking about is the policy options consultation on the new energy strategy for Northern Ireland. Indeed, that has an enormous range of support across the board and across many business organisations in Northern Ireland that can see the potential for the green economic recovery that we need to have here, and that we will build back better after the COVID pandemic.

On the Exeter report, which, of course, is entirely different, I have to say that the author of the same report said that, obviously, all reports are fact-checked, that that is normal practice and that it did not, in any shape or form, impact on the outcome.

Mr Nesbitt: Minister, can the grid handle 70% of energy coming from renewables? If not, what quantum of investment is required to facilitate that?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for that very important question, which the System Operator for Northern Ireland talked about in its recently published paper. Of course, we will need to upgrade the grid to ensure that it is fit for purpose. We also need to ensure that the generation, sale and distribution of electricity in Northern Ireland is done for the benefit of Northern Ireland consumers.

Economic Recovery Action Plan: Executive Agreement

2. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for the Economy whether her economic recovery action plan was agreed by the Executive before being published. (AQO 1864/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on our economy, and it is my duty as Economy Minister to ensure that there is a plan in place to support recovery. I moved quickly to

develop and publish my economic recovery action plan, which has been strongly endorsed by stakeholders and the wider business community.

The Member will be aware that the Finance Minister recently announced the allocation of £286 million to fully fund my economic recovery action plan. That includes £145 million for the high street stimulus scheme that will encourage spend in local towns and city centres. That is a clear demonstration of the priority placed on economic recovery by the Executive.

I am, of course, aware that economic recovery will not be delivered by my Department alone, and I support the Communities Minister in welcoming the £27 million allocation from the Executive that will primarily be used by her Department to deliver a local version of the Kickstart scheme. Recovery is at the heart of the work being taken forward by the Executive task force. As part of that work, Departments have been asked to consider the actions needed to drive forward the recovery process. My economic recovery action plan provides a comprehensive, fully developed contribution to that process.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answer, although I am not sure whether she actually answered the question. Nevertheless, one glaring omission in the action plan is the failure to identify and build on cross-border trade. Is that failure more about the objections of the Minister's party to growing cross-border cooperation and trade than about the needs and interests of businesses, which that she should support?

Mrs Dodds: Perhaps I should enlighten the Member and indicate that my party has always supported trade and companies trading across the border when it is applicable and useful for them to do so. He will also understand that, in my Department, I sponsor and work very closely with InterTradelreland, which has been busy supporting businesses not just in the COVID pandemic but when trying to unravel the myriad rules and regulations that the protocol that his party supports has foisted upon businesses. Every week now, I am writing to Lord Frost in London to report the specific issues that businesses are reporting to me.

Mr O'Toole: The protocol, while certainly imperfect, offers us the opportunity, as Invest NI, your own agency, says, to be at the "gateway" of two markets. It offers us a unique competitive advantage, and while imperfect — we did not want it in the first place; we did not want Brexit — it offers us some opportunity. Do you agree that images of our cities being subjected to petrol-bombing and rioting is deterring inward investors who are looking again at this society because of our unique position vis-à-vis the protocol? We have heard from specific investors who have been deterred from investing. Does she agree that political stability is necessary —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question.

Mr O'Toole: — in order to attract investment and that the protocol is part of that? Will she call for political stability in order to generate investment?

Mrs Dodds: As a Minister, it is important for me to say, yet again, that violence is wrong whenever and wherever it occurs. It was wrong in the past, and it is wrong now, and I call on people to desist.

As someone who knows the areas involved very well, I find it disturbing to see what has happened over the past number of weeks. As the Minister for the Economy, particularly because I am keen to promote skills and jobs and training in all parts of Northern Ireland, I have visited Impact Training on Lanark Way, which does a tremendous amount of work. I am really happy to report that the new Shankill/Falls women's centre, which is being built on Lanark Way, will soon be finished and open for business. I hope that people desist from violence. It serves no purpose but to bring misery to communities.

I spoke in recent days to Invest NI about inward investment, and there is no evidence at this minute in time that any investors have been put off Northern Ireland. Indeed, we have been busy with potential investors, and I look forward to working with them to see the fruits of that coming to Northern Ireland.

I commend the Member for his persistence on the protocol. The protocol, while giving us access to the EU market, also brings with it a huge number of problems for our access to our greatest and most important market, that market being Great Britain. I will say this again because it is worth repeating: we buy more from and sell more to Great Britain than to any other market —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister's time —.

Mrs Dodds: — throughout the world.

I will finish with one last thought. It is absolutely important that we deal with the issues of the protocol. Week in and week out now, I am writing to the Government about issues raised not just by small firms but by some of the biggest, best and most eminent firms in Northern Ireland.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister is within her rights at any point to ask for an extra minute, so that is OK.

Mr Middleton: It is to the Minister's credit that the economic recovery plan has received such positive comments right across stakeholders and business representative bodies. I welcome the fact that it has now been fully funded by the Executive. Does the Minister agree with me that it is important that, alongside the economic recovery plan, we now see a reopening of our economy and provide clear dates for our businesses to open in a safe manner?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question, which is not just topical but of absolutely paramount importance this week. The economic recovery plan on its own is not of great use unless we have an open and functioning economy. I am thankful, and I know that Members are thankful, for the reduction in transmission and for the roll-out of the vaccination programme. However, what we need now are clear dates so that we can reopen our economy, give businesses certainty and allow them to plan that reopening. That will then allow us to go forward with the actions in the economic recovery plan that are designed to help us to rebuild and recover after the damage of COVID.

Mr Muir: Recovery is essential, but it must be a green recovery. What work is the Minister doing, especially in liaison with her Executive colleagues, to ensure that, as part of the recovery plans, we focus on a green recovery?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. The Member will know that green recovery is one of the four fundamental pillars of my economic recovery plan. That

will not only lead us to a more sustainable environment and tackle climate change but help us to grow jobs and prosperity in Northern Ireland. We are already doing some of those things. There are many new and exciting developments and research and innovation projects such as Artemis, which will bring to fruition the really ambitious green recovery programme that Northern Ireland needs and seeks.

COVID-19 Support Schemes

3. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department's COVID-19 support schemes will continue whilst there are ongoing restrictions to trade for affected sectors. (AQO 1865/17-22)

4. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she is planning any additional bids to the Minister of Finance for financial support schemes to assist businesses in their financial recovery from the impact of COVID-19. (AQO 1866/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will group questions 3 and 4. Also with your permission, I will avail myself of an extra minute to answer.

I can confirm that payments to eligible businesses under the COVID restrictions business support scheme and the large tourism and hospitality business support scheme will continue while restrictions remain in place. Whilst grant support has been a lifeline for many businesses, it cannot last indefinitely. The best way to support businesses is to get them operating again. I am of the view that the safe reopening of businesses should happen as soon as possible.

On 25 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. In addition to reprioritising funds within my existing budget, I have secured an additional £286 million from the Executive, which will allow me to deliver my economic recovery action plan in full. It is, however, important to recognise that recovery will not be completed in one year alone. Many of the actions set out in this plan will require funding beyond 2021-22. The action plan includes the high street stimulus scheme, which officials are developing in order to provide a much welcome boost to the local economy. I look forward to announcing more details about the scheme in due course.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her comments. Obviously, the tourism and hospitality sector is vital in Northern Ireland. As the successful vaccination programme rolls out, there is a great opportunity for staycations in Northern Ireland and an ability for this place to be used as a destination for people across these islands. We can really push our economy to do that. Will the Minister outline any plans that she has for the promotion of Northern Ireland, in our centenary year, as a great place to visit if we are going to be sticking to staycations?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. Like him, I think that Northern Ireland is a great place to live, work and visit. I have spoken much about my economic recovery action plan in the Chamber today.

In that plan, we have some funding for Tourism Northern Ireland for a staycation voucher scheme for Northern Ireland, which I hope to roll out in the reasonably near

future. Also, we will promote Northern Ireland, in the Republic of Ireland and with Tourism Ireland in the Great Britain market, as a wonderful place to stay and visit.

All our research suggests that people will be more comfortable travelling within the British Isles over the next number of months, and we want our businesses to be able to take advantage of that and to have a good summer season, which is absolutely essential. Of course, to do that, they need to open. They need to open successfully, safely and, above all, soon, and they need a timeline to do that.

2.15 pm

Mr Chambers: Is the Minister planning any additional bids to the Minister of Finance for financial support schemes to assist businesses in the wedding sector in their financial recovery from the impact of COVID-19?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. Undoubtedly he, like myself and many others in the Chamber, has been lobbied and spoken to by a number of sectors within the economy that have been terribly impacted by the pandemic. The best thing that we can do for business is to allow it to reopen, restart and get on with doing what it does best. Representatives from the wedding sector, specifically, met with officials from my Department this week and talked about the problems that they have encountered in that reopening. First, they need the ability to plan, and that is hugely important in planning the way forward. We will, of course, continue to support and sustain businesses, but reopening is key to making the economy work.

I heard this morning on the radio that there is a backlog of over 3,000 weddings that will take place in Northern Ireland this summer. I think that it was representatives from the hotel sector who were being interviewed. It is a huge industry and, of course, personally very important to many.

Mr O'Dowd: On the subject of weddings, you all know Fra McCann: he got married yesterday to his lifelong partner, Janette. I think that he waited until the lockdown because he did not want to buy any of us a dinner, but that is a different matter. [Laughter.] On economic support for businesses, Minister, many businesses have found it difficult, if not impossible, to wade their way through the different schemes in your Department. Is your Department considering expanding or changing the criteria of those schemes to ensure that as many businesses as possible receive support?

Mrs Dodds: First, I pass on my congratulations to Fra McCann. I suppose that it is better late than never, but we wish him well.

The issue around schemes, as you understand, is complex and costly. We need businesses to be able to reopen, and to reopen as soon as possible. I was talking to businesspeople in Banbridge, my home town, and they were indicating to me the sales that they had lost since Christmas because of the restrictions and the need to shut down non-essential retail. No grant — no amount of money that we can give people, no matter how valuable and important that is — will replace reopening the economy. Many of those businesses, and particularly retail, really need to see that date. They need to see that timeline. They need to know that they can reopen. Many of them are just getting in spring stock. I spoke to one young shop owner in Portadown who was really distressed by the fact that,

unless she was given some hope, she did not know how this stock would either be paid for or sold.

Mr O'Toole: I agree with the Minister on the importance of our hospitality trade. Will she engage with the Communities Minister on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill, which is going through? At the minute, we have a very regressive, unreformed, old licensing system, which is driving rural pubs to shut, and that is damaging our tourism offer.

Secondly, I agree that we want to attract tourists from across the UK and Ireland, but does the Minister agree that what is guaranteed to keep tourists away is looking at their screens and seeing a summer of protest in Northern Ireland? We need them to come here and we need for them not to be seeing that on their screens.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. We should be very clear that Northern Ireland is a peaceful and largely prosperous society that is very resilient. Communities across Northern Ireland are very resilient and have withstood an enormous amount of violence that has been foisted on them over the years. We now need to move into that positive space where we talk about opportunity and the needs of an economy that has reinvented itself over the last number of years into one of the most promising tech economies in Europe. Belfast was rated as one of the best tech cities in the whole of the United Kingdom. We need to make sure that the positive message of Northern Ireland goes out, while dealing with the political and social problems that may lead to unrest. I want us to have a perspective of what, I believe, is an absolutely brilliant place to live, work and do business.

Ms Sugden: I agree with the Minister. Businesses need to open as soon as possible. In her responses, there are suggestions that others in the Executive are tentative about reopening. Given that the rate of infection is going down significantly, what reasons are being given by her Executive colleagues to continue staying closed?

Mrs Dodds: I do not want to pre-empt any Executive discussion or to discuss the business of the Executive. Some are that way, and we understand that because our community in Northern Ireland has suffered enormously through COVID. Today, I was talking to a Member who told me of one family in his constituency that buried three family members within four or five weeks. Communities, families and individuals have had to face dreadful things. Of course, there is a lot of nervousness, but we have a tremendous vaccine roll-out programme. Everyone involved should be praised for that. Transmission rates are now very low, and we cannot keep people in lockdown in their homes in the way that they have been. People have made enormous sacrifices. It is now time to reopen and regrow our economy, to rebuild and recover and to work together to do that. I look forward to working with others across the House in an effort to do that.

North/South Student Mobility

5. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline any discussions she has had with the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in relation to North/South student mobility. (AQO 1867/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. I have not had any discussions with the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science about North/South student mobility. The most recent statistics for 2018-19 confirm that the total number of Northern Ireland domiciled students enrolled in higher education courses in the Republic of Ireland was 1,500. The total number of Republic of Ireland domiciled students enrolled at Northern Ireland higher education institutions was 2,245. The total number of Republic of Ireland domiciled students enrolled at higher education institutions in Great Britain was 7,375, and the total number of Northern Ireland domiciled students enrolled in higher education courses in Great Britain, including undergraduate and postgraduate, was 17,425.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move to topical questions. Before I call the first Member on the list, I congratulate him on his recent nuptials.

Taxi and Coach Industry: COVID Support

T1. **Mr McCann** asked the Minister for the Economy, after thanking Members for the well wishes that he has received, albeit she will be aware that although taxi drivers and coach operators are extremely important to our economy, particularly our tourism offering, workers in those sectors feel that they have been neglected by her Department and the Department for Infrastructure, to explain why, if that is not the case, only one out of 49 applications to part B of the COVID restrictions business support scheme (CRBSS) was successful. (AQT 1181/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Again, I pass on my best wishes. I wish you and your wife well for the future.

Mr McCann: It took only 39 years.

Mrs Dodds: Taxi drivers, coach drivers and coach operators have been taken under the wing of the Department for Infrastructure, and it is largely the Department for Infrastructure that has administered the grant scheme that is applicable to them. I would be happy to provide the Member with the exact figures relating to that grant scheme, should he require them.

In relation to part B of the CRBSS, I do not have the specific figures for taxi drivers and operators. I am very happy to supply them and will do so as soon as possible.

Mr McCann: Thank you for the information thus far, Minister, and thank you again for your best wishes. It has just been a 39-year engagement. That is how we look at it.

Your economic recovery strategy commits to extending apprenticeships to people of all ages. While that is welcome, does the Minister agree that many older people, who are likely to have higher costs and more commitments, would find it impossible to survive on an apprentice's wage of £4.30 an hour? Do you agree that the best way to address this kind of issue is by transferring the minimum wage powers in accordance with the New Decade, New Approach commitments so that we can set our own incentives?

Mrs Dodds: First, apprenticeships, training and providing job and life prospects are probably the most important things that we can offer to create a stable and prosperous

Northern Ireland. Giving people hope, the ability to earn a living and the ability to be part of society are really important things that we can do for Northern Ireland.

The Member will be glad to know that I spent some time this week talking to my officials about apprenticeships. We talked about how we can extend apprenticeship recovery and retraining and the new apprenticeship package right through this year and into next year. We also talked about how, hopefully, I will, fairly soon, be able to bring to the Assembly the news that we are able to open up apprenticeships to all ages. It is imperative not just that firms are incentivised to take on apprentices but that apprentices can earn appropriate wages. We will look at all those issues as we bring forward the package on all-age apprenticeships.

Mr McCann: Thank you very much, Minister.

Caravan Site Fees

T2. **Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister for the Economy, given that she will be aware from correspondence from him and other SDLP MLAs that caravan owners across the North feel deeply aggrieved about the costs that they have incurred over the past year in significant site fees, ranging from between £2,000 and £3,000 in some cases, despite not being able to use their caravans, to outline whether she has engaged with the Minister for Communities or what action has been taken to ensure that all those people with caravans are not severely financially disadvantaged because of COVID-19. (AQT 1182/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Like the Member, I have had an enormous amount of correspondence from caravan owners: some of whom had site fees partially returned last year; some of whom did not. We should remember that those are contractual matters for the individuals and the site owners. By far the largest volume of correspondence that I received from caravan owners was about allowing them to return to using their caravans in a safe, COVID-compliant and socially distanced way.

I hope that we will be able to give them further information on that in the near future, and I know that many of the caravan owners who correspond with me will be glad to hear that.

2.30 pm

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for her answer and for recognising that there is an issue. Minister, I understand that there is a contractual arrangement between caravan park owners and caravan owners, but there is also a responsibility in the House to ensure sufficient regulation so that those caravan owners are protected and not abused. Very few have received discounts, given that caravan park owners have received government intervention. Does the Minister believe that there should be government intervention for caravan owners who have had to pay out thousands without being able to access their mobile homes?

Mrs Dodds: As I said, the contractual issue is between the caravan owner and the site owner. If the site owner is amenable, it is reasonable to assume that, if you are unable to use your caravan, you should be able to get a discount.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have received no notification that Ms Sinéad Bradley will join us remotely

and she is not in her place, so I move on to Mr Justin McNulty.

COVID-19 Study Disruption Payment

T4. **Mr McNulty** asked the Minister for the Economy to confirm whether the Comptroller and Auditor General was correct in his assertion on 25 March at the Public Accounts Committee that her Department is paying third-level institutions a 10% fee to administer the £500 student COVID grant, for which the SDLP campaigned and 40,000 students are eligible. (AQT 1184/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The COVID disruption payment was a unique opportunity to support students who attend institutions in Northern Ireland. In order for us to make that unique payment, we had to ask the universities to do it since they had access to the appropriate information to do so. It is important that we acknowledge the fact that universities incur costs in doing that and should be remunerated for it.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for her answer. That means that £2 million has been paid to universities to administer that money. Would that money not be more wisely spent on the students whom you have excluded from the scheme, including those who are studying in Britain, down South or further afield? When will those students be included in the scheme?

Mrs Dodds: The Member is absolutely aware that we took advice on the remit for students studying in Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland. We have supported the students in the institutions that we publicly fund in Northern Ireland. Of course, students from Northern Ireland who are in Great Britain will be able to claim funding from the universities that they attend. In Scotland, I think, some £30 million of additional funding was made available for student hardship. I know that, in England, just recently, an additional £50 million was made available for student hardship and, in Wales, something in the region of £40 million was made available.

Wet Pubs: COVID-19 Support

T5. **Ms Mullan** asked the Minister for the Economy whether there has been an underspend in her Department's £10.6 million allocation to the wet pubs business support scheme and to outline whether, if trading is limited when they reopen, she will consider supporting wet pubs going forward. (AQT 1185/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The wet pubs scheme was based on the number of pubs that were identified as being in that category by the Finance Department and through the local rates schemes. We were given the number from those schemes. When we wrote to those businesses, many of them declared that they had been open for part of the summer and therefore would not be eligible as they did not meet the scheme's criteria. I am happy to write to the Member with the exact figures for the uptake of the scheme and how that has worked out. I commend those who forthrightly said, "We were open during that period", even if they were open in only a limited way. That is commendable, and it is very important for us to recognise that.

Going forward, we really want businesses to be open, to be viable and to open safely. As I have said many times in

the past number of minutes in the House, we need to give those businesses a date for reopening as soon as we can.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, unfortunately, there is a growing concern in Derry that you are less than enthusiastic about fulfilling the commitment for the expansion of the Magee campus that is in 'New Decade, New Approach'. Can you provide an update on any engagements and work with Ulster University on the commitment to deliver an expansion of the campus to 10,000 students?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. I will write to you with all the specific details of my engagement with Ulster University and about the Magee campus. It is, of course, for the Department of Health to identify a need and do the business case. We will then administer that in relation to the medical school. Everything, as far as I am aware, is progressing on time and appropriately. I have not been notified of any bumps along the road.

Recently, I signed off the strategic outline business cases for two projects for the Magee campus that are being delivered in relation to the city deals. Both projects are worth in the region of £50 million to the university and will substantially increase its ability and its research base at that location. Ulster University is a three-campus university, however, and we would like to see its plan for all the campuses across its sites.

FE Colleges: Face-to-face Teaching

T6. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for the Economy when further education colleges will return to face-to-face teaching, in line with this week's return of post-primary schools. (AQT 1186/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member, as this is a really important issue for many FE learners and those associated with the colleges. I hope that, after Thursday's Executive meeting, there will be definite dates in the pipeline. Of course, FE colleges have been open throughout for those who needed to go in to college to do practical subjects, with the rest of their course being taught by remote learning. As we come up to those crucial professional exams, however, many of those young people need to have the required practical experience in order to pass them. For example, it has been difficult for young people who are studying health and social care or hairdressing to gain the practical experience that they need to progress, because those parts of the economy have been closed. We need to work urgently to make sure that all those young people can succeed and get the qualifications that they need in the summer.

Ms Sugden: I forgot to declare an interest: my husband is a college lecturer. I am not asking on his behalf; rather, I am asking on behalf of a concerned constituent whose daughter chose an FE pathway instead of going into sixth form. She is worried that FE students will be disadvantaged, because sixth-formers are now back at school but FE students are not. I look forward to hearing about dates on Thursday, hopefully. It is important that no one be disadvantaged in our school system.

Mrs Dodds: I absolutely agree with you. Our FE colleges are amazing places of learning. They are not just about learning but about the whole community of people at the college. It is such a broad range of people, from

those doing foundation degrees to some of the most vulnerable young people in our society. No one should be disadvantaged. The Executive and the House should be concerned about the future for young people. That is the future of Northern Ireland, and we must work to build it.

Adjourned at 2.40 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 19 April 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Members, before we begin our business today, I want to deal with a few points that are outstanding. Since the Assembly returned in January 2020, I have been very pleased that the vast majority of our debates have been constructive, even when robust, and that there have been relatively few significant issues for the Chair to deal with. In recent weeks, the tone of debate has been concerning at times, and a number of matters have been raised with me, including fair and reasonable points raised by Gordon Lyons, John O'Dowd and other Members. In my view, the fact that all those matters arose is probably a symptom of our wider political tensions, however, in the past week, there has also been very welcome recognition that what happens in the Assembly Chamber can set a positive tone for the wider community.

I have indicated to the Business Committee and, indeed, to the Principal Deputy Speaker and Deputy Speakers that I would much prefer to see the Assembly continue in that mode. In truth, it might be helpful, in that context, to draw a line under issues raised on all sides. Therefore, over the past week, I have written to a number of Members, including Linda Dillon, Pat Sheehan, Martina Anderson, Emma Sheerin and Trevor Clarke to draw points to their attention for the future, but I do not intend to dwell on those issues this morning.

It is clear that the absence of Assembly sittings for three years and the turnover of membership in the Assembly may have reduced the awareness of our standards of debate as they are expected. Therefore, I have written to all Members today, reminding them of the standards established by Speaker Willie Hay and Speaker Mitchel McLaughlin. These standards, essentially, set out an expectation that contributions to debate should be in keeping with good temper, moderation, courtesy and respect. I have also sent Members a copy of 10 principles, which I have developed with officials, to give further detail on what courtesy, good temper, moderation and respect mean in practice.

I will not dwell on those principles now, but I want to note that there are realities that come from the fact that this is an Assembly of clearly diverse political views, as indeed all Assemblies will be expected to be. All Members have to accept that, often, things will be said that they may disagree with, sometimes in different terminology from that which they would use themselves.

However, from my own years of participating on the Floor of the Chamber, I also know that, sometimes, in the heat

of politics, any of us can say things that perhaps we would rather had been said in a different way or not been said at all.

In this Chamber, Members are speaking not only to their political base but to a wider audience of people from other parties and different political perspectives as well as the wider community. Members may well want to make the same core points in the Chamber as they would elsewhere, but it is worth considering whether more can be achieved if those points are expressed in a way that is more appropriate to the public platform that the Assembly provides. When fractures and tensions undoubtedly exist in the community, Members on every side of the Assembly need to be mindful of the greater sensitivities. That is demonstrated by the fact that Members on all sides of the Chamber have raised the issue of respect.

I close on the issue with the point that heated language or a confrontational and adversarial tone in the debate is likely only to exacerbate the situation rather than help the Assembly to perform its role of finding resolutions to those very difficult issues.

Today, I have written separately to Members in relation to points of order. It is an abuse of points of order to use them to respond to the substance of what someone has said in debate rather than to seek an intervention or to speak yourself. Trevor Clarke raised a point of order with me on 23 April. He made a valid point about Members raising complaints about other Members when those Members are not present. In other places, it is an expected courtesy that, if a Member intends to raise an accusation or allegation about another Member, they should give that Member notice. That is an entirely fair approach as it allows the Member in question the opportunity to be present and to have a right of reply.

Complaints and accusations about other Members should not be raised lightly, but I rule today that, if someone wishes to raise an issue when the Member in question is not already present, they should notify that Member in advance. Members should also indicate to the Chair that they have done so.

Finally, I much prefer that Members largely regulate their own contributions in the Chamber and that interventions from the Chair be few and far between. Therefore, I ask Members to take the time to consider both of my letters today.

Matter of the Day

NI Senior Women: UEFA Women's Euro 2022 Qualification

Mr Speaker: Mr Mike Nesbitt has been given leave to make a statement on the Northern Ireland women's football team qualifying for the European Championships that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should rise in their place and continue to do so. All Members called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take points of order on that or any other matter until the item of business has finished.

Mr Nesbitt: We can still count on the fingers of one hand the number of times that a senior international football team has qualified for a major finals. We have been trying since 1948. It was Sweden '58, Spain '82, Mexico '86, France 2016 and now England 2022. That on its own is a significant measure of the success of the senior women's football team at Seaview last Tuesday night. Another such measure is where the team stands in the FIFA world rankings, which suggest that it had no business qualifying for England 2022. Of course, though, it has. A third might be the resilience of that team, which began the campaign with two very heavy defeats. Yet the heads did not go down. They stuck at it, they came through and they qualified. There are many good reasons to celebrate and to congratulate the team, the squad, the manager and the coaches.

Is that enough, or should we now focus on the sort of experience that we want those players to have in England next summer? Do we want it to be like the euphoria and success of Spain '82, or are we just going to settle for what happened in Mexico in 1986? That was more akin to saying, "Well, at least we got there. At least we qualified". I know what I would like. It is time to ask not what more we demand of that team but what we can do to help it.

Since Tuesday, I have listened to quite a few interviews with members of that squad. At the risk of being patronising, I say that they are very articulate sportspeople. What comes across is that, by and large, they are amateurs who have day jobs and train at night, getting home at 9 or 10 o'clock in the evening. Some are young mothers with families to look after. Therefore, rather than just congratulating them, shall we put our money where our mouth is? Shall we say that it is our determination to find the funds and resources to let these players train and prepare as professionals for their trip to the Euro 2022 finals in England next summer? They have done us proud, and the House should reciprocate.

Miss McIlveen: I am delighted that the Assembly is taking time to mark an outstanding achievement for the Northern Ireland women's football team. I do not wish to repeat what was said by Mr Nesbitt but, from being established only 17 years ago to qualifying for the European Championships, the women's team has outstripped all expectations.

Anyone who has watched their development over the years, capped off by the two victories over their play-off opponents, Ukraine, will know that that qualification was no fluke. This is a team of wonderfully gifted footballers that has shown its commitment to ladies' football, as demonstrated by Julie Nelson with 116 caps and Ashley Hutton with 111. I have had the great pleasure of attending many of the team's games over the years, and it was a

deep frustration to me that, due to coronavirus restrictions, I was unable to be present for the home play-off game. I was also really annoyed that their families, having supported them throughout their careers, were unable to be there to share in the excitement.

I would like to mention Sara Booth, the former international captain and Irish Football Association (IFA) official who is now the FIFA head of competitions in the women's football division. She has done so much to promote the women's game in Northern Ireland. I would also like to mention former women's coach Alfie Wylie, who helped to lay the foundations of the women's game and drive it forward in Northern Ireland. Both will be delighted at the progress of this fantastic group of players under the excellent coaching of Kenny Shiels.

What has been achieved by the current team will inspire and encourage other young women and girls to get involved in the sport. As we emerge from an incredibly difficult year, we have all been lifted by what the team has done.

I look forward to watching the team when it takes to the pitch in Euro 2022 in England. I hope that the green and white army will have the opportunity to be present and be able to support the team in the only way that it can.

Ms Ni Chuilín: I thank Mike Nesbitt for bringing forward this Matter of the Day. It is appropriate to do so, given that this is our first opportunity since Tuesday to discuss it.

The headlines speak for themselves. The women have made history by beating Ukraine, and a lot of the references in the media have been in that context. It is historic. Michelle is right to mention Alfie Wylie and Sara Booth, and I want to add Sue O'Neill to that list. They did the hard yards when the game was not popular. Sara has since moved on, but she will not forget where she is from: she will not forget women and she will not pull the ladder up behind her.

I had the pleasure of working with some of these women when I was in DCAL. I have to say that the conditions that they trained in and the kits that they got were nothing short of pathetic. However, their spirits, commitment and dignity shone through all that because they were determined to put themselves in the spotlight.

I also want to mention Denise Watson and Ruth Gorman, two sports journalists who have been consistent in their support of the Northern Ireland women's soccer team. You cannot mention the people who got the team to where it is today without mentioning women such as Julie Nelson, who has 116 caps. That is no mean feat.

I looked at some of the headlines over the weekend. Most of these women have full-time jobs, come home to grab a snack and go off to training. That is hard work, and it shows massive commitment.

Let us hope that the goalkeepers, the defenders, the midfielders and the forwards will all now become household names and that all the young girls who do not already know them will know them. I watched some young girls from St Dominic's looking at them as sporting icons, which speaks for itself.

12.15 pm

We have part-time players with full-time dreams. I repeat Mike's call: I want to see them playing in Windsor Park,

and I want them to have ongoing support. I would like to see them supported in their journey to the championships. If the House could agree to that today, the IFA would need to listen. Those women are exceptional, not because they have given us joy or because of what they did last week but because they work in Nightingale hospitals or in schools. They are carers, providers and supporters as well. They have been nothing short of inspirational, but now we all know the mettle that they are made of.

I want to thank them. Like Michelle, I wish that their families had been there because they have been with them from day one. I will finish with something that came from the Northern Ireland women's team: see it, believe it, achieve it. They certainly did, so well done.

Mr O'Toole: I thank Mike Nesbitt for bringing the Matter of the Day to the Assembly. It is really encouraging to see the level of unanimity and pride in what the Northern Ireland women's team has done. I watched the game against Ukraine. The whole campaign was remarkable, but what was particularly exciting was the performance that was put in to get there. Marissa Callaghan and Nadene Caldwell scored in that match.

This speaks to two wider points. First, we have all had a difficult year, and this was an enormous boost for everyone who watched the glorious performance from the Northern Ireland women's team. Secondly, to go back to what Carál Ní Chuilín just said, there is a huge amount of passion and pride among the women, who are not full-time professionals and are not paid to stop their full-time jobs. They have families and lives and jobs. They are civil servants, teachers and shopworkers who, as Members have said, go to their training after doing a day's work. Often, they have childcare and other responsibilities. They do not have the luxury of being able to commit their time in full to training and to football, but they have done an amazing job and have done us all proud. It is a completely remarkable achievement in the circumstances. I agree with Mike Nesbitt that it would be wonderful for us all to see them have a full level of support in 2022, a full contingent of travelling fans and the full support of all of us as they go through that.

Over the past few years, thankfully, women's football, not just here but globally, has started to get the recognition and support that it properly deserves. For too long, it was not given the status and attention relative to the men's game, but — do you know what? — women like the Northern Ireland women's team have proven exactly why all those old arguments and prejudices should be thrown out of the window.

In a strange way, it is important that we are discussing this now because other football fans will, over the past 24 hours, have seen an example of what has gone wrong, in many ways, with the men's game. We have the fairly grotesque example of senior teams in England looking as if they are trying to break away from a league with which they have been involved for over 100 years in order to set up a rich man's cartel and deny people proper competition. The passion, pride and dedication of the Northern Ireland women's team are the exact antithesis of that kind of grotesque greed. That is why I am delighted to pay tribute to those women today and wish them all the best next year. Hopefully, we can all support them in person.

Mr Lyttle: I declare an interest as a registered football coach with the Irish Football Association. I extend massive congratulations on behalf of the Alliance Party to all the history-makers in the Northern Ireland women's football team on their amazing qualification for the European championships in England, where they will be able to compete against the elite football nations of Europe with the full backing of the famous green and white army.

It is genuinely hard to put into words the pride and gratitude that we feel for everyone who is involved in this historic achievement. I recall that, last week, my son asked me what the score was in the PSG-Bayern Munich game in the Champions League and I told him to leave me alone because I was watching a proper football match: the Northern Ireland women against Ukraine.

I was delighted to see Marissa Callaghan and Nadene Caldwell score those goals in the second leg of the final play-off game. I am delighted for Kenny Shiels and the staffing team, former manager Alfie Wylie and all the many trailblazers whose years of perseverance made this achievement possible. Some have been mentioned already: we think of Sara Booth and of Cheryl Lamont, who recently became the first female president of a football association in Northern Ireland. There are other leaders in women's football in Northern Ireland, such as Gail Redmond. As an East Belfast MLA, I must mention the multiple members of the squad who play their club football with Glentoran, including a friend of mine, Emma McMaster.

The women's football team have inspired a generation of girls, and boys, to dream a new football dream. They have demonstrated the power of football to unite and lift the spirit of an entire community and have done what not many people have managed to do, which is that they appear to have united the Assembly as well, and that is welcome to see. As other Members have said, that will hopefully now lead to the Executive, the Assembly, the IFA and all clubs in Northern Ireland seriously upping their game by supporting girls' and women's football in Northern Ireland properly and giving their full backing to the Northern Ireland women's football team to do its very best to achieve in England in 2022.

Miss Woods: I thank Mr Nesbitt for submitting the Matter of the Day. He got it in just before mine. I am glad that it was accepted so that we could mark the efforts, skill and excellence of the Northern Ireland women's senior team that, having reformed in only 2004, made history on Tuesday night by reaching the Euro 2022 finals. I look forward to getting my tickets in the post. On Wednesday, we heard on the radio from players about the work that they have put in to get there: all the training, commitment and sacrifices that they have had to make in work and employment as well as in family life.

We cannot say it enough: congratulations and well done. What an absolutely amazing achievement. There has rightly been a positive response to the match and a positive feeling among those who play grassroots women's football about what this means not only for the Northern Ireland team but for all those who have become involved in the sport and those who may want to join. There have been much-needed strategies and investment put in place on the ground recently and work done with so many others to encourage participation in the sport at all ages.

Not long ago, I would not have dared go near a football, making all the excuses that I could think of not to. After five years, however, with Belfast Ravens, a team that was set up after a charity game at Seaview, and just over 18 months after I set up the women's team at Hollywood Football Club — big-up the Tuesday squad, which also made history by coming back on Tuesday after the COVID regulations were relaxed — I would not change it for the world. I have met so many amazing people through football. A community of people trying to get fitter, even over lockdown, has been built, and the camaraderie, friendship and support is fantastic. I hope that the achievement encourages every girl, teenager, young woman and older woman to try out football.

I will finish by reading out a message that a football colleague sent me last week. She said:

"My four-year old daughter was gripped by every minute of the matches. After watching last night's match, she pointed to the screen and said, 'Mummy, that's what I want to do. I want to be like them and play for Northern Ireland when I grow up.'"

Those women are an inspiration to so many. They are game changers. They are the inspiration. So have a go. As team captain Marissa Callaghan said:

"dream of wearing the green shirt because it is the most amazing experience you will ever have."

Mr Allister: Everyone loves an underdog. The TUV can say that with feeling and some experience. I join in the Assembly-wide congratulations to the team for their remarkable success. Of course, having come in as outsiders, to make such progress adds to the pleasure that even some football philistines will feel about the achievement, so very well done. It also presents a timely challenge and message to the Executive to examine whether the support — financial and otherwise — given to women's football is sufficient and whether they, too, could not do much better in that regard. The success of last week was a cheering moment for us all and an encouragement of what dedication and commitment can deliver. They have lifted spirits right across the community, and that can only be a good thing. Congratulations and every success to them as they go forward to Euro 2022, carrying the banner of Northern Ireland with all of us behind them.

Ms Sugden: I join everyone else in wishing the team massive congratulations in qualifying for Euro 2022. I am incredibly proud, not least as two of my constituents, Lauren Wade and Chloe McCarron, made the squad. I have watched these young women grow up and travel the world improving their soccer skills. They are an example to many young women across the world, as are all the squad. This really was their greatest achievement and the win that we all needed, particularly given recent events. This is Northern Ireland; this is what we celebrate and how we move forward. They are not only inspiring this generation but future generations. They are role models — really incredible young women.

Kenny Shiels has instilled belief and confidence. We need more Kennys in the world to inspire our young people to be the best that they can be, as he has for these women. Captain Marissa Callaghan said, "They did not stand a chance because we believed in ourselves." What a

message to send out to young people, young girls in particular. Someone described this as the biggest success in Northern Ireland's sporting history. That is incredible, and I agree. Someone else said that women's football in Northern Ireland can kick on from here. Absolutely, and I join Mr Nesbitt and others in saying that the Northern Ireland Executive need to look at women's football and community football across Northern Ireland. The Executive need to start investing in stadiums so that we can build these young people and have future players like Marissa.

Let us put this into perspective: a part-time team, 49th in the world, largely made up of amateur players drawn from a domestic league, playing their hearts out to make their dreams come true. They sacrificed their personal lives and committed to achieving success, not only for themselves but for Northern Ireland. This is huge, and I appreciate the opportunity to recognise it today. They will be the only debutantes at the tournament. They are the first women bringing us a European Championship. That is remarkable. We need to get behind them because we are all part of the green and white army. Let us put our money where our mouth is and support these women to victory.

Mr Humphrey: I thank Mr Nesbitt for bringing the motion. I am getting off the substitutes' bench to speak on behalf of my colleague David Hilditch, chair of the all-party group on football, who cannot be in the Chamber. I join Members in congratulating the ladies from the Northern Ireland football team in qualifying for Euro 2022. I suggest that the Assembly Commission look at lighting up the building green and white for that tremendous achievement. I congratulate Kenny Shiels, his coaching staff and, obviously, the players and squad, led by an inspirational captain, Marissa Callaghan. It was a fantastic achievement in a most difficult week in Northern Ireland.

After Friday's game, I sent a text to the manager congratulating him and the squad. He came back to say that the job was only half done and he reiterated that in the media. The 2:0 win on Tuesday night at Seaview was a tremendous performance, with outstanding performances right across the team and, of course, goals each from Marissa Callaghan and Nadene Caldwell. They are history-makers while mostly part-time players. Seventeen years of a journey, and Julie Nelson has been with them for 116 caps across those 17 years.

Perhaps it is fitting that the team qualified at Julie's home ground of Seaview, as she is a Crusaders' player, by beating a team 25 places above them in the world rankings. I want to pay tribute to Alfie Wylie and his team for laying the foundations, as others have said, for this campaign. We qualified with eight players not being available or injured. Given that we have a part-time squad, that is a remarkable achievement. I am a proud member of the green and white army and support them at all levels. I am as proud after Tuesday night as I was when the men qualified after beating Greece 3 0 at Windsor Park.

That was a tremendous achievement.

12.30 pm

I was in France in 2016, and I hope to be in England in 2022. I have no doubt that this tremendous campaign and qualification will boost ladies' football in Northern Ireland. Resource needs to be given to the IFA to do just that. It is now time to build on this campaign in the run-up to 2022.

I was in Lyon on the night that we beat Ukraine 2-0. I will never forget that night and that week. We need to make sure that names like Furness, Nelson and Callaghan, which are now on the lips of many young people across our society, are as famous as the names Davis, Evans and Lafferty.

Where football is concerned, 2016 was a great year for our wee country, and I have no doubt that 2022 will be as well. Our girls dared to dream, and that dream is a reality. I have no doubt that the award-winning green and white army will be there to cheer them on and shout for our wee country. I praise every single player, every member of the coaching staff and all our supporters, who were, frustratingly, unable to be there. It is a great achievement for Northern Ireland and one that we should praise in the House and across our country right through to the competition. I wish them well in 2022 in England.

Ms S Bradley: I, too, thank the Member for bringing forward this Matter of the Day and support his calls for more support for the team. I want to say three things to the Northern Ireland women's team. First, congratulations. Each one of them will know their personal story behind that victory and the commitment, dedication and sacrifices that had to be made to achieve it. I also thank them, because we all shared in that victory. At a time when we were all welcoming any good news, it definitely brought a positivity to people everywhere, and it was much-needed at a difficult time.

I will be swift in my congratulations to those on the team, but thirdly, good luck to them going forward. No doubt, they are buoyed up by this success. All eyes are on them now, and we are all watching with great anticipation. While they are history-makers, I have no doubt that their star will shine brightly in the future, and I look forward to being part of that.

Mr Chambers: Football has given me a lifetime of pleasure, both playing it and watching it, but, being a Glentoran supporter, it has broken my heart on many occasions.

I watched the last three or four games of the women's national team that were televised, and I was not watching a women's football match: I was watching a game of football that was being played to a very high standard of technical ability by highly committed players, supported by an excellent back-room staff. I listened to an interview with Julie Nelson, and she said that, in recent years, those on the team had to make do with hand-me-down gear from the IFA. They had to wash their own training gear, because they had only one set, and they had to pay their own way to go to matches, including to overseas matches. It is to their credit that they had that commitment to build women's football to where it is today.

The competition is a year away, and a lot can happen in a year, but what a boost the team's success has been for women's football. There will be lots of young girls looking at it. They will be coming into the game, and, with the competition being a year away, some of them may well break through into that squad, if they have the talent. That is a wonderful prize for all young girls who are coming into the game to aspire to. As other Members said, with the competition being a year away, we have to offer the team every help and encouragement that we can to make sure that it makes a huge impact in July 2022.

Ms Armstrong: I will not take too long. It was mentioned that those on the women's football team are stars. I could not help but notice the smiles on each of their faces, and I am sure that, as we listened to the interviews afterwards, each one of us could do nothing but join them in those smiles. This Northern Ireland team is amazing.

It is a 17-year journey. The manager, Kenny Shiels, and the captain have invested a huge amount of time and, over the years, as others have said — I am not going to mention all the team members' names — these women have come to this level. As Deputy Chair of the Committee for Communities, and also as a member of the Women's Caucus, I have written to wish the team the best of luck. We wanted to welcome them to the sisterhood of women who are achieving. I am not frightened to say that it was a women's football match: those women hugged each other and loved each other, and we love them back. Roll on, 2022.

Mr Frew: I bestow hearty congratulations on our Northern Ireland international women's team for what it has achieved. I put on record here that I believe, and I do not think anyone will contradict me, that this is the greatest achievement that a Northern Ireland national team — a group sport team — has achieved in the history of our state.

International football is different. It is different from ordinary Association Football. It is about the pride and the passion. It is about playing for your shirt, your country and your teammates. That brings a wealth that no one can describe unless they have been out on that field of play. Those players who have achieved this probably do not realise yet how big an achievement it is, but they will next year, and they have that to look forward to. We should support them in all their endeavours to make sure that what they experience next year is the best that it can be. It will be out of this world. That experience will live with them for all of their lives, and not only their lives but their families' lives. That is an amazing achievement.

For the green and white army, to go to another tournament is beyond our wildest dreams. I remember France. I remember Mexico. I remember Spain, although I was not there — I was only a young boy — but I remember France. Not only that: my two boys were there. My daughter did not go, unfortunately. I begged with her to go, but she did not go. She did go to a Northern Ireland match later on, and she said, "I get it now, I really do", because of what the green and white army brings to the international team.

The women's team has had an amazing achievement. I wish them all the best in the coming year. They have made us so proud, and we will support them 100%, as the green and white army does. I think we are the best fans in the world, and now we have one of the best women's teams in the world, which has made it to a major tournament. When you look at the scale and depth of the challenge, it is remarkable. It is our best achievement in our state's history.

Mr Givan: I join colleagues in congratulating the Northern Ireland football team on its qualification. What an inspiration it is to young girls across Northern Ireland. Now we must build on that to enhance female participation in sport.

In a previous time, when I was Communities Minister, something that came across the desk on many occasions was the question of what we could do to drive up the

number of girls getting involved in sport. I met the IFA and those who were involved. We are seeing the fruits of that investment in the results that are coming through, so we need to build on it next year, now that this is clearly in the calendar.

What more can we do at local government level? What more can we do in our schools? I ask this with a conflict of interest: I have three daughters — no sons to carry on their father's football prowess, but my daughters are more than able — and my middle girl, in particular, proudly wears the Northern Ireland kit whenever she is playing football. We have a good girls' league in Lisburn; Hillsborough Boys Football Club runs a female game. You should go and see the talent. Some of those girls would run rings round many of the boys of the same age. We have girls' competitions in our primary schools as well, and I was able to go to cheer on my daughter last year when her school was competing in the Lisburn primary schools' league.

We need to use this and build upon it, and we need to have the right facilities. The Lisburn Ladies Football Club has just signed a partnership agreement with the Ballymacash Sports Academy, and the council is looking at a new changing facility and considering what other facilities can be put in place to make sure that it provides the right kind of environment. That is what we need to focus on, and I know that the Minister for Communities and the Committee will want to take that forward. This is a golden opportunity to drive up the number of girls who are involved in sports.

When I was the Minister, I had the privilege to be in France for a number of the games. What amazing reputational benefits there were from having the kind of support that we had and that being put in the shop window at that European and global level.

I will be rooting for the team next year. I am very much a European when it comes to football and supporting the Northern Ireland football team in that competition. I wish them every success.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that I wrote last week to the captain of the team, Marissa Callaghan, to congratulate her and the team. I also did that because I had invited her to contribute to the Speaker's Office initiative on International Women's Day, for which she made a very captivating video. I invite people to go on to the Assembly's website to re-familiarise themselves with her very strong and solid words of encouragement and inspiration to the many young women out there in our community. On that basis, I endorse all the remarks that have been made by Members across the House this morning.

That concludes the Matter of the Day. Members should take their ease for a moment or two.

Committee Business

Damages (Return on Investment) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 28 October 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill (NIA 16/17-22).

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate.

Mr Givan: The Committee Stage of the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill began on 10 March. The Bill contains six clauses and a schedule, and its main aims are to introduce a new statutory methodology for calculating the discount rate; ensure that the rate is regularly reviewed at least every five years; and transfer responsibility for setting the rate from the Department of Justice to the Government Actuary.

To assist its scrutiny of the Bill, the Committee has issued a call for evidence, through media notices in the main newspapers and the Assembly website, and has written to a targeted range of key stakeholders and organisations to seek views and comments. While the policy area that is covered by the legalisation is relatively specialised, it will be of interest to a range of organisations and experts that operate in the field, some of whom provided information and views on the Bill prior to the commencement of the Committee Stage. The Committee also intends to commission relevant research to assist its consideration of the key issues.

As I outlined during the debate at Second Stage, the Justice Committee recognises the arguments that have been put forward by the Department regarding the need to change the legal frameworks, and it fully supports the principle that any framework should ensure 100% compensation for losses suffered as a result of personal injuries that are not the fault of an individual, without ever overcompensating or undercompensating injured parties. The Committee also engaged with the Department and sought further clarification and information to assist its understanding and consideration of the policy proposals.

However, as the Minister and Department were aware, the Committee had not reached a position on whether it supported the Department's approach of adopting an adapted Scottish model as the best way forward to achieve the principle of 100% compensation before the legislation was introduced in the Assembly.

12.45 pm

The importance of getting right any new framework to set the personal injury discount rate is clear. It will set the rate for the foreseeable future, which matters greatly to those who have been injured through no fault of their own. We also have a responsibility to the organisations, including the Department of Health, that are paying the awards made under the framework. We must ensure that claimants receive 100% compensation and are not undercompensated. However, we must also be sure, as

far as possible, that the model that we adopt in Northern Ireland does not overcompensate. We also need to understand the impacts of the change in rate that will, no doubt, arise from the implementation of any new model and what, if any, actions may be possible to mitigate the impact, if necessary. It has been drawn to the attention of the Committee that the indemnity rates for GPs in Northern Ireland are higher than they are in the rest of the UK, for example.

The model brought forward by the Department of Justice is an adaption of the Scottish model, and the Committee wants to clearly understand its implications and the likely compensation that it will deliver; in particular, we want to explore a range of issues, including whether the new statutory methodology is the most appropriate to achieve, as closely as possible, the 100% compensation. Has it the potential to veer towards undercompensation or overcompensation, and, if so, how can that be rectified? Does it better reflect how a claimant would be advised to invest their award? What are the likely effects of using an investment period of 43 years rather than 30 years in the model? What are the advantages or disadvantages of transferring responsibility for setting the rate from the Department of Justice to the Government Actuary? Is there an appropriate level of accountability in the new statutory methodology?

At the meeting on 11 March, the Committee discussed potential timescales. Following detailed consideration, all members agreed that an extension until 28 October was needed to undertake the Committee Stage of the Bill. The extension is required to provide the Committee with the time to undertake the scrutiny of the damages Bill that I have just outlined and to provide maximum flexibility to complete the Committee Stage of the other Bills that are already with the Committee or will be referred to it in the near future. The Damages (Return on Investment) Bill, the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill and the Protection from Stalking Bill are all at Committee Stage. In addition, the Department has indicated that it hopes to introduce the Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill in May. That will be a large Bill covering a disparate range of policy areas, to which, the Department has indicated, further provisions will be added by way of amendments during its passage in the Assembly. The Committee will therefore have four Bills to scrutinise over the coming months, and, given the limited time until the end of this Assembly mandate, careful management will be required to ensure that all are completed in time. Maximum flexibility is required to do that.

When considering the time required, the Committee also took into consideration other work priorities that have to be completed, including subordinate legislation, legislative consent motions, scrutiny of the Department's budget and the need to retain some capacity to deal with issues that can arise unexpectedly. Account was also taken of the parameters within which the Committee has to operate, such as the finite staff resources that support the work of the Committee, the availability of meeting rooms and broadcasting arrangements to facilitate additional Committee meetings and the current COVID-19 restrictions that impact on Assembly business, including the continued need to adhere to social distancing.

Members were also aware of and took account of the fact that the Minister and the Department wanted the

legislation through the Assembly as quickly as possible. If that had not been the case, the Committee would likely have sought a longer extension period. Initially, the Minister indicated that she was going to ask the Assembly to agree to accelerated passage for the Bill on the basis that the Department wanted a new rate in place as soon as possible, but did not intend to do that under the current framework, despite having completed the required statutory consultation on a new rate earlier in 2020. It, therefore, wanted the Bill to have passed through the Assembly and received Royal Assent before the summer. Having decided not to pursue that approach, the Minister wrote to the Committee advising that the Executive had agreed to the introduction of the damages Bill with a condensed Committee Stage that would need to conclude by 30 April to allow the Bill to pass all its stages before the summer recess and outlined an indicative timeline for the Bill that provided for 27 working days for the Committee Stage, on the basis of the expectation that the Bill would be introduced to the Assembly on 1 March.

While the Department and Minister may have wanted the legislation to pass through the Assembly with little or no scrutiny, members have a responsibility to ensure that the Committee has an adequate timescale within which it can properly scrutinise the Bill in the way that we are scrutinising and intend to scrutinise other pieces of justice legislation that are referred to us. While it is a technical Bill, we must ensure that the underlying policy aims and the new framework are the right approach for Northern Ireland.

Before the Bill was introduced, the Committee had already been contacted by key stakeholders highlighting a range of issues regarding the current position on the personal injury discount rate and the proposed legislative framework. We are also all aware of the heartbreaking cases of individuals who, through no fault of their own, have suffered personal injuries, some of which are life-changing, and, as a result, depend on the lump sum compensation awarded to cover future financial losses, such as loss of earnings and the cost of the care that they need. It is in everyone's interests to get this right.

Since the Committee agreed to seek an extension of the Committee Stage until 20 October, the Department has decided to change the rate under the current framework and has provided the SL1 for the necessary subordinate legislation. The Committee considered the proposal at the meeting last Thursday and agreed that it was content for the Department to bring forward the statutory rule.

While the Department has now gone ahead with the necessary subordinate legislation change and the changes to the personal injury rate under the methodology that is currently in place, I assure the House that the Committee will not take any more time than is necessary to complete Committee Stage to provide for a new methodology. The extension will, however, provide the necessary flexibility to manage the heavy legislative programme that we have to complete and enable us to carry out the scrutiny that the Bill requires. I commend the motion to the House.

Ms Dillon: I agree with all that the Chair has outlined. We will try to process the Bill as quickly as possible because the interim rate is not ideal and has raised its own problems. We want this to go through Committee Stage as quickly as is humanly possible, but we need the extension for all the reasons that the Chair has outlined. That is not

to mither or complain about the fact that we will be looking at four pieces of legislation. That is what we are here to do, and we want to do it. The Justice Committee has shown that by what it has done to date, and we will continue to do that. If every other Committee were progressing legislation in the way that we are, the House would be in a much better place.

Mr Speaker: I invite the Chairperson to respond and make a winding-up speech on the debate.

Mr Givan: I agree with the Deputy Chair of the Committee. The Committee will expedite the scrutiny of the legislation as efficiently and effectively as possible, and, given our track record, we will do that as quickly as we can.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 28 October 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill (NIA 16/17-22).

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

Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 19 November 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 15/17-22).

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I call the Chairperson of the Committee for Health to open the debate on the motion.

Mr Gildernew: The Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill passed Second Stage on 15 March 2021 and was referred on for Committee Stage the following working day. The objective of the Bill is to remove the ground for an abortion in cases of non-fatal disabilities. The Bill is very short, with two clauses. The first clause amends regulation 7 of the Abortion (NI) (No. 2) Regulations 2020, and the second clause is the short title.

Following the commencement of Committee Stage and to assist the Committee in its consideration of the Bill, the Committee agreed to issue a call for evidence through notices in the main newspapers, on the Assembly website and on the Committee's web page. The Committee wrote to a list of key stakeholders and organisations to highlight the consultation and to seek written submissions. The Committee agreed a seven-week consultation period, which closes on 7 May.

At its meeting on 25 March, the Committee considered a draft timetable for consideration of the Bill and agreed a motion to extend Committee Stage to 19 November 2021. The Committee made that decision on the basis of a number of factors. The Committee has an extremely heavy workload, with ongoing consideration of COVID regulations, COVID recovery in the health and social care sector and key priorities in other areas. The Committee has another Bill at Committee Stage, which will be discussed in a few minutes' time, and expects a large and complex adoption Bill in the coming weeks. In order to allow sufficient time to scrutinise this Bill in the detail required, it was agreed that an extension was needed and that it should allow for some flexibility in the Committee's consideration of the Bill. The Committee looks forward to considering the Bill in more detail following the close of the consultation period.

The proposed extension will allow sufficient time for that detailed consideration while balancing the Committee's consideration of other Bills and priorities. While an extension to 19 November has been requested, I assure the Assembly that the Committee will endeavour to complete Committee Stage earlier if possible.

I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 19 November 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 15/17-22).

Health and Social Care Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 1 October 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Health and Social Care Bill (NIA Bill 18/17-22).

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I call the Chairperson of the Committee for Health to open the debate.

Mr Gildernew: The Health and Social Care Bill passed its Second Stage on 16 March 2021 and was referred on for Committee Stage the following working day. The objective of the Bill is the dissolution of the Regional Health and Social Care Board and the transfer of its legislative functions. The Bill has seven clauses and three schedules. Overall, the clauses provide for the dissolution of the regional board and the transfer of its functions and require the Department to make transfer schemes for its assets, including its staff and liabilities. A further clause provides for necessary transitional provisions. The remaining clauses provide for interpretation, commencement and the short title.

Following commencement of Committee Stage and to assist us in our consideration of the Bill, the Committee agreed to issue a call for evidence through notices in the main newspapers, on the Assembly website and on the Committee's web page. We wrote to a list of key stakeholders and organisations to highlight the consultation and to seek written submissions. The Committee agreed a five-week consultation period, which closes on Friday 23 April.

At our meeting on 25 March, the Committee considered a draft timetable for consideration of the Bill and agreed a motion to extend Committee Stage to 1 October 2021. The Committee made that decision on the basis of a number of factors. As outlined in the previous proposal to extend, the Committee has an extremely heavy workload at this time, with ongoing consideration of COVID regulations, COVID recovery in the health and social care sector and key priorities in other areas of which Members will be aware.

The Committee also has a private Member's Bill at Committee Stage and, as I mentioned, is expecting a large and complex adoption Bill in the coming weeks. To allow sufficient time to scrutinise the Health and Social Care Bill in the detail required, it was therefore agreed by Committee members that an extension was needed and that that extension should allow for some flexibility in the Committee's consideration of the Bill.

1.00 pm

Although the Bill itself is relatively small and technical, it does have larger and far-reaching ramifications. A number of areas that the Committee will want to consider in much greater detail have already been identified and include the process for the commissioning of services, tackling health inequalities, retaining local and regional expertise, and engagement on the commissioning of services. The proposed extension will allow sufficient time for that detailed consideration, balancing that with work on

considering other Bills. Although an extension to 1 October has been requested, I again assure the Assembly that the Committee will endeavour to complete Committee Stage earlier if possible. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 1 October 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Health and Social Care Bill (NIA Bill 18/17-22).

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two, please. Thank you.

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

Private Members' Business

Brexit: EU Card Transaction Fees

Dr Archibald: I beg to move

That this Assembly regrets the decision of Visa and MasterCard to increase, drastically, their fees for EU card transactions; notes that these increases are possible only because of Brexit and the subsequent loss of EU consumer protections; condemns this cynical exploitation of working people and small to medium-sized enterprises by big banks and card companies during a global pandemic; further notes that this extortionate increase will disproportionately impact border communities, which have already borne the brunt of Brexit; and urges the British government to reverse these increases through legislation to regulate interchange fees on EU transactions.

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. I ask you to open the debate on the motion, más é do thoil é.

Dr Archibald: I rise to move the motion and also indicate that my party will happily accept the Alliance Party's amendment.

The motion highlights one of the more hidden impacts and costs of Brexit. Those who campaigned so vociferously for Brexit were often quick to point to EU regulation and bureaucracy. They argued to "Take back control". However, in reality, on this issue, it is corporate elites who are in control and big financial institutions that will be the beneficiaries. Card issuers are cynically exploiting Brexit in a move that would see more money go to big banks while ordinary people and small businesses pay the price.

In January, only a few weeks after the end of the transition period, MasterCard announced that it would hike by 500% the transaction fees on UK-issued cards making purchases from EU-based companies. In March, Visa followed suit, announcing that it, too, would increase its interchange fees by around 475%. They can do so simply because we are no longer in the EU and the EU interchange fee regulation no longer applies. The regulation has applied in the EU since 2015. When it was introduced, the move at its core was to align fees across the internal market in order to remove barriers to the freedom to provide services. With respect to the interchange fees and different rates, it was outlined in the regulation that merchants, in turn, would incorporate card costs, like all other costs, in the general prices of goods and services, and that regulating the fees would improve the functioning of the internal market and contribute to reducing transaction costs for consumers.

In 2020, the European Commission's report on the application of the interchange fee regulation highlighted that, in 2017, there had been 70 billion card-based transactions in the EU. That is likely to have increased as COVID-19 accelerated trends towards contactless and electronic payments. As a result of the interchange

fee regulation, there have been more than €2.6 billion of savings, with merchants — businesses such as retailers — having saved costs in the range of €1.2 billion per year — obviously, that also includes the domestic caps — part of which would eventually pass to consumers through lower retail prices or improved services. When the EU regulation was put into domestic law in 2015, the rationale for intervention included estimates from the British Retail Consortium that the price cap could be of benefit to UK retailers by £480 million per year, with respondents to the consultation estimating savings, a gain, to businesses more widely, in the region of £700 million per year. Again, that includes the domestic caps.

Therefore, it makes sense to believe that the converse is also true: if the interchange fee goes up, the costs will be passed back to consumers. When MasterCard's announcement was made, estimates put the costs to EU-based businesses selling goods to UK customers at over £14 million per year. However, the Visa announcement is even more significant because Visa is the biggest card issuer, with around 73% of the market. Therefore, the costs will be greater still. If this goes —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: I will, very quickly. Go ahead.

Mr Allister: The Member recites cost figures. Has she any figures for the cost of the protocol on the goods that those cards would pay for, particularly in circumstances where, under EU regulations, the costs of checking will have to be charged out to the suppliers and consumers? Does she agree with that as well? Do those costs not interest her?

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for his intervention. Of course, I opposed Brexit, which is the reason that we have the protocol in the first place. Those who campaigned for Brexit need to own its consequences.

The increases — sorry: I have lost my place. If that goes ahead, undoubtedly, those charges, which affect all online purchases, will eventually be passed on to customers. Obviously, as well as the impact generally on purchases from the EU, there is a particular North/South dimension to this. It could see increased costs being passed on to people in the North for purchases from the South. Orders of goods across the island are regularly made through card transactions. While the protocol protects the trade of goods across the island, it does not cover services, and that is a service charge.

The increases in interchange fees could have an impact on those in border communities, including for the purchase of everyday items such as groceries, on a cross-border basis. While the interchange fee caps apply only to consumer cards and not commercial business cards, it is not uncommon for small businesses and microbusinesses to use consumer cards for online orders, so they could face increased costs when buying parts or goods from the EU. Our small businesses and microbusinesses in particular do not need that when they are already struggling to deal with COVID.

To date, I am not aware of reports of retaliatory charges from issuers in the European Economic Area (EEA) states, but that is certainly a possibility and would impact businesses here with the reverse of the sums outlined previously. For many of the small businesses and microbusinesses across the island, cross-border North/

South trade is really important. For almost all businesses in the North that export, the South is one of the markets to which they export, and for 80% of microbusinesses in the North that export, their only export market is the South. Struggling small businesses and microbusinesses across the island do not need the barrier of increased cost as a result of corporate greed.

Cross-border trade continues to grow. According to InterTradeIreland's figures for 2018, it was worth £6.5 billion, while trade and services where online purchases with cards for bookings etc would come in was worth more than £3 billion. Last week, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in the South reported that cross-border trade has grown significantly for the second month in a row when compared with the same time last year.

The all-island supply chains and growing the economy on an all-island basis are vital factors for the economic recovery of businesses across the island post-COVID and post-Brexit. Taking the tourism sector, which is a really important sector for our economy, last summer, all-island tourism flows were instrumental in mitigating some of the decline in overseas tourism due to the pandemic. The card charges announced would impact on businesses in the South with bookings from northern customers. If hoteliers and accommodation providers face increased costs for card bookings, it is very likely that those costs will be passed on to consumers. While those costs are small on an individual basis, the charges will accumulate.

At the time that the interchange fee regulations were introduced in 2015, my party colleague Matt Carthy TD was an MEP in the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs in the European Parliament. He urged that the issue of cross-border transactions be included in any cap as it is particularly important in the Irish context, where we need to break down barriers to create an effective all-island economy.

In 2019, the Interchange Fee (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 were passed in Westminster. They reduced the scope of the application of the interchange fee regulations in British legislation from the European Economic Area to the UK. That means that only transactions that take place solely within the UK would be covered by the amended regulations, and cross-border payments between the UK and the EU would not. The practical impact of that is that payments made within the UK are covered by the UK regulations and payments made in the European Economic Area are covered by EU regulations, but cross-border payments between the UK and the EEA would not be subject to the caps. However, the explanatory memorandum states that it would technically be possible, within the British regulations, to mandate interchange fee caps that UK card issuers would be permitted to charge to international transactions.

We want the British Government and financial regulators to intervene to stop the increased fee charges. As I said, to my knowledge there have been no signals of retaliatory increases from EEA issuers, but it remains a possibility, so we are very happy to accept the amendment from the Alliance Party to explore cooperation with European Commission on this issue to remove unnecessary cross-border barriers.

This motion is about stopping the Brexit credit card rip-off and standing against the corporate greed of the

two biggest card providers. This is a rip-off of ordinary people and hard-working businesses, which will line the pockets of big banks. We must not allow that to go ahead unchallenged. When the DUP and Brexiteers campaigned to take back control of their money, laws and borders, is this what they meant: people giving control of their money to corporate elites? We need to stand against these plans and stop them in their tracks. Workers, families and businesses should not pay the price for Brexit. I urge all parties to support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Stewart Dickson to formally move the amendment.

Mr Dickson: I beg to move

Leave out all after the second "Brexit;" and insert:

"recognises that the United Kingdom's ability to regulate charges on cross-border transactions is limited; calls on the UK Government to reinstate the previous cap on interchange fees within their regulatory authority; and further calls on the UK Government to engage with the European Union to reach an agreement on interchange fee caps on UK-EU and EU-UK card transactions as part of wider efforts to ease the trading frictions caused by Brexit."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): You will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who speak will have five minutes.

1.15 pm

Mr Dickson: I rise to propose the Alliance Party's amendment, and my colleague Mr Andrew Muir will make a winding-up speech on it.

The interchange fee regulation introduced in 2015 meant that, across the European Economic Area, a standardised cap existed on fees for cross-border transactions. The fees were calculated on the proportion of the total amount of the transaction and the payment method of 0.2% for debit cards and 0.3% for credit cards. Those are much lower rates than in other comparable countries and meant that a customer from Germany, for example, could buy goods in Northern Ireland without onerous interbank fees being incurred and vice versa. Of course, after the UK Government's decision to pursue the hardest possible Brexit and leave the single market, those protections have been rolled back. The regulation itself was retained in UK law but, disappointingly, operates on a UK-wide basis, as the Government took the position that capping fees on UK-to-EEA transactions whilst EEA issuers did not face a similar cap would result in asymmetrical obligations on UK business.

It is no coincidence that, soon after the transition period ended, Visa and MasterCard announced their intention to massively increase the fees levied on online EEA purchases by UK debit cards by more than 400% and by 500% on credit cards. That announcement came during one of the most disruptive and painful years that many businesses and consumers have faced. They are looking towards reopening and recovery, and those additional costs are the last thing that they need. It has been mentioned already but is worth repeating that those living in border regions or who source goods from the EEA are particularly vulnerable to increases in such fees, which

will likely be passed on to consumers in the form of higher prices and less choice.

Those painful charges are made even more acute as there are few alternatives to what is essentially a duopoly, with Visa and MasterCard essentially controlling the entire debit and credit card market in the United Kingdom. It is cynical and deeply damaging at this exceptionally difficult time, and, indeed, it benefits no one but big banks and multinational corporations that are concerned more about their shareholders than about consumers and small businesses. I note, however, that Visa and MasterCard have announced that they will delay a rise in online purchase fees planned for US customers until April 2022 to give businesses space to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. It is disappointing that United Kingdom businesses and consumers have not had such an approach extended to them, so I today call on Visa and MasterCard to rethink the massive increases. I have not seen any justification for them; in fact, it is pure opportunism. Nonetheless, this is a problem caused by Brexit, and we believe that the United Kingdom Government need to act to resolve it.

That brings me to the amendment. We recognise that the United Kingdom Government could have retained regulations that would have maintained the cap on charges that the UK issuers levy on EEA merchants, and we call on the United Kingdom Government to act to protect UK customers from these unfair and unwarranted price rises and, indeed, the danger of further price rises. Nonetheless, even if the United Kingdom Government took that action, it would not offset the risk of higher fees being levied by the European card issuers on UK sellers, as the UK is no longer covered by the interchange fee regulation limits. That would make it more expensive for UK businesses to sell goods to Europe, as, although the merchant would be in the United Kingdom, the card issuer would be in the EEA and would be free to raise fees. As a third country — yes, that is what we are — this would be outside the United Kingdom's ability to regulate.

Unfortunately, this is just one instance of how a hard Brexit, with its threadbare and rushed Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), has allowed for the reintroduction of barriers to trade. The issues need to be resolved, because they hurt businesses and consumers across the United Kingdom. The Government must engage with the EU with pragmatism and in good faith to build on the inadequate TCA. That should include reinstating a reciprocal cap on card interchange fees, as proposed in our amendment. That is clearly possible, as it was done before and could form part of the financial services chapter of the TCA. Clearly, it would also be to the mutual benefit of consumers and businesses across the UK and the EEA.

As an aside, another tangible benefit of the single market harmonisation was that there was no cost on mobile phone roaming. I hope that the UK Government will provide the assurance that they failed to provide in respect of debit cards and that we will see an agreement on that as quickly as possible. I note with concern today that one of the Finnish telecoms companies has already announced the return of roaming charges for customers travelling to the United Kingdom. That could be the thin end of the wedge. If those charges were to be reinstated, people would, understandably, be upset.

In addition to the issues relating to services, we believe that, with goodwill and pragmatism, much can be achieved in finding a way to streamline the flow of goods from Europe to GB and across the Irish Sea and make the protocol as light-touch as possible. We, as a party, have been leading the calls for practical solutions since the very beginning of the process. A clear and constructive way forward, for example, would be a veterinary agreement. A UK-EU agreement on sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) rules on the movement of animals and food products would go a long way to reducing checks on goods travelling between Europe, GB and across the Irish Sea. Such an agreement has existed between the EU and New Zealand since the 1990s, meaning that New Zealand — a country more than 11,000 miles away — has simpler access to the EU than food products from the UK. As we move further into the year, more and more people from all sides are coming to realise that the situation is not workable. Shellfish, salmon, lamb and cheese exports, to name but a few, all across the UK are feeling the pain of delays not from the United Kingdom into Northern Ireland — this part of the United Kingdom — but from the United Kingdom into Europe. Negotiating a veterinary agreement should be a key and urgent priority for the UK Government. They should do so as quickly as possible. Further mitigations for groupage, customs declarations, parcels and property and properly communicating the changes through the UK and the EU are achievable if the UK Government and the EU are determined to reach agreement on them.

Ultimately, leaving the world's largest and most integrated trading bloc was never going to lead to anywhere but a tangle of red tape and extra cost for businesses and consumers. We had an open and free trading relationship with the EU for so long that the old barriers, physical and bureaucratic, had been forgotten. A very pro-single market United Kingdom Prime Minister — one whom I do not often quote or agree with — summarised the benefits in 1988 as follows:

“Just think for a moment what a prospect that is. A single market without barriers — visible or invisible — giving you direct and unhindered access to the purchasing power of over 300 million of the world's wealthiest and most prosperous people. Bigger than Japan. Bigger than the United States. On your doorstep.”

Unfortunately, those old barriers are returning, and access to the world's biggest single market is being hindered. We see a tangible example of that before us today. Perhaps the words of Mrs Thatcher should be ringing in the ears of some of her former ardent supporters. That is why our amendment calls for card fees to be reversed where possible and for the United Kingdom to re-engage and reach reciprocal agreements with the EU to protect customers and break down the barriers to business, not raise them. I am delighted to hear that the proposer of the motion will accept our amendment, and I trust that the House will support the amendment unanimously today.

Mr Stalford: It is not my party's intention to divide the House on the amendment. It clearly improves the folderol that we were served up by the Chair of the Economy Committee, which is just the latest in a litany of political point-scoring exercises undertaken by her party in this regard. If ever a motion was tabled on an issue where people are unable to see the wood for the trees, this is

it. Members rising to their feet on this issue previously passed motions that called for the rigorous implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol. It is ironic to be lectured on the costs to businesses by any of the parties opposite that argued in favour of the protocol. Northern Ireland, with less than 0.5% of Europe's population, is being subjected to 20% of the checks that take place along the borders of the EU. That demonstrates to us all the rigorous implementation for which the parties opposite campaigned. They actively supported — *[Interruption.]* It is no good the Member for South Belfast chuntering from a sedentary position. They spent three years actively demanding the provisions. You created them. You own them.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: Perhaps later.

The DUP recognises the need to ensure that consumers in Northern Ireland, who are already feeling the impact of the oppressive Northern Ireland protocol, do not face additional barriers to trade within the United Kingdom and further afield. The rise in interchange fees will apply to retailers based in the EU when they sell goods or services to someone using a credit or debit card in the UK either online or over the phone. That will not affect in-person or card-present payments, and I hope that that offers some comfort to those in border areas who physically cross the border for their work or for business.

Whether any additional cost will be passed on to the consumer, therefore affecting trade into Northern Ireland, is still uncertain, and further work will need to be undertaken to see how that can be mitigated. A June 2020 report from the European Commission examined the advantages of its interchange fee caps and found that retailers had saved €1.2 billion a year. The extent to which consumers benefited from that was much less clear. It will be important, therefore, as households and communities emerge from the lockdown under which we are living, that eventual plans, whether they are to go on holiday or travel for business, are not complicated by additional costs passed on by European airlines, hotels, car rental firms and holiday firms.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: I certainly will.

Mr Allister: The Member rightly indicates that it is not yet clear whether the charges that initially apply to the vendor will be passed on to consumers here. However, there is a certainty, is there not, about the charges that will result from the protocol checks in that the EU 2017 Official Controls Regulation requires it as a matter of law that the cost of those checks be charged to the supplier? Those costs will inevitably fall on the consumer, and yet today we have not heard one cheep of opposition from the rigorous implementers of the protocol to the fact that their protocol will impose those charges on all of us.

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

Mr Stalford: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I doubt very much that my friend will hear one cheep in the debate from Brussels' little cheerleaders across the way.

It will be important, therefore, as households and communities emerge from lockdown, that clarity is

provided on the matter. There is an irony in Sinn Féin condemning the charging of interchange fees when it endorsed and spent three years trying to secure the provisions of the protocol. Those provisions, as the Member for North Antrim Mr Allister said, impose far greater charges on businesses in this country, but, evidently, Sinn Féin's higher loyalty to the European Commission and to European institutions trumps its obligation to its constituents who want to make it easier to set up a business, to trade and to prosper.

As I said, it is not our intention to divide the House on the matter, but it is rather like someone's house and shed being on fire, yet the Chair of the Economy Committee is more concerned about the shed than she is about the house. The real damage is being done by the protocol, which the parties opposite argued for: they should own that.

Mr O'Toole: Who knew that a project about leaving the world's biggest integrated trading and economic zone would lead to barriers to trade for consumers? Who could have guessed that that would happen?

Who could have possibly imagined that leaving a market of nearly half a billion people and what was then 28 member states, with integrated rules around trade, including on the usage of cards, would have created extra costs and burdens for consumers and small businesses? If only someone had told us. If only someone had said. Of course, we said repeatedly that it is what Brexit is about. Brexit is about tearing down the integration that had benefited consumers and businesses, small and large, across the continent. This is an outworking of Brexit. There is no use, I am afraid, in Members opposite seeking to deflect responsibility for a project that they supported, funded and helped to deliver through a majority in the House of Commons. There is no use in their trying to deflect blame for it on to Members opposite them.

1.30 pm

If I may, I will go through some of the issues raised by today's motion and amendment, both of which we welcome and will support today. There are specific issues to do with card fees, and those have been touched on by Caoimhe Archibald and Stewart Dickson. It has been mentioned that there will be a fivefold increase in fees for credit card use and about the same increase for debit card use. Those fees are charged to vendors, as has been said, but, invariably, they end up being passed on to consumers, particularly as we are talking about businesses of all sizes. It is why the interchange fee regulations existed in the first place: because the European Union is about protecting consumers. Why was the single market created? I see my colleague from South Belfast laughing at this. That is what the European Union is: it is a single market designed to protect consumers and to regulate trade between economic actors on the continent, and we have left it.

Members opposite, and particularly the Member behind me, have, because of the effects of the protocol, talked repeatedly about an economic united Ireland, and they have blamed us for its effects. The point of the protocol is to protect us on this island from some of the worst effects of Brexit, but it relates only to goods. I have talked repeatedly about the potential benefits of the protocol for businesses in Northern Ireland. I think that it will lead to real benefits and real opportunities, and they are there

already. Does the protocol involve disruption? Does Brexit involve disruption? Yes, of course they do. Here is the thing: I am talking about how we mitigate the situation. My party is engaged with actors in Northern Ireland, Brussels, Dublin and London to try to make the best of it, because we are taking responsibility for the mess that others have created. We believe in making the situation better.

The protocol relates only to goods. We heard Mr Allister wax lyrical today about the effects of the protocol. We have heard him talk before about the effects of an economic united Ireland. It is some economic united Ireland. The truth is that 70% of the economy of Northern Ireland, and the economy of the whole of the UK, is services-based. We are not trading in goods as we sit here and debate in the Chamber. Most people in our economy are employed in services of one form or another, and it will become harder to trade in services across the border and from Northern Ireland into the EU. The protocol relates only to the movement of goods. That means that the economies on the island of Ireland are, much to my frustration, diverging, not moving closing together. It will be harder to buy something with a card because of what we are talking about today. It will be harder, as of later this year, to buy something with a card from a supplier in the South because of Brexit.

If we had an economic united Ireland, it would be much easier to move a member of staff from Dublin to an office in Belfast, but you cannot do so, because we have an awful, regressive immigration policy that is being forced on us, against the will, by the way, of the DUP Economy Minister, who accepts that it is bad for Northern Ireland businesses. A company operating in Belfast cannot now simply move an EU national who is working in Dublin up to an office in Belfast. That is no economic united Ireland, given that a company could do that before the end of last year. All of that reminds us of the problems of Brexit. We therefore have the protocol to protect us.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: No, I will not, because I am near the end of my time, but I appreciate the Member taking the opportunity —

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

Mr O'Toole: OK. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Card charges are one more example of why Brexit is a terrible thing. Members opposite laugh, but they should take responsibility. They are, in part, the reason that this has all happened. We should —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Time is up.

Mr O'Toole: — all be working together, in the Assembly —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Time is up.

Mr O'Toole: — North/South and east-west, to make the situation better.

Mr Stewart: I will try to get back onto the subject at hand. On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, it is not my intention either to divide the House, and I thank the Members who tabled the motion and those who tabled the amendment.

British consumers make tens of billions of pounds of purchases every year from European merchants on credit

cards alone, and the hike, both from MasterCard and Visa, will affect the majority of those transactions. Hopefully, the concerns of border communities will be alleviated by the point that my colleague for South Belfast made that face-to-face contact in those trades will not be dealt with, but, undoubtedly, the impact will be felt by online retailers. It goes without saying in the traditions that we already see that any costs borne by traders and merchants will be passed on to the consumer. 'Which?' said that just last week in raising concerns about it.

The increase will be relatively small. It seems that this is quite niche, but we only have to look at the amount of turnover and the increasing transactions that are taking place online to realise that this will affect a lot of people, particularly at a time when businesses face extra costs for checks and paperwork as a result of the protocol.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with him that this does not, at the moment, affect face-to-face or in-person card transactions, but we have just come through a year where more people in the United Kingdom have involved themselves in online or phone transactions. They have been doing that predominantly to order their groceries from supermarkets. Those payments will be included, so, as in-person activity declines, online and phone activity will increase. Therefore, I believe that the problem will increase.

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

Mr Stewart: Yes, and that is the fear. I agree with my colleague from East Antrim about that. Undoubtedly, as I have said, online trade is growing exponentially year on year at a rate of 20% plus, so this is only going to affect more and more people. It is right, therefore, that we are discussing today the impact that it will have.

As I said, fortunately it is getting recognition at Westminster and in the other Chambers of the devolved institutions. I know that the Westminster all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking has already addressed this at its past two or three meetings. The chair, Conservative MP Kevin Hollinrake, said that not only will the costs inevitably be passed on to consumers but that it is completely unjustifiable and akin to profiteering and opportunism in the Visa/MasterCard duopoly. I agree with him and others in calling on the Financial Conduct Authority to step in and put measures in place to prevent these increased charges.

Given the way that Visa and MasterCard are getting on here, it is no surprise that their share price has increased threefold in the past five years. They are colossal wrath-of-God financial institutions in their size and scale, and that share price increased threefold in five years with caps on their fees, yet they are looking to increase by 400% or 500%. It is completely unacceptable, and it will be passed on to consumers because of the pressures that businesses are facing. I hope that a message from this House can be sent to Westminster and that something can be done there. Deputy Speaker, I am not going to take the rest of my time.

Mr Frew: As my colleague has already outlined, the amendment improves the motion; hence, we will not oppose the motion if amended. I hear from the utterances across the way that those Members also support the amendment, so I can see that the House will not divide.

That is probably a good message and a good omen on an issue that needs resolved.

Having listened to some of the debate, I am frustrated that Members use an issue such as this to fight a battle that has already been lost — Brexit. There were a million ways to leave the European Union, and implementing the protocol was probably the worst of them.

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with him that there were different ways of implementing Brexit, but the DUP, when it was in a confidence-and-supply agreement with Theresa May as Prime Minister, had a golden opportunity to shape a deal that would not have resulted in motions such as today's on Brexit charges.

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

Mr Frew: Yes, we did shape the mindset, and we did add to the debate in the House of Commons, as was our right. It is the Government's decision on how they enact legislation. Whilst that is a problem that we need to raise with our Government and the EU and that we need to come to some arrangement on, there are always going to be those issues. Let no one say that leaving the EU is not a fundamental change. Of course it is. The very nature of the EU means that leaving it will always be a fundamental thing, given that it is an authoritarian state. That is one of the issues.

One issue that frustrates me is that, even though the motion is about an issue that needs to be resolved, the parties opposite, which have talked about the damage of Brexit, will not mention the protocol or the fact that they are pushing for its rigorous implementation, which is doing grave damage to our consumers and businesses.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: No, I am not going to give way. Maybe I will give way to the Member in time. He knows that I usually do.

What that looks like is this: people across the way are worried about the flea on the wild bear when the wild bear is charging towards us. That means the implementation and the removal of the grace periods of the protocol, which will do us in Northern Ireland grave damage. That is nothing to do with Brexit. That damage will come from the protocol — pure and simple. There were a million ways to leave the EU. *[Laughter.]* The irony in all that is Sinn Féin's condemnation of the change in interchange fees when it has endorsed protocol arrangements that put a far more significant and costly burden on businesses and consumers in border communities. In fact, the rise in those fees may have a more adverse impact because of the protocol. Our consumers and businesses could well be forced to look to the EU rather than to the UK for their market for goods. That has had a perverse effect and that is because of the protocol.

I have not understood for a long time why, on the EU, the SDLP has been consistent over its history, but Sinn Féin and the republican movement have not. Throughout their tragic and violent history, they were always anti-EU until the point where they could see more division. I will not take any lectures from Sinn Féin, especially when it says that the EU is so good, yet we see that its Abú database of voters breaks EU law and article 9 of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I ask the Member to withdraw that comment about Sinn Féin being involved in any lawbreaking.

Mr Frew: The Member has the right in his contribution — I am sure that he will do this when he sums up — to explain to the House what Sinn Féin is at when it talks about its database and the information that it holds on voters, who are workers and family members, and how that complies with EU law. That is something that we will wait to hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to return to the motion.

Mr Frew: OK. I will give way to Matthew O'Toole if he wants me to.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member very much for remembering me.

He made the point about the protocol. We did not want the protocol. We did not ask for the protocol. We think that it should be implemented because it is international law and has real benefits and opportunities. The protocol needs to be made to work, so we want to work with you, if you are willing, to make it work. We recognise that there are issues. That is just to clarify that point.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his contribution. That was very helpful. We will work with anyone who assists in trying to reduce the burdens and the grave damage that the protocol does to our people, businesses and workers. I think that it was Stewart Dickson who talked about higher prices and fewer choices —

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

Mr Frew: — that result from it. That is what the protocol brings. It brings higher prices and fewer choices, and we, in this party, are opposed to that.

1.45 pm

Ms Dolan: We are approaching the fourth month after the end of the transition period, and some of the implications of that that are already affecting my constituents on a day-to-day basis are the loss of the EU directive on cross-border healthcare, the need for a green card to drive in the Twenty-six Counties and mainland Europe, and the presentation of several challenges and uphill battles for our already struggling agri-food sector. Now we have this announcement from MasterCard and Visa that they are increasing credit and debit card fees fivefold. It is all because of a Brexit that the majority of people in the North voted against. It is clear that these major companies are cynically using the loss of EU consumer protection laws to overcharge customers.

This is Brexit laid bare: an opportunity for big businesses to line their pockets, free of the EU legislation that reined them in. What is to stop the mobile network providers reintroducing roaming charges, for example? My point is: where is this going to end? As a result of this and numerous other Brexit-related threats and loopholes, border dwellers are, once again, potentially the worst affected. Where I come from, people cross the border daily to purchase everyday items such as groceries and fuel. Credit card charges on basic goods and services must be avoided, as workers and families here are typically on lower incomes than those elsewhere. According to

NISRA's low pay index, 25% of workers in the North earn below the living wage of £8.21 an hour. The North has the highest rates of low pay across these islands. On these card charges, and in many other areas outside the scope of the protocol, we are facing divergence and increased costs for those who work, live and trade across the border. Workers and families simply cannot afford the additional charges and the costs of Brexit — again, a Brexit that the majority of them did not want.

Hotels, airlines, travel groups and car rentals could be the hardest hit by this announcement from MasterCard and Visa. Throughout the pandemic, the all-Ireland tourism flows have been instrumental in mitigating the decline in overseas tourism. These card charges put North/South tourism in jeopardy and endanger our tourism recovery.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Ms Dolan: Yes.

Mr O'Toole: A Member opposite raised the point that this was not relevant to in-person card fees. However, the truth is that, if someone is booking a hotel in Donegal or Mayo this summer, they might pay for it online using a card.

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

Ms Dolan: Thank you. I completely agree with the Member. Obviously, as we are encouraging staycations this year, that is more than likely going to happen.

At a time when many businesses have shifted to online models merely to survive during the pandemic, these extra charges will cut even deeper. We should be helping to ease these new trends, not exacerbating them. These unnecessary charges could be the difference in job losses and business closures, and therefore they should be stopped. I support the motion and the amendment.

Ms McLaughlin: If anyone had any doubt that the impact of Brexit would be to increase the burden on commerce, the costs for the consumer and the profits of some businesses, here it is. I say to the Members opposite that no amount of gaslighting or deflection will wish away the result of Brexit. I am reminded of the fairytale where the emperor wears no clothes. The charges imposed for many of my constituents who use their cards to shop a couple of miles away across the border will rise fivefold later this year. Visa has said that its change will affect only 5% of consumer transactions. The problem for Derry, and other border areas, is that it will affect perhaps 75% of people. That is my guess as to how many people in my area go across the border at some point in a normal month.

The credit card companies say that this increase is not their fault and that they are just making up ground for what they regard as unfair controls on their fees that were imposed by the European Union. Another way of saying that is that our constituents have been helped for years by the strong consumer protection that we lost as a result of Brexit. A lot has been said on this issue today, and I support most of what has been said, so there is no need for me to repeat it. However, it is not just about card transaction charges. Consumers, or constituents, have also lost protection against high mobile phone roaming charges and data roaming. For many people who live on the border, it is not just about going on holiday. It means that they must now be ultra-careful to avoid their phone

automatically switching networks and being hit by high roaming charges.

Until the end of last year, EU regulations prevented mobile phone companies in any EU country imposing high charges or charges for using a phone outside the UK. That protection ended on 1 January. Roaming charges now vary between mobile phone companies, placing a burden on the consumer to know the situation. I stress that that particularly hits those who live in border areas — people who were ignored too often throughout the Brexit referendum debate.

Remember the phrase "Project Fear", which was used whenever any of us who opposed Brexit warned of the possible impacts, including on phone roaming charges? Well, this is what "Project Fear" really looks like. This is the reality. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Catney: The pandemic has had a profound effect on how we do business across the world. The consequence of that is that the use of cards and contactless systems has increased exponentially. It is incredibly important that, coming out of the pandemic, we do all that we can to help our businesses to recover, to facilitate improvements that lead to business being conducted more effectively and to remove barriers to recovery and allow businesses to thrive.

The decision by Visa and MasterCard to increase fees as soon as the EU cap did not apply to the UK was opportunistic, short-sighted and almost predatory. To increase card fees when contactless transactions and e-commerce are rapidly accelerating will result in stifling the economy just as we are trying to bounce back from the past year: it simply cannot be acceptable. I can understand how costs can increase, but these are big companies and experts in the field. A five-fold increase surely cannot be justified in any way. The increases will have a huge impact on border companies but also on the number of world-class artisan and small businesses that work within the EU. Those are unique and specialist companies, which are at the heart of our local economy and which we should all be encouraging.

Commerce has moved online, but so has the processing of transactions. We hear all the time about the cost-saving opportunities that occur with technological advances. Why, then, do those massive companies need to impose such over-the-top charges on consumers? Any argument that the charges are required because of Brexit does not hold water for me. I have spoken with many small retailers in Britain who have managed to work out the different regulatory systems that exist now. If they can do that with teams of one or two people, then large companies such as Visa and MasterCard can deal with those changes with the minimum of disruption.

I have heard of a number of large companies that have looked to set up EU entitlements to try to avoid the fees, but that may not be possible for smaller businesses. We must push the UK Government to introduce a cap on the fees and to work with the EU on interchangeable caps. We live in a global economy, and our businesses operate within it. There has been a lot of talk about unfair tax regimes and other impacts that we need to oppose. This is another area where unfair costs are being imposed on our businesses, and there is a need to oppose them with the same dedication and perseverance.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): As Question Time begins at 2:00 pm, I suggest that the House takes it ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mr Muir, who will make the winding-up speech on the amendment.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Teachers: Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998

1. **Mr Stewart** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what consideration they have given to removing the exception of employment as a teacher in a school contained in the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998. (AQO 1877/17-22)

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): The provision has been part of our law since 1976. It was introduced to maintain a balance in the religious composition of the teaching workforce by allowing schools in the controlled sector to have regard to the community background of teachers when making appointments. Schools in the maintained sector may be able to rely on the occupational requirement of a religious education qualification for appointments to posts in that sector. Things have changed since 1976, and we need to review the provision. Our officials have had some preliminary engagement with the Department of Education, as any such review will be taken forward collaboratively with the education sector. Progress on that work has, of course, been impeded by the current crisis and the pressure on staff and ministerial time.

Mr Stewart: I thank the First Minister for her answer. I am exasperated by just how long this is taking. The only employment in Northern Ireland that does not operate under fair employment laws is teaching. Colleagues of mine have been highlighting the issue for many years, and it has been batted back and forth between the Executive Office and Education Ministers. How can we even begin to move towards a shared and single education system when it is perfectly legal to discriminate against a teacher on the basis of their background? First Minister, where is the blockage to change? Is it coming from the Department of Education, vested interests, the Churches or teaching unions? Who is against equality?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his supplementary and, indeed, his original question. I share his frustration. It seems like we have been talking for ever about the fair employment exemption and, indeed, the certificate for religious education in the maintained sector. Of course, we understand why the maintained sector seeks to have that for a number of teachers, but why should all teachers have to have the certificate for religious education if applying to the maintained sector? I share the Member's deep frustration. I feel that this needs to be dealt with, and I say that clearly because the Member asked where the blockage was: it is certainly not with me. I believe that there is a need to deal with the issue. He is right: if we are to have sharing across Northern Ireland, we should, of course, have it for our schoolteachers.

Ms Brogan: Will the First Minister outline what preliminary stakeholder engagement has taken place on the topic?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. A range of engagements with key stakeholders go back a number of years to before the Assembly was reconstituted in 2007. We took a number of views on the exemption in the last mandate. Officials will re-engage with the work as soon as they can, given the pandemic pressures, particularly on staffing in our office and, indeed, in the Department of Education. There is a clear need to deal with the matter, and I hope that the Member understands that that is my position.

FICT Report: Work Plan

2. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the detailed work plan, including resource and funding implications, of their Department's response to the report of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) will be completed. (AQO 1878/17-22)

Mrs Foster: With your permission, Mr Speaker, junior Minister Lyons will answer the question.

Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): As agreed by the Executive on 25 March, the FICT working group has started engagement with Departments to develop a FICT work plan for Executive consideration. Subject to any emerging pressures, the work will be completed over the coming months.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you for the response. I am conscious that a lot of work went into the development of the draft report, including the stakeholder engagement. Going forward, will representatives of different sections of society be on that working group, and what input will councils have?

Mr Lyons: I thank the commission for the work in which it has been involved. It produced a comprehensive report with many recommendations.

We have decided that a whole-of-Executive approach should be taken, because we want the maximum buy-in. It is only when we all work together that we will get some of the results that we want to see and get buy-in from everybody. We want the Executive as a whole leading on it, rather than just the Executive Office. Of course, as we develop a plan and consider implementation, it may be appropriate to engage with other outside bodies and agencies, including councils. The working group is prepared to look at all that and engage where necessary.

Mr Catney: Given the recent violence on our streets, does the Minister feel that other important resources, such as the anti-poverty strategy, must be considered as part of the implementation of any outcomes from the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition?

Mr Lyons: First and foremost, it is important that we condemn the violence from wherever it comes and wherever it happens. As a House, I think, we have been united on that. There are many causes for some of the disturbances and violence that we have seen lately, and those need to be addressed in different ways. FICT will play an important part in that. It is about recognising people's identity and culture and making sure that they feel supported in that. FICT has a role to play in all that, but by no means will it be the silver bullet.

Mr Sheehan: I welcome the progress that has been made on the FICT report. Increased equality, respect and parity of esteem must be the outworkings of that report.

As we all know, functioning North/South structures are critical for the successful operation of the Good Friday Agreement. The cancellation of a number of recent meetings because of the refusal of unionist Ministers to attend was a retrograde step. Does the Minister agree that playing politics with the Good Friday Agreement is disrespectful to the people who voted for it and risks undermining the agreement itself?

Mr Lyons: I congratulate the Member on being able to turn a question on the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition into a question about the North/South Ministerial Council. I think that he knows that one has nothing to do with the other. Our position has been made clear: when the meetings take place, they need to take place at an agreed time and the papers need to be agreed.

The Member raised the interesting matter of the Good Friday Agreement. A lot of Members around the House are not concerned about the outworkings of the Good Friday Agreement, the consent principle and Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom. I urge the Member to recognise those parts of the Good Friday Agreement as well and, in particular, the problems that the protocol is causing and work with others to sort them out.

Mr Stalford: Identity, culture and tradition are important, as are functioning institutions of government. Does the Minister agree that it was disrespectful to refuse to turn up for work for three years?

Mr Lyons: I think that we can all agree that three years of no government was detrimental to people across Northern Ireland. Many of the issues that we need to see addressed in our society could have been progressed had we had a functioning Government in Northern Ireland. All Members should reflect on that and recognise the problems that that caused.

Communities in Transition: Extension

3. **Mr McHugh** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether consideration has been given to extending the Communities in Transition project. (AQO 1879/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Again, with your permission, Mr Speaker, junior Minister Lyons will answer the question.

Mr Lyons: The Executive have agreed to a further phase of the Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime programme, which is led by the Department of Justice, to be delivered up to March 2024. In the wider programme, the Executive Office has lead responsibility for the Communities in Transition project, which will be a significant part of the community-facing element of the programme in phase 2. Our officials have used the past number of months to engage across the eight areas of focus to inform draft proposals for phase 2 delivery.

A contribution of £10 million has been made available from the Northern Ireland Office to support the Communities in Transition project over three years, up to March 2024. That funding is to support preventative work in communities that will build their resilience to paramilitary and criminal

elements. Contrary to recent media reports, the funding is not designed to support paramilitary organisations in becoming community groups. It should also be noted that the Communities in Transition project is only one of the many interventions that are being funded as part of the Tackling Paramilitarism programme, which includes policing responses and focused youth interventions, among others. A lasting impact will be achieved only through all parts of the programme operating in partnership.

Mr McHugh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. The programme and its extension are to be welcomed. I would like to see it extended geographically to include areas that I represent, such as Strabane. Will the Minister give us an assurance that none of the Communities in Transition funding will be provided to organised crime gangs?

Mr Lyons: As somebody who has had interventions in his constituency, I see the benefits of the Communities in Transition project and can understand why people want to see it extended to other areas. Feedback from elected representatives suggests that further areas could benefit from a focus from the Communities in Transition project. If sufficient funding is available, those areas may include but are not limited to Shantallow, Tiger's Bay, Mourneview in Lurgan and north Antrim. Expansion into other areas is being considered in the context of planning for phase 2 of the project.

The Member raised something that, I think, comes from recent media coverage of the Communities in Transition project. Of course I can confirm that the funding is not for paramilitary organisations. It is for communities in transition: the clue is in the title. It is to assist the communities that are most at risk of coming under the coercive control of paramilitary organisations. It is important that we support those communities. We have to look at the projects involved. It is about helping people with their mental health and with employability and skills. It is about all sorts of things that we want to see happen, which then reduce the impact, the influence and the control that paramilitaries can have. It is important to put on the record what the money is for, what it is intended for, what it is doing and the positive work that is going on in communities. In my constituency, I see the positive and life-changing impact that it has had.

Mr McCrossan: Before the First Minister answers my question, I ask her, when she addresses it, to address the House with facts. Last week, she addressed the House with incorrect claims against me, claims that were totally wrong. I would appreciate it if spurious remarks were not made by the First Minister.

How can the First Minister ensure equality of delivery and value for money from Communities in Transition spend? Will that be made public?

Mr Lyons: We need only look at the outcomes and impacts that there have been already. The outcomes are exactly what we wanted to achieve, and we have a clear record of them. That is why we are moving into phase 2 and why more funding has become available. The process is open and transparent. Projects are awarded through an open procurement process, so any organisation that is registered on the public-sector procurement portal, eTendersNI, can bid to be part of the delivery framework

for the project. There are rules and procedures in place to make sure that the money is spent in the right way, and we are seeing the impacts of that.

2.15 pm

Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland

4. **Ms S Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the work done by their Department to facilitate the implementation of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. (AQO 1880/17-22)

10. **Mr Easton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the impact that the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland is having on businesses in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1886/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will answer questions 4 and 10 together. Since the end of the transition period, it has been a priority for our Department and the wider Executive to identify, assess and seek to resolve issues that are having an impact on our businesses. The deputy First Minister and I met Michael Gove and the European Commission vice-president Maroš Šefčovič to outline the challenges that we face, and I note their public commitment to find solutions and to engage with our business groups and civic society.

We continue to engage at ministerial and official level with the United Kingdom Government and others as relevant. Throughout all our engagement, we have taken every opportunity to highlight the need to resolve issues and to ensure that the additional burdens and costs for our people and our businesses are minimised.

One of the key agreed objectives of the Executive is to ensure, in so far as is possible, unfettered trade between ourselves and the rest of the United Kingdom. As an Executive, we regularly review related issues to the end of the transition period as well as preparations for the end of the grace periods, including those that the United Kingdom Government unilaterally extended in March 2021.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the First Minister for her reply. I think that all in the House can agree that Brexit and the outworking protocol were inevitably going to raise issues and a challenging transition period, but will the First Minister agree with me and the many business people who recognise that all those problems are solvable and can be worked through? Does she believe that this place has a duty to reach out and support all those businesses and not be an obstacle to finding solutions?

Mrs Foster: The solution and the way to deal with all the huge difficulties that businesses are facing is to replace the protocol. That is very clear because just when you think that you have answered one issue with the protocol, another arises. That is the difficulty with the protocol because, as the European Union continues to implement regulations, we will diverge from the internal market of the United Kingdom. Therefore, the protocol needs to be dealt with, and I support businesses in doing that.

I spent some of Friday hearing about the extra costs that businesses are having to absorb as a result of this iniquitous protocol, and it is long past the time for our Government to act to make sure that the protocol is gone.

Mr Easton: The situation is clearly extremely challenging. What recent discussions has the First Minister had with local businesses about the protocol? What differences does she envisage if the grace periods were to end?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for accommodating me and enabling me to speak to some businesses in his constituency on Friday. I found it very useful, and I thank him for that. I was alarmed at the extra costs that those businesses have to incur. Some of them are passing those on to consumers and clients, which is very worrying, so we are seeing a reduction in choice and an increase in cost as a result of the protocol being implemented in the fashion that it has been.

We have heard already from the chief vet in Northern Ireland that the number of checks that he would be required to do if the grace periods were to come to an end would be unworkable. The checks being carried out at present are completely disproportionate to the risk to the single market. We are all very aware of that. However, the European Union continues to push ahead to try to implement the protocol. The damage that is being done to our businesses is incalculable, so we will need to continue to try to get the protocol replaced so that we can move on.

Mr O'Dowd: One of the ways that our society and this institution can face the challenges of Brexit, COVID and economic recovery is through North/South and east-west cooperation, and, over the last 24 or 48 hours, we have heard a number of reasons why your party has not been turning up at North/South ministerial meetings. Mr Lyons has just told us that it is for diary reasons. Yesterday, the deputy leader of your party told us that it was in opposition to the protocol. Will you assure this House and others that your party will not use North/South cooperation in your campaign against the protocol?

Mrs Foster: Not for the first time, you have misrepresented what the deputy leader of my party said yesterday. To answer Mr McCrossan's point earlier, I can show him the post that he put up if he would like me to show it to him because he put it up before anybody else —

Mr McCrossan: *[Inaudible.]*

Mrs Foster: — and that was the point that I was making. *[Interruption.]*

Mr McCrossan: *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCrossan: — entirely wrong. Ridiculous for a First Minister —

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. Excuse me, Mr McCrossan. You should come to order when you are requested to.

Mrs Foster: Just to be clear for Mr O'Dowd, who asked the question, I have made it clear at all times that I and colleagues will act in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland and in accordance with all our ministerial responsibilities and, indeed, with the Pledge of Office, as we have indicated. There has been much misrepresentation, which has been quite mischievous, and I expect that from political opponents. We heard it here again today that we are “refusing” to attend meetings between the Northern Ireland Executive and the Government of the Republic of Ireland, and that is simply not the case. I spoke with the Taoiseach Friday week ago, actually, by telephone.

However, I just want to be clear about this: the Northern Ireland protocol is not part of the North/South Ministerial Council. As we outlined some weeks ago, North/South relationships will be affected by the fact that the protocol is in place, because it has damaged east-west relationships. We need to sort it out. We need to get rid of the protocol so that we can continue to have relationships with our nearest neighbour in the appropriate way in the future so that every community can benefit from Northern Ireland's constitutional and economic position as opposed to being in the dreadful situation that we find ourselves in.

Mr Allister: Does the First Minister have any comment on the repetition last week of the false propaganda by the vice president of the European Commission that the protocol is the only way to protect the Belfast Agreement and to preserve peace and stability? Is there a single passage in the Belfast Agreement that prevented the United Kingdom leaving as one nation, that prevented the two parts of Ireland belonging to different single markets and that required a border in the Irish Sea? If the protocol, by its very authors, is built on such flagrant falsehoods, how is such a warped and intolerable imposition meant to be experienced and endured? Does she agree that it must go?

Mrs Foster: I agree with the Member that the protocol should go. He rightly points out the misrepresentation by the European Commission vice president and the fact that he either wilfully misunderstands the Belfast Agreement or is misrepresenting it for his own ends. I know not which, but there is a need for those in Europe, London and Dublin to listen to the voices of those of us who will not have the protocol because it is damaging the economy of Northern Ireland. More than that, it is damaging our citizenship here in Northern Ireland as equal citizens of the United Kingdom because we cannot partake of the internal market of the United Kingdom, something that, as I am sure the Member will be aware, was very much at the core of the Act of Union all those years ago.

It is fundamental that we continue to put across the point that the protocol must go.

Dr Aiken: The Chair of the Seanad Special Select Committee on the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union said recently that the protocol damages the Belfast Agreement. Does the First Minister believe that any political party in Northern Ireland can no longer call for its rigorous implementation because it is indeed so damaging to Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question and comments. I was made aware of those comments by his colleague at the Committee for the Executive Office last week. I was interested to hear them and that there is a realisation that the protocol is damaging the Belfast Agreement. That is something that the Member's party was very much involved in from the outset. Therefore, I take on board what he says, and there is absolutely a need to deal with the matter and to deal with it as quickly as possible.

‘Moving Forward: The Executive’s Pathway Out Of Restrictions’: Progress

5. **Mrs Cameron** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on progress on ‘Moving Forward: The Executive’s Pathway Out Of Restrictions’. (AQO 1881/17-22)

11. **Mr Boylan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out Of Restrictions'. (AQO 1887/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will answer questions 5 and 11 together. As part of the four-week review process that is outlined in 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out Of Restrictions', the Executive took a wide range of decisions last Thursday to reopen many aspects of our economy and society over the coming weeks. The deputy First Minister and I outlined those in our statement to the Assembly's Ad Hoc Committee last week. All the decisions that we have taken on relaxations since the pathway was launched at the start of March have been informed by the data, and we are committed to keeping them under review.

We appreciate the sacrifices that have been made to reduce the spread of the virus. In that knowledge, we have reached these decisions carefully to balance the need to control transmission with the need to open up our economy and society again. However, the lifting of restrictions does not mean that we can let our guard down. It is down to all of us to continue to adhere to the measures that we are now so familiar with to protect the relaxations that we have worked so hard to achieve. By that, I mean maintaining social distancing, washing our hands, wearing a face covering and continuing to use the StopCOVID NI app.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the First Minister for her answer. Will she give an assurance for businesses in particular that, as COVID data continues to improve, economic recovery will be an ever-increasing focus of the Executive?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. I absolutely concur that economic recovery must now be very much our number-one focus. We know that there are industries and businesses right across Northern Ireland that have been in a really dire situation over the past year. We have tried to help through mitigations and through making grants available to those companies, but we totally understand that the best way to recover is to be open and to be able to continue with business.

It is really good news that there is now an opportunity for those in the 35-39 age group to book their COVID vaccine; that was announced by the Department of Health at 1.00 pm. People who are in that age group can now avail themselves of the COVID vaccine. If there is anybody in that age group in the House — junior Minister — I encourage them to make sure that they take that up.

Mr Boylan: Minister, the pandemic has clearly highlighted the deep-rooted disadvantage and deprivation across many parts of our community. Can the First Minister assure us that addressing social inequality will be at the core of any recovery strategy?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. Throughout the pandemic, we have tried to talk about the impact on the health and well-being of our people but also to look at economic well-being and societal well-being. Those are the three elements that will inform the strategy of the Executive. Those are the three core elements of what we are trying to achieve. We do, of course, recognise — I am sure that the Member will agree — that having a job is very much part of dealing with the societal disadvantage that some have in their lives. That is why

we should very much strive to make sure that there are suitable and well-paid jobs available for everyone.

Dr Archibald: As we come out of lockdown and move towards economic recovery, part of that recovery should be to build on the unique status that we have under the protocol. That is something that Invest NI has been promoting. I understand that there has been significant interest in relation to that within Invest NI, with at least 30 investors exploring opportunities here since the end of the transition period. Will the First Minister comment on that level of interest? Does she agree that we need to maximise opportunities under the protocol?

Mrs Foster: Unfortunately, because of the damage that the protocol has visited upon us here in Northern Ireland in respect of our largest market, we have not been able to take as much advantage of the interest from other parts of the world as we would have liked. I find that very disappointing. The fact that our largest market has been hampered in the way that it has has caused great damage. We need to see the protocol dealt with as soon as we possibly can so that we can then go out into the world and take advantage of the skills that our young people have and the fact that we have such a strong educational base here. We need to bring our young people back. Pivotal public policy forum recently did a report about the brain drain out of Northern Ireland and the fact that we need the brightest and best to stay here. Those are the things that we need to focus on in our forthcoming economic recovery.

Mr Stewart: The sectors last to open will be hospitality, including the wedding sector, and tourism. They have been most affected throughout this.

Can the Minister assure the House and those sectors that financial support will be there and will continue, even when they open in a partial way, to support them through this?

2.30 pm

Mrs Foster: Certainly, the Executive's decision last week was that financial support would continue until they are fully reopened again. Some of those hospitality venues that have outside premises can open, as the Member knows, on 30 April, but their support will continue because they cannot open fully. We think that that is the right thing to do.

We are very conscious of the fact that many people in the wedding industry have suffered greatly. My heart goes out to those who have had to reorganise their weddings. I was speaking to a couple, at the weekend, who have had to reorganise theirs four times. That is just incredible. What a stress that is on young people — and maybe on those who are not so young as well; I will not be ageist. It is important that we continue to support the industry. The Economy Minister continues to keep in close contact with the industry to see what else we need to do to help it.

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

NSMC Meetings: Failure to Nominate Attendees

T1. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister on what basis they failed to nominate a Minister to attend last week's North/South sectoral meeting, given that section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act

sets out the legal duty of Ministers to attend meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) and where there is any doubt over which Minister should attend, it is up to the First Minister and deputy Minister to attend. (AQT 1191/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The transport Minister, Ms Mallon, decided that the sectoral meeting would go ahead despite the fact that she had been told that it did not suit the nominated person who would accompany her and that the agenda and papers had not been agreed by my office. North/South Ministerial Council meetings are to proceed by agreement. That is the whole point: that a unionist Minister is there when a nationalist Minister is in the lead, and vice versa. All those things have to proceed by agreement. I very much hope that agreement and consensus will be sought by those Ministers who are setting up North/South Ministerial Council meetings in the future.

Ms McLaughlin: I thank the First Minister for her answer. Now that she is quite well aware of the distress that not appointing someone to attend that meeting has caused to the House generally, will she assure the House that Minister Dodds will attend the meeting that is due to take place later this week, or might we learn of some excuse now as to why that, too, would be impossible?

Mrs Foster: I am not sure where the distress is. My goodness, if this is what distress looks like, I would hate to see what real distress actually looks like. As I have indicated to Mr O'Dowd and will indicate to the Member as well, I am fully aware of our ministerial responsibilities with regard to the NSMC, as outlined in the Pledge of Office. I have told the Member why the meeting did not go ahead. It is up to her to decide whether she believes it or not. That is a matter for her. That is the reality. There was no agreement on the agenda despite the fact that her party's Minister decided to tweet the draft agenda on Thursday night, thereby breaching ministerial protocol by putting Executive papers out into the public realm — and not for the first time, I have to say, from the SDLP. However, that is a matter for her.

Mr Speaker: George Robinson is not in his place, and topical question No 3 has been withdrawn. I call Mark Durkan.

Mental Health Crisis

T4. **Mr Durkan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans the Executive have to address our mental health crisis, given that they will be well aware of the scale of the challenge that we face to address mental health issues here — we were in a bad place pre-pandemic; according to the experts, we are in even worse place now — and responsibility does not lie solely with the Minister of Health. (AQT 1194/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question on a subject that he returns to frequently, and I commend him for that. The Executive subcommittee that deals with mental health, resilience, well-being and suicide prevention is, I have to say, one of the best attended of the Executive's subcommittees. It is an area that we all take very seriously. We want to interact with the health professionals who come to that subcommittee. At the last meeting, we were briefed by the interim mental health champion, when she was able to bring us up to date with ongoing interventions at that time. That subcommittee continues to have, as the Member rightly says, a whole-

of-Government approach to the mental health issue. Of course, primacy for that lies with the Minister of Health, but, as an Executive, we all stand four-square behind the Minister of Health as he tries to deal with this incredible difficulty, which will, unfortunately, only get worse as we move out of the pandemic.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her answer, and I hope that this issue can unite parties and people here. Political discord and instability do nothing to help our population's mental well-being. As chair of the all-party group on mental health, I take this opportunity to ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister, together with all MLAs, to unite in support of Mental Health Awareness Week next month and to renew their commitment to tackling the pandemic of poor mental health.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for that. I will not speak on behalf of the deputy First Minister, but, if the Member would like us to do something collectively to mark that, I am sure that we would be more than happy to look at doing that. It unites everybody not just in the Executive but across the House. This is about how we intervene to try to deal with some of these issues in a timely fashion. That is why the subcommittee is not just about suicide prevention but about resilience and well-being and trying to deal with early intervention issues. I very much look forward to the Member writing to us if he feels that we can help with that.

Wedding Receptions

T5. **Mrs Barton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to clarify the position with wedding receptions, including music and dancing, given that there must be something in the air in Fermanagh, with her being contacted by a number of couples over the weekend in relation to the reopening of hotels. (AQT 1195/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The Member is right to identify that. I had to deal with that over the weekend. Wedding receptions will be permitted on a risk-assessed basis from 24 May 2021, depending on the size of the venue. In that respect, it is like the situation with churches. We still do not have clarity on the matter of music and dancing, but we will continue to speak to our medical advisers about that. They are concerned that singing and dancing could cause some difficulties because they are aerobic activities, but we are very much aware of the issue and will be happy to come back to the House on it in due course.

Mrs Barton: The Minister will also be aware that many couples have organised and reorganised weddings and that many have lost deposits as a result of that. Where service providers have held on to those deposits, can they claim from the various COVID schemes and grants that have been made available?

Mrs Foster: The short answer, unfortunately, is that I am not over the detail of that. I am happy to take it to the Economy Minister who should, under consumer law, be able to provide some clarity about whether they can claim from some of the grant schemes because of the loss of deposit. Let me take that away and get the Economy Minister to come back to the Member about that.

HIA Redress Board: Dissatisfaction

T6. **Mr Clarke** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether talk of dissatisfaction with the Historical

Institutional Abuse Redress Board has reached TEO, given that although it is welcome that there has been movement on the historical institutional abuse (HIA) issues, with the redress board having met, there seems to be dissatisfaction in some areas. (AQT 1196/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Yes. The deputy First Minister and I had a meeting about historical institutional abuse with the new commissioner, Fiona Ryan, who has been put in place as an advocate for all the people who come forward with their stories. That was a very useful meeting. I know that a number of Members across the House have been contacted by people who are applying to the redress board and that they have concerns that the process is causing distress for some of those individuals. The deputy First Minister addressed that in her previous Question Time appearance. We are aware of that issue and will get a briefing about it to see whether there is anything that we can do to assist. The last thing that we want to do is to cause any retraumatisation.

Mr Clarke: In essence, the First Minister has answered my supplementary question. For many, it has been a difficult, long journey with a lot of waiting. It is inevitable that any conversation that they have will revisit the past, so I welcome the fact that she will look at that. Can the First Minister give us any idea of what could be done to soften that for the individuals involved?

Mrs Foster: We want to hear people's experience of what is causing problems in the process. You will know, Mr Clarke, that, whether because of this sort of abuse or other sorts of abuse and violence, individual victims have different reactions to what they have to go through. We will want to listen to those voices and, indeed, engage with the commissioner again to see whether she can give any clear suggestions on what can be changed in the process to try to help.

Mr Speaker: I call Seán Lynch. [Pause.] The Member is not in his place. We will move on. I call Pat Catney. [Pause.] Mr Catney is not in his place.

HIA Redress Board: Payments

T9. **Mr Sheehan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for a progress report on payments that have been made by the HIA Redress Board. (AQT 1199/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Unfortunately, I do not have information on the precise number of payments made to date, but, bearing in mind the last question — I want to take into account that answer when I reply to the Member — we are pleased to see the number of cases that has been going through the redress board. Again, we will want to take into consideration the distress that has been pointed out to us so that we can try to see whether there is a solution to that.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad-Aire as ucht a freagra. I thank the First Minister for her answer. Have any resources been directed to increasing the number of panels in order to speed up payments?

Mrs Foster: I do not think that we have identified the speed of payments as a particular issue. The payments are going quite well. As the Member will know, some cases are more complicated than others and will take a little more time, but one issue that has been raised with us and has caused distress is the fact that medical reports have

had to be obtained again, and that causes difficulties if people have to go through that process again. We will look at the HIA process to see whether there is anything more that we can do to try to deal with the problems that have been identified.

Mr Speaker: Andy Allen is not in his place, so I ask Members to take their ease for two or three minutes until 2.45 pm. Thank you.

2.45 pm

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

Education

Free School Meals: Eligibility

1. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister of Education to outline the number of children eligible to receive free school meals in each of the last five years. (AQO 1892/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I thank the Member for his question. My Department does not hold information on pupils who are eligible for free school meals. However, it holds information on pupils who are entitled to free school meals — it is a slight and subtle difference — having applied through the Education Authority's (EA) free school meal entitlement process. That is collected annually via the school census. In 2016-17, 102,996 pupils were entitled to free school meals. In 2017-18, 101,061 pupils were entitled to free school meals. In 2018-19, 99,893 pupils were entitled to free school meals. In 2019-2020, 97,350 pupils were entitled to free school meals. Finally, in 2020-21, which is the most recent complete set of data, 98,239 pupils were entitled to free school meals.

Mr Allen: I thank the Minister for his answer. A significant number of children are entitled to free school meals across our education system. It is important for them to be provided with free school meals in a school setting. Minister, you moved quickly during the pandemic to provide payments when children were not in school. Do you have any plans to bring forward a more long-term policy to tackle holiday hunger?

Mr Weir: As the Member will be aware, I put a proposal to the Executive. We reacted fairly quickly to the issue of holiday hunger when it hit during the pandemic. One of the advantages that we have in Northern Ireland compared with other jurisdictions that operate largely through local government districts is that single payments can be made. Initially, about 95% or more of the pupils who were entitled were in the one set of information. We worked to complete that. A proposal was then put to the Executive from a holiday hunger point of view to extend that to the periods in which schools were not in place: summer, Christmas, Easter and the half-term holidays. Those payments will continue to be made until the end of the Assembly term. Northern Ireland was the first jurisdiction across the UK to do that. I take on board what the Member said. That provides a scenario for the next year or so, but, as part of that, there will be discussions about the anti-poverty strategy. The direct lead on holiday hunger and across the board when it comes to child poverty lies with the Department for Communities. We are working on a cross-jurisdictional basis, particularly with the Department for

Communities, to try to scope out the actions that could be taken beyond 2022 so that there is a permanent solution to the issue.

Mr Lyttle: I will press the Minister for further clarity: does he support the permanent introduction of free school meal direct payments during holiday periods?

Mr Weir: I am entirely open to the avenue in which that can take place. I am supportive of that being extended into the future and made permanent. As I indicated, about 100,000 children are entitled to free school meals at the moment. There is a concern that that number will expand as we move beyond the pandemic, people go back to work and furlough ends, because there may well be further redundancies. It is important that children are provided for during that period. In many ways, the issue has been forced into a stronger conclusion because of COVID; there are occasionally useful spin-offs in that regard. It has focused minds. As such, we need to provide a longer-term solution. That will probably mean a change in legislation, because, strictly speaking, a methodology is used for those payments at present. Where we find directions that can be made, they are not, strictly speaking, on the free school meal side of things. Rather, they flow from that.

As I said, we have a high level of advantage, because we have worked with the EA and others to identify the bank account of any eligible family. We have also spoken to the Home Office to make arrangements for refugee children. We therefore have a fairly watertight and complete list. Leaving aside the arguments elsewhere, in England, Scotland or Wales, because free school meals are administered there through a range of local authorities, there are not the opportunities to identify those who are eligible. We need to take advantage of the fact that names are available here through the payment system that the Education Authority established.

Ms Brogan: The Department's figures from last year show that only 80% of the children who are entitled to free school meals availed themselves of that support. Will the Minister outline what he is doing to increase the number of children who avail themselves of free school meals?

Mr Weir: We encourage everyone to apply. It is about proportionality. I will give a headline today: we will be releasing the latest direct figures on 29 April. As the Member indicated, the proportion of school meals taken last year was around 80% or 81%. When we talk about school meals being taken, figures are recorded on a day-to-day basis, and we have to realise that, at any one time, some pupils will be off. People are therefore encouraged to take up their entitlement, but, ultimately, we cannot force them to do so. I encourage anyone who is eligible to take up that entitlement, however.

Mr Allister: Does the Minister have any plans to visit the linkage, which was created by his predecessor from Sinn Féin, between the number of free school meals in a school and the level of funding for which that school qualifies? That linkage is causing a disparity in the general funding of schools and putting schools with a low level of uptake of free school meals at a great disadvantage. Is that disparity going to continue?

Mr Weir: The broader review of the common funding formula is ongoing. We need to make sure that the funding is always distributed in the most advantageous ways possible. I have striven to ensure that schools have a

higher proportion of the budget and that the aggregated schools budget is protected. We need to ensure that the funding formula, whatever it is, is as fair as possible to schools. In my experience, with any change to funding, those who will gain an advantage from it are quite happy and those who will see a reduced level of funding and are at a disadvantage are not. All factors have to be taken into account, and, from that point of view, the broader review of the common funding formula is about trying to make sure that we have as fair a distribution as is possible.

St Mary's High School, Brollagh: Closure

2. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Education how he took into account the needs of the rural community of Brollagh in relation to his decision to identify St Mary's High School for closure. (AQO 1893/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her question. In making my decision on development proposal (DP) 584, I was mindful of all the duties placed on me and of the need to consider all the evidence presented. In many ways, from a ministerial and departmental viewpoint, when it comes to DPs, we are effectively the end point of the process. I can make decisions only on proposals that are brought forward by the school planning and managing authorities.

It is clear to me that, on a number of grounds, St Mary's High School in Brollagh, despite the great work of many people, is unsustainable and that its discontinuation will be in the best interests of pupils. The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), which is the managing authority, has confirmed that due regard was given to the Rural Needs Act 2016 and that details of that were included in the equality and human rights screening of DP 584 and in a separate rural needs impact assessment. The rural needs impact assessment states that the intention of the proposal is to advance the aspirations, aims and objectives of the sustainable schools policy and:

"It is important that children in rural communities have access to a quality education in cost effective provision."

CCMS acknowledged, in the screening of the proposal, the potential impact of closing St Mary's, Brollagh, on the local rural area. Although it is recognised that the closure of any school is upsetting for a community, difficult decisions have to be made, and they have to be made in the best interests of the children, rather than necessarily the institution. The decision allows those pupils to have access to the broad and balanced curriculum that is afforded to other post-primary pupils across Northern Ireland.

Ms Dolan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. I declare an interest as a past pupil of St Mary's. Coláiste Cholmcille, Ballyshannon, and Magh Éne College, Bundoran, are both closer to St Mary's, Brollagh than any post-primary school in Fermanagh. I have raised that with the Donegal Education and Training Board (ETB), and, in response to the Donegal ETB, CCMS said that it recognised that parents and children may wish to consider those schools and agreed to have the locality education adviser liaise with the school's principal and Donegal ETB. Can you also facilitate and support that?

Mr Weir: We are happy to look into how that will help any individual pupil. From that point of view, there will be pupils living in border areas who may be seeking education in

either direction: in the Republic of Ireland if they live in Northern Ireland, and vice versa. We are happy to see what can be done to facilitate that.

This is ultimately about trying to ensure that there is a choice for pupils. The number of subjects that St Mary's, Brollagh could offer was well below what the entitlement framework suggests. Last year, 60% of pupils in years 11 and 12, which are examination years, had to travel to at least one other school at some stage during the week to avail themselves of lessons. I appreciate that it is painful when any school closes, but we need to ensure that the opportunities for children in Brollagh are the same as those provided to children elsewhere. If that can be provided to some pupils by moving to a location in the Republic of Ireland, I am sure that that will be looked at, as happens on other occasions.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, this is, as you said, a very painful case. It is hitting the local community very hard, and people are annoyed by it. Can you reassure the House that every possible avenue has been explored to save the school? Is closure really the only option that is left, given the circumstances of the case?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. Let us put this in context: not only were the pupils at Brollagh not able to access, by a long way, the full range of topics — I think that it was sitting at 11 or 12 subjects — but, as indicated, 60% of pupils at that level had to move to other schools for at least part of the week. When the decision was taken on St Mary's, Brollagh, I think that there were 67 pupils at the post-primary school. The normal threshold for a post-primary school — that is regarded as a general rule of thumb for sustainability — is that there should be 500 pupils in years 8 to 12. I appreciate that some schools have a bit below that. However, catering for a little bit over 10% of what should be the minimum threshold is simply not sustainable.

A range of options for St Mary's, Brollagh has been on the agenda for, I suspect, most of the last decade. I remember that the Member's party colleague and predecessor in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, Richie McPhillips, had a range of suggestions that were all explored. However, there comes a point at which, to provide education to young people, difficult decisions have to be made based on sustainability. I entirely understand that there will be concern in any school when potential closure is mooted.

Mr Buckley: Minister, can you outline the recognition that is given to the reality when considering thresholds for the sustainability of schools?

3.00 pm

Mr Weir: In post-primary education, there are, principally, two objectives for the numbers: an intake of 100 and an overall cadre of 500. There is also the impact that it has on the entitlement framework, which is about the level of choice. Specifically in the primary sector, there is much more of a clear differentiation, meaning that, for a primary school in what is counted as an urban setting, 140 is the recommended minimum threshold number; in a primary school in a rural area, it is 105. There is perhaps that more direct relationship because, particularly for primary schools, there is an expectation that having to travel for long distances is more problematic for very young children than it is for those at post-primary level.

Even if we take those figures, the numbers attending St Mary's, Brollagh — it is a scattered rural community, so

there was no vast, untapped pool of children — which is a post-primary school in a rural setting had, for a number of years, been less than two thirds of the minimum for a primary school in a rural setting. I think that that really becomes unsustainable. Rural need is one of the factors that are taken into account, and I appreciate that there is probably a bit more fluidity in an urban setting. Last year, an amendment, largely speaking, was made to the definition of the terms "rural" and "urban". In education, there was an old definition of the term "urban" covering purely Belfast and Londonderry, and that has now been extended to deal with some of the anomalies, which are settings where there are large areas of population. Even with that, whatever way you count it — you should count this on a rural basis — unfortunately, St Mary's, Brollagh simply was not meeting the criteria on a range of subjects.

Cotton Primary School, Bangor: Vacant Site

3. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans for the future of the old Cotton Primary School site. (AQO 1894/17-22)

Mr Weir: When an EA property becomes vacant, it may be put to alternative use, retained for a future educational use or disposed of in line with current guidance from Land and Property Services (LPS). It is normally where disposal takes place that there is a sort of a pecking order where there is an option to see, first, whether there is any other educational benefit for which the site can be used. It would then be offered either to a social enterprise, community group or other Department. Finally, if there were no interest, it would be offered to a commercial setting.

Specifically, the former Cotton Primary School near Newtownards is being retained by the Education Authority for potential use by children and young people's services for special educational purposes. It is under consideration for additional special school provision. The review on its usage is ongoing.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he outline the SEN pressures that have warranted the building being considered for use? Will he also give a guarantee that he can secure the site, as the place has been wrecked?

Mr Weir: I will take the first point first. A significant number of additional places are required in special schools for September 2021 for children and young people with statements of special educational need. We are in the virtuous situation where that is also the case with specialist provision in mainstream schools. Down the years, we have seen such an expansion because of additional statementing and because children who, going back 10, 20 or 30 years, would not have been in a position to go to a school are much more able to do so. As I said, that has arisen also from the EA clearing a substantial backlog of statutory assessments. There was a period when there were extremely long waiting lists, and those have been largely got down. Also, there is a yearly trend of increasing numbers of children and young people with more complex special educational needs. For instance, this year there has been a 5% increase on last year. My officials are working with the EA through a number of fora to undertake a full assessment of capacity and need with the special school estate and of specialist provision in mainstream education.

On any physical destruction of the building, we will have to make sure that everything is fit for purpose. I will raise that with officials to see what actions are being taken to secure the site to make sure that, as far as possible, it is not subject to any level of vandalism as we move ahead. That is always a risk with any vacant sites.

Miss Woods: On the same thread of site disposal, I ask the Minister for an update on plans for the current Priory Integrated College site in Holywood, if and when the school moves to Redburn.

Mr Weir: I will get the specific and detailed information for the Member and write to her on that.

On the overall issue, Priory is one of the projects that have been green-lighted for Fresh Start money. Therefore, there will be a change of location that, hopefully, can allow Priory to further grow and flourish. It will require that relocation side of things. I will check the details of the timing. As indicated, the general position, which falls under the remit of the EA, is initial retention and then examination if the site is to be disposed of in any way. The consistent pecking order is that, where there is an expression of interest that is doable and has a direct educational impact, that will always come as first priority. Any sort of government institution or a situation involving a social enterprise would come next. Only when there is no real interest from those areas will there be an examination of any commercial disposal for whatever purposes.

Mr Chambers: I welcome the proposed use of those premises. Will the Minister give an anticipated timescale for the premises to come back into meaningful use?

Mr Weir: From that point of view, it will be dependent on an exercise currently going on because of some of the additional pressures that there will be on SEN in September 2021. Those cannot be met simply by putting more children in classes, in part because there will be a restriction, particularly with SEN in special schools, on how many can be accommodated in a class. There is probably less elasticity, shall we say, than there is in a mainstream setting.

There is a strategic discussion to be had, if additional physical resources and additional sites are needed, on whether that will be met in the short term by using sites that are vacant at present and to what extent, for example, additional mobile classrooms can be used in some settings. It will be part of an overall strategic decision. Therefore, particularly in relation to September 2021, decisions will be taken fairly swiftly to try to ensure that the school estate that we have is compatible with the needs and pressures. I anticipate that the decisions will be taken fairly shortly. Given the ongoing pressures and the need, looked at from the perspective of longer-term capital turnaround, if the conclusion were reached that, for example, the Cotton site was not needed for September 2021, that does not mean that it is ruled out for that purpose for all time. It may well be that there is a pressure in 2022 that needs to be met. That will be factored in. Hopefully, there will be a bit more clarity around that fairly soon.

Irish-medium Education

4. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Education to outline the steps he has taken to develop Irish-medium education. (AQO 1895/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her question. In delivering the statutory duty on my Department to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education, a range of actions, funding support and policy adaptations are undertaken. My Department seeks to respond positively to parental demand for Irish-medium provision and works to meet the needs of the sector, for example in considering home-to-school transport requirements and schools' requests for temporary variations to their approved numbers. All policy areas across the Department consider whether any policy adaptation could support the delivery of that statutory duty.

Additionally, a range of bespoke, sector-specific investment is provided to support the development of Irish-medium education. That includes annual funding to Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG), which acts as a valuable advocate for the sector, specific support to Irish-medium units, funding to the Education Authority and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), and early years funding to Altram, which has developed a range of pre-school resources aimed at helping immersion learning. My Department also requires its arm's-length bodies to support the delivery of the 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 CnaG to support schools. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, I set up the continuity of learning programme, with a focus on supporting pupil learning. Recognising the specific needs of the sector, I included a separate work stream for Irish-medium education. Much valuable work has come out of that work stream.

I am also aware of the loss of language learning due to the pandemic and the shortage of substitute teachers. My officials continue to work with relevant partner bodies to seek opportunities to mitigate and resolve such concerns.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as sin. Given that comprehensive response, could the Minister outline any discussions that he has had with his ministerial colleague in the Department for the Economy regarding workforce planning for the Irish-medium sector?

Mr Weir: As regards workforce planning, we are looking at the issue of qualified teachers, and there is, obviously, a particular issue at post-primary level. I am aware of the issues about the availability of suitably qualified teachers. Last December, I asked officials to allow additional flexibility for Irish-medium schools, so that they could utilise alternative staff, for instance, under the Engage programme. As we move ahead this year, the aim is to allow that, if they are unable to secure qualified teachers.

I raised that issue with my ministerial colleague at the Department for the Economy in relation to initial teacher education (ITE). As the Member is aware, there is an interface between Education and Economy on that. My officials will engage in work to consider the current provision, particularly for post-primary schools, with ITE providers and sectoral representatives. That work will scope what longer-term ITE provision is needed — clearly, even if there is agreement today on something, it will take effect only four or five years down the line — and how those teachers receive the best training to support them in delivering immersion education in the Irish-medium sector.

My officials continue to work on accessing substitute teachers. There have been opportunities, at times, to take teachers with expertise from outside the sector and provide language training for them and to apply some flexibility.

The pandemic has exposed something important. We pride ourselves on having a large pool of substitute teachers, but we have found that, at times, it has not been quite as deep in numbers as we thought. It is important that, as we move ahead with the substitute list and General Teaching Council (GTC), there should be a much greater level of accommodation for those, for instance, from outside this jurisdiction, whether it is in the Irish-medium sector or —.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am afraid, Minister, that you are at your two-minute limit.

Mr Weir: OK.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You can resume your answer after Mr Patsy McGlone asks his question.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. I listened carefully to what you said about pupils who had lost out on immersive learning in the Irish-language sector. You said that you were looking at mitigating measures that could be taken to help those youngsters catch up on lost time and learning. It would be helpful if you could provide us with details now, or you can write to me with expansive detail on that.

Mr Weir: Part of it is about the adaptation of resources that will be provided to the sector, across all schools and the sector as a whole. This year, we had some interruptions. We moved ahead with the Engage programme. There was some disruption to Engage in the spring term, from January to April, because schools were not open physically. However, we have been able to roll the funding over for the rest of the academic year. The aim is — there has been indicative support — to roll COVID funding for 2021-22 forward into the next academic year. I have yet to get a final paper signed off by the Executive. The aim of it is to provide schools with funding to help with catch up.

I always take the view that it is not for me or the Department to dictate from on high exactly how that should be spent. The flexibility is largely given to schools to spend their allocated money according to the intervention that they want to put in place. In the Irish-medium sector, there is flexibility so that, if they want to focus that on lost language learning, that can be progressed.

3.15 pm

Similarly — we are waiting for final allocations and a paper will be put in — there have been indicative COVID allocations. Over the summer, as well as what is happening, broadly speaking, in youth work, the intention is to enable schools, on a voluntary basis, to be funded for one, two or three weeks, depending on what they want to do, for a summer school of learning. Given some of the pressures that exist, many schools will simply say that it is better for their pupils and staff to have a bit of time off over the summer, which is perfectly understandable. However, opportunities will be provided for schools to apply flexibility so that they can focus on pupils and on the level of provision that they want.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes the period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions.

Sure Start: Resumption of Activities

T1. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Education for details on the Sure Start schemes that can resume activities following the easing of restrictions. (AQT 1201/17-22)

Mr Weir: As part of that, we are trying to balance the important provisions that are made by Sure Start and by generic youth work, for instance, with making sure that they are compatible with public health requirements. As such, while the focus tends to be on the youth side, a paper was put to the Executive on the restart of those facilities, which was passed before Easter, and Sure Start has been given a green light. All child-centred activities, which are the bulk of what Sure Start does, have been given a green light to fully restart. Obviously, those Sure Start projects will operate where they can within mitigations and protections.

There is one outstanding area at present in relation to Sure Start. As part of its programmes, Sure Start will also look at the level of its engagements with adults and parents, because that is where there is a greater risk from a public health point of view, as opposed to with very young children. As such, we have not been able to give the green light to those engagements. It is about a phased restart, but the Executive have agreed a full restart of all child-centred activities. That is particularly important, given that Sure Start is largely focused on areas with higher levels of social deprivation. The damage that was done, unfortunately, was as a result of some of the provisions that had to be put in place, but, at least, we are starting to reverse those.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Minister for his answer. That was going to be my follow-up: will this include families? You rightly point out that that provision is what has been missing. Certainly, in correspondence that I have received, I see that it is affecting our communities. Can we expect a time frame for the next phase so that families can be included, even on an outdoors basis? Can we meet in groups with families face to face outside?

Mr Weir: We will continue to push in that regard. There are public health concerns, and there is the question of getting support from the Department of Health. I will certainly not be any sort of barrier to that. Where there are very young children, whether in schools or in Sure Start, there is very little risk of transmission. As well as that, the value of the intervention probably outweighs any level of risk. In schools or in Sure Start, the bigger danger is in adult-to-adult transmission. That will be a slightly higher hurdle to overcome. As we move towards gradually easing restrictions, that next phase will come, but I do not have a definitive date for it at this stage.

AS/A-level Grades

T2. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Education whether AS grades awarded in the 2020-2021 academic year will count towards next year's A-level grades. (AQT 1202/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her question. As she is aware, what was previously awarded in 2020 does not count towards 2021. I hope to be in a position in the next

few weeks to make an announcement around the wider picture of the exact structure of examination grades in 2022. We are still working with CCEA, and we will work closely with stakeholders in schools. I anticipate that we will reach a final position in the next few weeks. From that point of view, I am not in a position to unpick that announcement at this stage or to give specifics about individual elements of it. I hope to make that clear within the next few weeks.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you very much for your answer. Minister, you will appreciate that the sooner the decision is made, the better for our students.

GCSE students have reported a significant increase in the number of assessments and exams that they are facing. Do you agree that that is a huge pressure on students who are already feeling the pressure of the pandemic on their mental health? Will daily support be given to those students in schools?

Mr Weir: I will disaggregate that into a couple of answers. First, provision has been made available for assessments. However, in relation to qualifications, the concept is that the assessments are to be evaluated by the school. The assessments are not compulsory, and the school can use any evidence from the period in question. The advice from not only the Department of Education but CCEA — we should appreciate that not every examination or qualification in Northern Ireland is through CCEA — is that, where assessments are being used, there should be only one assessment per subject. Some schools have gone well beyond that. Schools have autonomy and are being asked to provide their own information, assessment and evaluation. Some schools have gone further than what was suggested; others felt there was no particular need for that. I appreciate the level of pressure that is there. As part of the overall finance structures for next year, additional money will be made available to support pupils' emotional health and well-being. Again, there will be opportunities within schools to deliver that support.

Independent Review of Integrated Education: Recommendations

T3. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister of Education, after apologising for not being in his place during tropical [sic] questions to the First Minister and deputy First Minister — he was listed to ask question 8 but was caught out because, although he felt like Linford Christie running around the Building, the business in the House seemed to move faster than he did — to provide a justification for why 11 of the 39 recommendations from the independent review of integrated education will not be taken forward. (AQT 1203/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Member is right about the specifics. Some processes can be taken forward and brought into place. The authors prioritised certain individual recommendations. If there are discussions with the sectoral bodies, they will say, "Well, actually, that is less of a priority as it is less of an issue". A range of wider recommendations falls into the category that should be looked at as part of the wider picture of the independent review of education. The position is that the call for those who wished to put their names forward as potential panel members closed on 26 March. There was a significant response to that call, and those responses are going

through a sifting process. A panel will then interview to determine who is to be appointed. Most aspects of education are interconnected. Consequently, a range of recommendations best falls within the remit of that panel. We are talking about 39 recommendations. Rather than trying to extrapolate reasons why each of the 11 individual recommendations has not gone forward, if the Member writes to me about specific recommendations that he feels are not being taken forward, I will provide the rationale.

I do not know whether the Speaker will ask the Member to remain behind and write, "I will not be late for the Assembly", 100 times as a form of sanction.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Those "tropical questions" can be difficult.

Mr Catney: One hundred lines? I will have to go far back into the annals of history to see when that happened.

Minister, thank you very much for that very comprehensive answer. I will come back to you on the concerns of some in that sector. Can you reassure the House that the Department is committed to implementing the recommendations and will assist with the growth of the integrated sector?

Mr Weir: I am committed to that sector and to every sector because it is important that every child is looked after. As such, there will be a range of decisions. Today, for example, I signed off on the transformation of a school in east Antrim to integrated status. We will try to support all pupils.

School Curriculum

T4. **Ms Brogan** asked the Minister of Education whether he plans to follow up on the Commissioner for Children and Young People's recommendation that relationships and sexuality education (RSE) become a mandatory part of the school curriculum. (AQT 1204/17-22)

Mr Weir: That will require a change in legislation. Leaving everything else aside, I suspect that that will not happen overnight. Internationally, when any subject is made mandatory in the curriculum, there is no real causal link of that being better taught than other subjects. There is a requirement for all schools to deliver RSE, and it is critical that we look at minimum standards. Consequently, and in light of the Gillen report, my officials and DOJ officials are working on a range of issues to see where minimum content should be. That is particularly focused on issues such as domestic abuse and consent. Those are critical. We adopt a cautious approach in making elements compulsory because that can sometimes crowd out other elements of the curriculum. Overall, Northern Ireland has benefited from flexibility on what can be delivered. That means that we can respond to changing events and changing necessities. That is an advantage of our system, as opposed to what happens in some other jurisdictions, where there is an attempt to impose from the top down.

Ms Brogan: I thank the Minister for his answer. He has touched on my follow-up question. The Assembly has already debated domestic abuse and sexual abuse on women and girls. Minister, do you agree that mandatory and standardised relationships and sexuality education will help to educate our girls and boys and better equip them going into adulthood?

Mr Weir: As I indicated, it is beneficial to have a flexible approach to the curriculum. Minister Long and I met a month or so ago on the Gillen recommendations. We have started work for the two Departments to work closely together on those recommendations, most of which fall to DOJ but there is an overlap with Education. RSE is a requirement for all schools, but it is not simply a one-size-fits-all approach, because, depending on age and experience, there can be a differentiation. It is important to look at areas of minimum content, particularly to ensure that society reflects concerns about abuse, which lie beyond what is happening in the classroom but can transmit, unfortunately, from generation to generation in families, and a proper understanding and acceptance of consent. That is critical as we move ahead.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Dickson is not in his place.

Engage Programme

T6. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education to confirm that the very successful Engage programme will continue for the rest of the term. (AQT 1206/17-22)

Mr Weir: We are waiting on final confirmation beyond that. The roll-out of the Engage programme, which equates to about £5.5 million for this term, will continue for the rest of the term. As part of that, we are looking to finalise the details for the school year 2021-22 and what will happen over the summer. As I indicated, it is important that the programme gives schools the opportunity to tailor what they are getting and to focus as much as possible on where they see the best interventions. Quite often, the best things are decided at grassroots level.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Department have the necessary budget to continue this programme into the next academic year?

Mr Weir: That is the aim, but, because it is a one-off costing, it is not directly baselined in the budget. Before the conclusion of the Budget exercise in March, Departments were asked to put in their bids for the pot of COVID money. As such, it has been agreed provisionally that money could be made available for the continuation through COVID of the Engage programme to allow it to run from September onward. Similarly, as I indicated, the aim is also to have a level of academic and other interventions on the youth side during the summer.

3.30 pm

There may well have to be a further paper brought to the Executive very shortly so that they can confirm the exact details of the proposals, but, broadly speaking, the Department of Finance and the Executive as a whole have indicated support for the continuation of the programme through 2021-22.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. That concludes Question Time to the Minister of Education. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments before we return to the item of business that the House was considering before Question Time. Thank you.

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

Private Members' Business

Brexit: EU Card Transaction Fees

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly regrets the decision of Visa and Mastercard to increase, drastically, their fees for EU card transactions; notes that these increases are possible only because of Brexit and the subsequent loss of EU consumer protections; condemns this cynical exploitation of working people and small to medium-sized enterprises by big banks and card companies during a global pandemic; further notes that this extortionate increase will disproportionately impact border communities, which have already borne the brunt of Brexit; and urges the British Government to reverse these increases through legislation to regulate interchange fees on EU transactions. — [Dr Archibald.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after the second "Brexit;" and insert:

"recognises that the United Kingdom's ability to regulate charges on cross-border transactions is limited; calls on the UK Government to reinstate the previous cap on interchange fees within their regulatory authority; and further calls on the UK Government to engage with the European Union to reach an agreement on interchange fee caps on UK-EU and EU-UK card transactions as part of wider efforts to ease the trading frictions caused by Brexit." — [Mr Dickson.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Members, we are not entirely quorate, but we can start anyway. We left off just before Question Time, and Andrew Muir will now be called. Andrew, this is your opportunity to wind on the amendment, and you have five minutes to do so.

Mr Muir: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I intend to summarise in the five minutes some of my views on the debate and some of the comments that were made. I will support the motion and the amendment.

For decades, Eurosceptics in the UK told us that all we ever got from Brussels was bureaucracy and bendy bananas. The reality is that we got better consumer and environmental protection, workers' rights and more. Brexiteers promised that those protections and rights would be maintained and even strengthened after we left the EU. Remainers warned that the core proponents of the Brexit project had exactly the opposite interests at heart.

Brexit was sold as a victory for the ordinary people over the Establishment. The reality is that, by leaving the world's largest economic and regulatory bloc, we are far more exposed to the powers of supersized multinational corporations.

The post-Brexit increase in interchange fees by Visa and MasterCard will hit the pockets of ordinary people hard. I am glad to see this issue brought before the Northern Ireland Assembly today. This payment duopoly's combined revenue last year was greater than the spending power of the entire Northern Ireland Civil Service. The EU, as the world's largest economic bloc, was able to bring these

giants to heel with the cap, in the interests of consumers. Brexit has allowed Visa and MasterCard to take back control and quintuple their charges for cross-border transactions to 1.5%. We are starting to see the impact on consumers of leaving the world's largest economic and regulatory bloc. Whilst I agree that the UK must use its powers to cap interchange fees on cross-border transactions, we recognise the reality that those powers are limited. As well as using its own power, the UK should engage with the EU in efforts to reach a reciprocal agreement to reflect the status quo that was in place prior to Brexit.

Since 1 January this year, the Alliance Party has been calling for practical solutions to the very real problems caused by Brexit, as my colleague Stewart Dickson outlined earlier. We have called for mutually agreed extensions to grace periods, a veterinary agreement to reduce the need for sanitary and phytosanitary checks, and practical solutions to the issue of groupage. We can add the issue of interchange fees to the long list of things that need to be dealt with. However, given the direction of travel of the UK's relationship with the EU over the past few months, I do not hold out much hope.

As I wind up on the amendment, I do have to recall, in relation to some of the comments made through the debate about the Brexit deal that we have at present, that the DUP did have an opportunity to shape that deal over many years while it was part of a confidence-and-supply agreement with Theresa May, but it failed to do that and left us with a hard Brexit. The situation that we are debating regarding credit card fees is Brexit. The protocol is Brexit. Despite Mr Frew saying that the protocol is nothing to do with Brexit, here, in Northern Ireland, we are living with the consequences of Brexit, and to blame those who opposed Brexit and warned of its consequences is, frankly, ludicrous. Another comment was made, by Mr Stalford, in relation to the:

"house and shed being on fire"

and blaming us for tabling a motion on this. In relation to the challenges being posed and arising from Brexit, the question has to be asked: who bought the petrol, and who thought it was a good idea to pour that over our economy? It was not the Remainers.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Muir: Yes.

Mr O'Toole: While I do not accept all the analogy, does the Member agree with me that it is at least progress that certain DUP Members at least acknowledge now that the shed is on fire?

Mr Muir: It is indeed, and they have to take responsibility for the outcome of Brexit.

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member's giving way. We have been lectured a lot about dialling down the rhetoric. At this time, it is not appropriate to talk about sheds, fire and getting the petrol. It is foolish language.

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his intervention. He was not here earlier during the debate when his colleague actually raised the issues.

As Mr O'Toole outlined, we are living with the impact of services not being included as part of the Brexit deal. John

Stewart also referred to the fact that this is unjustifiable profiteering and that it is unacceptable. I entirely agree with him. Sinead McLaughlin and Stewart Dickson raised the issue of roaming charges: they are a significant issue and, as we have seen in Finland, they are already looking at bringing those in from May. We are living with the consequences of Brexit. Pat Catney made a remark about the impact of charges on border consumers and businesses. That is the real impact of Brexit. What we need to do is find solutions, going forward, in response to the hard Brexit being pursued by the United Kingdom Government.

Mr O'Dowd: I rise to wind on the motion and on the amendment, which we are accepting. A clear message needs to be sent out to all those who have power to change what is planned here. They should change it. We are particularly speaking to Governments, whether they be the Government in the UK, in Brussels, or wherever they may be. We are also particularly speaking to MasterCard and Visa, which have said that they will put their hands into the pockets of consumers and small businesses and take out their hard-earned money. Those institutions are hugely profitable. It is not as if they have hit hard times or that things are difficult for them.

In proposing the motion, Caoimhe Archibald pointed out that, since the EU acted in 2017 to protect consumers through interchange fee regulations, it is estimated that €2.6 billion of savings have been made by merchants and businesses across the EU. That is worth noting. Savings in the UK are somewhere in the region of £480 million a year.

These are all our constituents who will be asked to pay extra fees. For what exactly, nobody knows. It would appear, certainly to me as an onlooker, that those major financial institutions have taken the opportunity of the UK leaving the EU to earn more money. We have seen examples of that throughout the transition period and, indeed, throughout the Brexit debate, where there have been significant enough rumours, suggestions and facts to show that many bet on hedge funds and made tens of millions of pounds out of Brexit. Here come two more significant financial institutions that think, "We will have a bit of that".

Some of the contributions to the debate, particularly those from the DUP Members opposite, can be summed up as follows: that our side of the House does not care about the protocol. That is not true. It simply is not true. We are prepared to work with anyone in or beyond the Chamber to ensure that we have a smooth running of the protocol and that those areas that need to be challenged or changed can be. We will support others in doing that work. It is therefore unfair to suggest that there is a deafness on this side of the House to genuine concerns that are being raised in some quarters.

Dr Archibald: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will certainly.

Dr Archibald: I reiterate your point, but it also seems that there is a deafness from the other side of the House to acknowledging the impact of Brexit. We have seen the collapse in exports from Britain to Europe and financial institutions leaving London. Apparently, that is all the fault of the protocol.

Mr O'Dowd: Yes, and that brings me on to my next point. During the Brexit debate, Members opposite spent far too long speaking to English nationalists rather than Irish nationalists. If they had spoken to Irish nationalists, they would have found friend and favour. The Brexit agenda that was set elsewhere was never designed for the island of Ireland. Regardless of your beliefs — whether you are unionist, nationalist, republican, other or whatever else — it was somebody else's agenda, to which some people here foolishly hitched their wagon. We now have the result of that, and Brexit will cost consumers here more. The protocol and Brexit are the one thing. The protocol does not cover the services issues being discussed, but it is there as a result of Brexit.

Mr Muir quite rightly pulled up Mr Frew when Mr Frew said that there are many ways in which to leave the EU. There were many ways in which to leave the EU, but, unfortunately, you chose the hardest way. Your chief Brexiteer — the brigadier in charge of Brexit — Nigel Dodds, who was setting your strategy in Westminster, led you to a position in which we now have a protocol and extra credit card charges for many citizens, and in which, as Jemma Dolan pointed out, there is the potential for workers' rights to be lessened. All those things flow from one situation.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. I notice that the tone and the tenor of language are beginning to change again. It does not take the House long to forget what was said in the Chamber last week about respect and the way in which we use language. The Member is using language that is not helpful. He made accusations about us not hearing, about brigadiers and all of that. There are no brigadiers in the DUP. You may have to look in other places to find them.

Does the Member accept that the one thing that he keeps forgetting is that this was a democratic decision by the United Kingdom, of which we are a part, and that that democratic mandate gave the UK the right to leave the European Union? Sinn Féin is a party that always talks about "one man, one vote", but it seems that that applies only when it suits it.

3.45 pm

Mr O'Dowd: I do not want to distract too much from the issue at hand — the credit card rip-off being governed by major financial institutions — but Members have to accept that something is wrong. This is not Finchley, and it is not Finglas. We have a constitution, by way of the Good Friday Agreement, and that is how we govern ourselves. When decisions are made or strategies developed elsewhere that do not meet the needs of the people on this island, particularly in relation to Brexit, the responsibility of political leaders on this island is to represent the people of this island. I stand by my comments that there was not engagement between unionism and Irish nationalism.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I am not giving way any more. The bright lights of London and the popping of champagne corks in Westminster distracted the party opposite from the people it is in partnership with on this part of the island. That is what happened, and that is how we ended up where we are in relation to the protocol and Brexit, which are the one thing.

Imagine that there was no protocol and that we were dragged out of the EU customs union and single market etc as Britain has been. My colleague Caoimhe Archibald touched on that. Economic harm is being done to traders, businesses, workers and families in Britain as a result of Brexit, and you cannot blame the protocol for that. Economic harm is being done to workers and families in Britain as a result of the added costs that they will face due to the credit card and debit card charge increases. You cannot blame the protocol for that. There will have to be an acceptance, in certain quarters, of where the problem is. When you accept what the problem is, you can try to solve it.

I stand by what I said at the start of the debate: we are prepared to work with any party in the Chamber to ensure that the pressures that have arisen as a result of Brexit, whether the protocol, or whatever else they may be, can be resolved. However, we are also insisting that the opportunities that come about as a result of Brexit are exploited, and that, where there is an opportunity to create jobs, new businesses and prosperity for the people we serve, they have to be exploited. There can be no turning of blind eyes to them. They have to be exploited so that we can ensure that the people we represent are given good, well-paid jobs and have a future. Let us do that together.

In conclusion, the motion and the amendment are about protecting workers, families and businesses from being ripped off by large credit card companies that see an opportunity to make tens of millions of pounds, as a result of Brexit, on the backs of hard-working families and businesses. It is only right that the Assembly stands as one and supports the motion and the amendment. I note that the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party have said that they will not divide the House. I welcome that; that is good. It sends out a strong message. It also allows us to look at other areas where we can work together to ensure that the people we represent are not being ripped off.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly regrets the decision of Visa and MasterCard to increase, drastically, their fees for EU card transactions; notes that these increases are possible only because of Brexit and the subsequent loss of EU consumer protections; condemns this cynical exploitation of working people and small to medium-sized enterprises by big banks and card companies during a global pandemic; further notes that this extortionate increase will disproportionately impact border communities, which have already borne the brunt of Brexit; recognises that the United Kingdom's ability to regulate charges on cross-border transactions is limited; calls on the UK Government to reinstate the previous cap on interchange fees within their regulatory authority; and further calls on the UK Government to engage with the European Union to reach an agreement on interchange fee caps on UK-EU and EU-UK card transactions as part of wider efforts to ease the trading frictions caused by Brexit.

Adjourned at 3.49 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 20 April 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statements

2020-21 Further Funding Allocation

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance that he wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members in the Chamber that, in light of social distancing being observed by 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 also make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. Members who are present in the Chamber must do that by rising in their place as well as by notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions as this is not an opportunity for actual debate. 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 thereafter.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Members will be aware of the additional funding allocations that were made since the 2020-21 January monitoring round. I advised the Assembly of those by written ministerial statement, and I undertook to provide an oral statement, once all further funding allocations were made, to allow questions to be asked.

At the conclusion of the January monitoring round, unallocated funding of £346.4 million resource, £28.3 million capital and £55.7 million financial transactions capital (FTC) remained. Ministers were asked to come forward with spending proposals to use that funding. As a result of that work, further allocations were agreed at four points since the January monitoring round.

Departments also took the opportunity to surrender reduced requirements for reallocation in those financial exercises. Details of the reduced requirements notified and allocations made at each of those points were appended to my written ministerial statements and have been included again in the tables to this statement for completeness.

The final tranche of allocations was agreed on 25 March. While it is unusual to allocate funding at that late stage in the financial year, Members will appreciate that it was an unusual financial situation as a result of COVID, especially with the drip-feed of funding from London.

By the conclusion of January monitoring, the Executive had already allocated over £3 billion for COVID support and public services in 2020-21. Since January monitoring and taking account of additional funding provided by the Treasury, the Executive allocated a further £634 million,

including £175 million for health PPE; £10.4 million for higher education student support; £12.4 million to extend the business support scheme and the large tourism and hospitality business support scheme; and £35.4 million to support a pay increase for teachers. A further £27.3 million was provided for student hardship and £25 million for the £500 payment to health workers.

My Department has received £231.6 million. That is not the figure in the statement, which was corrected just before I came to the Chamber. I apologise for the wrong figure being in the statement, and an amended statement will be sent to Members. The actual figure that we received was £231.6 million. That includes £51 million to extend the localised restrictions support scheme (LRSS) in view of the continued restrictions.

As result of the late announcements from the British Government, the Executive had a significant amount of money to spend in the last quarter of the financial year. I encouraged Departments to bid for that money, but I also developed contingency plans in case funding was at risk of being surrendered to the Treasury.

Once again, Land and Property Services (LPS) stepped up to develop three grant schemes for businesses. The total cost of those schemes is estimated at £177.9 million resource DEL. That funding will sustain many businesses and the workers whom they employ.

Those are just some of the more notable allocations made since January monitoring, and full details of all allocations are in the tables accompanying the statement.

By the end of the financial year, the Executive allocated all available resource DEL funding. All spending proposals brought forward by Departments to provide COVID support to individuals and businesses since the conclusion of January monitoring were met in full.

Unfortunately, £55.3 million of financial transactions capital remains unallocated, and, while we can carry forward some FTC to 2021-22, it is again inevitable that some of that loan capital will be lost.

Due to the late surrender of capital funding by Departments, there remains £0.4 million unallocated in capital DEL. However, that is a small amount, which we will be able to carry forward to next year, provided that Departments do not return excessive end-year underspends. With the exception of the FTC lending, that position should mean that no funding will be lost to the Executive. However, that is dependent on Departments spending the allocations that they have been provided with.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I thank the Minister for his oral statement and for previous written ministerial statements and correspondence to the Committee in respect of the 2020-21 allocations. I think that the Committee — looking around me, most of its members are here — will welcome the fact that all the resources and most of the capital for 2020-21 appear to have been spent before the end of the financial year.

Members will, I think, also welcome the targeted support for the health service in extra PPE and, particularly, the bonus award for our much-valued and important staff; for our teaching professionals, who have done an equally outstanding job; and for the significant sums made available to hard-pressed local businesses as we emerge from the pandemic and start to tackle the economic consequences of COVID-19. I particularly note the £231.6 million, Minister, and thank you for making the correction before the House.

It has been difficult for Departments to spend those large quantities of money in relatively short timescales while ensuring appropriate governance and robust adherence to the rules. The extent to which it has been successful is not yet entirely clear and will continue to be scrutinised by all the Statutory Committees. Will the Minister clarify the total amount of resource and capital that he expects to be carried forward from 2020-21 to 2021-22, assuming that Departments meet their commitments?

From the Minister's written statements on the 2020-21 allocations and the 2021-22 Budget, it would appear that there is still no explicit provision for the victims' pension scheme, better known as the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme. The actuary's report shows that the cost would be £19 million in 2021-22, rising to perhaps £70 million in subsequent years. Can the Minister explain how these costs will be funded, given that the courts have ruled that the Executive are obliged to make the relevant provisions?

I would like to make a few remarks as the Ulster Unionist Party's finance spokesperson, particularly on the victims' pension scheme.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Member that this period is for questions to the Minister.

Dr Aiken: It is a question, Mr Speaker. I am sure that you will grant me this short indulgence.

There are indications that there is the potential for top-slicing the various Departments' budgets. Our concern is that, as per a commitment in New Decade, New Approach (NDNA), the Health budget is supposed to be ring-fenced. By my calculations, a considerable amount, maybe as much as between £35 million and £40 million, would be taken out of the Health budget. Bearing in mind that we are trying to get out of COVID, and particularly the implications that it has had for waiting lists, I would like the Minister to state whether that is the proposed course of action that he is likely to take.

Mr Murphy: I thank the Chair for his comments and questions. The normal Budget exchange scheme allows us to carry over a proportion of money at the end of the year: up to about £85.8 million resource DEL, £2.8 million ring-fenced resource DEL, £3.4 million student loan impairment, £22.3 million capital DEL and £29.2 million

financial transactions capital. We also got permission, because we had a very late allocation from Treasury, to carry over until the next financial year a further £238 million non-ring-fenced resource DEL, £75 million capital DEL and £14 million financial transactions capital.

The Budget provides £6.7 million to TEO for the implementation costs of the victims' payment scheme. As the Member is aware, the First Minister, the deputy First Minister, the Justice Minister and I have given an undertaking that the costs of the scheme will be met this year. Of course, the Executive's position is that those costs should be met by the British Government under their own statement of funding policy. We intend to continue that discussion with the British Government to ensure that they step up and meet those costs. I will engage with Treasury in the time ahead.

The Member referred to top-slicing Departments' budgets. That will be the outcome if the British Government refuse to honour their statement of funding policy and pay for the scheme that they devised and legislated for, which is outside what the parties agreed at Stormont House. If we end up in a situation where the Government refuse to provide some support to us to pay for the victims' pension scheme, the only alternative that the Executive will have to meet the payments is to take the money off Departments on a pro rata basis. That is certainly not where we want to go, because it pits the provision of vital public services against the needs of victims. This is not the space that any of us wanted to be in. It is the consequence of a Government deciding at the last minute, under pressure from their own Back-Benchers, to increase substantially the victims' pension scheme that the parties agreed at Stormont House and to heap the costs of meeting their policy and legislation on to the Executive.

We intend to continue to have that discussion. Top-slicing Departments' budgets would be the last resort. It is certainly not anywhere that the Executive want or intend to be.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions. We have quite a number of Members who want to ask questions.

Mr Frew: I applaud the Minister's statement. I applaud the efforts made by the Minister and the Department over the course of this very difficult year. I also applaud the Chairman's fine speech.

The Minister talked about the mistake in his written statement. I hope that it was a typo because, if not, it seems that we have lost over £20 million somewhere. Maybe the Minister can clarify how that mistake happened.

The Minister talked about £51 million to extend the LRSS scheme but clarified for the House that that is only £51 million of £230-odd million. Will he outline what other factors and spends are contained within that amount?

Mr Murphy: First, we checked the statement's figures against the table's figures. We continued to check them right up to the last number of minutes before I came down.

We realised that there was a miscalculation in the statement rather than in the tables. I have corrected it in the House, and we will send an amended statement round to ensure that Members are aware of that.

10.45 am

The £51 million was a carry-over. We knew that we were spending out in this financial year, but we also knew that the effect of COVID and the need for LRSS support would go into the new financial year and would, obviously, still be paid out and will be until at least the latter end of May. We wanted to ensure that we had money to continue that carry-over and, of course, for the COVID restrictions business support scheme (CRBSS), which the Department for the Economy will administer as well, and to ensure that money was retained there. Of course, a huge amount of LRSS money was paid out in the last financial year. That was, if you like, the buffer to ensure that, as we went into the new financial year and restrictions were still in place, we were able to continue to pay that out.

Mr McHugh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement. As he stated, resource money has been fully allocated. Is he confident that it will be fully spent by all Departments?

Mr Murphy: Our objective was to ensure that it was allocated, and it sometimes is. As the Chair and Deputy Chair acknowledged, it was a significant challenge to ensure that the additional £3.3 billion was spent out on top of the budgets that we had last year. It came in a haphazard fashion, which made that complicated. The lockdown restrictions changed and eased, and, then, they changed and went from lockdowns in council areas to a full lockdown of the Six Counties. It was a complicated process to try to get through. Nonetheless, we have allocated all available COVID-19 funding and have been assessing the position with regard to spending that right up until the last number of weeks of the financial year. I am confident that all Ministers who bid for that money have been making all efforts to ensure that it is spent. We will assess that as part of the provisional out-turn later this year. Therefore, I do not anticipate handing any funding back. We still have some headroom in the normal Budget exchange scheme to carry over resource DEL, should that be required. We had conversations with Departments when they bid for money late in the year to ensure that they could spend that out. We expect that to be the case.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for coming to the House to update us. Further to the previous question, I obviously welcome the fact that resource allocations have been made in full. On FTC, it looks as though around £55 million will have to be handed back. Can the Minister clarify that? Earlier in the financial year, he and others talked about improving the use of FTC by Departments. We know that it has been a long-standing challenge. How is that work progressing? Is there a particular strand of work to make civil servants do better in spending that out, particularly as we come up to what will, hopefully, be a multi-year spending review from the Treasury later this year?

Mr Murphy: There is a provision to carry over some FTC, so it will not be the full figure of £55 million. I think that there is a figure of £29.2 million under the Budget exchange scheme that can be carried forward under FTC. Therefore, £55 million minus that figure is the amount that would be surrendered to Treasury. As the Member knows, financial transactions capital comes with a set of conditions attached and restrictions on how it can be spent. Therefore, it is not a straightforward matter of spending out capital money.

We encouraged Departments to come forward in the latter part of the year. Indeed, a number of Departments did so. Education and Infrastructure were looking at schemes. The Health Department looked at schemes that just did not make it. One area where we had sought to use it most related to the changeover arrangements in the Housing Executive. It came late in the year. Obviously, everything that Departments were doing was knocked sideways by the response to the pandemic. Our ambitions at the start of the year did not get the time and space to be fully developed. The Member is right: if we go into a multi-annual-Budget situation, we would have a better handle on it. I believe that there was a better approach to FTC this year than, perhaps, in previous years. We want that to improve and continue, because the amount that is available to us and the payback for Departments are fairly favourable.

There are strict parameters around how it can be spent, over what lifespan it can be spent and what assets it can be spent on, but it is an improving picture. If we get more space and time and move to a multi-annual budget, we will have a much better approach to spending out FTC.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for his statement. In the 2020-21 financial year, a significant amount of money was spent on non-domestic rate relief. For a number of sectors, that has been carried forward into this financial year. Over the past number of weeks, a number of businesses have contacted me with concerns about what will happen in April next year without a reform of our rating system. What actions is the Minister taking to ensure that our non-domestic rating system is reformed in this financial year so that people do not hit a cliff edge with their rates bills?

Mr Murphy: There has already been significant action taken. That has probably been missed in the course of all the rates holidays and rate relief, which I am glad that we have been able to extend for a full year, meaning that those businesses will have two full years without paying rates. Over the past year, I have carried out frequent engagements with businesses and business organisations, and that was one of their big asks. We were able to deliver on that, which has been gratefully received. That masked the fact, however, that there was effectively an 18% reduction in non-domestic rates in last year's Budget. That was a very significant reduction.

We continue to look at bringing forward revaluation exercises to make sure that there is no gap or huge change, instead of leaving them sitting for a number of years. We are therefore turning around revaluation exercises much quicker. We will continue to engage with businesses, and if LPS can get back to doing what it does, which is managing the rates rather being the grant-giving agency that it has ended up being for most of the past year and will continue to be in the short to medium term ahead, we will be able to have a sensible discussion with business sectors in the time ahead to try to get a better outcome on rates for everyone.

Mr Givan: My question follows on from the question about the ending of support mechanisms and concerns the £51 million to extend the LRSS. The hospitality industry has raised concerns with me that, as businesses are allowed to reopen, they will not be viable until the social-distancing restrictions of 2 metres are gone. For how long can the Executive continue to provide financial support to the

hospitality industry and other sectors that will be impacted on until the social-distancing requirement is removed?

Mr Murphy: The LRSS and probably the Department for the Economy's COVID restrictions business support scheme are governed by health regulations. That means that they can continue to be paid only if businesses are closed or very severely impacted on. For instance, we continue to pay retail businesses when they can offer click and collect and to pay hospitality businesses even though some outdoor opening will be allowed not this weekend but the weekend after. We will continue to pay those supports until all hospitality can open. We recognise that we are only in the middle phase of moving towards reopening, so there will still be mitigations and restrictions around how many people are allowed in premises and how those premises can do business, but those payments are tied to health regulations, which means that there is no basis for paying them out once premises reopen.

In response to the previous question, we will continue with the rates holiday for a full year, through to next April. That is of huge benefit to tourism and hospitality, and to retail in particular. We recognise that businesses will continue to struggle. That is why, as part of the COVID money for next year, I funded in full the bid from the Minister for the Economy for the economic recovery package. As a consequence, I hope to see some support going to the high street, as well as to tourism and hospitality.

We do not have anything like the amount of COVID money that we had last year. We are trying to continue providing support as best we can, but, next year, we will have a standstill Budget, with a limited amount of COVID money compared with last year. We will still try to give what support we can, but that will definitely happen in the context of much less generous financial circumstances.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for his statement. I appreciate that this might be outside his remit, so I understand if he does not have the answer. Is there an update on the £25 million that is allocated for the £500 payment for health workers?

Mr Murphy: We made that funding available for the Health Minister's bid. He then asked us to engage with Treasury and DWP in London to see whether that would be taxed and whether, at the lower end, people would lose benefits as a consequence of the payment.

We were told that that would be case and that HMRC was treating it as a gift and would tax it, so we provided additional funding to cover that to make sure that people got the £500. That is our contribution, if you like, and the Health Department is then responsible for paying out. The update would need to come from the Health Minister.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for the statement and providing the updated information. As other members of the Finance Committee have done, I commend the Minister and the Department for ensuring that the total resource budget was fully allocated to Departments.

Minister, in your statement, you say that there were four opportunities after January monitoring to look at spending and that Departments took the opportunity to surrender reduced requirements for reallocation in those four exercises. Can you confirm the total amount of reduced requirements surrendered by Departments since January?

Mr Murphy: I think that it is in the table. I am not sure that I have the exact figure to hand. It is broken down across a number of statements. With the four opportunities, it was, if you like, an open-ended opportunity for Departments to bid for money and to surrender money that they were not going to spend. For instance, in the statement on 2 February, there was £7.9 million, and then, in my last written statement in March, there was £7.2 million. Sorry, that was capital. I can get the total figure for the Member, but I think that there was £10 million and £21 million over the course of those four statements.

The Member asked about opportunities. We did some allocations, sent in a written statement and said at that time that we would do a complete statement and a question-and-answer session when that exercise was completed. There were a number of surrenders, and that meant that we had to try to reallocate as we went along. It was an open-ended process for Departments to bid, so, when we got a significant number of bids and allocated the funding, we did a written statement. We did that right up until the last allocation, which was the one that we took to try, as a contingency plan, to use up what was left at that stage. That was on 25 March. The statements are there. It is a matter of adding each figure from the tables in each of the four statements and calculating the total.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. We have had a number of reports to the Finance Committee about how the end-of-year surge spending is not value for money and how some of that spending may go to the wrong projects. What are you and your Department doing to prevent that end-of-year spending and promote a better balance of expenditure throughout the year?

Mr Murphy: That is the perennial question. If we were in a multi-annual Budget situation aligned to a Programme for Government, we would get planned spending over a number of years. That is where we want to be. That is where, we were told over the last year, we would be following the comprehensive spending review, but that is not in our hands. The time frame of the budgets and the funding allocation itself are not in our hands, so you end up having to respond. In an annual Budget setting, the biggest sin for a Finance Minister or an Executive is not spending out. It is not ideal.

I would not say that we are spending on the wrong projects, but it does not necessarily align with long-term spending plans. It would be much more efficient if we were in a multi-annual Budget situation and could plan over that time and allocate accordingly to make sure that there is a more strategic approach to the spending of public funds than, perhaps, a rush at the end of the year to spend what is left. It is not ideal. The bigger sin, I suppose, is if we end up not spending it and giving it back, so it has to be spent on projects that, although they are not wrong, would perhaps not be a priority if we were in a much broader strategic framework. It is more about the things that are ready to go and are can be spent on.

Of course, that is the situation that we want to be in, and we will continue to press Treasury to get us to that situation. We expected, right up until the year of last year, that that is where we would be, and we had very short notice that we were into a one-year Budget again with a flat-cash situation. We will continue to engage with Treasury on that, and I know from speaking to my

counterparts in Scotland and Wales that we are all on the same script in pressing for that outcome.

11.00 am

Mr Nesbitt: Returning to financial transactions capital, I sense that the Minister shares the frustration that the money is flowing in the wrong direction, namely, largely back to Treasury. Minister, further to your answer to Mr O'Toole, can you explain where, you think, the fault line lies? Are you promoting this only to Executive Departments, or are you proactively targeting projects in the private and the third sectors? How many successful applications are there? Why do applications fail? Is it because of a fundamental misunderstanding of the qualifying criteria?

Mr Murphy: It could be a combination of those things. I do not think that there was, over the last number of years —. There was a much bigger return of financial transactions capital last year. It is a complex process, and therefore Departments try, in the first instance, to get straightforward capital for the projects that they want to do. When I was pressing Departments and Ministers over the last number of months to access this, some came forward with schemes, but some of them did not fit. That maybe points to Departments being not fully sure. The assets themselves have to have a time span of at least 25 years, so it cannot be spent on short-term repair work or short-term facilities. They have to be facilities with that type of time frame. It is much more restrictive than a straightforward bid for capital. I suppose that it is easier for most Departments to go for the easier source rather than to apply for it.

It is something that we have improved on. Even with all of the priority attached to the pandemic in every Department and the bandwidth that has been taken up with that response, there is an improvement. We will continue to press for a full understanding of how it can be accessed, what it can be spent on and what Departments need to come forward with. The rates are favourable. It is an asset, if you like — pardon the pun — that is available to the Executive. We have done better this year with it, but we are still surrendering some of it. We do not want to be in a position where we are not utilising things that are available to us.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his statement this morning. It is important to get the clarity that Members around the Chamber have sought.

Regarding the £175 million for health PPE, we all know the history of PPE orders being placed, orders not being placed, orders that were in the pipeline and orders that never arrived. We know the history of that, but £175 million is a substantial amount of money. In the Minister's or his Department's allocation of those contracts, how can he encourage local companies to make the bids for that £175 million, rather than the PPE being purchased from China or other sources?

Mr Murphy: The Member makes a very valid point in relation to that. There are many lessons from the pandemic, and one of them is about security of the supply chain. The idea that "Cheap is best" means that you end up on the other side of the world trying to procure critical materials for the health service. Then, if there is a pandemic situation or some other unforeseen situation, we

are left in a position where we do not have access to things that our population very badly needs.

Regarding the £175 million figure, Treasury made an allowance that, if money was being spent on PPE, it could be allocated in the last financial year but spent in this financial year. That is why we were able to allocate a significant sum to that.

We have been having this conversation in the Procurement Board, which I chair, but a further conversation needs to be had around the Executive table. Where companies stepped up and proved that they could provide us with critical supply and that supply was only an hour's journey by road away from us rather than thousands of miles away on the other side of the world, those companies need certainty that that sort of contract will continue. If they are going to repurpose manufacturing capability, they need certainty that there will be contracts to be bid for and won in the future. The procurement side in the Health Department should engage with the manufacturing sector, perhaps through the Department for the Economy and Invest and others, to say, "OK, the cost of those products may be more here, but, first, there are ethical issues in terms of their supply. Are all our supply chains on the other side of the world meeting the ethical requirements that we have and should continue to have? Is there security of supply?"

We need to reconsider whether cheap is king in all this. I hope that that conversation takes place; it needs to take place fairly soon, because if we want those people to stay in the frame so that they can step up and repurpose manufacturing, they need to have some sense that there is business for them in it.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for his statement. I want to return to the LRSS, because it has been an absolute lifeline for businesses, along with the rates holiday. You said that it will continue for businesses until they open. Are you keeping that under review, and are you encouraging the Economy Minister to look at other supports that might be needed to help businesses when we reopen?

Mr Murphy: As I said, they are governed by the regulations, which mean that if businesses can open up, the regulations do not permit them to continue to be paid beyond that, although all businesses will be subject to some kind of social-distancing restrictions.

We have declared that LRSS will continue to be paid. I am not certain what the position is with CRBSS; that might be a question for your Committee to ask the Department about. As you are aware, we fully funded the economic recovery package that the Economy Minister brought forward, and we will continue to support businesses through the rate relief for the rest of this financial year to next April. We are trying our best to continue to support them, albeit with much less resource than we had last year. We have fully funded that economic recovery package, and I hope that that has a beneficial effect for businesses as they begin to open up.

Mr Dickson: Minister, what discussions have you had with the Treasury, particularly with the Chancellor, who, according to some media outlets, has done a disappearing act since he produced his Budget? What discussions have you had about rebuilding our economy and our community and about how the various schemes will be tapered as a consequence of the reopening of services?

Mr Murphy: Officials continue to have that discussion, and I hope to get over there in the next week or two to have a discussion, certainly with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury if not with the Chancellor. You will know that the extension of the furlough scheme, which we pressed for a number of times, has now gone to the end of the summer, albeit, I think, with an increased employer contribution over the summer months.

There are some discussions about whether Treasury will try to amend the loan scheme slightly, I think. I have seen some reference to a sort of a pay-as-you-earn (PAYE) thing, so rather than businesses being expected to pay back loans, if they can demonstrate that they can afford to pay back more as they begin to do more business, there will be some flexibility. We will continue to press the case for that, because the furlough scheme in particular was critical, not only to businesses, but to workers.

While we hope to have a good summer, we are a long way from being clear of the pandemic and its impacts. I have spoken to banks and other institutions, and there is expectation that maybe there will be a glut of spending when things open up but that that could taper off again in the autumn. I think that that is when businesses will face the real crunch. While we will be doing all that we can in the time ahead, as I said in the responses to the statement, clearly they will need continued supports, so we will continue that conversation with the Treasury and the Government.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Minister for his statement and his answers thus far. Will the Minister indicate when businesses can expect to be paid through the scheme that was recently announced on the COVID business support grants?

Mr Murphy: One element of that is the £50,000 grant for businesses that were above the net asset value (NAV) level last year and did not get that support. I think that some businesses started to receive that today. The other elements of that scheme will be done in the coming weeks. There are some further regulations that need to be sorted out on them, but we will do those as quickly as we can.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his statement and his answers thus far. Following on from the previous question and the £178 million that has been announced for three schemes, will you, Minister, give us greater detail on when you expect those payments to be made? When will the application process open for the schemes that require an application?

Mr Murphy: As I said in response to the previous question, the £50,000 scheme for businesses that did not get the £10,000 or £25,000 grant last year because they were too big has opened. I think that some of those are being paid out today. Regulations for the schemes need to go through the Finance Committee and be passed in the House to do that, and the portal needs to be up and working for the ones with an application. The intention is to have those done in the coming days or, at most, weeks and get the support paid out to those businesses as quickly as we possibly can.

Mr Allister: Given the rush to allocate and spend the further Treasury largesse before the end of the financial year, it is understandable that mistakes will be made. If funds are recouped from organisations that should not have received them, what is the destiny of those funds?

Can they be retained? Do they have to be returned? How much headroom do you have in your carry-over?

Mr Murphy: It is a separate exercise. You are right: the more schemes are done at pace, the more potential there is, human nature and systems being what they are, for mistakes to be made. The LRSS paid out hundreds of millions — I think that it was £290 million — and I think that 1.6% or 1.7% was identified as having been paid in error. That is remarkable, given the amount of money that was paid out and the haste with which those schemes were put in place. The Member is correct: there are attempts to recoup some of that. For some who received an allocation incorrectly but are due another allocation — the people who will benefit from some of the schemes that I just referred to did not receive LRSS — we can deduct the amount that they owe us from what they will get. It is complex and there is a different set of circumstances in each.

My understanding is that, because we have allocated that funding, we can retain it, but I will confirm that with the Member. The focus has been on ensuring that errors are corrected.

There is flexibility to have a working arrangement with those who have to pay back. There is also flexibility across other schemes to make sure that, if someone was paid out under our scheme and received money from another Department, they will be paid minus the amount they have already received so that we do not have to recover money from them directly. There is a range of measures. I know that LPS was in front of the Committee last week. I am not sure what level of discussion there was about that, but it is probably worth LPS coming back to the Committee, at some stage in the not-too-distant future, to brief you on that. A number of measures are in place so that we can work with other Departments to make sure that, if further moneys are due to them, they can be deducted from the payments. Some of it will be direct clawback. The question then arises of whether we can retain the money. My understanding is that we can, but, if that is incorrect, I will be happy to inform the Member.

Mr Carroll: Thanks to the Minister for his statement. Many people will be left scratching their head as the Executive once again struggle to spend money. At any time, that would be disastrous, but, when food bank usage has soared, workers are facing pay freezes and cuts, and child poverty is soaring, it is almost insulting. What would the Minister say to those who wonder whether the Executive are up to the task of meeting economic and societal problems if they cannot even spend the money that they currently have?

Mr Murphy: The whole purpose of the statement was to say that we had spent the money that we currently have. I am not sure whether the Member was listening to the start of the statement. He should not underestimate what we managed to do. I am not blowing my own trumpet; it was departmental officials who managed to do it. We ensured that not only was the Budget that we were allocated last year spent but the £3.3 billion that we received on top of that was allocated. A lot of that money came at a very late stage with a lack of notice to us. It came after the summer, when we were told that that was all that we were getting for the year; we then received a further four tranches of money.

11.15 am

I get the political points that the Member makes about people who are struggling; I absolutely get that. The three priorities for this were protecting the health service, supporting vulnerable people and supporting businesses and workers, and that is what we have allocated the money for. He says that we cannot spend the money, but we have just spent the whole time for the statement speaking about how we have done so, against the odds and with warnings of doom from very many Members over the last three or four months that we would not spend it. We have managed to do that, and he should at least acknowledge that. I certainly concur with his points about people who are struggling, and we need to continue to provide support there.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. Members, please take your ease before the next item of business. Thank you.

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

Neurology Recall: Cohort 2 Activity and Outcomes Report

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have received notification from the Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, that he wishes to make a statement.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Members will recall that, in December 2019, the Department of Health published the outcomes report relating to the initial recall of approximately 2,500 neurology patients who had been discharged from the care of consultant neurologist Dr Michael Watt and whose treatment was reviewed by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. At that time, the Department provided a commitment that it would carefully consider anyone who had previously been seen by Dr Watt and discharged and then recall any key groups of people who, based on the advice of the consultant neurology team, required a review. A second recall was announced in October 2018, involving a further 1,044 patients.

I can announce that, today, the Department of Health has published the 'Neurology Recall: Cohort 2 Activity and Outcomes Report'. The patient group concerned comprises two subgroups. The first includes patients in high-risk groups who had been seen by the consultant between 2012 and 2017 but who were discharged back to the care of their GP. That group included patients who had been prescribed anti-epileptic drugs, immunosuppressants and disease-modifying therapies used to treat epilepsy and MS. The second group included patients of the consultant who had been referred back to the neurology service for review by their GP.

In line with cohort 1, the main purpose of the second recall was to ensure that patients were receiving the correct treatment. However, the clinicians conducting the review were also asked to consider whether the diagnosis was secure, whether proper management was in place and whether prescribing was appropriate. The purpose of the recall was to see and assess individuals to ensure that they were receiving the care and treatment that they required. It was not intended to provide a definitive assessment of Dr Watt's practice.

The cohort 2 outcomes report shows that, across both subgroups, of the 927 patients of Dr Watt who were assessed by the reviewing clinicians, 702 had a diagnosis that was considered to be secure and 181 had a diagnosis that was considered "not secure", while, for 44 patients, there was uncertainty in respect of whether the previous diagnosis was secure.

It is important to note that a diagnosis that is considered to be not secure does not automatically equate to a misdiagnosis. Other factors need to be considered. The patients involved have been advised of the outcome of their individual case. Although a higher proportion of the cohort 2 patients were assessed as having a secure diagnosis than for cohort 1, there remained approximately one fifth of patients with an insecure diagnosis. The responses to the other questions relating to management plans and prescribing were broadly similar.

I put on record my appreciation for the work undertaken by the clinical and administrative staff as part of the recall. Important, too, are the neurology charities, the Patient

and Client Council and the more informal patient support groups that contributed to this process.

I return to the report. In the context that a significant proportion of the cohort 2 patients had an insecure diagnosis, the advice from the reviewing consultants was that it would be appropriate also to review an additional cohort of Dr Watt's patients, cohort 3. These are patients who were discharged between 1996 and 2012 and who meet certain criteria, alongside a number of patients who had not been reviewed as young stroke patients in the previous recall cohort, due to the agreed criteria around age. The Belfast Trust, overseen by the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and the Department, undertook an initial stratification exercise to assess which patients would require a recall consultation with a consultant neurologist.

The 276 patients who need a consultation include those who had a continuing prescription of higher-risk medication — for example, epilepsy medication — prescribed by Dr Watt and who had not been subsequently seen by another consultant neurologist. Of the 276 patients, 209 are from the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust; 57 are from the Ulster Independent Clinic; and 10 are from Hillsborough Private Clinic. This process will commence imminently and conclude in a few months. In addition, for a further 495 patients who have been identified as currently being prescribed low-risk anti-platelet medication, the trust will require additional information from their GP to establish whether a further consultation is needed, and that process will also commence imminently.

In light of the ongoing pandemic, all initial recall consultations will take place virtually, with the reviewing consultant making a clinical decision at that stage on the requirement for a further face-to-face consultation. Affected patients have been contacted by the trust by letter to advise them of the arrangements and offer support where required, and a patient helpline — 0800 980 1100 — is available for them in this regard.

First, I thank the patients and families involved in cohorts 1 and 2. Their cooperation and patience in this most difficult of circumstances is greatly appreciated. The process will have been enormously frustrating and, at times, distressing. I met patients and families affected by the recall in October last year, and I reiterated my apology to them for how they have been let down by the health and social care (HSC) system. I do so again here today. Whilst this report is statistical in nature, it deals with individuals, their families and their experiences. Many will have had their confidence in our health service shaken, and I remain committed to helping to restore it.

I acknowledge the delay in the publication of the outcomes report and any additional concerns that this may have caused. Whilst the cohort 2 recall and related outcomes were largely finalised last year, the pandemic, understandably, significantly affected the trust's progress on the identification, validation and preparatory work relating to cohort 3. The perspective of and impact on patients have been foremost in my mind in the timing of this announcement. It would not be acceptable, for instance, to announce that there is to be a third cohort but not advise patients whether they are to be involved.

In announcing a further recall, I also acknowledge the fact that more patients are affected. It is deeply regrettable that any of our patients had that experience. When I consider

the total number of patients involved, I find it even more so. I therefore unreservedly apologise to those patients and to their families for any upset and distress that it has caused.

As Members will know, in order to address these issues, an independent public inquiry is investigating the circumstances that led to the neurology recall. In December 2020, I converted that inquiry into a statutory public inquiry to ensure that it could complete its work with unfettered access to all relevant information. The inquiry team has advised that it is at an advanced stage in fulfilling the remit of the terms of reference. I thank team members for their ongoing work, and I look forward to receiving their report in due course.

I also take the opportunity to update Members on a number of work streams that are connected with the neurology recall. The first relates to an epidural blood-patch review undertaken by the Belfast Trust, which is subject to independent verification by the Royal College of Physicians. The review focused on 66 patients who were not part of cohorts 1 or 2 because they had since been reviewed by a different consultant neurologist.

The initial review has been completed, and it has established that 46 patients had care that was unsatisfactory and fell below a standard that we expect. Additionally, the review established that, for 45 patients, there is no clinical evidence to support a decision that a blood-patch procedure was required. An interim report by the Royal College of Physicians to validate the trust's findings independently has indicated that their findings are generally consistent. The trust has contacted individual patients and offered them support. I am sure that all Members will agree that these are very concerning findings. I take this opportunity to apologise publicly to the patients for that and for the distress that it will have caused.

A second issue relates to redress. While the main focus over the past three years has been to ensure that Dr Watt's patients are receiving the correct treatment, it was also recognised that those who had suffered harm due to negligent treatment were entitled to compensation. The primary purpose of a redress scheme is to provide compensatory payments earlier than under normal arrangements for clinical negligence, with less distress to patients and lower legal costs. Options for a redress scheme were developed during 2019 and considered in early 2020. Further work on a streamlined process for neurology patients was commissioned but subsequently suspended owing to the need to divert staff resources to manage the response to COVID-19. That work has restarted in recent weeks, and I expect to receive an update on the latest position from the project board in June. I have specifically asked the project board to focus on an approach that, as far as possible, provides early resolution for patients who wish to avail themselves of it. In the meantime, all claims received to date in respect of the care provided by the consultant neurologist are progressing as quickly as possible under the standard arrangements for health service litigation claims.

Members will also be aware that, throughout the process, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) has been commissioned to undertake a number of reviews. I will first provide an update on the expert review of deceased patients. That review involves the clinical case notes of those of Dr Watt's patients who died

in the 10 years prior to the neurology recall. The review was commissioned in 2018. It has been significantly delayed, initially owing to legal issues surrounding the sharing of sensitive information and more recently owing to the pandemic's impact on resources. The preparatory phase was completed in November 2020, with the formal adoption of operational protocols and a legal framework to ensure access to the relevant deceased records.

Phase 2 will commence imminently and involve 45 patient records, including the records of those deceased patients whose family members have approached the RQIA with concerns about their care and the records of patients who were included in the Belfast Trust's cohort 1 neurology recall but unfortunately died before either attending or completing their reassessment. The RQIA has commissioned the Royal College of Physicians to establish an expert review panel of experienced consultants from outside Northern Ireland to review the records selected for phase 2 and, in addition, to consider any information shared with the RQIA by the families of the deceased patients.

11.30 am

On completion of the review of the records selected for phase 2, the royal college will provide the RQIA with a report on its findings, and those will then be shared with the Department of Health and published on the RQIA's website. I expect phase 2 to be completed towards the end of the summer. A decision on the roll-out of future phases of the review will be made following the completion of phase 2.

In addition to the deceased patients' review, the RQIA has undertaken two further reviews as part of the response to the neurology recall. 'Review of Governance of Outpatients Services' was published in February 2020 and the review of governance arrangements in independent hospitals and hospices in Northern Ireland has been completed, with final preparations being made to support its publication in the coming weeks.

Another piece of work that emanated from the events that led to the patient recall was the Department of Health's review of neurology services. The review commenced in December 2018 and produced an interim report in October 2019 that set out the case for change. Further work on the review was paused in March 2020, owing to the need to redeploy resources to respond to the pandemic. I anticipate that work restarting in earnest in the near future, with significant progress being made before the end of the year.

I will end by again thanking the patients and families who have been affected by the recall process. I acknowledge that there is a great deal of work still to do in this area, but I am confident that we have the correct structures and resources in place to complete the work and improve services for patients. I commend my statement to the Assembly.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I thank the Minister for his statement and for meeting the Deputy Chair of the Committee and me earlier about it.

The neurology inquiry has again revealed more examples of a lack of transparency and deficits in governance arrangements and accountability in the health service. People's lives have been impacted on. Indeed, some

people's lives have been devastated as a result of this scandal. I have met families and know that the lack of answers has been hugely traumatic and caused great anxiety.

What does the neurology inquiry and scandal tell us about how patients have been treated in the past by trusts? More importantly, what does it tell us about what lessons we need to learn and what changes we need to make and implement in future?

Mr Swann: I thank the Chair of the Committee for his comments about the work that needs to be done. In the statement, I indicated that the Belfast Trust, the RQIA and other bodies are already doing a specific piece of work on neurology.

Furthermore, a consultation was launched recently about the duty of candour. It will start to reshape and reassess some of the psychology in our health services across Northern Ireland. There is a realisation of the need to change, an indication of a willingness to change and an ability to change. Among all the professionals in our health service that I have met, that I talk to and that I deal with, there is a desire at their core to do right by their patients. This piece of work, along with the neurology inquiry, the urology inquiry, the inquiry into Muckamore and the work on the duty of candour all serve to reinforce and put structures around the need for us to ensure that our patients come into a health service that we can all be proud of: a health service that we all feel confident, safe and secure entering. That is what every patient should feel, and that is what the reviews that have been undertaken as a result of this piece of work and others will be able to achieve.

Mrs Cameron (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I thank the Minister for his statement. The announcement of a cohort 3 recall is a saddening but necessary step towards ensuring patient safety for those who may have been affected under the care of Dr Watt. My thoughts are with the individuals and families involved in that horrendous experience.

The Minister mentioned a redress scheme to provide compensation to those who are entitled to it. Does he have any indication of the scale of resource required to provide redress to all those who have been affected, and when does he anticipate that such a scheme will be ready to open?

Mr Swann: The project board is due to report to me in June on an all-encompassing redress scheme so that some of those acknowledgement payments could be processed quickly without the long duress that is needed because of legal requirements. A number of claims have already been put through the normal processes, which will be supported. At this point, we do not have an indication of the financial commitment because the initial cases are coming through to the project board as to what assessment can or needs to be made.

However, there is an assurance that redress payments will be paid. This was a failure of our systems, which has to be corrected. I have apologised for it here today on behalf of our service. We also need to rebuild confidence in our systems, and that is why a cohort 3 is necessary. We need to make sure that anybody who was misdiagnosed during that period can receive a review from another consultant, so that they get not just the financial but the medical and psychological support that they require.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister for his statement. The experience has been very distressing for a large number of patients and their families. Recognising that it is an extremely traumatic experience for them, what mental health support is available for those patients?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for that question. The issue that she raises was made very clear to me when I met the families and the patients involved towards the end of last year. That is why I encourage anyone who still feels that they need to reach out for help to contact the patient helpline: that is what it is there for. I remind the Member that the helpline number, which is being supported and facilitated by the trust, is 0800 980 1100. Furthermore, the Patient and Client Council is an independent body whose services can be used by any patient or family that needs additional support.

Mr Chambers: I welcome this extremely significant statement from the Minister today. It is important and proper that it has acknowledged that the patients and families affected are more than mere statistics. The Minister will be aware that I have spoken with him previously about a constituent's treatment for spinal fluid leakage. There was previously a suggestion from a clinician that the ongoing inquiry may have proved a barrier to the treatment being available. Will the Minister confirm that, in fact, all trusts locally are providing a blood-patch service?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member: It is something that he has raised with me. I want to reassure him that I am aware of issues that have been reported about the local provision of treatment for cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) leakage. I want to be very clear about that matter. It can be a very serious and painful experience, and it is always a matter of clinical judgement as to the treatment provided, whether locally or through a referral to GB. Whilst issues around that treatment have been considered as part of the neurology inquiry, it is not accurate to say that that has halted the provision of the treatment in the health and social care system.

Where a CSF leak is clearly linked to a procedure such as epidural spinal anaesthesia during childbirth, it will be managed conservatively in the first instance. However, if that is unsuccessful, all HSC trusts provide a blood-patch service, which is normally performed by an obstetrician and an anaesthesiologist. Other types of leaks, where the cause is not apparent, are looked at on an individual basis, and, where clinically appropriate and the expertise exists, a small number of cases are treated in Northern Ireland. However, more complex cases need to be managed by a multidisciplinary team for CSF pressure disorders.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next person on my list, I have noticed that there are significantly more people in the Chamber than are on my list. I will call the names out. If you are not on my list, please, rise, and I will add your name. Thus far, I have: Ms Bradshaw, Mr Buckley, Ms Ní Chuilín, Ms Flynn, Mr O'Toole, Mr O'Dowd, Ms Kimmins, Mr Allister and Mr Carroll. If you are in the Chamber and your name has not been called, please, rise in your place, and I will add your name to the list.

Ms Bradshaw: Apologies, I was not here for the start of the statement.

Minister, thank you for your statement today. Of all the patients I have spoken to over the past few years about

this matter, the most striking case was that of a woman who had been bed-bound for several years because she had been misdiagnosed and was on the wrong medication. When she raised that with Dr Watt, he said, "Sure, we are sorting you now". She, and many others, will be devastated that there has been very little progress made with the redress scheme today. I appreciate that we are coming through a pandemic, and, therefore, I urge you to seek to subcontract that work to one of the large consultancy companies. The Deputy Chair of the Health Committee, Pam Cameron has covered that matter.

I want to raise the issue of the epidural blood-patch review. What safeguards are in place to ensure that such an issue does not arise again?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. As I said in my answer to the Deputy Chair, the project board for the redress scheme has restarted again. I do not intend to subcontract that work at this stage as that would involve restarting all that work, and that would further delay any completion of what needs to come forward.

The epidural blood-patch review focused on 66 patients who were not part of cohort 1 or 2 and had a procedure under the care of Dr Watt. The findings of the internal review indicate that 46 of the 66 patients reviewed indicated that their care was unsatisfactory and fell below standards. For 45 patients, there was no clinical evidence that a blood-patch procedure was required. The initial internal review by the Belfast Trust has been subject to an independent quality assurance process by the Royal College of Physicians, and that work is concluding. However, the college has been able to provide an interim update that there are findings are generally consistent with those of the Belfast Trust. The trust has contacted all its relevant patients and offered ongoing support.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for the statement. A third recall will cause further distress to many patients across Northern Ireland, but, indeed, it is necessary. Within cohort 2, a subgroup of patients was assessed, and 75% were secure and 19.5% were not secure. Can the Minister elaborate on the other factors that must be considered, as is mentioned in the statement? There is also reference made to 5% where there is uncertainty. Can the Minister elaborate on stage 2 of that process? What is the follow-up process when uncertainties like that are found?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for that question. Those deemed to be uncertain will go through a further assessment process to see whether they fall into the other two categories. There are conditions that need to be taken into consideration other than the clinical diagnosis, the assessment of the patient for medication prescribed or not prescribed or the alternative treatments that could have been or were offered at that time. There is a further piece of work that goes on around those factors to make sure that all the prevailing circumstances to any diagnosis or reassessment of a diagnosis are taken into consideration.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis ar maidin. I thank the Minister for his statement this morning. I can tell from his tone that this is just another debacle that he and his Department have to fix. I am sure that he will appreciate that, for many people, it is stolen years. Their fertility has been disrupted; their intimate personal relationships are impacted, and that is only a couple of examples.

Can the Minister provide an update, particularly on the impact of the investigation by the regulator into the consultant who was appointed — Dr El-Naggar — to reassess patients affected by the Dr Watt scandal?

I am not being facetious, but can people now trust the trusts? To be frank, there is a series of reviews, and the public inquiry will start sometime, and I would appreciate the Minister providing clarification on that. While it was not on his watch when it started, it needs to be on his watch when it is concluded.

11.45 am

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. She knows me well enough to know that this is not work that I want to hide or brush under the carpet. I make the statement today to try to engender the trust in our health service that we all need to be part of. Those medical professions need our support to give reassurance to the public that, yes, things have gone wrong but the House is doing what it can to correct that and to support the people who have been failed. Our trusts are also doing what they can to correct that and to support the people who have been failed. There are a number of reviews and inquiries. The Member will be well aware that I have launched three public inquiries since coming into office in regard to what, I feel, needs to be brought out into the open, because that is how we engender trust in our health service again. The people working in it, as the Member knows, are genuine and good people who, at their core, do their best for everyone. Have there been failings and mistakes in the past? Yes. Have they been on my watch or before my watch? That is not relevant. It is about how we correct them, get them right and re-engender trust in our health service.

The Member has raised the matter of the consultant with me before in the House. I am aware of a hearing by the General Medical Council (GMC) regarding the consultant who assisted the neurology patient recall review in 2018. The hearing relates to a case in a previous post in England. My Department has received assurance from the Belfast Trust in the context of the consultant's work as part of the neurology recall. It has advised that the matter has not identified a concern in the specific area of work that the consultant was asked to undertake as part of the recall or the ongoing follow-up of patients in his care. The consultant's recall-related work was done as part of a wider multidisciplinary team with the review of clinical findings being part of a key process. I understand that this may concern the patients involved in the recall, but I assure them that ongoing safety remains our focus. Patients and families impacted by the neurology recall will continue to be supported by the Belfast Trust. Any patient affected by the recall who has concerns can avail themselves of the neurology advice line. I have been given that reassurance by the Belfast Trust, which knows that this has to be got right and wants to ensure that it is done right. It is in its interest to get to the bottom of this to make sure that it does not happen again.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Minister for the statement to the House. The Minister mentioned that all the affected patients had been contacted by letter by the trust around making arrangements, providing support and all the rest. Can the Minister be sure that everyone has already received those letters? Is that the case, or may it be that

some people are still falling through the gaps? What can the Department do to rectify that?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her comment. We wanted to ensure that this was managed, as much as possible, so that people who are waiting to see if they will be part of cohort 3 did not hear me announce the review of cohort 2 without us having done the preparatory work. Those letters have been issued and will arrive with people over the next few days. If people are still concerned and think that maybe they should be part of that cohort, they can use that contact number through the Belfast Trust to seek reassurance. They can also contact the Patient and Client Council, which is leading on the engagement and support work for us. It is meeting the family groups and charity groups, while the statement is being made, to re-engender trust in the work that has been done and that will be done under cohort 3. That is to make sure that nobody hears about this in a way that they should not and that the information, which is highly sensitive, highly emotional and highly stressful, is managed as sensitively as it can be.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for a full update to the Assembly. Like others, I have dealt with patients or, in my case, families of patients who have suffered because of the actions of Mr Watt, so I welcome a lot of what has been announced today.

Of course, dealing with the cohorts and the further recalls will be critical, as is the broader review of neurology services. At the end of the process, we need to know that neurology services will be fit for purpose going forward.

I note that the statement refers to the review being paused in March 2020, but it does not give clarity. You have stated that you think that significant progress will be made before the end of the year, but it would be helpful if you could give a commitment on time. In a sense, the most important thing going forward is clarity. When do you anticipate publishing the final review?

Mr Swann: I do not have a firm date. If I had, I would have put it in the statement so that Members knew.

I reaffirm our support for the current neurology team and the neurology services that we provide. They are working in a highly stressful situation at this minute in time because of the public focus on this work, especially today, when the recall of cohort 3 and the review of cohort 2 have been announced. They are a group of professionals who are picking up many pieces, putting people's lives back together and still seeing their patients as effectively as they can. This has had a knock-on effect on our neurology services in Northern Ireland, and it will take work, input and strong leadership to bring the review about and to bring in people to fill the vacant posts in that service.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his statement. Regrettably, he has had to announce further reviews of former patients of Dr Watt.

The recall runs the obvious risk of raising the anxieties and concerns felt by patients and their families. Will the Minister provide assurance that the necessary level of effective and sensitive support will be provided to those who might need it in this situation?

Mr Swann: Again, that is critical. When I met families and previous patients of Mr Watt, one of the main issues raised was the need for that support.

I appreciate the requirement for psychological support for neurology recall patients, given the distress that can be caused by the process. Access to psychological support has been put in place by the Belfast Trust to support patients who were affected by the neurology recall. That additional service, which has been provided to support patients affected by the recall, is not available to others. The Belfast Trust continues to support patients who attend the neurology service and those who were included in the neurology recall process. Members will be aware of the significant demand for psychological support across all areas of our healthcare system. There are long waiting lists, and the pandemic has made that much more challenging. That support is there through the Belfast Trust and the helpline.

Mr O'Dowd: Minister, it is shocking that you have had to come to the House again to update it on further developments in this case. I have raised with you before my concerns about the amount of power that consultants have in our health service. Undoubtedly, daily, if not hourly, consultants save people's lives or change their lives for the better. However, in any institution, when someone is deemed to be or seems to be unaccountable, mistakes will be made. Today, we have listened to a litany of mistakes and potentially huge errors that will have a detrimental impact on people's lives as a result of the work of one man — one man.

When will the public inquiry start, and what input will affected patients have into its terms of reference?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for that question. Part of the work being done, even in the consultation that has been launched on the duty of candour, is looking at something that starts to change the psychology and the mental aspect of how our health service works.

As I said, I converted Brett Lockhart's work into a full-scale public inquiry. The basis for needing that conversion to statutory public inquiry was primarily to ensure that the Independent Neurology Inquiry team had access to all relevant information so that it could draw its conclusions, make recommendations to my Department and support a timely outcome for the report. The inquiry team is at an advanced stage of fulfilling its terms of reference, and the decision to convert to a full public inquiry has not adversely impacted on the work or timescales of the inquiry. I reiterate my thanks to the chair and the Independent Neurology Inquiry team for all their work to date. That work has been ongoing, albeit on a full independent public inquiry footing only after I converted it towards the end of last year.

Ms Kimmins: The statement mentions that a high number of epidural blood-patch patients had unsatisfactory care, and the Royal College of Physicians has confirmed that that amounts to almost 70% of those patients. What support is available to those patients? Has the trust offered them a full apology?

Mr Swann: The trust has engaged with and is reviewing the independent quality assurance process by the Royal College of Physicians, which is concluding its work. The college has provided its interim update, and the findings are generally consistent with what was found initially by the Belfast Trust. It is necessary for the Belfast Trust to apologise to those patients, but I will also apologise. I apologise as Minister of Health on behalf of the Belfast

Trust and on behalf of the service for the disservice that those patients received at the behest or at the hands of Mr Watt.

Mr Allister: Ultimately, this pretty awful saga will result in a considerable draw on the public purse through the redress scheme and the private litigation that will undoubtedly be pursued. What redress will there be for the public purse? We know that Dr Watt has left the service of the Belfast Trust: is he on a full pension, paid by the public?

Mr Swann: I do not have that detail to hand to answer the Member, but I will answer him in writing.

Mr Carroll: I offer my sympathy and thoughts to all the people affected by the Dr Watt inquiry. My understanding is that some of the people affected by the recall have been told that, if they suffer from a functional neurological disorder, they may have to seek services in England. Will the Minister confirm whether that is the case? How many people will be affected by that? Will one of the lines of inquiry include looking at pharmaceutical companies and their practices on pushing particular drugs, especially for epilepsy and other neurological issues, to doctors and patients?

Mr Swann: I will need to check the terms of reference of the public inquiry and get back to the Member. We will provide whatever support we can to patients, where and when we can, as quickly as possible. If that involves some people being offered medical procedures or medical supports in other parts of the UK, we will do that. We will support them while they do that, because it is important that we get as many people as possible seen as quickly as possible to make right what was done wrong.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No other Members are indicating that they wish to ask a question. That concludes questions on the statement from the Minister of Health. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments while we make a change at the top Table.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

12.00 noon

Private Members' Business

Conversion Therapy

Mr Beattie: I beg to move

That this Assembly rejects the harmful practice widely referred to as conversion therapy; notes that the UK Government National LGBT Survey in 2018 reported that 2% of respondents had undergone conversion therapy, with a further 5% having been offered it; acknowledges the damage that this practice causes to the mental health of those who are subjected to it; further acknowledges that this practice has been widely rejected by medical professionals; declares that it is fundamentally wrong to view our LGBTQ community as requiring a fix or cure; and calls on the Minister for Communities to commit to bringing forward legislation before the end of the current Assembly mandate to ban conversion therapy in all its forms.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one and a half 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.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister for Communities for being in attendance and look forward to hearing her response to the debate. Although this is an Ulster Unionist Party motion, I accept that a lot of parties have fed into the debate on the issue, not least the Alliance Party and Paula Bradshaw, who only a number of weeks ago brought forward a petition asking for a ban on conversion therapy. Everybody therefore has a vested interest.

I have always been told that, when you open a debate, you should say something profound to engage everybody in the room. I do not have anything profound to say, but here is what I will say: I am a straight man. I was born straight, and there is no fix or cure for me or any therapy that will make me a gay man. Why on earth therefore would we say that a gay man was not born that way? Why would we say that a gay man can be fixed or cured? Why would we say that there is a therapy to change a gay man into a straight man? There is not. It is ludicrous. If you believe that being gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans or gender-diverse is a lifestyle choice, there is nothing that I can say to you today that will change your mind. If that is what you believe, that is what you believe.

Conversion therapy is humiliating and harmful, and having listened to testimonies of individuals who have undergone conversion therapy, it is clear that it has far-reaching negative mental impacts. The continual promotion that somebody is broken or wrong leads them to feel that they are worthless, and extremes lead to suicide. The British Psychological Society for Northern Ireland chairperson said that conversion therapies are unethical and unsupported by psychological evidence and that her society is committed to ending the practice. She said that sexual orientation and gender identities are not mental health disorders. However, those subjected to exclusion,

stigma and prejudice may well experience mental health issues as a result. She went on to say that it is important that the public are made aware of the risk and the harms of conversion therapies.

The UN independent expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity said:

“actions to subject lesbians, gay, bisexual, trans or gender-diverse persons to practices of ‘conversion therapy’ are by their very nature degrading, inhuman and cruel and create a significant risk of torture.”

“A significant risk of torture”, “inhuman”, “cruel”: those are words that should shake us all to the core when we think that some of our people here in Northern Ireland — our brothers and our sisters, our sons and our daughters, our teachers, our policeman, our nurses and our doctors — are subjected, or could be subjected, to that. It should shake us all, yet it is happening here in Northern Ireland.

We have a charity, with charitable status and everything that goes with that status, conducting conversion therapies here in Northern Ireland. It is part-funded by the International Federation for Therapeutic and Counselling Choice, which says that witnessing domestic violence or suffering sexual abuse can make you gay. My word. So, if you are subjected to domestic violence or sexual abuse, it can make you gay.

I have to say to everybody here and to anybody listening that this needs to be stopped, and I will keep saying that. Those are inhumane, cruel practices that are detrimental to people’s mental health.

We have issues of faith, and I do not want to get into a theological debate with anybody in the Chamber, as that would not be helpful. However, last year, just under 400 leaders of the world’s main religions called for an end to conversion therapy, and every main political party in the Chamber has stated that it wants to ban conversion therapy.

Many have tried to frame this debate as an attempt to stifle religious freedom. That is not the case. The right to preach, pray or counsel somebody who seeks support should not be diminished. The intent of the motion is not to limit anybody’s faith or belief or their ability to express them. I do not believe that private prayer about sexual identity, conducted in a supportive, affirming way, is conversion therapy, unless it is subversive and harmful. I do not believe that pastoral care is about changing someone’s gender identity, unless it is deliberately targeting the young or the vulnerable with the intent to do so. The word “intent” is incredibly important. If the intent is to change somebody’s sexual orientation or identity, it is wrong. It is trying to convert.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beattie: No, I am sorry, Jim, for time reasons, I will not give way, but I will listen to what you have to say.

A person of faith should support banning conversion therapy not in spite of their faith but because of it. The evangelical group Left Side Up said:

“To engage in activity to alter the sexual orientation or gender identity of a person is not an expression of religious freedom, but an abuse of power.”

It also stated:

"There are compelling Christian reasons to celebrate the wonderful rainbow of human diversity."

That is an evangelical group. I understand that people have religious views, and I respect them. I have always respected them, and I will not denigrate them in any way.

I cannot support the amendment, because removing the line:

"it is fundamentally wrong to view our LGBTQ community as requiring a fix or cure"

promotes the idea that they do need a fix and do need a cure. That may not have been the intention, but that is what it looks like, that is what it feels like and that is what our LGBTQ community sees it as being. I cannot support it, and I will not support it. However, I ask respectfully, and I say this respectfully, with no political mischief to my friends in the DUP: do not move that harmful amendment. Do not move it. I will not play political mischief with you; I will applaud your moral courage. The amendment is damaging to the people of Northern Ireland. It is damaging to a community that has long been damaged.

A young female member of the LGBTQ community once said:

"It won't always be like this. It's going to get better."

I never knew Lyra McKee, and she will never see the "better" that she foresaw. As we remember Lyra McKee two years after her murder, it is incumbent on all of us to reach inside ourselves to change this practice of conversion therapy. Nobody is tackling anybody's faith, but if it is coercive and controlling, we have to stop it. I believe in the promotion and protection of all spiritual beliefs, unless they are coercive in nature and directed deliberately at the LGBTQ community to create a sense that they need that fix or cure.

We can all play with words today, and I hope that we can all look at each other at the end of this and say that we have been respectful to each other. I want to be respectful to everybody in this room. It does not matter what any of us say here today, because the reality for me will be what the Minister has to say and how she takes this forward. Conversion therapy needs to be banned, it needs to be banned now and it needs to be banned before the end of this mandate.

Please express your opinions, but do not paint this as something that it is not. This is not about attacking anybody's religious freedoms. This is about banning a harmful practice that is damaging our young and old alike.

Mrs Cameron: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "professionals" and insert:

"recognises that legitimate religious activities, such as preaching, prayer and pastoral support, do not constitute conversion therapy, cannot be defined as such and must be protected; and calls on the Minister for Communities to consult widely on the way ahead, including relevant legislative options, to ban the practice of conversion therapy."

Mr Speaker: Thank you. You will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up

speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mrs Cameron: At the outset, I thank the Members who tabled the motion and state that I am in full support of a ban on the dangerous practices of conversion therapy in Northern Ireland. My party believes that discrimination against someone on the basis of their sexual orientation is wrong. We are all created equal and should be treated as such. No one should ever be forced into treatment for being gay.

I share the grave concerns of many Members at the various abhorrent practices that have been promoted under the umbrella of conversion therapy in the past and those that sadly still exist. Those have included electroconvulsive therapy, enforced isolation, aversion therapy, food deprivation, hormone therapy and hypnotherapy. Those and some other forms of so-called conversion therapy should never be allowed to harm our loved ones, friends and neighbours ever again.

As a party, we are firmly opposed to those forms of coercion and manipulation, because they do not respect human dignity. As a result, we are supportive of an appropriate response to prohibiting unsafe and coercive practices, including through legislation. However, we are concerned about the absence of any clear or evidence-based definition of conversion therapy in the motion.

There is a risk that such ambiguity, if translated into legislation, would criminalise legitimate activities or conversations. We simply want to avoid unintended and unjustified consequences. Therefore, we need to nail down what activities we seek to deal with not just to safeguard activities that cannot be reasonably be deemed to be harmful or coercive but to give the best protection to our LGBT community.

12.15 pm

Some Members disagree with our amendment because they want the ban to cover religious settings. Others object because they do not feel that the motion covers religious settings in the first place. That highlights the ambiguity that exists without clear definition. The motion does not account for a complex legal landscape of competing rights, including freedom of religion and freedom of speech. It was for those very reasons that legislation in Germany was restricted to treatments in healthcare settings and for minors. That is why our amendment encourages the Minister to consult widely with affected stakeholders on plans for legislation. We want legislation to be ambitious and effective, but that cannot happen with unclear and sweeping definitions of conversion therapy. It is also important that we consider other dangerous, unregulated and unqualified pseudoscientific forms of treatment, counselling and healthcare for all manner of things, many of which have no foundation in any religious beliefs.

Let me be clear: I do not believe that members of our LGBT community should be fixed or cured. I might not agree, but I recognise that there are those with deeply held religious beliefs on sexuality who have differing opinions on how someone should live their life. The DUP wants to see progress on banning conversion therapy. Those appalling practices that still pervade our society today must be defined and made illegal if they are not already. We are committed to not just any legislation to ban

conversion therapy but the best legislation — legislation that is fair and evidence-based. We ask Members to support the amendment. Good law is clear law. Effective law is law with clearly defined scope.

Ms Ennis: I support the motion and oppose the amendment tabled by the DUP. I am conscious that there will be people outside the Chamber watching the debate who have experience of the trauma of this kind of pseudoscientific malpractice. I hope that we all bear that in mind and are sensitive to it in our contributions.

It is hard to know where to start with a concept like this, which is so obviously morally and ethically wrong. It is so indefensible that it is really hard to get your head around the fact that it still happens here today. I will start with the term itself: "conversion therapy". The word "therapy" suggests something healing, holistic and restorative, so let us look at the therapeutic effects of attempts to change a person's sexual orientation. A recent 'Spotlight' investigation of conversion therapy reported that, in 2018, a UK-wide survey found that over half of those who had experience of attempts to change their sexual orientation had subsequently suffered mental health issues and one fifth had attempted suicide.

A UN expert recently reported to the Human Rights Council that conversion therapy inflicts "severe pain and suffering" on lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender-diverse persons, often resulting in "psychological and physical damage" that is "long-lasting". When asked about their experience of conversion or "pastoral therapy", as it is sometimes called, participants in the discredited practice said that they were made to feel so degraded and ashamed and that their self-loathing became so great as a result of what they were being told by the people delivering the therapy that they wanted to end their life. If there are organisations in this jurisdiction exposing our citizens to behaviour that is so destructive that it makes them feel that they want to end their life, the Assembly needs to come down hard on them and work to eradicate the practice completely.

I thank the hundreds of people who have contacted me over recent weeks to show their support for a ban on conversion therapy. I do not think that I have been lobbied as strongly on any other issue. I want to make it clear that Sinn Féin unequivocally condemns the practice of conversion therapy and what it stands for. It is deeply damaging to the mental health and emotional well-being of the LGBTQ+ community as a whole. We are resolute in our opposition to homophobia and discrimination in all its forms.

Despite DUP attempts to suggest otherwise, it is fundamentally wrong to view the LGBT community as requiring a fix or a cure. That is why the Sinn Féin Communities Minister, Deirdre Hargey, is bringing forward legislation to ban conversion therapy in every way in which it masks itself. Like any new legislation, it will take time. I am sure that my colleague will, of course, want to ensure that no loopholes are made available by any changing of names or definitions. It is also important that those affected by conversion therapy and the wider LGBTQ+ community have their say when the legislation goes out to consultation. I have no doubt that they will do that.

As I said, Sinn Féin will support the motion as it stands but will not support the amendment. I urge other Members to

reject the amendment. The toxic mix of heteronormative conservatism combined with religious fundamentalism that permeates the DUP is given voice in its attempt to amend the motion. The amendment seeks to provide cover for quacks and clerics to continue to damage and harm our LGBTQ+ citizens. Again, I urge Members to reject that fossilised thinking by rejecting the amendment.

I will finish by saying that I am sure that there are many eyes and ears on us today. There may be people watching the debate who are coming to terms with their sexuality. Maybe they do not have the right support system around them, and maybe they are not given meaningful, proper sex education in their schools that reflects their feelings and sexual orientation. If you are such a person and you take nothing else from the debate today, please know this: homosexuality is normal and natural. You cannot change or control your sexuality any more than you can change or control the colour of your skin, and anyone who tells you otherwise is nothing more than a snake oil salesman. No cure is required for being yourself, and you do not need to be fixed because you are not broken.

Mr Durkan: I want to start by saying that no one should be told that their identity — who they are as a person — is wrong or that it is something that must or even can be cured. It needs to be said emphatically and unequivocally that sexual orientation is not a sin to be confessed. The freedom to be oneself is something that most of us take for granted, yet, for some gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals, being themselves can be the most frightening step that they will ever take.

The practice of conversion therapy is not only abhorrent but barbaric and must be consigned to the past. The untold damage and trauma that it has caused people here will never truly be known. However, thanks to the bravery of victims — yes, victims — who have come forward to share their harrowing experience, a light has been shone on just how widespread the practice is here, with 7% of LGBT+ people having been offered or having undergone that deeply distressing practice. That abuse should not be tolerated, let alone provided for, under current legislation.

For too long, the LGBT community has been let down and has had to fight for the rights that are afforded to others and an equal place in society. While we have come some way in advancing LGBT rights, the fight is far from over. The Executive committed to a sexual orientation strategy in 'New Decade, New Approach'. The Minister has said that legislation to outlaw conversion therapy will be a part of that. However, the LGBT community wants a swifter and separate approach. We have seen too many strategies launched to great fanfare, only to sink without a trace.

Mr Catney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: Certainly.

Mr Catney: I am slightly embarrassed in front of those who are from the LGBT community, especially anyone who is in the Chamber, that we are debating the issue. I am 66-year-old happily married grandad: that is who I am. No one is trying to change me. Why is it right that some people out there should try to change anyone else? I have three little words: love is love.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his intervention. Love is, indeed, love.

Any strategy that is brought forward must focus on addressing LGBT health inequalities. Research from the Rainbow Project has shown that LGBT people are particularly vulnerable to developing mental health problems due to the homophobia, discrimination and oppression that exist in our society. It will, therefore, come as no surprise that that community is more likely to self-harm, to feel suicidal and to suffer addiction issues. Most shocking of all is the statistic that Ms Ennis quoted on the number of people who have attempted suicide. Consider those horrific statistics in the context of conversion therapy, in which organisations perpetuate the falsehood that sexual orientation can be controlled and prey on extremely vulnerable individuals.

Many victims have spoken of their struggle to accept themselves, and practices such as conversion therapy serve only to compound their feelings of self-hatred and shame. That discredited practice is completely unethical. No one should be put through that traumatic ordeal or be led to feel that they are deficient in any way. Put simply, it is abuse. The Governments here and in Westminster have not done enough to establish protections for the LGBT community. It is incumbent on us all to acknowledge and tackle all forms of discrimination in our society. We must find a way forward to protect victims and to send a clear message to practitioners that this so-called therapy is wrong. To do that, we need legislative backing in the form of an outright ban.

Some promote mental health and well-being but, in the same breath, support — well, tolerate — conversion therapy. Those viewpoints are completely incompatible. Tolerance of the latter is effectively a denial of the former, and we will oppose the amendment today. Homosexuality is not a brokenness; rather it is the system and attitudes here that are broken. I apologise to every member of the LGBT community who has been failed by our system. Every citizen should be free to live and to love without fear of shame or judgement. We need to start from the premise of understanding and to champion inclusive education in our schools to allow young people to form healthy relationships with themselves and with others. By engaging and educating, we can create a society that works for all.

The SDLP is built on foundations of equality. We fully support the motion and the ban on conversion therapy.

Mr Muir: To start, I thank Doug and John for tabling today's motion. I know them as allies of the LGBT community, alongside others in the Chamber such as Carál Ní Chuilín, whom I have known for many years and who supported me when I was much younger and less grey-haired as an LGBT activist. I really appreciate them tabling today's motion, and I appreciate the work that so many have done, including my colleague Paula Bradshaw. I also thank, in particular, those who have been involved in a very successful, professional and well-organised campaign. I am impressed by the work that has been done. I speak as an Alliance Party MLA on behalf of the party. I am conscious of the need for a respectful debate, because people are watching, and the way that the debate plays out has impacts.

On Saturday, I was sorting out the books in my study, having got new shelves from a well-known furniture retailer. I found one of my books — 'Boy Erased' — which was given to me as a gift by one of my best friends, who

was able to come to terms with his sexuality and with his friends and family in relation to that. I strongly recommend the book in relation to today's debate. Alongside the book, I found a postcard that was given to me in the late 1990s when I was at university in Derry. Things have moved on somewhat from then. At the top, it says, "Lesbians and gay men are". Well, we have moved on to be more inclusive than that, as the LGBT community. The postcard says that they are our daughters, sons, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, cousins, grandparents, uncles, aunts, in-laws, carers, cared-for, friends, work colleagues, customers and service users. That is whom we are talking about today. The issue that we are debating has a significant impact on so many people: not just my LGBT brothers and sisters but their wider families, friends and work colleagues.

12.30 pm

I am very fortunate to have had a very inclusive upbringing, a very supportive family and a mother who is probably more liberal than I am, but I am conscious of those who have not and of the impact of this debate on them, particularly the DUP amendment tabled on Friday. That amendment has caused hurt and offence, and people have contacted me saying that they have been re-traumatised by it, particularly the desire to remove the wording about a "fix or cure". I really regret that that has happened.

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that it has been heartbreaking to hear, over the last week or so, from people who have been so traumatised by the amendment? It has traumatised a vast part of the community, which did not expect this to happen.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Muir: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I agree with Ms Armstrong. All the amendment does is harm. The DUP needs to recognise that it is on the wrong side of history on this. The debate that we have had in recent days about the amendment has shown that society has moved on quite a lot. The idea that a ban on conversion therapy can be an attack on religious freedom is building a straw man. Any legislation that is passed by this place would have to be compliant with the European Convention on Human Rights, especially article 9. I am used to these straw men being built, especially in relation to equal marriage. We were told that the sky would fall in if we legislated for equal marriage. The reality is that people are a bit more equal and are happier in love. The sky has not fallen in.

For me, when we are debating conversion therapy, it touches the core of what is deep-rooted homophobia in our society. There is an idea that sexuality is a choice and a lifestyle. I chose to wear a bow tie today. That is a lifestyle choice; my sexuality is not. It also goes to the core of deep-rooted transphobia in our society. The reality is that it is perfectly good and normal for one man to love another man, for one woman to love another woman or for someone to fulfil their gender identity. The failure to recognise and accept that shows why we need an effective ban. We need that ban. This must not be symbolic legislation. That would be an insult and would allow the harm to continue.

A definition of conversion therapy is essential to allow that effective ban, and the Ban Conversion Therapy coalition of LGBT+ organisations has provided a recommended legal definition, which is about actions to encourage

someone to erase, repress or change their sexuality or gender identity. Asking someone to repress, for example, their sexual orientation is deeply harmful. I know people to whom it has happened. I know people who suffered from the homophobia and transphobia in our society to such an extent that they took their life. We have a responsibility in this place to ensure that an effective ban is brought forward. Yes, it must be done through co-production and co-design with the LGBT community, but this Assembly mandate must end with an effective ban.

Ms Sheerin: As has been said, Sinn Féin will support the motion and reject the amendment. I preface my remarks with thanks to the UUP Members who tabled the motion. I place on record an acknowledgement of the huge amount of work done by Micky Murray of the Alliance Party through the online petition that he started last year and, of course, the Ban Conversion Therapy alliance for its work in bringing so many people together to call out the notion that gay people need a fix or a cure. I was happy to hear from my constituents, who lobbied me on this.

It is reassuring to see such consensus across parties for the banning of this cruel and inhumane practice. Work began last year when Carál Ní Chuilín met the Justice Minister and the Health Minister in the summer. Our party is working on this in the South through Fintan Warfield's Bill of 2018. From a rights perspective, this could not be more clear: banning conversion therapy is the bare minimum. This is not even about applying the conditions for LGBTQI+ brothers and sisters to live a life with equal opportunity; this is about removing a real and visceral barrier to a full and happy life.

Under article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, everyone has the right to live life free from inhumane or degrading treatment, which is what those so-called therapies clearly amount to. The testimonies from people who have been subjected to conversion therapy speak for themselves. Article 8 of the ECHR allows everyone the right to a private life. Imposing your views, whatever they are, on another person's home is a contravention of that. Conversion therapy, slurs daubed on walls and violent attacks are the physical outworkings of a much deeper problem: they are symptoms of homophobia. It is that discriminatory prejudice that we really need to address.

No one is born homophobic; it is something that is conditioned by society. Like any other form of discrimination, we need to challenge homophobia when we are confronted with it. Just as institutionalised racism survived the abolition of slavery and the ending of Jim Crow, the implementation of marriage equality did not fix all the issues that LGBTQI+ people face. Telling people that you regard them as equal is important, but, unless you actually treat them as equal, you have failed. Allowing language that ostracises and others people leads to those people being ostracised and othered. That requires ownership and acknowledgement.

I note that a proponent of those therapies, who was challenged this morning on radio, claimed that homosexuality or transsexuality is a lifestyle choice, as Mr Muir referred to. When he was asked whether people should be allowed to change from heterosexual to LGBTQI+, he faltered. Of course we know why: to change who you are and who you love is not possible. We are not having this conversation about people attempting to turn

gay; we all know that those in our LGBTQI+ community have fewer rights and face more challenges. Our LGBTQI+ community has had to fight hard for the realisation of its rights. In doing so, that community faced stigma, shame and ignorance. Unfortunately, that is just the thin end of the wedge. There is also discrimination in the workplace, attacks on nights out, homophobic abuse on social media and threatening catcalls on the street. When we talk about those matters, I always think of people, particularly young people, growing up in rural areas such as my own who are grappling with their sexuality and figuring out that they are gay, lesbian or trans and all of the challenges that that can bring because of a lack of resources, education, community and support. Our LGBTQI+ population is dispersed by its very nature. That is felt all the more when you live in the country.

A few weeks ago, one of our councillors — Councillor Cora Corry — and I met Mid Ulster Pride, which is a group of young people trying to establish an LGBTQI+ network in their constituency. I learned a lot from our conversation. They listed concerns that never would have occurred to me as a young person. There is an additional layer of rural isolation with which I did not have to contend when I was growing up. The motion is a step in undoing some of that harm. It is about telling members of our LGBTQI+ community that they are valued and loved just as they are. The Assembly has not always been a friendly place for people who identify as LGBTQI+. That is the only thing that requires a fix.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank Doug and John for tabling the motion. This is a really important day in the Assembly. There has been a lot of debate, rightly or wrongly, since the motion was mentioned, as there was when Paula brought forward the petition on the issue and when Órlaithí Flynn raised it at the Health Committee. The message to me is that the issue will keep being raised while the practice exists. It needs to be banned.

No one in the House has an issue with the banning of torture. That is what conversion therapy is. I have spoken to people who have tried to be converted. What they experienced, particularly the older gentlemen, was nothing short of torture. I am the proud sister of a gay brother. I witnessed what my younger brother experienced when he grew up. My family were like many families. My father, Lord rest him, was a working-class engineer. He was certainly not politically correct, but he knew about the bullying that his youngest son went through because he was gay. My brother is happily married, but why did he have to go to London to feel included? Why did he feel that, as soon as he turned 17, he needed to get out of here?

That has happened to so many people. He was so lucky to have friends from Belfast and across the North who acted as a support mechanism for him. I spoke to some of them at his wedding and heard about some of the things that they had had to go through, which, I have to say, were and are shameful. What is even more shameful is the attempt to use religious belief to say that it is OK, when it is not.

I listened to Andrew, whom I have known for a long time. He said that he has grey hair now, and the fact that mine is not shows that I have been to the hairdresser while Andrew has not. The point of the matter, however, is that all denials of equality started in places such as this, and they need to end in places such as this. That is the only way in which we will protect people who face discrimination and

bullying and will ensure that, as described in the European Convention under, as Emma said, articles 3 and 8, they have the right not to be tortured and the right to a private life. I could not help but be moved by what Andrew said on the radio this morning, and I was really proud of him. Like many people, he is saying, "When will this nonsense stop? How many more times do people have to ask to be treated fairly?"

We need to go beneath the skin of the amendment. The only way in which any of us will be taken seriously, when it comes to people's rights, entitlements and protections, is if we pass legislation to protect. In 2021, we still have people saying, "Listen, I'm not a homophobe. I'm just not convinced that your notion of conversion therapy is the same as mine". The fact that you are even saying things like that in 2021 is ridiculous. I do think that that is homophobic. I accept that some of the people with strongly held religious beliefs are not homophobes, and I take your point about being respectful, despite being really annoyed. This needs to stop, however, and it needs to stop now. The only way in which we can put an end to people being abused and being made to feel different or less human is to bring forward legislation now.

To end on a positive note, it has been a respectful debate, and it will hopefully end as a respectful debate. In 2021, strategies and legislation are still being blocked, and commitments made by Governments have not been honoured. If we are still doing that in 2021, we need to ask ourselves fundamental questions. If you say that you are for equality, show me what that looks like. We know what it looks like when you are opposed to it. It means sending people to join a long waiting list for mental health support, if they can get it. Our brothers and sisters — either they are your brothers and sisters or they are somebody else's brothers and sisters — need our support, and they need it now.

Ms Hunter: I will start today with some direct quotations from Members and former Members from the party opposite.

Sammy Wilson, DUP:

"I don't care if they are ratepayers. As far as I am concerned they are perverts."

Thomas Buchanan, DUP, said that homosexuality is: "an abomination."

Edwin Poots, DUP:

"It is unnatural in the first instance, and abominable in the second instance."

Iris Robinson, DUP:

"Gay people are more vile than child abusers."

That last quotation is from 2005. Today, in 2021, as a young person, I am in genuine disbelief that we are here today even having to debate conversion therapy. People of the LGBT+ community need not our prayers but our respect and support.

I thank the UUP for tabling this important motion. I really am at a loss as to where to begin. Today's debate is the symptom of a very sick part of our society that believes that our LGBT friends, family and colleagues need to be cured. To be frank, I find the amendment insulting. It is a

cheap tactic from the DUP, utilising religion as a veil for its evident and ardent homophobia. The idea that a young, vulnerable person who is looking for guidance on their sexuality is met with therapy is the real abomination.

12.45 pm

As someone with a strong faith myself, I am sick and tired of religious freedoms being used as a way to think that it is in any way acceptable to reject the LGBT+ community. Get real. The motion is not about criminalising prayer; it is about limiting harm to our LGBT brothers and sisters with these unethical therapies. Religious freedoms must be questioned the moment that harm is committed, and we know, from speaking first-hand to people who have endured conversion therapy, that many have experienced hurt and rejection from people who told them, "God condemns you because of who you are and who you love". That is shocking.

Has the LGBT community not been through enough, from the historic shame of the AIDS pandemic to delay after delay in the right to marriage equality? We do not want more young people, especially those in isolated rural communities, watching us today to experience more anguish. I cannot imagine how that must feel.

Looking back at our history in NI on LGBT issues, I remember, when I was growing up, looking round the table at lunchtime and thinking that it was so strange that half my friends would be able to dream about their wedding day and getting married while the other half would not. It makes me feel ashamed that, just a few years ago, that was the reality in my home, in our home.

What a shame it is that the party across from me, led by the First Minister, wants to amend the motion to take out:

"that it is fundamentally wrong to view our LGBTQ community as requiring a fix or cure".

What message does that send to the young people in our schools who are struggling or repressing their identity? They should not be met with shame, stigma and, least of all, therapy. They should be met with love, understanding and respect. After all, is that not the Christian way? Research on the issue of family acceptance of LGBTQ youth showed that young people were eight times more likely to be suicidal, six times more likely to report high levels of depression, and three times more likely to use drugs.

I say to the DUP, and its actions today and its actions spanning decades, that using religion as a mask and a weapon to do your dirty work for you and to allow you to be freely and openly homophobic is a disgrace. To that end, as someone with a strong faith, I have to say that it is you and your mentality that are the problem, not members of the LGBT community. The SDLP strongly supports the motion and rejects wholeheartedly the DUP amendment.

Mr Allister: I have no difficulty whatsoever in condemning some of the gruesome practices that, historically, were associated with what has been called conversion therapy, including the use of drug and aversion therapies. All of that was obnoxious. My problem with the motion, however, is, very simply, its deliberate obfuscation by the fact that it fails to define conversion therapy. In fact, in its very last words, it embraces the banning of:

“conversion therapy in all its forms.”

What are “all its forms”? If we take seriously some of the lobbying from the LGBT community, it patently and indisputably includes religious exercises. We have all received — I know that I have — lobbying from that community making it very clear that it wants a ban not just to extend to the gruesome and the horrible practices that I have talked about but to religious exercises. They want to criminalise preaching in accordance with the sexual ethics set forth in Holy Scripture; they want to criminalise praying in accordance with the sexual ethics set forth in Holy Scripture. Where there has been legislation, as in Victoria, Australia, that is exactly what happened.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Wells: Did the Member note this morning that a leading SDLP councillor made it very clear on ‘The Nolan Show’ that he wanted all forms of religious intervention to be banned and that a leading councillor from the Alliance Party on ‘Talkback’ made exactly the same point that all religious intervention of any kind in this field must be banned?

Mr Allister: Absolutely. That is the nub of the matter. That is why I am astounded that Mr Beattie tells us that he is not in the business of suppressing religious expression and exercise but is opposed to an amendment that seeks to protect it.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: In a moment.

We are in a situation where it is abundantly clear from the lobby groups that advance this motion that they are in no doubt that they want to suppress and, indeed, criminalise religious activity. By their standards, that giant of Christian heritage St Paul would be a most offending criminal. Anyone who has ever read — maybe not enough have — his letter to the church at Corinth, First Corinthians chapter 6, will know that he, apparently, could readily be accused, in the terms of the LGBT community, of conversion therapy. When he referred to changes in lives and said, “such were some of you”, was that not conversion therapy in the terms that are being proposed? It seems to be.

It is critical that religious practices are protected. If a minister of religion is approached by a young person or an older person who wants counsel and guidance on sexual issues because they are a person of faith or who is attracted to faith, is that minister of religion to be criminalised? There is a great phrase to the effect that the Government should not intervene between consenting adults in the bedroom. Fair enough. Now, however, there is the desire to intervene between consenting adults in the minister’s counselling room because it offends thought processes by daring to uphold what is clear to anyone who holds to Christian faith as set forth in the Bible. It is sad to me that those who want, rightly, to ban conversion therapy are not prepared to stand up and accept an amendment that would put it in the right context that preserves, outside that ambit, freedom of religion. That is protected as an absolute by article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights but would be trampled by this motion if it got the sort of legislation that embraced its terminology of “in all its forms”.

Mr Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to speak. I support the amendment because it does preserve the fundamental imperative of religious freedom, and I will oppose the motion because it does not.

Mr Speaker: I am going to have to give four minutes to all Members who speak next, in order to give the rest of the Members who wish to speak that entitlement. I rule that there will be four minutes each with no additional time for interventions. Be aware of that. It is to ensure that we give as many as possible of the Members who are listed to speak the opportunity to do so.

Mr Nesbitt: First, as a member of the Policing Board, I condemn without reservation the attempted murder of a police officer overnight. The PSNI, I believe, found a viable device and dealt with it. Whoever was responsible has no place in our society in 2021.

I thank my colleague Mr Beattie for tabling this motion. Once again, he demonstrates what an asset he is, not only to the Assembly but to society, in his fairness, his inclusiveness and his compassion.

The debate works on two levels. Obviously, there is the specific level, and I accept that we need to tighten up our definition of conversion therapy, but that is not something that we will do today in a private Member’s motion. We will do it when we get to legislation. I note that Sinéad Ennis confirmed that the Minister is preparing to bring forward legislation, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister later.

Not only will that legislation need to define more closely conversion therapy but it will need to address the legitimate concerns of those who believe that it will have a negative impact on worship in this country. That is not what I am about in supporting the motion. I am about protecting the vulnerable and outlawing coercive practices. Everybody who has spoken so far agrees that there are and have been coercive practices. I simply want to put in place protections that I would want for me, my family and my friends if we were being pressurised to change against our will.

Yesterday, I listened to a member of the LGBTQ+ community talk about his experience of how he was made to feel ashamed of who he is. I have met many others who, like Carál Ní Chuilín’s brother, have left this little part of Planet Earth not because they wanted to but because they felt that they had to as a result of who they are and of how we treated them. That is just wrong, and I am so sorry to hear that about your brother, Carál.

The debate is about recognising that we have not done well by our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters. It is also about acknowledging that, as Peter Lynas of the Evangelical Alliance did on the radio this morning, the Churches have not done well on occasions. That is a big statement, coming from Peter Lynas.

Most of the parties in the House, 23 years ago, agreed on a way forward on building a society that is inclusive, respectful, builds trust and recognises diversity. In fact, more than recognising diversity, it was changing the narrative from saying that we are a divided society that needs a fix and a cure to becoming a society where we recognise and celebrate our diversity. That is why I support the motion but not the amendment. That amendment

implies that our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters need to be cured and fixed.

For those who are listening to the debate who seek unionist unity and are wondering why we do not have it, the answer is very simple. Read the motion and the amendment. They are like chalk and cheese. That is why there is not and never can be unionist unity.

I support the motion. I do not support the amendment.

Mr Wells: Those who oppose conversion therapy have been utterly honest in their demands, and I applaud that. We all received a briefing last week from a group of LGBT activist organisations that made it absolutely clear that what they seek and that what, clearly, the motion seeks is a complete ban on all interventions by pastors, priests and ministers on the issue.

I am a married man of 38 years, and I have three children. If I were in a situation where I started to struggle with same-sex attraction — I am not, by the way — and I went to my pastor seeking spiritual guidance, the motion and the campaign would mean that the only thing that he could do is approve of my lifestyle choice, commend it and wish me all the best. If at any time he were to quote from his Church's teaching on this issue, which is clearly outlined by Paul, Leviticus, Jewish sacred writings and the Koran, and he indicated to me his Church's teaching, if reported to the police, that pastor, priest or minister would be up in the courts. People say that it has not happened, but it has. What about Pastor McConnell from Whitewell Tabernacle, who was up in court for articulating his Christian views on a certain subject? Therefore, it happens.

1.00 pm

Are Mr Beattie and Mr Stewart putting themselves into a position where they will put pastors, priests and ministers into the dock? If they are not, they should not be supporting the motion. When people talk about conversion therapy, they talk about physically and sexually abusive practices that are appalling. We all oppose those: there is no difficulty whatsoever with that. However, they also talk about innocent behaviour, such as people praying or asking for prayer. Remember that we are not talking about coercion here: we are talking about adults who perceive that they have a problem and who go to their spiritual adviser to seek prayer and counselling. There can be no compulsion whatsoever.

I came across an article in 'The Guardian' recently, which shocked me. The journalist wrote:

"Some churches claim their prayer practices are not conversion attempts",

but the article quoted an activist who said:

"That's merely semantics ... Conversion practice is the oxygen you breathe the minute you go into a conservative religious environment".

'The Guardian' apparently endorses the idea that conversion therapy is the oxygen that conservative Christians breathe. So when they support banning conversion therapy, they and, presumably, Mr Beattie and Mr Stewart support the banning of conservative religious practices. I notice that neither of them have asked me to give way on that point.

Here in Northern Ireland, they are outlawing the beliefs of hundreds of thousands of people, including in Upper Bann and in East Antrim. Normal, everyday Christian practices and beliefs are being compared to bogus therapy and even rape, and that is considered as merely semantics. I am not sure that I have strong enough words to condemn that slur.

If you are gay and have never stepped into a church, the sort of news that you read and the picture that you get is that there are millions of Christians in the UK who are looking for opportunities to hurt you. You are told that if someone prays for you, it is actually a form of abuse. You are told that the entire religion of hundreds of thousands of people in Northern Ireland is so toxic that it should be outlawed. I put it to the proposers of the motion that that is incredibly dangerous language. It is a crude caricature of our religious communities —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Wells: — that seems designed to stir up hatred and suspicion against them and to justify taking away their basic human rights.

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. This debate will resume after Question Time, when the first Member to speak will be Rachel Woods.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 1.02 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Finance

Zero-carbon New Builds

1. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on his plans to ensure that new buildings are zero-carbon. (AQO 1906/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): My officials continue to engage with the Building Regulations Advisory Committee (NIBRAC) and the specialist technical subcommittee to bring forward an uplift in that area as quickly as possible. There are a number of detailed and interconnected considerations on issues such as the assessment software, outworkings of proposals emerging from other regions, renewables and local grid consequences, which are being considered alongside a cost-benefit assessment of options. My officials briefed the Finance Committee on some of the details of that last week and have been invited to provide a similar briefing to the next meeting of the all-party group on climate change. Every effort is being and will be made to progress an uplift in this Assembly mandate, if possible. I will provide notice of any consultations in due course. I have also provided the Finance Committee with outline proposals for an ambitious phased plan of uplifts over the longer term. Those have recently been published in the Department for the Economy's energy strategy options consultation, and my Department will consult on them in due course.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister will be aware that the carbon footprint of construction is unregulated but can account for up to 70% of a building's emissions over its lifetime. Does the Minister intend to regulate embodied carbon in construction? Will he commit to meeting me and members of the Architects Climate Action Network Northern Ireland (ACAN) on the decarbonisation of the construction industry?

Mr Murphy: As I said, the Department's building regulations group is consulting on doing significant uplifts in relation to that and is addressing all the issues. We have to fit in with the Executive's overall carbon reduction targets. It is not just in the short term — we have some catch-up to do in the short term — but in the long to medium term. The officials were to brief the Committee on the undertakings. However, we are more than happy to consult others who have an interest in the area. If the Member contacts the Department, I will be happy to meet her group.

Mr McHugh: Minister, if we are to become a zero-carbon society, we need to improve existing buildings as well as new structures. Is any work ongoing to retrofit existing buildings?

Mr Murphy: The building regulations set standards only for when building work takes place, and grant schemes and programmes to encourage retrofit are principally a matter for other Departments to lead on. The energy

strategy cross-departmental group is looking at the matter. Our building regulations standards are for work to existing buildings and are largely in line with those in England. We will consider the standards in place in the South and any proposed uplifts in other regions that will come into effect in 2022 as part of our programme. We will also look at the issue of retrofit within that programme. We are mindful of the aim for zero-emission building stock by 2050 and that new buildings should not contribute to the need for further retrofit. Therefore, the regulations need to be right and issues with buildings need to be resolved. The uplift that we are looking at is considering significant improvements to the limiting fabric standards for new buildings, and it is anticipated that there will be further improvements in the subsequent uplifts with that in mind. Sudden and extreme uplifts in performance standards could halt the industry, and that is why a phased solution towards a very high standard is proposed.

Mr McGlone: Can the Minister advise what action his Department has taken to improve the existing energy efficiency of public buildings? Does the Minister plan to review the Department's 'Energy Management in Public Sector Buildings' manual? Apparently, it has not been updated since 2015.

Mr Murphy: My Department is responsible for managing the Civil Service office estate, which equates to around 4% of the total public-sector energy consumption here. Through the office estate energy efficiency carbon reduction plans, we aim to achieve cumulative energy savings and consequential reductions in carbon. Those savings support and feed in to the wider energy management strategy and action plan to 2030 for central government introduced by the Department for the Economy. The use of energy-efficient installations has been incorporated into Civil Service accommodation and standards specifications. Furthermore, the Department's procurement guidance, which applies to all Departments, expects that any new or refurbished building should undergo the BRE Environmental Assessment Method appraisal. This seeks energy performance standards significantly in excess of the building regulations minimum.

Civil Service Homeworking: Productivity and Post-pandemic Review

2. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the work his Department has undertaken to establish the impact on productivity of civil servants working from home (WFH). (AQO 1907/17-22)

11. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Finance whether he will review working from home arrangements for the Northern Ireland Civil Service post-pandemic. (AQO 1916/17-22)

Mr Murphy: With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will group questions 2 and 11. I place on record my continued thanks to civil servants for their hard work and flexibility in response to the challenges of delivering services during the pandemic. At very short notice this time last year, the majority of civil servants moved from the office to homeworking as the pandemic emerged. I am encouraged by feedback from my Department on the positive impact of homeworking on many of our staff, who feel that they now have a better balance between work and home commitments.

Responsibility for the performance and productivity of all staff, including those who work from home, rests with managers in each of the Departments. Staff in the Department of Finance have continued to deliver essential services while also delivering to thousands of businesses unprecedented support through COVID funding, including rates relief, a range of business grants and support for airports and hospices. The Civil Service will adopt a blended approach to home and remote working, which will depend on the individual departmental requirements and job role. A remote and homeworking policy is being developed in consultation with trade unions. The Department also recently announced plans for a number of Civil Service regional hubs. These will enable civil servants to work closer to home, reduce travel time and promote regional economic balance.

Ms Bunting: With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take this opportunity to condemn the attack on a police officer. It is important, as a member of the Policing Board, that I do that and send our best wishes to her and her family.

It is clear that working from home cannot continue ad infinitum. Given the need to open the economy and instil confidence in the community, and given the extent of the vaccine roll-out, should the Civil Service not lead by example and return those who do not fall into a vulnerable category to the workplace as quickly as possible?

Mr Murphy: First, any return to the workplace will be guided by the health advice that the Executive as a whole will agree. The advice from the Department of Health and the health adviser in the Executive is still to work from home where possible, so that continues to be the case. Undoubtedly, the whole experience of the pandemic has accelerated a trend that was already developing in how people work, and we have to be mindful of that. Civil servants can now work in a blended situation: they can be at home, in a regional location or in headquarters. It will not significantly affect the Civil Service footprint in Belfast, for instance, as there will still be a requirement for a large number of civil servants to work out of offices. However, it changes the office accommodation requirements, and we have a responsibility to look at that.

We must look at not only the benefit for individual civil servants and workers but what the Executive are required to spend on the Civil Service estate. If the nature of work is changing and technology allows more remote working, we have a duty, for the public services that we want to support, to ensure that we are not spending money on the Civil Service estate that is not required. It is a balance between all those things. No doubt, people will go back to work in the not too distant future, but we have to ensure that it is in line with the health advice and that the new way of working will, ultimately, be of benefit to public finances and individual workers.

Ms Sugden: I also put on record my condemnation of the attack in my constituency.

I see opportunities in working from home. I also recognise that there might need to be a hybrid model. What savings can we identify? Moving forward, what lessons can be learned from the positive benefits for family life and for getting women back into the workplace?

Mr Murphy: It is very hard to quantify savings. If you put out a figure, that becomes the target. This is much

more than that, as the Member identified. It is about the responsibilities that people have at home and in caring situations. Perhaps, in the longer term, it will be about the willingness of people to apply for jobs that are Belfast-based and involve travelling for an hour or two a day, and it could be even more than that if they are coming from further west to work five days a week in a Department's headquarters. I have no doubt that this will change the nature of work. It will open it up more to women to whom, unfortunately, the primary caring function falls and to people who live in the further regions of this part of Ireland and who are further away from their workplace than those living in the urban centres.

It will open up a lot of opportunities. It will, undoubtedly, allow us to rationalise the Civil Service and save more. It should yield savings, but that is not the primary driver behind all of this. We want a more effective and productive working environment. Regional hubs will not only allow that and contribute more to local economies but allow an exchange between local government and central government personnel to create more space for joined-up and connected government.

There are real benefits to come from this. I am loath to put figures on it. It will undoubtedly yield savings, but its major importance relates to how people work and how a greater variety of people, particularly women and those who are under-represented in the Civil Service, can access potential opportunities.

Mr Butler: What analysis has the Department done on levels of sickness-related distress and on whether homeworking or remote working have improved productivity?

Mr Murphy: The Department of Finance has done an analysis, or survey, of its staff. There has been an overwhelmingly positive response to homeworking across most of the Department's workforce. I am sure that that is not unique and is reflected across the Civil Service in general. With the challenges of the pandemic and lockdown, people have recognised the fact that blended working, where some work can be done from home, some in the regional hubs that will be developed, some in headquarters or some in city or town centres, affords staff more scope to manage their responsibilities. It has been positive and positively received. It accelerates lessons that were already beginning to be learned, and it will probably accelerate a response to those lessons in future workforce planning.

Ms Armstrong: The Minister mentioned hubs. How many people will the Connect2 hubs hold?

Mr Murphy: That will depend, because they are all different set-ups. The Member may be more familiar with the hub in Downpatrick, which we intend to do at an earlier stage. Some are in development phase, and we are talking to some councils about future development. The initial 10 hubs in the roll-out are almost ready to go or expected to be ready within two years, I think. The response has been overwhelmingly positive, because the hubs not only allow people to work closer to home, save travel time and help to reduce carbon emissions but allow them to contribute to their local economy and manage their work-life balance better given that they are not spending as much time in cars. We will look forward to assisting and improving productivity. I expect that, when we get those

10 hubs in place, we will look at more in the future. Each one is different and probably has different accommodation requirements. They are based on studies from where people were travelling into Belfast. That focused attention on where the first run was needed. There will not be fixed desks, so it is not an alternative place to work. It is somewhere where people can work for a number of days a week.

Mr O'Toole: I agree with the Minister on the value of flexible working. I do not agree with the original questioner that it is something of which we should be suspicious. Will it be tied into the broader and more urgent look at the structural flaws in the Civil Service? We know that 80% of our senior civil servants are over 50, for example, and that we have high vacancy rates. How will any measures be linked to the workforce strategy to give us the Civil Service that we need in the years to come? I am sure that the Minister will not disagree that there are major, serious structural flaws in our Civil Service.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That goes way beyond the issue of working from home, but the Minister may wish to comment.

Mr Murphy: It is a very broad issue, and we could spend a long time talking about it. These things are interrelated and complement each other. In the longer term, people will not need to spend a couple of hours a day travelling to work, which will allow more people and a greater variety of people, such as those who are under-represented in the Civil Service, to apply for jobs. We are looking closely at all the issues that the Member mentioned. There is a need, and a number of reports, such as the RHI report and the Audit Office report, looked at the make-up and capacity of the Civil Service. Significant work needs to be done, and we intend to bring that forward. These developments will assist with that, because they open up more opportunities for a broader range of people to be employed in the Civil Service.

2.15 pm

'The Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor: Current Profile, Potential for Recovery & Opportunities for Cooperation'

3. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister of Finance to outline his next steps following the launch of 'The Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor: Current Profile, Potential for Recovery & Opportunities for Cooperation' report. (AQO 1908/17-22)

Mr Murphy: First, I commend the eight councils and two universities along the corridor for coming together to produce this landmark report, which showed the significant opportunities to be gained from working together in that way. It is important that the corridor drives balanced economic growth across the island. For example, a high-speed Belfast-to-Dublin train should be part of an all-Ireland rail network that includes Derry, Cork and Limerick.

I understand that the councils' next step will be to establish an oversight and governance board that will develop a programme of works. That is what is needed now alongside an action plan so that the corridor can form part of an investment-led recovery from COVID and Brexit. My Department is, of course, content to play its part as the

councils take their economic development work on the corridor forward.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for his answer and look forward to seeing the report's outworkings and the benefits for citizens and businesses along the corridor.

The Minister mentioned a high-speed train from Belfast to Dublin: as part of that work and work on an all-Ireland rail network, will he outline some of the benefits of having such a train?

Mr Murphy: The benefits have long been recognised. Back when I was the Minister with responsibility for transport, it was recognised, particularly at North/South engagements, that the ambition for a high-speed and more frequent service between Dublin and Belfast would be beneficial to both cities and all of the areas in between. With that and with a broader rail development from, as I said, Derry to Dublin, Cork, Limerick and other destinations, there will be opportunities to grow indigenous businesses, establish clusters of key sectors, lever the appetite for collaboration and use the corridor as a driving force for economic development in that region and across the island generally. It should assist with securing high-value-added jobs while enabling a balanced distribution of its benefits and equality of opportunity for all our citizens.

These are ambitious plans that have been talked about for a long time. I hope that the involvement of the councils and universities and the endorsement of and encouragement from the Administrations North and South will see some advancement of the plans. The benefits that will flow from them across the Belfast-to-Dublin corridor and beyond are undoubted.

Mr Catney: Given your Department's role in relation to financial services, Minister, what action will it take to mitigate the damage being done to the all-Ireland economy by Brexit and the disinvestment by banks such as Bank of Ireland and Ulster Bank on both sides of the border?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That question strays way beyond the issue of the economic corridor. I will let the Minister decide whether he wishes to comment.

Mr Murphy: My answer will be a broad one, because the question goes beyond the detail of the substantive question that I was asked.

I very much recognise that. It is an Executive responsibility, alongside the Government in Dublin and the British Government through the North/South and east-west arrangements, to ensure that the damage that has been done by Brexit be mitigated as far as possible. In that regard, the agreement between the British Government and the European Commission on protocol arrangements has gone some way to undoing some of the damage. Undoubtedly, Brexit will have a negative impact across this island in particular and, I imagine, in the longer term, in Britain, although that is very much a matter for it.

We need to be protective and ensure that the arrangements that we have work. We also need to ensure that financial institutions that, not that long ago, were the beneficiaries of support from public finances make decisions that are in the interests of the economic recovery from Brexit and the pandemic and continue to hold them to them. We do not have regulatory authority over financial institutions here, but we need to ensure, as we have been doing, that we engage with them and encourage them

to see the role that they have to play in the economic recovery. When they were in difficult positions, everyone moved to support them, so there is a requirement on them to do something similar at this time.

Mr Muir: This is an important report. As we seek to recover our economy, it is vital that we have good North/South and east-west cooperation.

I am aware that the Minister has a meeting scheduled, potentially for this week, of the North/South Ministerial Council with the Economy Minister. Will he give us an update on the scheduling of that meeting? Are there any potential diary clashes for the other party?

Mr Murphy: The Member will know that I will be the accompanying Minister on that. The Minister for the Economy and I, along with our counterparts from the South, had to signal to the North/South Ministerial Council administration sector that we were available. As far as I am aware, the signal was given last week that all Ministers would be available for the meeting, so I expect it to go ahead on Wednesday afternoon as scheduled.

LRSS: Payment Delays

4. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister of Finance why applicants to the localised restrictions support scheme (LRSS) are experiencing a delay in payment. (AQO 1909/17-22)

Mr Murphy: To date, over £272 million has been issued to almost 13,000 businesses through the localised restrictions support scheme. Almost every one of the eligible businesses is now fully up to date with the payments that they are entitled to for the period of restrictions up to 14 April. Land and Property Services (LPS) will issue further payments this week to cover businesses for their entitlement up to the reopening dates agreed by the Executive last week.

Payments are on hold to a small number of applications that are being investigated because a concern has been identified about their eligibility or the possibility of double funding with another grant scheme. LPS has issued correspondence to those businesses explaining the situation and providing them with the opportunity to appeal or to provide additional information.

Mr Harvey: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Minister plan to continue providing localised restrictions support scheme payments to businesses that are working at a limited capacity?

Mr Murphy: Yes. We had money set aside because, until last Thursday, we were not sure what decisions the Executive would take on reopening. In previous experience, when retail had some partial reopening and could do click and collect, we continued to pay out to the retail sector under LRSS because we recognised that it was still significantly hampered from doing full business. Similarly, with hospitality and, I think, gyms, we have recognised that, even if there is a partial or outdoor reopening or, in the case of gyms, an ability to do one-on-one training, they continue to be substantially restricted in the time ahead. So, up to 24 May, which is the indicative date that the Executive have given for a full reopening of hospitality, we intend to pay out to those businesses.

We also recognise that there will continue to be mitigations for all businesses and that will restrict them,

but we are limited in what we can do. LRSS is based on regulations, so, if a business is open, it is not entitled to payment. However, the Minister for the Economy's economic recovery plan received full financial support from the Executive, so we expect that and a combination of the ongoing rates relief to be of some assistance to businesses in the time ahead.

Ms Hunter: Areas such as Benone and Magilligan and ports in my constituency are heavily dependent on tourism to thrive. Has the Minister had any conversations with the Minister for the Economy or the tourism sector to help those towns build back better after COVID?

Mr Murphy: As the Member will know, the primary responsibility for tourism and the economy is with the Department for the Economy. We have had discussions on the large hospitality support scheme that the Minister for the Economy is running. That has expanded somewhat, and we keep in close contact because, at various times, there has been overlap or, certainly, close contact between some of the schemes that we have been running. Bear in mind that the Department of Finance does not do economic support — that is not our job — but we have taken it up during the pandemic. We have kept in close contact with the Department for the Economy, and we supported in full the bid that the Minister for the Economy made for economic recovery.

I recognise that a lot of the hospitality sector, particularly in the Member's constituency on the north coast, is very reliant on tourism. International tourism will be restricted again this year, but there was a substantial benefit last year that the Minister for the Economy advised us of, which was that a substantial number of visitors came to stay north of the border, many for the first time. It is in all our interests to have a peaceful time in the run-up to summer and a peaceful summer and not to discourage visitors from coming north, because a lot of those businesses will be very reliant on business on the island of Ireland this year. We need to do all collectively in our power to make sure that we have somewhere that people want to come to over the summer months and that businesses can get the best benefit that they can from that.

Ms Armstrong: I thank you and your Department for the help that you have given my office to assist businesses.

In mid-March, there was an announcement about top-up payments, but they are yet to be paid. When will businesses receive them? Additionally, where can businesses get an update on when their payment will be made?

Mr Murphy: Payments have been made basically every day. Some were held back because there were queries about whether people had been paid wrongly, had perhaps been overpaid or had benefited from two different sets of grant support. In a number of cases, Land and Property Services informed people that they were investigating that and gave them an opportunity to provide additional information. In some cases, there will have to be a recovery of money, although, if another grant is available, they can offset that payment and basically deduct it from whatever grant they may well get.

There is ongoing work. It is a marginal amount. In the overall scheme, about 1.6% of payments were possibly made in error, and there is an effort under way to recover that. That has slowed down some of the top-up payments.

Rather than continue, when a question arose, LPS was obliged to investigate whether the payments had been made properly. I know that that raises concerns for a lot of businesses, but we also have a responsibility to the public purse to make sure that payments are made correctly and that, where they have been made in error, there is an attempt to recover them.

NICS Vacancies

5. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Finance how many vacancies there are in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS). (AQO 1910/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Each Department is responsible for managing its resources, both financial and staff. When a Department identifies a vacancy that it needs filled, the request is referred to NICS HR in my Department to initiate the process to fill the post. At the end of March, my Department had been asked to fill over 3,000 posts across the Civil Service that had been confirmed as affordable by the relevant Departments.

Approximately 1,900 of those posts are general service posts. Around 1,000 are at administrative officer, staff officer and deputy principal grade, for which there are live recruitment competitions with available appointees and/or selection activity in progress. A further 1,250 posts are a wide range of non-general service specialist posts. NICS HR continues to plan and deliver recruitment competitions to fill those vacancies, working with Departments to seek to prioritise, agree and plan to fill the most urgent posts. Since November, NICS HR has filled over 1,500 vacancies.

Mr Stalford: At various Committees it has been outlined to us how difficult it has been for Departments to deliver on their priorities because of shortages in the Civil Service. What steps will the Minister's Department and, indeed, the Government take to advertise Civil Service careers to young people coming through as an attractive prospect for them to build their lives on?

Mr Murphy: That is part of the ongoing work. It is up to Departments to identify their individual workforces. We have a broader responsibility in the wider reform of the Civil Service to make sure that it is accessible and that we are trying to attract younger people. We have been having conversations about the idea of apprenticeship schemes in the Civil Service, and I know that the Department for the Economy is keen on that. We want to encourage a uniform approach across all Departments so that there is not an ad hoc approach to this.

There is a recognition that the recruitment exercise that is required can infuse more diversity and, I suppose, alter the age profile of the Civil Service as a whole. There is a recognition, as I said in answer to a previous question, that there is a substantial amount of work to be done there. This exercise, along with other exercises in terms of the Civil Service estate and a new approach to blended working arrangements, can contribute to that idea of recruiting more people but with more diversity in age and other profiles such as disability and ethnic minorities — the type of diversity that we need in the Civil Service to reflect society as a whole.

Dr Aiken: Has a detailed assessment been made of the voluntary exit scheme's impact on Civil Service vacancies

so that we can look closely at its impact on efficiency and whether there is a read-across to the current vacancy problem?

Mr Murphy: I am not aware if that has been done. I imagine, given that the scheme was put in place, that an assessment of not only how it ran its course but its impact would be available. I am happy to talk to officials and provide the Member with some material, if it exists.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of our period for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions. Question 6 has been withdrawn.

2.30 pm

PSNI: Budget Allocation

T1. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the final Budget allocation for the PSNI and to state how many new police officers that will mean, given that some 700 extra officers were promised in New Decade, New Approach (NDNA). (AQT 1211/17-22)

Mr Murphy: That figure eludes me just at the moment, but I can provide it for him. Between the initial Budget outline of what was available for next year and the final Budget paper, which will be brought to the House very shortly for discussion and questions, we had a lengthy discussion on improving the position on the number of police officers that can be recruited. There has been an improvement. As he will know, once you recruit somebody and put them in post, that becomes a recurrent cost year-on-year. In some sense, while we can find money next year, that commits us to year-on-year recurrent expenditure. That is what the Executive have agreed to in its final Budget position. I will get the actual figures that are involved to the Member, but it is an improvement on the draft Budget position that was outlined previously.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his answer. It is disappointing that we are not able to get confirmation that the 700 extra officers will be in place. Will the Minister inform the House how and when he will allocate funding to victims' pensions and how he will restore confidence in his Department given the recent damning court case?

Mr Murphy: I am not certain that there is a lack of confidence in my Department. I am representing the Executive's view on the funding arrangements for that. As he will know, the British Government's own statement of funding policy states very clearly that, where a Department has developed and legislated for a policy, it has responsibility for paying any costs that accrue from it. The victims' scheme that the British Government brought forward is vastly different from the scheme that was agreed by the parties at Stormont House. They have added very substantially to the scheme's scope and, consequently, to its cost. While the First Minister, the deputy First Minister, the Minister of Justice and I have committed and given undertakings to the court to ensure that victims' payments are made — we have always wanted a scheme to be running to give victims certainty — we will continue to have a discussion with the British Government about the responsibility for the funding. However, the Executive will ensure that payments are made to victims.

Business Support Schemes: Allocations

T2. **Ms Brogan** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on when businesses are likely to receive allocations from the new grant schemes that he announced, which are very welcome, particularly now that we are moving towards economic recovery. (AQT 1212/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There are a number of schemes. In my enthusiasm, I announced this morning that applications opened today for the scheme for businesses that have a net asset value (NAV) of above £50,000 and were not able to avail themselves of business grants last year. They can actually apply to that from tomorrow. There are schemes to support manufacturing. There are top-up schemes of £5,000 and £10,000 for businesses that were not able to avail themselves of the localised restrictions support scheme (LRSS) or other supports over the last number of months.

Those schemes were developed because we know that there is an ongoing need for business support and to ensure that the COVID money that we had was allocated and would not be returned to Treasury. There will be further detail on those in the coming weeks. We hope to see them paying out as soon as possible because, while there is optimism that things are opening up again and that people will be able to get back to business, we recognise that the effects of the pandemic will be with us for a long time and that people's ability to get back to the normal way of trading is some time off as restrictions will continue to apply in some shape or form for the foreseeable future. The schemes will be very important to try to support those who did not have the ability to apply to the LRSS and various other support schemes.

Ms Brogan: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. It is also welcome news that most businesses now have a date for reopening. Will you confirm that LRSS payments will continue to be made to eligible businesses until they can legally resume trading?

Mr Murphy: Yes. When click and collect opened up for retail, we recognised that, although people could trade in some fashion, they were still a long way off normal trading and still significantly impacted by the restrictions that continue to exist.

Similarly, with hospitality and gyms, even though hospitality can operate outdoors, in a country like this, where you can never be certain about the weather, that can still be a very restrictive area in which to operate. Gyms, while they can open up for one-on-one training, as those of us who frequent them would know, a lot of the finance that they accrue is mainly from classes and the ability to take in groups of people to do training. Therefore, they continue to be significantly restricted. However, the Executive have given the indicative date of 24 May for full reopening of both hospitality and gyms. We sincerely hope that we are able to meet that date. That is the Executive's clear intention. We have given an undertaking to continue to support them through the LRSS up to that point.

Procurement Board: Environmental Criteria

T3. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the work being done in his Department to ensure that procurement processes are changed

to keep environmental practices to the fore, given that although we have an environmental target of achieving net zero emissions by 2050, we might be able to do that a bit earlier if we were to change our procurement requirements to ensure that not only do our public services purchase environmentally friendly and environmentally improving items but that other companies that are funded by government follow that procurement path also. (AQT 1213/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As the Member will know, we have recently reconstituted the Procurement Board. We have added many more people with direct experience, both those who have procured in various Departments and those who have been at the business end of that, in order to try to improve the overall procurement function. We are looking very closely at that.

I intend to bring in policy on social value, which can look at a whole range of measures, including environmental issues, and ensure that we achieve the best outcomes and actually meet the Executive's targets in other areas, such as the reduction of carbon emissions, as the Member mentioned. We are happy to take all those issues on board. Not only am I open to looking at how we do our own procurement, but we have been looking closely at supply chains and ethical policies within them. "Ethical" can relate to policies on anything from the use of slave labour, basically, to production methods that are challenging or damaging to the environment and contribute to the climate change crisis. The Department wants to look at all those areas. Even though, in global terms, we are a very small procurer, I believe that we have a responsibility to lead by example on those matters. Therefore, I am keen that we bring policies on social value and ethical procurement very much to the fore in the time ahead.

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Minister for his answer. In the run-up to Earth Day, I am keen to ensure that, where we are talking about reducing carbon emissions, the Government are actually seen to do that. There are many car parking spaces at Civil Service and public buildings across Belfast. As new building regulations come forward, is consideration being given to whether people who put up new buildings will have to consider public transport access to them? Can it be a cross-government and cross-departmental commitment that all new buildings that follow the building regulations will have reduced car parking spaces in order to build upon public transport services?

Mr Murphy: My Department has responsibility for the Civil Service estate. We have put a proposition to Departments to reduce car parking spaces in Belfast city centre. There are very decent — some would say excellent — public transport facilities available to get people into the city centre. We have done that. We are doing it. Unsurprisingly, people who have been used to driving their cars and parking in the city centre sometimes take issue with that. Nonetheless, if we want to achieve the type of outcomes to which the Member refers, we have to look at our own house in the first instance. The logical follow-through of that is that, when we are planning any new building, we must ensure that public transport access is a feature. That follows through on something that we have already been developing.

Victims' Payment Scheme

T4. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Finance how he came to his assessment that the Troubles-related victims' payment scheme, which is to open to applications next month, will be funded, given that, at the moment, three Departments, including his, plus the British Government are telling us that they cannot afford to fund the scheme, albeit the Executive Office and the Department of Finance have said that the scheme will be funded and payments will be made on time. (AQT 1214/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The British Government have not said that they cannot afford to fund the scheme; they have simply said that they are not going to fund it. They are well able to afford to do that, and, according to their own statement of funding policy, it is right that they do that. That is part of the rules that they established for their Departments and which, in this instance, they are disregarding. It is not a question of affordability for them. It is a question of affordability for us, but we have given an undertaking that it will be done however we find the resource to do it. Over the last two financial years, we have provided expenditure for administration, so we have already contributed to getting the scheme up and running. We have given an undertaking to the court that payments will be made and will be made on time, and we will hold to that commitment. We will continue to engage with the British Government regarding their responsibilities in relation to the matter. Under their own policy, they are responsible for meeting the cost of the scheme.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for that answer. He will be familiar with the Government Actuary's Department's estimate for the cost of the scheme. At the top level, that is £1.2 billion, although I appreciate that that is over a large number of years. Minister, I wish you luck in your current activity with the British Government.

Is it possible that you, as the Finance Minister, will have to consider revenue-raising possibilities that have hitherto been turned down? I am thinking of water charges and the rates cap on domestic properties, and there are probably one or two others that I cannot think of. Is it possible that you might have to delve into those sorts of possibilities?

Mr Murphy: We have always wanted the scheme to be up and running and to be fully funded. We have never wanted a situation in which victims end up having to go to court to resolve those issues, creating further distress and uncertainty for dependants. We have never wanted to be in that place. We have tried to have logical discussions with the Secretary of State and others over a period of time, but those discussions were fruitless, have been difficult to arrange and continue to be difficult to arrange, so we have ended up in a situation that was not what we desired and was not of our making, but we have given undertakings to try to give that certainty to victims.

If we cannot resolve that with the Government, the Executive will undoubtedly have to meet the cost, which, as the Member said, will be anything between £600 million and £1.2 billion, according to the Government Actuary's Department. Then it will be a question for the Executive of how to find the resources to do that. If there is no additional support from Treasury, one way to do that is to top-slice from Departments and to take the year-on-year funding for the scheme off departmental budgets pro rata. Another way is to look at fundraising, but the cost

associated with the scheme will be so significant, certainly over the first four or five years, that I doubt whether there is any fundraising capability in the Executive that would match it.

Procurement Board: Efficiency

T5. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Finance — after asking him to join with him, as a member of the Policing Board, in condemning the murderous attempt on the life of a part-time police constable in Limavady in the past few hours, to whom he sends his thoughts; welcoming the fact that the Minister will open the business fund tomorrow; and placing on record his appreciation to Land and Property Services (LPS) for the outstanding work that it has done — whether, in light of the fact that he has made changes to the Procurement Board, introduced social requirements and even thrown in climate change, he will also include efficiency measures, given that, already this week, two cases have been brought to him in which the problem has been procurement. (AQT 1215/17-22)

Mr Murphy: First, I concur with the Member's remarks about the incident in Limavady. I appreciate his remarks in relation to LPS and the work that it has done. I think that, like the Department, LPS is looking forward to getting back to what it is supposed to do, which is collecting rates. There is still some more work to be done to get support out there, and it has performed that function very effectively.

We of course want to make procurement as efficient as possible, and we are not looking simply at social value and how procurement can be of benefit more broadly. Procurement has to be done efficiently. We have to make sure that there is value for money and that the relationship between the way in which government awards contracts and the people who are in the sphere to try to provide services to government is as efficient as it can be. That is why we took the permanent secretaries off the Procurement Board and put in practitioners from various fields, including from construction, the social economy and a range of areas with direct experience of dealing with government. We did that to make sure that people are talking the same language and so that we can get an efficient outcome from procurement policy.

2.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of the period for questions to the Minister of Finance. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments as we change places.

Private Members' Business

Conversion Therapy

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly rejects the harmful practice widely referred to as conversion therapy; notes that the UK Government National LGBT Survey in 2018 reported that 2% of respondents had undergone conversion therapy, with a further 5% having been offered it; acknowledges the damage that this practice causes to the mental health of those who are subjected to it; further acknowledges that this practice has been widely rejected by medical professionals; declares that it is fundamentally wrong to view our LGBTQ community as requiring a fix or cure; and calls on the Minister for Communities to commit to bringing forward legislation before the end of the current Assembly mandate to ban conversion therapy in all its forms. — [Mr Beattie.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "professionals" and insert:

"recognises that legitimate religious activities, such as preaching, prayer and pastoral support, do not constitute conversion therapy, cannot be defined as such and must be protected; and calls on the Minister for Communities to consult widely on the way ahead, including relevant legislative options, to ban the practice of conversion therapy." — [Mrs Cameron.]

Miss Woods: I thank the Members from the Ulster Unionist Party for tabling the motion and for giving us a chance to reject conversion therapy and expose the damaging practices that some have supported and continue to support.

I do not have enough time today to outline my reasons for supporting the motion. It is 2021, and it should not need to be debated. The Green Party has been highlighting conversion therapy in the Chamber since 2012. Nearly a decade later, a ban is still not a reality, but I welcome the commitment from all those parties that support the motion. It is time for some action. Legislation must be passed in this mandate.

I thank those who have got in touch to lobby about this matter, and I also thank the Ban Conversion Therapy group and all others who have campaigned for years to advance LGBTQ rights. We will continue to campaign to show people that minority orientation or gender identity is normal; that you can be happy, healthy and accepted as an LGBTQ person in Northern Ireland; and that your life needs no cure.

There have been previous attempts to carve out circumstances for exemptions, and we have one such example today. I will not get into a debate about religion, although I am happy to have such a debate. We know that this is not about imposing on religious freedoms.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Miss Woods: I will not. We all know how far we need to go in recognising and positively acting on LGBTQ rights in Northern Ireland. We need to look at the lived experiences and the health inequalities, and we need to talk about bullying, HIV, stigma, trauma, shame and the impacts of

such on everybody in our society, but especially those whom we are talking about today. Anyone who watched 'It's a Sin' recently will know exactly what I am talking about, and, for those who have not watched it, I suggest that they do.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I advise the Member that, whether she takes interventions or not, she has four minutes.

Miss Woods: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will not take my four minutes.

We need proper mandatory and comprehensive relationships and sexuality education that reflects the lives of everybody in our society.

Let us look at the mental health impact of continuing to stigmatise those who identify as LGBTQ, even the young people in our schools. The Department of Education's research into post-primary school experiences showed that two thirds of LGBT young people did not feel welcomed or valued in their post-primary school. Some young people decide not to come out because of the negative attitudes of others, and I know this well through personal experience. So many of my friends have experienced this through secondary school. One of my friends was ganged up on after coming out and had rocks hurled at him. With another friend, I had to call 999 after they took a drug overdose because of bullying.

This is the reality of the school system that we have here. This is the reality of the attitudes that a lot of people have and continue to portray. These attitudes, it appears, are based on a lack of understanding of LGBTQ people, leading to stereotypes and, in some cases, intolerance. Some 88·6% of LGBT people heard homophobic or transphobic language in schools. Two thirds heard people receive verbal threats. Some 88% of respondents to the Rainbow Project's survey reported that teachers rarely talked about LGBT issues sensitively.

Banning conversion therapy is one step that needs to be taken, but we need to do a lot more to right the wrongs and provide support. Previous Executives and Governments have failed queer people. The sexual orientation strategy, promised since 2007, still has not been delivered —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw her marks to a close?

Miss Woods: — and no funding from Departments with responsibility for equality has been provided to LGBT groups since Peter Hain was Secretary of State. Progress on equality has come through the courts or Westminster. Today is an opportunity to begin to redress that and send a clear signal of support. We will support the motion but not the amendment.

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): Thank you to everybody who has contributed to the debate today.

Mr Carroll: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Speaker said previously that all Members on the speaking list would be called in the debate. I was on the speaking list, and I think that others might have been. Can you advise on that point?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I have been given direction that there is a time allocated for this debate, and I have exercised that direction. The Minister has attempted to allow as many people as possible to speak, but I was

advised by the Speaker's Office before coming in here that it was to be four minutes, with one more person to speak. Apologies for that, but the Business Committee allocated an hour and a half for this debate, and that is what has been afforded to Members. If, in future, you wish to have more time in the debate, it is important that those representatives in the Business Committee decide such things.

Ms Armstrong: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I do not mean to question your ruling on this. However, as a member of the Alliance Party, under d'Hondt, I would have been entitled to speak as the second Member speaking for the Alliance Party. I was not brought into the debate today. I ask that you take that decision back to the Speaker's Office to review.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, your comments are on the record and will be fed back. I repeat that there is a limited time opportunity, and I have been operating under the appropriate direction from the Speaker himself.

Ms Hargey: Thank you again to all the contributors today, and to John and Doug for tabling the motion. I agree wholeheartedly that so-called conversion therapy is a cruel and inhumane practice, and it should be ended now. Legislation to ban it should be introduced as soon as possible. Indeed, I am exploring all legislative options available to me.

This is an abhorrent practice, and it is cross-cutting: there was the potential for it to be caught up and lost between several Departments. To ensure the protection of our LGBTQI+ community, my Department has taken the lead in this policy area. I call on everyone around the Chamber to support our work in bringing a ban into effect. We need to do this properly, through research, consultation and producing effective legislation, and we need to make sure that we get the policy right. We can learn from the experience and situation of other jurisdictions. We will work to ensure that we avoid the pitfalls and shortcomings that they faced, and I do believe that we can lead the way in producing a model of best practice and provide the best possible protections for our community here. We need to hear from those who have lived experience of this so-called practice, in whatever form it took, by listening to and involving those impacted by discrimination and injustice and by working with them through a co-design approach, which we are using to take forward the LGBTQI+ strategy on behalf of the Executive.

Last year, the Department established an expert panel as part of the development of the strategy. One of the recommendations put forward by the group was the ban of this practice. That is a recommendation that I wholeheartedly support. I have listened to the lived experience and stories of those who have been impacted by the practice. Those emotional and traumatic experiences should guide us as we move forward to protect our community by bringing in a ban.

I know how huge the hurt and damage to people can be when they are told that they need to be fixed or cured. We have heard that hurt again from many in recent days. That language and behaviour are unacceptable and should not be tolerated. Such language will not be included in any proposals that are put forward by my Department. We

need to accept people for who they are, and that is what I will be sure to do.

I know that this has been touched on, but who are they? They are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex. As was said, they are family members, loved ones and neighbours in our community. They are those who treat us and who teach us. Indeed, they are our co-workers in this very Chamber.

I have also engaged political reps and parties to listen to their views, concerns and lived experiences. I welcome their support and look forward to working in partnership with them. My officials have commenced policy work to inform the drafting of the legislation alongside work that we are doing on the LGBTQI strategy. We need to identify the facts —.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Ms Hargey: No, you are OK, thank you.

Mr Wells: Are you scared to give way?

Ms Hargey: No, I am not. I am definitely not.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order.

Ms Hargey: We need to identify the facts, such as how widespread the practice is and the forms that it takes. We need to look at legislation in other areas by pulling out what has worked and what has not worked. We need to be clear on what we are going to ban, and we need to look at what is already in place. Just as importantly, we need to consider how we can help and support those who have been most impacted on and start to repair the damage of this so-called conversion therapy.

As we work through the drafting and, ultimately, the passing of legislation, there are things that can be implemented now. The strategy aims to tackle the wider inequalities that LGBTQI+ citizens face at every stage of their lives, promoting acceptance and recognising and enhancing the visibility of our LGBTQI community. I encourage all aspects of our society to take what action they can on this. I welcome —.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Ms Hargey: No, you are OK, thank you. I listened to your contribution.

As was said —.

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

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I hope that this is a point of order.

Mr Wells: Have we got to the stage in the Assembly that a Minister cannot even take a legitimate intervention?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): As the Member will recognise, that is not a point of order, but his comment is on the record.

Mr McCrossan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order, Members. The debate has gone quite well. Members have generally been respectful. Please do not let it descend into lots of points of order.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Mr Wells has been bouncing around the Chamber and has not

sanitised a single desk today, including this one, that one and the one behind me. Perhaps you could remind him about safety —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. That is clearly not a point of order. Members, you are making this trivial. Please allow the Minister to make her response. *[Interruption.]* Order.

Ms Hargey: There has been good conversation and debate, and I hope that that is the train as we move through in looking at the ban. There were impassioned contributions and, indeed, personal experience as well. Again, I welcome all those. I know that Members talked about this also being a torture treatment, and I completely recognise and understand the impact that that has had.

My father was tortured before I was born. I know the impact that that had on him and that torture and that type of treatment have on families. I also know the ripple effect that they have on wider families and, indeed, friendship groups and circles. For those cruel reasons, it is a practice that we need to end.

3.00 pm

I also note that theology and religion were mentioned during the debate. This is not about religion or theology; it is about human rights. Indeed, the UN special rapporteur on the freedom of religion or belief said recently that attempts to change someone's sexuality or gender identity were "chilling" and that a ban on those practices:

"would not violate freedom of religion or belief under international law".

Some Members mentioned —.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Hargey: No, thank you. I have already said that I will not give way. I listened to your contribution, and I know that there will be more in the time ahead.

Some said that they want an effective ban. I want that as well. I want to make sure that we do not leave any loopholes in any legislation. As we move ahead, I want to make sure that we engage with the community, particularly those who have been affected by the practice.

I also note the words of those who said that lobbyists are engaged on the issue. I do not see that as lobbying in the same way as the recent story about Greensill, in which big corporations wanted to profit from lobbying Ministers. Those who emailed me and, I am sure, other Members are people who have been impacted. Their lives have been put at risk by this cruel practice. I welcome their lobbying and know that they will continue to do that. I want to listen to and engage with those members of our community as we go forward.

As was touched on in Members' contributions, homophobia is in our society. Just like racism, sectarianism, sexism and ageism, we need to challenge it where it raises its ugly head and face it down. That is by —.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Hargey: I will not give way to anyone. I have not given way, and I want to be fair across the board, but thank you.

The strategy looks at protections, support for the community, visibility — that is also important — and, indeed, inclusion as citizens in our society.

As Members touched on today, society is changing. Andrew Muir mentioned marriage equality, and the same applies to language and other rights. The sky did not fall in when changes were made in that area, and they did not infringe on other people's rights; other people's rights were not put at risk by those changes.

We can lead the way. We can provide a rights-based approach that is framed in an international human rights framework. I look forward to working with all who support the motion and making the ban a reality. I will work to ensure that we bring it forward in the right way and work with the co-design group and the wider community. We need to ensure that the legislation is robust enough to protect those whom we wish to protect. I commit to doing that.

Mr Newton: The motion starts by rejecting the:

"harmful practice ... referred to as conversion therapy".

Of course we do that. There are some appalling stories of techniques that were used in conversion therapy, and we do not speak without compassion for those who suffered in those appalling situations.

The motion ends with the words:

"to ban conversion therapy in all its forms".

Members across the Chamber have made much of the clumsy positioning of the DUP amendment, but, if you believe Mr Beattie's remarks, he has also been clumsy in the construction of the motion. He said that it is not about Christian beliefs and so on, but he used the words:

"to ban conversion therapy in all its forms"

in the motion text. I will deal with that at a later stage.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Newton: No, I will not give way.

If the Northern Ireland Assembly is to make law, we have to be very clear about what we are and are not banning. As a party, we do not support gay conversion therapy, and we are clear that no one should be forced into any treatment against his or her will.

Our approach to any legislation that may come forward will be an adherence to that principle. In equal measure, we believe that there must be a balance between safeguarding against dangerous practices and any attempt, deliberate or otherwise, to restrict the freedom of religious belief, speech or association.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Newton: I do not have time, Jim. Sorry.

We retain a level of concern that the debate on this important issue has at times become conflated with efforts to restrict those freedoms and constrain legitimate activities by religious organisations or others that cannot reasonably be deemed to be conversion therapy. In striking an appropriate and balanced outcome, we will continue to take account of the views of professional bodies on issues relating to conversion therapy and appreciate what future steps should be guided by such relevant expert advice.

I have, as, I am sure, others have, received an increased postbag on the issue. I received a letter from the general presbytery of the Free Presbyterian Church in which it expressed its concern. It states:

“Some activists are deliberately confusing conversion therapy with Christian conversion. Becoming a Christian leads to changes in behaviour. Repentance is central to our theology. A conversion therapy law must not criminalise Christian conversion.”

I note the article in the ‘News Letter’ on Saturday by Dr Mike Davidson of the Core Issues Trust, who expressed his concern about:

“intelligence gathering and tracking systems to identify individual [sic] and groups that are continuing to carry out conversion therapy”.

He asked:

“Could this lead to a mole in every church and classroom?”.

One of my constituents who is concerned wrote:

“In the media, the concept of conversion therapy seems to be conflated with the idea of religious conversion. At the very least, this conflation of ideas could cause confusion, and, at the worst, would make it difficult for a believer to share their faith with an enquiring individual.”

My constituent also cited the case of Nelson McCausland, who was hounded because he mentioned an individual who wrote a book. It was said that the Minister should get rid of him from the Education Authority. My constituent stated:

“A catch-all therapy would turn all ministers into criminals for preaching about Christian views and marriage. It is also amazing that many of those demanding a ban even want to outlaw praying with people who have asked for prayer.”

Another constituent — an elderly lady — stated:

“I am writing in respect to the debate concerning conversion therapy. This therapy would turn Christian ministers into criminals for preaching the gospel and teaching about the Christian view of marriage.”

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

Mr Newton: Mr Deputy Speaker, five minutes is nowhere near adequate. I am sorry that I did not get to the contributions made by the many Members who spoke during the debate. We are coming at this with a very sympathetic ear to the concerns over what is known as conversion therapy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I now call John Stewart to conclude and wind on the motion. You have up to 10 minutes.

Mr Stewart: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity today, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, to wind on this important motion. I thank my party colleague Doug Beattie for moving it.

I will address at the outset the issue of the DUP amendment. The Ulster Unionist Party will not be supporting that amendment to the motion, as my party colleague stated, because of its omission of the following important phrase:

“it is fundamentally wrong to view our LGBTQ community as requiring a fix or cure”.

We, as a party, stand by the rights of ministers and people of faith to give pastoral care and religious guidance and to offer prayer to those who seek it.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stewart: I am not giving way, Jim. The motion does not inhibit those rights.

Mr Wells: You do not even know what I am going to say.

Mr Stewart: I know.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order.

Mr Stewart: I have 11 minutes of a speech and 10 minutes in which to give it, Jim. I do not get an extension.

Mr Wells: Thirty seconds.

Mr Stewart: I will carry on. You will have plenty of chances.

We seek a ban on harm being caused. I thank everyone today for what, for the most part, has been a well-natured debate. I think that we can all agree on that. Many have spoken with compassion and empathy about this truly emotive subject. I also thank the many thousands of people from across the country who have emailed as part of the Ban Conversion Therapy campaign to lobby their MLAs. I would say that that has happened on both sides of the argument but particularly as part of that campaign.

It was not just members of the LGBTQ+ community but their families, friends and allies.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stewart: Jim, please. I am just carrying on with my speech.

Mr Wells: Are you scared to give way?

Mr Stewart: I am not scared to give way.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. I ask Members to stop commenting from a sedentary position.

Mr Stewart: With respect, Jim, I will happily chat to you any time, but the last four or five Members have not given way to you,.

As I say, I thank everyone for that.

What an amazing age we live in. Recent years have seen unbelievable advances in our thinking and in our society. We have seen huge progress in technology and in our ability to communicate across the globe. In many ways, this is an age that would have been unrecognisable 30 or 40 years ago. Paradoxically, though, it is an age when some in our society cling to a nonsensical belief that they can convert or cure gays. Can we just take a moment to reflect on how primitive that concept really is? It is cruel; it is outdated; and it is a hangover from a darker time when to be LGBT was to be flawed or inadequate and in need of being fixed. Rather than the offer of re-enforcement through love, compassion, tolerance and understanding,

the offer of LGBT conversion therapy is the very antithesis of that. Our LGBTQ people are not sick, so they do not need a cure; our LGBT people are not broken, so they do not need fixed. Changing people's sexual orientation is scientifically impossible. LGBT people are who they are in the way that we all are who we are; it is what we are. If anybody has a problem with that, I am sorry, but that is their problem; it is not the problem of members of the LGBT community.

Many of the Members who spoke today have set out with passion, emotion and clarity the barbarity of conversion therapy, a sad and widespread coercive practice that seeks to erase, repress, cure or change someone's sexual orientation or gender identity. Conversion therapy causes severe physical and psychological suffering, violates the human rights of the LGBT community and is, for good reason, considered by some to be a form of torture. The testimonies of many people who have been through those forms of treatment are often stark and unsettling. There is strong evidence of the harm that conversion therapy inflicts. More than half of those who have gone through it report mental health issues, including breakdowns, eating disorders, substance abuse, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts. Evidence also suggests that it is being inflicted mainly but not only on vulnerable LGBT teenagers. We must treat the term "therapy" with the contempt that it deserves. We must be clear: it is not a therapy. It is a pseudo-psychiatric 21st-century snake oil, nothing more.

Despite all major counselling and psychotherapy bodies in the UK, the Royal College of General Practitioners, the NHS and hundreds of charities and health bodies around the world condemning LGBT conversion therapy, it is still legal, and LGBT individuals in the UK are still exposed to that psychological, physical and emotional abuse to this day. In 2017, the Church of England also passed a motion condemning such practices and called on the UK Government to ban them. That call has now been echoed by over 370 religious leaders and organisations worldwide, and that is growing by the day.

I want to finish by saying that there is a misconception that a ban on conversion therapy somehow impinges on the practice of religion: it does not.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stewart: Please, Jim.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. A Member has the Floor. If the Member wishes to give way, he may do so. Mr Stewart, please continue.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Member said that he is going to run out of time. He has only reached half his time and he says that he is about to finish, so he can take points of order.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. The Member will know that that is not a point of order. It is up to the Member who has the Floor to decide whether they wish to give way.

Mr Stewart: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. With respect, Jim, you had your chance to speak. Everyone else has had their chance to speak, and now it is my chance to speak.

There is a misconception that banning conversion therapy somehow impinges on the practice of religion. In my opinion, it does not. My colleague Doug Beattie has actively sought to allay the concerns of those inside

and outside the House that a ban on conversion therapy could lead to the criminalisation or sanctioning of religious leaders in the routine work of pastoral care, prayer or spiritual guidance. It will not, and any form of legislation should reflect that. Religious freedom is fundamental, but so too is people's freedom and right to live their life free from intolerance and identity-based violence and abuse. We must protect the conversations between Church leaders and members of their flock. This should not be a fight between faith and non-faith; rather, it should be about protecting the freedoms of the LGBT community and stopping those who abuse their power.

This is not just not a motion. It may be non-binding, given that it has no legislative framework at this stage, but it will deliver a strong vote, hopefully of unanimity, that will be a powerful signal to the LGBTQ+ community, their families and their allies that we are willing to do what is needed to protect them against these awful, coercive practices. I commend the motion to the House and urge you all to support it.

3.15 pm

Question put, That the amendment be made.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Question will be put again in three minutes. I remind Members that we should continue to uphold social distancing and that Members who have proxy voting arrangements in place should not come into the Chamber.

Before I put the Question, I remind Members that, if possible, it would be preferable if we could avoid a Division.

Question put a second time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members that, as per Standing Order 112, the Assembly has proxy voting arrangements in place. Members who have authorised another Member to vote on their behalf are not entitled to vote in person and should not enter the Lobbies. I remind all Members of the requirement for social distancing while the Division takes place. I ask you to ensure that you maintain gaps of at least 2 metres between yourselves and other people when moving around in the Chamber or Rotunda and especially in the Lobbies. Please be patient at all times, observe the signage and obey the instructions of the Lobby Clerks.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 28; Noes 59.

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr M Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Givan and Mr Newton.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Butler, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Chambers,

Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Ennis and Ms Sugden.

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

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

Mr K Buchanan voted for Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mrs Foster, Mr Lyons, Mr Middleton and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis [Teller, Noes], 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 O'Toole voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin and Mr McNulty.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): We will now pause briefly to allow Members who wish to return to the Chamber for the next vote to do so.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I assume that we are going to move to the substantive motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): We have a vote to take.

Mr Wells: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, I understand that the amendment has fallen. Am I therefore right to believe that the substantive motion is before the House and that there should be a vote on it?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Sorry. To be clear, we are pausing in case some Members who went out whilst proxy voting was taking place wish to come in prior to the next vote. We are moving to that stage as I speak.

Main Question put.

*The Assembly divided:
Ayes 59; Noes 24.*

AYES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Butler, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Chambers, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer,

Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Sheerin and Miss Woods.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr M Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Clarke, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Newton and Mr Wells.

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

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

Mr K Buchanan voted for Mr Dunne, Mr Lyons and Mr Middleton.

Mr Butler voted for Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis [Teller, Noes], 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 O'Toole voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin and Mr McNulty.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly rejects the harmful practice widely referred to as conversion therapy; notes that the UK Government National LGBT Survey in 2018 reported that 2% of respondents had undergone conversion therapy, with a further 5% having been offered it; acknowledges the damage that this practice causes to the mental health of those who are subjected to it; further acknowledges that this practice has been widely rejected by medical professionals; declares that it is fundamentally wrong to view our LGBTQ community as requiring a fix or cure; and calls on the Minister for Communities to commit to bringing forward legislation before the end of the current Assembly mandate to ban conversion therapy in all its forms.

Mr Muir: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I ask that you review the Hansard report of today's debate because Mr Wells consistently and repeatedly sought to intervene when a number of Members were speaking. Whilst those Members did not accede to those interventions, he persisted. It was grossly discourteous, and it is important that you review Hansard in order to ensure that Mr Wells's conduct was in line with the standards that we expect in the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members are entitled to seek a Member to give way. That is in order, but when they persist, having been declined, it becomes an issue of order. The Member has made his point, it is on the record and I am sure that the Speaker will review it. However, when I saw that there was a need to intervene, Mr Wells ceased making such interventions. The Speaker may wish to review that and perhaps come to a different view, but there is an issue with Members' behaviour generally, so I ask Members to continue to be courteous with each other so that we can have constructive debate.

Mr Wells: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, we have reached a stage in the Chamber where we have a Minister who does not allow one intervention throughout her entire speech. Equally, the seconder to the motion did not allow an intervention. Surely, in any democratic Chamber, we have to have the situation where people have the courage of their convictions and take interventions.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has made his point. I am not sure that it is a point of order. It is a point of debate, and it is up to those who have the Floor to decide whether they wish to give way.

Mr Frew: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Please let us not go on and on with points of order.

Mr Frew: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is most disappointing and incredibly sad that the House has not been able to find common ground and that the amendment tabled by my party and the genuine concerns motivating the amendment were not accepted. Nonetheless, my party voted against the motion because our very serious concerns were not addressed, not because we support conversion therapy. We do not.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Clearly, that is not a point of order, but you have made your point, and it is on the record.

I ask Members to take their ease while we move to the next item of business.

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

4.00 pm

Cancer Services: COVID-19 Recovery Strategy

Mrs Cameron: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the serious and negative impact of COVID-19 on cancer diagnosis, treatment and surgery across Northern Ireland; notes with deep concern that, during the pandemic, tests, treatments and clinical trials have been disrupted or cancelled, with many patients not accessing help for possible cancer symptoms; highlights in this context the need to place the restoration of patient-centred and high-quality cancer services at the heart of the recovery from COVID-19; endorses the statement by 47 cancer charities, under One Cancer Voice, which seeks to plot a course out of the pandemic towards world-leading cancer services; stresses the need to direct resources to clear the cancer backlog as quickly as possible, drive faster and earlier diagnosis and encourage people with signs and symptoms of cancer to seek help; and calls on the Minister of Health to publish urgently an ambitious and fully funded road map for restoring and enhancing local cancer services.

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 in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mrs Cameron: I am sure that few Members will not have been contacted by a family impacted by the cancellation of cancer treatments during the pandemic. I have had many heartbreaking moments in the past 12 months speaking to those living with cancer and facing an uncertain treatment plan, a last-minute cancellation of surgery and the reality of a worse prognosis because services had been withdrawn or delayed. Today, I endorse the call by One Cancer Voice to address the crisis in cancer care that affects those in our constituencies and communities.

I do not use the word "crisis" lightly or as an exaggeration: the statistics prove it to be just that. Since March, cancer detections have dropped by 15%, with a shortfall of around 1,400 patients. Since the start of this year, the number of patients with suspected cancer has dropped by 76% at Altnagelvin Area Hospital and 26% at Craigavon Area Hospital. Those with suspected lung or prostate cancer have been disproportionately affected, with over 40% reduction in detections since January. Over 70% of breast cancer referrals recorded in January were deemed to be urgent. The 95% and 100% targets for patients starting initial treatment or being seen by a specialist were unmet. A particularly stark statistic is the figure suggesting that 4,630 urgent red-flag procedures were cancelled between March 2020, the start of the pandemic, and January 2021, which is the highest in the UK.

While we can recite figures all day, we must remember that each statistic represents a family — a mum, dad, brother, sister, son, daughter, granda, granny — a friend, a community leader, a loved one. Many families have lost loved ones to cancer in the last 12 months. It has been

a difficult experience. Diagnoses, sometimes terminal, have been given to people who were all alone and were denied visits in the aftermath. From diagnosis to surgery to results to chemotherapy, this is too much to do alone. Children have faced cancer treatment on their own, too tired or sick to talk to family on iPads. We need to restore compassion in our cancer care as we restore the full suite of interventions available to medical professionals.

I put on record my support of the Health Minister, Robin Swann, on his announcement of £10 million for the cancer charities support fund. For many local charities working with patients and families affected by cancer and mental illness, that funding represents much more than a recognition of their efforts during COVID-19; it will provide a vital lifeline for continuing that critical work during the recovery. The pandemic has had a deep and personal impact on those diagnosed with cancer. While the overriding priority must be scaling up diagnostics, treatment and surgery, the investment in areas such as psychological support and palliative care will help countless families living the reality of this terrible illness every day. The Minister also announced that progress continues to be made on the cancer recovery plan, which we all hope to see published soon.

Macmillan Cancer Support, in its briefing on rebuilding cancer care in Northern Ireland, made three core recommendations. First, there must be a cancer recovery plan that delivers additional, sustained capacity to address the backlog and prioritises a regional approach and recurrent investment in oncology and haematology services to ensure that cancer care can be rebuilt. Secondly, Macmillan calls for a fully funded cancer strategy that delivers a shift to integrated personal care and provides an effective recovery package for people living with cancer. Lastly, it recommends long-term investment in a workforce plan that creates a sustainable cancer workforce to meet current and future demand.

In Northern Ireland, we are blessed to have world-leading cancer experts: consultants, doctors and nurses. We need to ensure the swift return of those professionals to front-line cancer care as soon as possible from deployments elsewhere in our health service. We need a more sustainable approach to retaining time-dependent surgery and procedures that, if left for a protracted time, will become critical. Central to this is that we need safe spaces. COVID-free centres already exist in England. Such centres could act as hubs for the treatment of cancer patients while other facilities continue to treat those with COVID-19. The Minister must examine all resources in the health estate to take forward such plans in Northern Ireland, building on the existing day procedure unit at Lagan Valley Hospital, which has been operating as a COVID-light site

We recognise that the key to success will be transformation, and we recognise the need for strategic funding to provide the impetus. Cancer recovery needs more than a quick fix. It will require consistent and incremental financial backing, and the Finance Minister must take account of that. We owe it to our dedicated and skilled Health and Social Care (HSC) staff to look urgently at workforce planning and give them the additional support and resource needed to reduce in-work pressures and maximise capacity in the health service. That means looking at how we train and equip our nurses, consultants,

surgeons and anaesthetists and ensuring that such roles are attractive. When you speak to nurses on the front line in cancer care, you hear the stresses and pressures that they face daily. We need to look at staff numbers. We also need to ensure that the nurse banding of those in cancer care reflects their duties. Is it right that, today, band 5 nurses are asked to do what was the role of a band 6 or band 7 five years ago? No, it is not.

A specific issue that I want the Minister to look at is the continued closure of cancer units on bank holidays. Those holidays fall on a Monday, which can lead to undue delays in the treatment of those who are scheduled to attend on a Monday. That is deeply unfair and needs to be remedied.

We very much welcome the focus of One Cancer Voice on harnessing new ways to provide personalised and tailored cancer care to patients as part of the recovery. We need to draw lessons from the pandemic on what worked well and what could be done differently.

The emphasis on care at home and in the community, for example, is welcome. In equal measure, we would warn against large-scale reconfiguration of services without serious consultation with communities and professional bodies.

We also have to acknowledge the barriers to detection and diagnosis that have been presented by the loss of face-to-face contact. Surgeries have been at the forefront of the public health response. For many people, they will be the first port of call when they raise concerns about their health. There needs to be a clear framework and effective links between GPs and diagnostic or outpatient services in order to maximise early detection and referral of patients with suspected cancer and to ensure that services are accessible.

There is much to be done, but we must restore equality of care and access to treatment for those who are without COVID but face a threat to life and for those who are battling COVID. The Minister has my full support in doing that.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I start by thanking the Deputy Chair for tabling this important motion. I welcome the opportunity to make some initial remarks on behalf of the Health Committee before speaking as my party's health spokesperson, if I may.

As the motion outlines, there is no doubt that COVID-19 has had a negative impact on cancer services, including diagnosis, treatment and surgery. As MLAs, we are only too aware of the experiences of our families, friends and constituents who have been impacted by the disruption in accessing cancer services. Our thoughts are with all those families who have lost loved ones to cancer over the past year. It has not been easy for them, and we feel their sense of frustration.

While we can blame the pandemic for the disruption and cancellation of cancer services over the past year, it is not the sole reason that waiting lists are lengthening. We also need to look at the delivery of cancer services in the North and ensure that we are doing all that we can to deliver reactive and responsive services to those who are most in need of them. Services are a key priority for the Committee. It is concerned that a number of cancer diagnoses have been missed, which will lead to cancers

showing late, worse outcomes, inevitably, for patients and more difficult treatments for health services to provide. That has been outlined to the Committee on a number of occasions. Last Wednesday, the Committee held an event with a number of cancer charities and support groups. It was a good opportunity to listen and to hear at first-hand about the impact that COVID-19 has had on those groups and how they have had to change the way in which they deliver their services.

We also held an informal meeting with the Royal College of Surgeons to discuss the disruption and waiting lists. Surgeons are taking a number of innovative approaches under current conditions, which include moving to available theatres in order to maximise the number of surgeries that take place in the North. That is to be welcomed. I hope that that approach will continue beyond COVID. The Committee also had a briefing from the Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Medical Association on GP services. It took the opportunity to discuss cancer referrals and GP experiences over the past year. During all those sessions, there were two very clear themes. The first is the need for significant investment in cancer services, and, secondly, there is a need for a multi-year budget with recurring funding in order to make inroads into the vast waiting lists that patients are experiencing and to give them the opportunity for better outcomes.

I will now make some remarks in my role as Sinn Féin's health spokesperson. I take the opportunity to acknowledge the work of various cancer charities and support groups, many of which I have met over the past year. Their work on behalf of cancer patients and their families is important and invaluable. They, in turn, deserve all the support that they need in order to provide their services to patients.

According to Macmillan Cancer Support, pathology data from across the North shows that around 1,300 patients missed a diagnosis between March 2020 and February 2021. During that same period, over 5,000 red-flag cancer surgeries were cancelled. On 25 March, the Minister of Health announced that his Department was finalising a cancer recovery plan to address the backlog that was created by the COVID-19 pandemic. That plan must be fully resourced if cancer patients are to receive the attention that they urgently need. No effort can be spared in providing those patients with relief from the trauma that they have endured.

We are aware that, as was mentioned, long delays for services are not totally explained by the COVID-19 pandemic. Like in every other part of our healthcare sector, there were already worrying waiting lists associated with cancer services, and patients across the North were left worried and stressed by delays to their vital cancer treatment. Tory austerity had seen to that.

4.15 pm

The New Decade, New Approach agreement contained a new, 10-year cancer strategy to help cope with the shortcomings in our cancer care. Macmillan estimates that, in 10 years' time, there will be 40% more people living with cancer than there are today, so we must get the strategy right. At its core, the new strategy must be developed through partnership working and reflect the views and needs of patients, carers, cancer charities, cancer experts, medical professionals, unions and so on. If

the strategy is to be effective in its task of providing optimal cancer care to patients, it cannot be a top-down approach, with Department heads designing another inadequate service.

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

Mr Gildernew: Rather, the strategy must be co-designed and co-produced by its users.

The issue of oral health inequalities also needs to be addressed, but I am out of time. I commend and support the motion.

Ms Hunter: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this most important of issues. I thank Pam and Jonathan for tabling the motion. I know that Mr Buckley is very passionate about the issue. We have seen that over a number of weeks at the Health Committee. Thank you both for bringing it forward today.

We all know or love someone who has had cancer. It is a difficult, scary and traumatic time for the patients and families involved. That is the case at any time in their lives, but throughout the COVID pandemic especially it has filled patients and families with fear and, as Colm said, deep frustration. We all feel that and share their concern.

Over the past year, the pandemic has impacted on almost every aspect of our lives and of society. As we have seen, nothing has been impacted on by it as much as our health service and, in turn, its staff and patients. I take the opportunity today to pay tribute again to the amazing work that we have seen from the health service over the past year. It has truly been incredible. Of course, we recognise that the public health crisis of COVID-19 has had to be at the forefront of the NHS and trusts' priorities over the past year, but, equally, we recognise that it has come at a huge cost to other services and health conditions, not least to cancer services, including diagnostics, treatment and surgery.

Recent cancer figures for Northern Ireland are very alarming. They include only over half of patients who were given an urgent referral for suspected cancer by their GP in December of last year commencing their treatment within the recommended time. The Northern Ireland Cancer Registry's estimation that 1,600 cancer patients have been missed owing to the pandemic is similarly concerning. That includes 200 bowel cancers, 200 lung cancers and 100 upper gastrointestinal cancers. Behind all those figures are individuals and their families. The impact that that has had not only on cancer patients' physical health but on their mental health and well-being has been deeply significant. For many cancer patients and their families, I am sure that it has been a very daunting experience and time, exacerbated by the uncertainty around a return to normal services as well as the enforced isolation that has become a part of our daily lives. I welcome the fact that, in his statement last week on trust rebuilding plans, the Minister confirmed that the cancer recovery plan will be accompanied by an important mental health support scheme. I hope that that will go some way towards supporting those patients' well-being.

I am concerned that, over the past year, many people have put off seeking medical help and attention for symptoms because of the fear of contracting COVID-19. I understand that fear, but, in line with public health advice, I urge anyone with symptoms, whether or not those are cancer-

related, to seek the necessary medical attention and to contact their GP immediately.

Although I recognise, as we all do, that much needs to be done to address the issue, I also recognise the wonderful work being done in the cancer field in Northern Ireland and, in particular, the work of the North West Cancer Centre at Altnagelvin, from whose care many of my constituents and family have benefited.

The health service in Northern Ireland has been in crisis for many years, and the pandemic has greatly exacerbated that crisis. I welcome the fact that the Department is working on finalising the cancer recovery plan and hope that the Minister can bring it before us very shortly. Beyond that, in line with the cancer strategy, which I understand is due to go out for consultation this summer, we are presented with the opportunity, as we hopefully begin to emerge from the pandemic, to shape a very different and better health service for the future, not just in cancer services but across the health service.

In conclusion, I concur with the motion that cancer services must be put at the centre of the COVID-19 recovery.

Of course, there will be many competing priorities for the Minister, the Department, the trusts and, indeed, the Executive as a whole to decide upon in the coming weeks and months. I know that these will be difficult decisions to make, but the experience of cancer patients, these recent figures, and, sadly, often the severity of a cancer diagnosis makes it imperative that cancer services be a top priority.

Mr Chambers: I welcome the opportunity to debate this vital topic. Cancer is a callous disease that afflicts the young and the old. It has become increasingly common and is particularly cruel as it can develop and grow without any symptoms. That means that, by the time it is discovered, it, sadly, comes too late for some people. It is also a disease that thrives in any period of delay, and, sadly, despite the best efforts of clinicians to protect cancer services as far as was possible, the pandemic has undoubtedly stretched our already incredibly fragile cancer services. I pay tribute to the clinicians who have worked tirelessly over the last 14 months, and, whilst there have been some delays, I also welcome the fact that many key services were protected. Fortunately, no chemotherapy or radiotherapy treatment has been cancelled in any trust, and both services have been maintained throughout the pandemic.

Of course, the best way to protect cancer treatments and operations was to drive down COVID infection rates. That was a point repeatedly made by cancer specialists. As the number of cases and hospitalisations grew over each of the waves, hospitals had to scale up ICU capacity. They could do that only by taking specially trained staff from other parts of the hospital. The health service has only one workforce, and it can be stretched only so far. Staff were under incredible pressure, and yet they stepped up once again. Our hospitals, from our consultants to the hospital cleaners, did their absolute best to facilitate and care for everyone, including treating the sickest patients quickest. The system responded in a way that, only a year or two ago, would never have been envisaged. Staff are now travelling the length and breadth of Northern Ireland to deliver care in COVID-light sites, and many patients agree that getting treatment now — when it counts — is

more important than where the treatment is delivered. The damage that COVID has inflicted on our key services is undoubted and, unless we take swift action, will be very long-lasting.

When we draw on hindsight to pass judgement on difficult and life-and-death decisions made during a deadly and unprecedented pandemic, it is easy to forget the millions who have lost their lives to COVID worldwide and the multi millions who have suffered life-changing illness. It is easy to forget the terrible images from Italy in the early days of the pandemic, with very ill people drawing their last breath as they lay on the floors of hospital corridors and their bodies being transferred to military vehicles that had been converted into temporary morgues. Indeed, it is easy to forget the clamour locally to secure additional ICU beds and to source the all-important PPE to be worn by our health professionals. It was in that context that heartbreaking logistic decisions had to be made that we can now pick over, if we wish, in hindsight.

Last year, the Department published a policy statement setting out its approach to the rebuilding and stabilisation of cancer services. The plan represented a major programme of modernisation and improvement, but it will not be cost-free. As the Executive sometimes grapple even to properly spend emergency funds from the UK Government, I hope that, this time, all Ministers accept that, whatever the recurrent costs may be, the programme will be delivered. Saving lives from cancer must now trump all other political demands and red lines. No other issue is more important than the health and well-being of our population.

I look forward to the weeks ahead, as the Minister lays out even more detail on his plans to restore better elective services. Doing more of the same will just not cut it. We had appalling waiting lists before COVID, and they are even worse now. Unless we tackle the root causes, such as by better supporting our staff and addressing the extensive gap between demand and capacity, we will be doomed to repeat the failures of the past. As patients wait longer, not just for cancer treatment, there is a greater risk of them coming to long-term harm. I hope that the House commits to doing whatever it takes and spending whatever it takes to properly support our health and social care system. The Minister spelt out last week what we need to do.

It is all contained in the statement that he gave to the House.

I finish with this challenge: will all parties in the House support the Minister's road map?

Ms Bradshaw: I support the motion. I welcome the efforts of the One Cancer Voice campaign to raise awareness and better inform us of the challenges and potential opportunities that are ahead. It is a strong statement when 47 charities and organisations come together behind a single, well-informed campaign that provides a clear statement of intent and direction.

We cannot be under any illusions about the scale of the challenge. On top of the horrendous pre-existing waiting lists, we are likely to have around 1,400 people in Northern Ireland who should have started cancer treatment but did not. I therefore highlight a line in the motion, which reads:

“the restoration of patient-centred and high-quality cancer services at the heart of the recovery”.

What does that mean in practice? One Cancer Voice has some excellent ideas, but they are UK-wide and will need specific application in Northern Ireland. Merely clearing our backlog will take years and will require not only the support of the independent sector but learning to ensure that diagnostics, treatment and procedures are carried out efficiently. There is a specific challenge here. Alongside the ambition that is sought in the motion, there needs to be clarity about exactly what role the independent sector will be expected to cover for the rest of the decade, not just the rest of the year.

We also need to be very careful that our communications about the virus do not continue to suggest to people that they cannot and should not seek assistance. The Department needs to put in place an urgent and high-profile campaign to state quite the contrary: that the health service is open and that anyone with concerns should seek medical advice without delay.

When transferred to Northern Ireland, much of the work mentioned by the campaign is essentially about speeding up transformation. We need to be faster in reforming workforce planning and ensure that we have the most up-to-date equipment and the means to provide services in the home or via telemedicine, where appropriate. We need a greater focus on and investment in palliative and end-of-life care. Very specifically, we need to ensure that those in communities with traditionally lower levels of uptake of health and social care services do so faster.

Last week in the Chamber, the Minister provided us with an outline of the broad recovery plan. In fairness, it prioritised cancer, but it could be noted that what he said about cancer services applies to many other services.

Service delivery during the pandemic, in some ways, took us away from Bengoa and Donaldson and, broadly, an intentional change was made to prioritise urgent cases only. The difficulty that that causes is that a whole host of interventions that could have been made swiftly earlier will now need to be made later, with the potential for cases becoming more complex in the meantime.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. It is a very important issue for all of us.

The Member will agree with me that early intervention is key and that we should send out a message from the House that, no matter what age or how healthy you think that you are, if there is any change to your body, you find any lumps or you feel unwell, you should get checked immediately. It is vital that people seek support straight away.

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

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am not sure that I will need it.

I very much agree with the Member. I will come on to the point about patients presenting at GPs, but I very much commend our local charities that provide very useful online resources to those who are waiting for appointments so that they can get some information about potential changes and symptoms.

In other words, if we do not treat non-urgent cases, they will soon become urgent. It might also be emphasised that those who are living with chronic pain, uncertainty about the impact of their condition or, indeed, a diagnosed cancer for which they are getting no treatment because of clinical decisions will regard their cases as urgent.

The Minister and some of his party colleagues talked encouragingly about what, essentially, is a new and clear understanding, among public service users and medical professionals alike, of what a Bengoa transformation process would look like. With cancer and other services, the emphasis in the trust plans is, rightly, on regional prioritisation of clinical need to avoid any postcode lotteries. That includes patients and staff travelling to ensure that the highest quality of specialist care is provided. In other words, delivering a universal, high-quality health service at the point of access is not a matter of defending the status quo. It is about embracing reform and transformation.

4.30 pm

A lot of very useful work has already been done on prioritising proposals and assessing what constitutes an efficient way of improving cancer services. Given that the UK lags behind much of Europe on cancer outcomes, it is welcome that work has already begun on learning from elsewhere. As such, I hope that the forthcoming cancer strategy is set in the overall context of Northern Ireland and takes account of where we are in practice in areas such as past investment, workforce planning and data. We also need, as a matter of priority, to get GPs back seeing the vast majority of their patients directly. As beneficial as telemedicine is, some people need face-to-face appointments. They can be a vital early intervention.

I hope that, in his response to the debate, the Minister will provide more detail about the rebuilding of services on a regional basis; what the assumed scale of the challenge is, given that people have not necessarily sought medical assistance during the pandemic; how rebuilding dovetails with reforming; and, perhaps notably, a public awareness campaign to ensure that, as the motion says, people with signs and symptoms of cancer seek help quickly in the right place.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Bomaite amháin sula dtosaí muid. Just before you start, Fra, it would be very remiss of me not to wish you and your wife all the very best on your recent marriage. Comhghairdeas libh bhur mbeirt. *[Applause.]*

Mr McCann: You are too kind, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you very much. Go raibh míle maith agat.

I support the motion to put cancer services at the heart of our recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. I thank my colleagues in the Assembly for tabling the motion; it is timely and warranted. As most of you know by now, I have been on my own personal journey with cancer since the autumn of 2019. My diagnosis predates the COVID pandemic. In that regard, I am very conscious that I was fortunate; I was able to access the services that I needed at the time. Back in 2019, when I was first diagnosed, I knew that I was up for the fight, and I stated as much publicly. However, naturally, a diagnosis of cancer is a frightening development that causes a whirlwind of emotion and self-doubt. It is at such a time that you fully

understand the importance of your family and friends, who become the pillar of strength that you need. I thank my wife, Janette, my children, my grandchildren, my party colleagues and my wide circle of friends for their ongoing solidarity in supporting my battle with the disease. It would be remiss of me not to take this opportunity to pay tribute to everyone involved in my care from the day on which I was diagnosed until now. I have received world-class care from all those whom I have encountered across the health and social care sector. I have been treated with the utmost respect and compassion. I and my family are forever indebted to you all.

It is with deep gratitude that I realise how fortunate I have been. I am conscious that a similar diagnosis during the pandemic would have brought an additional level of stress and worry due to the cancellation of the various services and the disruption that that has caused to timely diagnosis and treatment for many. To those who have endured those circumstances, I express my solidarity. The negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is being felt across our entire society. However, the disruption to health, particularly cancer services, is deeply felt, especially by the patients involved. The cancellation of surgery, particularly red-flag cancer surgery, is deeply troubling. It is vital that we fully resume those services immediately. I support the calls contained in the motion for high-quality patient-centred cancer services to be at the heart of our COVID recovery. I urge the Department of Health to direct all necessary resources to clearing any backlog that has developed so that cancer patients can be treated with the urgency that is warranted in each case.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Agus arís eile, déanaim comhghairdeas libh. My sincerest congratulations to you both.

Mr McCann: Thank you.

Mr Robinson: Mr Deputy Speaker, prior to making my contribution and with your indulgence, I take this opportunity to totally condemn the reckless and life-threatening leaving of a viable device outside a policewoman's house in my East Londonderry constituency. I send our best wishes to the policewoman and her family, including her wee three-year-old child, after their frightening ordeal.

A Member: Hear, hear.

Mr Robinson: Thank you very much.

I will go on to my contribution. First, I add my sincere thanks to all healthcare staff, including cleaners and domestic staff, for their dedicated service during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their excellent work is greatly appreciated by all.

I want to concentrate on one particular aspect that I believe is vital in the overall debate, and that is diagnosis. Without early diagnosis, there is no treatment. It is simple. I have been approached on a number of occasions by constituents who had difficulty gaining a GP appointment and were concerned about a cancer diagnosis due to symptoms that they had been experiencing. Our GPs have much to deal with, but if a patient is displaying symptoms of cancer, it is critical that they are seen face to face by their GP as a priority. That is the best starting point for a plan to restore treatments, care and clinical trials.

Our local hospitals, such as the excellent Causeway Hospital in my East Londonderry constituency, could be used to help to alleviate the urgent cancer waiting lists in one way or another. We need good-quality diagnoses to ensure that life-saving treatments can be implemented as speedily as possible, considering how cancer can spread throughout an individual's body. In order to help to ensure that maximum awareness is gained of available services, the Health Department needs to fund an awareness campaign of the symptoms of cancer and encourage people to see their GP ASAP. That takes me back to my opening statement about the fact that the availability of GP appointments is essential for early diagnosis and subsequent early treatment.

I take this opportunity to ask the Minister to invest in diagnostic equipment that will enable our GPs to deliver speedier and more accurate diagnoses. In my opinion, that will save lives. A major concern is that there appears to be a reduction in the number of people seeking diagnosis, as the decrease in samples shows. That must be addressed if we are to ensure that our magnificent cancer services are not overcome in the future. I congratulate the Western Trust, which is in my area, for providing the magnificent new cancer centre at Altnagelvin Area Hospital, which is doing such sterling work for all its cancer patients.

Minister, perhaps in discussion with other devolved Administrations, we in Northern Ireland could develop a targeted plan to enable speedy diagnoses and provide further cancer treatment services. While COVID-19 is undoubtedly the main concern at present, it is essential that we do not take our eye off the ball of life-saving diagnoses and treatments. The full reintroduction of cancer services must be considered as a matter of urgency so that lives can be saved.

I fully support this very worthwhile motion, which has been tabled by my DUP colleagues Pam Cameron and Jonathan Buckley.

Ms Ennis: No one will forget the past year. COVID has impacted on so many aspects of our lives, and none more than those people who, during this time, have had enough cause for concern to go to their GP. Imagine for one minute what that is like. I know that there are Members who will know exactly how that feels, and we are truly delighted at their recovery and wish them well post-surgery and with their ongoing treatment. I assume that, under the law of averages, one in four of us will be impacted by cancer and that someone right now is fretting over something that is not right, either with themselves or with a loved one, and is worrying about having to go to their GP to have those conversations.

Last week, the Minister of Health made a statement on hospital waiting lists. The intention to tackle that mighty challenge was definitely there but was perhaps a bit lacking on the detail of how it will happen. Take, for example, red-flag cancer treatments. That should promote a sense of urgency, and plans need to be published to deal with red-flag cancer services. Individuals and families need to know that the Minister has their back and that they will be supported.

We will hear the phrase "COVID recovery" a lot, and that is a good thing, but we will also need to see what that recovery looks like. There is currently a target waiting time of 62 days for first treatment following an urgent GP

referral for suspect cancer. For some forms of cancer, that is a dangerously long time. With pancreatic cancer, for example, people have died within a few weeks from diagnosis, and some have died within days. There are forms of cancer that are aggressive in their nature and, therefore, an aggressive approach is needed. So, while the 62 days is a benchmark, I ask the Minister to clarify what steps or actions will be taken in the context of those aggressive cancers.

Screening is also key, and that often starts with the GP. Given the impact that COVID has had on getting access to our GPs, I am very interested to hear what the Minister will do regarding anyone with a fear of having a lump or bump and how they will be seen in a timely and speedy way.

Paediatric cancer services also need greater clarity. Are paediatric patients on a list for surgery and is it the same list as that which exists for adults? What is the situation there? I appreciate, Minister and Deputy Speaker, that I am asking more questions than giving a speech as such. The Minister also knows that I am not a member of the Health Committee, but I, like other MLAs, have been asked questions by constituents. If there is anything that we can do of a positive nature today, I think that it is to give greater clarity on what the next steps are.

I also understand that there have been workforce planning issues regarding getting consultants, and the issue of recruitment and retention of staff is nothing new. However, if we are to restore the much-needed services and supports to pre-pandemic levels, we need to ensure that the right staff, including nurses and theatre staff, are secured.

I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say in today's debate. With the announcements by the Executive on easements of some restrictions, it is vital that those in most need are given support and treatment at the point of need and as soon as they need it. Access to cancer services, in my opinion, is one of the most important issues.

Mr McCrossan: Thanks to the Minister for being here today to respond to this very important debate. First, I want to thank our hardworking NHS staff, including nurses, doctors and domestic staff. They have made huge and considerable sacrifices throughout the entire pandemic and also beforehand. Members have referenced that, prior to the challenge of the COVID crisis, our society and our health service were crippled with considerable challenges. There was a need for change, reform, investment and a full review of services. Bengoa did provide the map, but COVID has delayed the progress. I trust that this Minister, given his very positive record over the past year, will prioritise cancer services and the many challenges that our health service faces, but, at the centre of this, it is important that, at the outset of each debate, we reflect, as Members have done, on the huge and considerable sacrifices made by the beating heart of our NHS, which is our staff. They are the people who get up every day and do so much to save lives and to support our families. During the pandemic, they are there with our loved ones when many of us cannot be due to restrictions.

I want to follow what Mr Robinson said about the North West Cancer Centre in Derry. It is a fantastic resource that was long overdue and long needed and is absolutely playing a vital and key role in helping to battle that deadly disease. It supports all those who find themselves in those very difficult circumstances.

I made reference to those who may have changes in their body, be it lumps or feeling unwell. There is a whole range of issues. Some will have no symptoms whatsoever, but those who do, regardless of where we are in the pandemic, should always, always come forward and seek medical opinion and advice and support. In recent months, during the pandemic, a close friend of mine had a mole on his neck, and it changed throughout the pandemic.

It was noticed by another person. He went and got tested. It was cancer. He was fortunate that it was noticed at a very early stage. Otherwise, it could have been much more severe. The treatment that he received was second to none. He received first-class professional care from the start of the process to the end, and he got reassurance as well. He also received the vaccination as a priority.

4.45 pm

Huge numbers of positive things are happening, but, equally, in our society, we know — Members have referred to it — that there are those who say, "Sure, it'll be all right. I'll be grand." A year, if they are lucky, or maybe months later, they may not be here because they did not act swiftly enough. That message needs to go to loved ones as well to ensure that, if their child, son, daughter, grandparent or other family member is unwell, they get them checked immediately. They will be given the necessary priority.

Age does not matter. That is an important message to put across. It does not matter how young, old or healthy you are. The slightest change in your body could point to a very serious signal of change and to very difficult news indeed. Everyone wants to avoid that news. No one wants to be told that they have cancer, but we need to send out a message from the House: if you go early, as soon as you have noticed any changes, your life could be saved.

Many people are not with us today because they did not have symptoms or maybe because they felt that they would be OK. I have lost family members in those circumstances. Many across the House have lost loved ones in those tragic circumstances. It is vital that the necessary investment is put into cancer services. If you are too late, there are no second chances. We need to do all that we can to battle this terrible disease. As I have said, I know that this Health Minister will do everything that he can, and the House must support him to deliver and to invest properly and fully in cancer services.

My final point is that the role of the House, the function of the Assembly, is vital to saving lives —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will you draw your remarks to a close, please?

Mr McCrossan: — and it will save lives if it works together, collectively, on the challenges.

Mr Dickson: In supporting the motion, I welcome the opportunity to speak. First, I declare an interest as a member of the board of Oesophageal Cancer NI, which is a cancer charity in Northern Ireland.

I have experienced cancer. I received a diagnosis and treatment under two years ago. I have first-hand knowledge of the concerns and challenges of the journey and, indeed, of the continuing journey that diagnosis and treatment can be. All my treatment was free on behalf of our National Health Service. I did not have to worry about paying for the treatment that I received. All I had to

be concerned about was my journey to get through the treatment that I was to have.

The concept of a free health service at the point of delivery is one that, as we must emphasise, is so important to retain. We need to fund our health service properly. No one should be left behind without care. People should not need to have private care. We need and must maintain our universal healthcare system.

I was impressed by and thankful for the professionalism of the exceptional and compassionate care that I received. Other Members have spoken of that care today, and I know that many others receive it from staff across our health service. I place on record my thanks to the healthcare staff. I recognise the challenging work that they undertake every day.

Unfortunately, our health service is not, to put it mildly, in a good place. Even before the pandemic, waiting lists were at unacceptable levels. Too many people were living in pain or worrying about the waiting times for procedures and tests. The pandemic has put on pause or, in many cases, put a stop to our system of treating patients with cancer, meaning that waiting lists have grown even more. We have heard some of the figures set out in the Chamber today.

It is time to press play again. In fact, we need to press the fast-forward button.

When it comes to effective cancer services, we must start with early diagnosis. That often means not keeping suspicious pains, lumps or bumps to ourselves but discussing them with our GP and attending screening appointments when they are offered.

At the briefing by Macmillan Cancer Support to all MLAs today, it was noted that the pathology data suggests that some 1,300 patients missed a cancer diagnosis between March 2020 and February 2021. That is extremely worrying.

Most diagnoses start in primary care. I am concerned, and I ask the Health Minister directly, about the level of GP services that are available in Northern Ireland today. I understand, as everyone does, that, at the beginning of the pandemic, it was necessary to adapt to fewer face-to-face interactions to protect our services. However, today I asked my charity colleagues what was the key question that they wanted me to ask in the House. It was that GP services be opened up as quickly as is practicably possible. It is very difficult to listen to lengthy telephone messages and be told that, if the GP is able to call you back, all that you can have is a telephone triage call. Those are time-limited and difficult services for people to work in and understand. Quite simply, they put people off. People are not availing themselves of the services at the point at which they need to most — that is, to see a GP.

I can honestly tell you that it is so difficult when you do not see a GP. The first line of your conversation with your GP will not be about a lump or a bump; it will quite often be the second, third or fourth part of the conversation. It may even happen as you are going out the door. I know that our GPs understand, but it is vital that we return this service as quickly as possible.

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

Mr Dickson: Very briefly, I must say that we need to recover a world-class service in Northern Ireland. We need to deliver these changes quickly, but there are things that we need to do now in order to save lives in the future.

Mr Carroll: I send my best wishes to my fellow West Belfast MLA Mr McCann. I hope that he gets a honeymoon sometime soon.

Today's motion is important in supporting the provision of services for all those people in my constituency and beyond who need important and urgent cancer treatments. We heard figures from Mr Dickson, the Chair of the Health Committee and Macmillan Cancer Support that show that, last year, 1,300 patients missed a cancer diagnosis appointment. Moreover, 5,000 red-flag cancer procedures were cancelled. Those are, to be frank, very stark and worrying figures. It goes without saying that the past year was incredibly difficult for many people, none more so than for people who have or who may have cancer and issues connected to it. We have to take every measure possible to ensure that those who were failed before are not failed again.

While it is true that anybody can face a cancer diagnosis, there is a greater risk of cancer for people living in deprived or working-class communities, and that has to be inserted in the debate. People in those communities face greater levels of stress and are under greater economic pressure and so on. They face greater barriers in accessing healthy, nutritious food supplies. They face greater levels of pollution from motorways, traffic jams, industrial pollution and so on.

In theory, everybody could get cancer. Hopefully not, but it is a possibility. However, communities in which there is deprivation and underinvestment are more prone to cancer, and members of those communities have shorter life expectancy than people in more affluent parts of Belfast and across the North.

Unless we address low pay, poverty and economic insecurity, health disparities will continue. We can have the best cancer strategy in the world — I hope that we do — but it will be built on sand if we do not tackle those issues. This is a political issue as well as a health issue.

To do that, we will need to change tack from the approach that had been adopted for too long before the current Health Minister's tenure. That approach was to speak about and focus mainly on budget limits and constraints, the need for rationalisation and the need to live within our means. Such figures were trotted out too often. If we are to deal with the waiting lists, we need an urgent and rapid recruitment plan for NHS nurses and staff so that people are not forced to wait 10 years or longer for various treatments.

In coming out of a deadly pandemic, what better way to show all the health workers and all the people who have had appointments delayed or cancelled that we recognise their horrendous situation than by saying that we will rapidly recruit more NHS staff to deal with the waiting lists and also to give health workers a break. We were thousands of nurses short before the pandemic, so we have a big gap to fill at the moment.

So far, the Executive have been bereft of any transformative measures to deal with those problems. Rather, they have continued on as usual. Frankly, we

also need to bin strategies that further chop up, restrict, rationalise or cut back our health service, be they Bengoa or whatever else. The health service saved many lives this year, and so many people are forever indebted to those who work in it, so invest in it and stop starving it of essential funding. That is a fundamental and important point.

I am also concerned about an over-reliance on what is often called the independent sector. It is not, in fact, independent but heavily reliant on public money. From what I can see, there is a pervasive idea from some quarters in the House that it is OK to funnel large sums of public money through private healthcare providers whilst, at the same time, claiming that we do not have enough money for our health service to treat people who are on waiting lists. We are chasing our tail around in circles, and that needs to be addressed. We need to invest in public services and the NHS.

Finally, how obscene is it that people can get access to cancer services if they have several thousand pounds in their bank account? To me, that suggests a two-tier health service, and that needs to come to an end immediately.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call the Minister of Health, Robin Swann, who will have up to 15 minutes to respond to the debate.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I thank the signatories to the motion, because it gives me the opportunity to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cancer services and treatments, the measures that we have taken to manage the impact of COVID-19 and the plans for moving forward.

Let me start by saying that I am incredibly proud of the dedication and hard work of the highly trained doctors, nurses and other medical professionals who have provided care to our people in unprecedented circumstances. I am determined to work with colleagues and stakeholders across the services to deliver the improvements that we need to rebuild cancer services following the devastation of the pandemic.

Like others, I am all too aware of the challenges that cancer presents us with in Northern Ireland, especially in the aftermath of COVID-19. I commend all the cancer charities for joining together in the One Cancer Voice coalition, as outlined in the motion. That truly demonstrates the solidarity that is needed in order to continue to improve clinical cancer services and patient care nationally and to foster joint collaborations in cancer research and development. It is only by working together that we will succeed in providing the support that patients have the right to receive.

More than 26 people in Northern Ireland are diagnosed with cancer every day. Almost 10,000 people are diagnosed with cancer annually. The number of cancer cases diagnosed has increased by 54% over the past 25 years, and, as was said earlier, that figure is projected to double by 2040, primarily as a result of our ageing population. In the first COVID-19 surge, many screening services were temporarily suspended. In addition, we know that many people with potential symptoms were reluctant to attend their GP practice and that access to dental care was very limited. Consequently, the number of red-flag referrals dropped. Although they have recovered somewhat for some cancers, and in some trusts, by the

end of December 2020, they were still lower than in the equivalent period for 2019.

The impact was most severe for patients with cancers that have poor survival rates, such as lung cancer, where the timing of diagnosis and treatment is critical.

There is a clear need to take immediate and sustained action to recover our referral rates and to do what we can to smooth referral pathways so that we can support more timely care. Of course, it goes without saying that early diagnosis is vital if we are to improve cancer outcomes.

5.00 pm

The pandemic has had a major impact on already unacceptable waiting times. Unfortunately, that includes some cancer services. Elective activity had to be reduced, as we had no choice but to redirect resources to respond to the increasing unscheduled pressures. That has also impacted significantly on access to surgery. Unfortunately, that included particular specialist cancer surgery, which is often reliant on access to those all-too-precious intensive care unit beds. Let me be absolutely clear: patients have been and always will be treated according to clinical priority as determined by specialist clinicians. At the height of the recent surge, our hospitals did their absolute best to care for everyone, and that included treating the sickest quickest. Whilst I am well aware of the accusation, it would simply be untrue for anyone to accuse my Department, our trusts or our front-line staff of prioritising one condition over another. Our clinicians were faced with impossible choices almost daily. I, for one, sincerely hope that they never find themselves in such a position again. Thankfully, the COVID-related pressures on the system have since greatly reduced, and that has allowed us once again to focus on time-critical patients. I can also confirm to the House that, for patients scheduled to be admitted in the period from 1 January to 11 April 2021, there were 1,177 suspected or confirmed cancer procedures cancelled by HSC trusts and, of those, over 93% have since had their treatment completed or been given a confirmed treatment date.

As we continue to rebuild services, it will be critical that we move forward on the basis of two key principles. The first is care being delivered on the basis of clinical priority rather than the order of waiting. For cancer surgery, clinical prioritisation is based on Federation of Surgical Specialty Associations (FSSA) guidance. Additional surgical capacity has been provided through the independent sector and other UK and Republic of Ireland providers.

The second principle is equality of waiting across Northern Ireland. We must ensure that each cancer patient has the same opportunity to receive the same high level of diagnostic treatment and care available no matter where they live. The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) has established a new regional approach to the prioritisation of surgery. With that approach, any available theatre capacity across Northern Ireland is allocated to the patients in greatest need. That includes maximising all available in-house Health and Social Care and independent sector capacity. That regional approach will ensure the allocation of capacity on clinical priority and avoid any postcode lottery. We have utilised every resource that we can access from 1 April 2020, and approximately 5,000 patients have benefited from additional diagnostic and treatment capacity secured through the independent sector.

It must also be recognised that cancer services were challenging before the pandemic, with unacceptable waiting times and significant capacity and workforce challenges across a range of areas. COVID-19 has led to a worsening of waiting times, but the problems have been building for some time. I am committed to dealing with the problem. To that end, I am finalising a cancer recovery plan, 'Building Back: Rebuilding Better', to make recommendations to redress the disruption to cancer services caused by the pandemic. The cancer recovery plan is also fully aligned with the short-term recommendations in the cancer strategy and will focus on a three-year period until March 2024. The recommendations cover 11 key areas from screening through to palliative care and have been developed with clinical and professional colleagues from across the health and social care trusts.

I assure you that the issues outlined by the coalition will be fully addressed in the new cancer strategy for Northern Ireland. The development of the new strategy is entering the consultation stage under the direction of a steering group led by Northern Ireland's Chief Nursing Officer, Professor Charlotte McArdle.

The development brought together healthcare professionals, cancer charities and service users and will set the direction of travel for the next 10 years. Currently, strategy recommendations are being reviewed with internal stakeholder groups. Several events have already taken place, including a charity forum, two lived-experience events and two children-and-young-people events. It is anticipated that a full external consultation will take place over the summer.

Additionally, cancer charities are struggling to deliver current services and develop new services for those suffering from cancer while managing the impact of falling income streams. To support cancer services, I have used both transformation and COVID-19 funding to set up two grant schemes. In the last financial year, my Department administered a discretionary, non-recurrent grant to help cancer charities continue to enhance the delivery of key services and provide support and advice to patients following the pandemic. That grant, using transformation funding of £600,000, covered the period from December 2020 to 31 March 2021 and enabled charities to deliver a range of key services to support people living with cancer during the pandemic.

I have followed this with a larger grant scheme, using COVID-19 funding of £10 million. This will be available over the three-year time frame of the cancer recovery plan. The funding will not only support charities in the delivery of cancer services but allow them to deliver on the recommendations outlined in the cancer recovery plan. This funding will be managed through an intermediary funding body and, as such, will not impose any additional administrative requirements on trusts or the Department.

We are also building for the future. In March, I re-signed the All-Ireland Cancer Consortium. This is a multilateral partnership between the American National Cancer Institute and the health services of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The agreement forges strategic alliances among the three jurisdictions to improve clinical cancer services and patient care on the island of Ireland and foster joint collaborations in cancer research and development. The consortium contributes to cancer

control by focusing researchers on specific areas of care and research. That includes clinical trials, information technology, epidemiology, cancer registries, prevention, nursing, health economics, scholar exchange and training.

The focus of this motion is on cancer services, and rightly so. Lengthy waiting lists are not good enough. Patients have a right to have services there when they need them. Health and social care services have already put in place innovative solutions to work together to address the situation whilst maintaining safety for patients. We have made a great deal of progress but must acknowledge that our services are not where we need them to be. We are all aware that we have limited resources and that it will take time to build capacity. Therefore, we have no choice but to make sure we keep doing the best that we can with the resources we have.

Members should be under no illusion. For far too long, Northern Ireland has been presiding over a decline in performance for cancer and other key health services. That is unacceptable. People from across the system have been working to develop a recovery plan and map out our ambition for cancer services over the next 10 years through the upcoming cancer strategy. However, Members must also understand that there is no quick fix to these issues. They will require significant and recurring funding to implement. There are substantial costs associated with the delivery of the recovery plan and the strategy. However, that is the price that we must be prepared to pay if we truly want to provide a high-quality service to people with cancer.

The Executive and the Assembly need to come together and make sure that we can deliver these plans and create a world-class cancer service that the people of Northern Ireland deserve.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Mr Jonathan Buckley to wind up the debate.

Mr Buckley: As I rise in the House today, I thank every Member who has contributed to the debate. Members across the House, including you, Mr Deputy Speaker, will know my passion for this issue, particularly during COVID-19. You have afforded me considerable latitude to discuss it in previous debates, and I thank you for that.

We watched as a pandemic hit these shores, and we listened to the stories and testimonies of people across our land who were dealing with a cancer diagnosis and felt that they had nowhere to go. It was heartbreaking. I have had many personal testimonies, as, I am sure, have other Members. I went on record in the House previously to state that one of the greatest costs of COVID has been the neglect of cancer patients. I cannot help but feel that, as a society, we have, in some way, failed those patients at a time when we were, in fact, trying to save life. I know that the health service had to adjust to work in ways in which it had never worked before, under incredible pressure — many Members have mentioned the challenges that staff faced — but cancer is something on which, collectively, we have to do better.

This has been a wonderful conversation and debate. It has been wonderful to hear Members talk about their personal experiences, all politics being removed as Members have talked about the situation that we find ourselves in. I pay tribute to Fra McCann and Stewart Dickson for putting on record their own personal stories. I say this to both of

them: while we may not agree on many political issues in this place, I stand four-square behind you in your fight against this terrible disease. Thank you both for putting on record your stories, because, for every story that is told in this place, there is the opportunity for another person to hear it, get themselves checked and, hopefully, receive the life-saving surgery or healthcare provision that they require.

We on this side of the House have our own stories that we could tell of colleagues. Our thoughts and prayers are with them as they go through this terrible ordeal. When all is said and done, and when we look back on this period, it will be our response to this issue that can define this place in a positive light. I encourage every Member to engage on the issue in that manner, as you have done today, because there continues to be a real and palpable anger regarding the plight of cancer patients who are awaiting critical, time-dependent surgeries and facing cancellations and prolonged delays in the most crucial of stages. In January of this year, it was revealed that 275 people in Northern Ireland had had their red-flag cancer surgery cancelled.

I was particularly struck by Stewart Dickson's comments in relation to GP provision, because that is something that I have grappled with in my constituency and in stories that I have heard. Evidently, there is a great difference in experiences across the board in GP provision. I put on record the life-saving work of many of our GPs who have gone above and beyond during COVID-19, but it is fair to say that, across our constituencies, patients in GP practices have had very different and diverse experiences in their journey.

I listened at the Health Committee and read out an account of a gentleman who talked about the experiences of two of his close friends who wanted an urgent face-to-face appointment. These are things that you cannot diagnose or have a conversation about over the phone. You want to see somebody, face to face; you want to tell them the experiences; you want to talk about your anxieties. They were failed because they could not access that. The two friends died.

I listened to health chiefs talk to us at the Committee of experiences of late presentations at A&E, when, sadly, little to nothing could be done. It is essential that GP referrals are addressed as early and efficiently as possible so that cancers can be detected and the best possible course of action taken to alleviate the diagnosis. Many Members talked about early diagnosis, and it is so true: if we catch it early, there is a chance. I recognise that these issues were prevalent before COVID-19 and have only been exacerbated by it, but, for many people, if their condition is not caught early, it is too late.

5.15 pm

The Chair of the Committee, Colm Gildernew, talked about MLAs' experiences. Being able to talk about those experiences will provide powerful testimonies. There is a need for clear investment — the Minister and many Members across the House outlined that — but we really need to focus on where our energies and finances must go in order to help those who are in need.

We also heard about a multi-year Budget. I am sick hearing about that in this place. It is time to deliver it. If we cannot put that provision in place for the health service

in particular, we are only papering over the cracks. That is something that there is no political difference on in this place, but it is a real point.

Cara Hunter talked about the pandemic coming at a huge cost to other services. Since she came to the House, she has been on record championing the mental health needs of our community. Let us think of that in relation to our cancer patients. Just imagine the mental turmoil that many of them go through. That has been exacerbated by COVID-19.

Alan Chambers said that cancer thrives in periods of delay. How true. We have all heard about that. Paula Bradshaw talked about One Cancer Voice requiring a Northern Ireland-specific focus. I pay tribute to her for her work throughout the pandemic and before it as the chair of the all-party group on cancer. It truly has been great to see that work continuing, and I thank her for that. I also thank my colleague Joanne Bunting for her work on the all-party group on terminal illness. Quite often, we talk about failures in early diagnoses and about treatment pathways that have not worked out, but we need to address the conversations that charities that deal with terminal illness have. We need to address that because it is a bigger problem that is coming down the line. Members can grasp that.

I really thank Members for their points. Each one of you has a powerful story that you can tell, but please let us work together and do what we can to help on the issue. I want to see this place adopting the same vigour in fighting cancer that it adopted in fighting COVID-19. It may not be you today, but tomorrow it could very well be you, your family member, friend or child. Cancer is something that very few families escape. We must take it upon ourselves to work with everyone who wants to come forward in order to put a stamp on transforming our services and on the experiences of cancer patients. If we do that, it will be a true and lasting legacy of the Assembly.

I thank Members again, and I thank the Minister for his comments. He put on record his serious dissatisfaction with and alarm about the current waiting lists. We all have that concern, and Sinéad Ennis was absolutely right when she outlined that we have heard a lot of words about it. We need to see the plan before we can put it in action and collectively work together to achieve its aims.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the serious and negative impact of COVID-19 on cancer diagnosis, treatment and surgery across Northern Ireland; notes with deep concern that, during the pandemic, tests, treatments and clinical trials have been disrupted or cancelled, with many patients not accessing help for possible cancer symptoms; highlights in this context the need to place the restoration of patient-centred and high-quality cancer services at the heart of the recovery from COVID-19; endorses the statement by 47 cancer charities, under One Cancer Voice, which seeks to plot a course out of the pandemic towards world-leading cancer services; stresses the need to direct resources to clear the cancer backlog as quickly as possible, drive faster and earlier diagnosis and encourage people with signs and symptoms of cancer to seek help; and calls on the Minister of Health to

publish urgently an ambitious and fully funded road map for restoring and enhancing local cancer services.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask Members to take their ease before we move to the next item of business.

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

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.]

Adjournment

A5 Dual Carriageway

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: In conjunction with the Business Committee, Mr Speaker has given leave to Mr Declan McAleer to raise the matter of the progress of the A5 dual carriageway. The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes, and all other Members who speak will have four minutes.

Mr McAleer: I welcome the opportunity to raise in the Chamber the need for progress with the A5 dual carriageway, and I am delighted to see that the Infrastructure Minister has joined us. Members will be aware that this is something that we have been highlighting for many years. The A5 is a hugely important infrastructure project in the west to connect the west and the east in the North of Ireland and, indeed, the north-west to the South as well. It is also an Executive flagship project. It is hugely important for connectivity in the region and for our North/South links.

Importantly, the project is vital for saving lives. The A5 transport corridor, as it stands, is not fit for purpose. It is very dangerous, and the interface between strategic traffic and local traffic causes a lot of difficulties, which has resulted in a lot of accidents, and, unfortunately, we have seen many lives lost over the years. The Department for Infrastructure has projected that the new A5 could prevent 2,877 casualties and 19 fatalities over the next 60 years. I believe that that is a conservative figure, when we look at the number of lives that have sadly been lost over the decades.

It is clear that the A5 is fundamental for improving road safety and improving the economic fortunes of the west. Members will have heard us say many times here that we have a huge infrastructure deficit. We do not have trains in the counties of Tyrone or Fermanagh. Obviously, into north Derry, there is a connection there. The interim Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) report that was recently published restated some things that we have known for a long time. For example, the A5 is hugely beneficial for the north-west for road safety, journey times, facilitating economic growth and combating regional inequality. However, following last year's inquiry, the recent PAC report was not satisfied with a number of issues, particularly the Department not being properly prepared for the scheme's construction, for example, by not taking into account the most recent flooding data. It also wants the Department to engage in further, more robust environmental assessments. The report also states that DFI needs to further demonstrate that the current design of the scheme is the best option for the north-west.

That is despite the fact that we know that the benefits that the A5 dual carriageway will bring to the west, and indeed to the wider north-west, cannot be matched.

In fact, the PAC report, and the previous public inquiry held in 2016, concluded that the A5 was "of major public

significance". The public inquiry was not persuaded that the alternatives were:

"reasonably capable of achieving the same scale of benefits"

as this proposed scheme. We need clarity from the PAC on the change of tune.

We also need to ask why the issues that need further consideration were not sufficiently examined in the previous environmental statements or by last year's public inquiry. People are frustrated that a project that has taken so long to get to this point now needs even more documentation and consultation. Inevitably, that will lead to an inquiry and further delay, and it might be another two years before there is a chance to get construction under way.

This is the third public inquiry into the A5 project, the first being 10 years ago in 2011. Unfortunately, the scheme has also faced repeated legal challenges from a small and unrepresentative minority acting against the interests and wishes of the wider area. The overwhelming majority of people here in the North want safer roads, and they want regional development and economic opportunities to extend into the west as well.

The purpose of the debate is to express the frustration of the people west of the Bann at the fact that the scheme has not yet got off the ground and to stress its absolute importance. I appeal to the Minister to ensure that the A5 scheme is properly prepared going forward so that this latest delay, which has come as a massive blow to the project, will be the last.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Very generously, Mr McAleer did not use all his time, so I will exercise my right to discriminate in favour of Members from West Tyrone. Instead of having four minutes to speak, they will all have five minutes.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank the Minister for being here this evening as we discuss the A5. When it comes to such important issues, it is always good to see the Minister in place, even at an Adjournment debate.

To say that I am disappointed at the progress made to date on the A5 western transport corridor would be a gross understatement. In October this year, it will be 14 years since the project was first agreed, and Mouchel was appointed to undertake a detailed study of the potential dual carriageway upgrades to the A5, including highway design, traffic and economic appraisal. Yet, 14 years later, we are standing here again in the House. After much debate over those 14 years and at a cost to the public purse of £83·407 million, not as much as one sod has been turned or square metre of tarmac laid. That is a matter of grave concern. This is public money that we are talking about, and, 14 years later, we have spent over £83 million with nothing really to show for it.

Another alarming factor — if my figure is not right, I stand to be corrected — is that £51 million has been spent on consultant fees. While this delay in progressing works continues, those fees continue to increase, and there is nothing to show for it. I note that the Minister —

Mr McCrossan: I thank Mr Buchanan for giving way. Does the Member agree that a lot of those costs have got way out of control because of the continuing legal actions by the Alternative A5 Alliance? Does he agree that we, as

MLAs for the constituency and recognising the importance of the project, should stand together and call it out, tell it that this needs to stop and that it should let the road go ahead?

Mr T Buchanan: I fully agree with the Member. However, it is important to highlight the costs associated with the project at the minute, with nothing having been done.

I note that the Minister has instructed her project team to prepare a further addendum to an environment statement for further consultation later this year and even more consultation due next year.

I have to ask: when will this all end and work be allowed to begin on the ground?

5.30 pm

The issue also begs this question: who is benefiting from the project? Who has benefited from it over the last number of years? It is certainly not the business community, which is crying out for the new road in order to increase its businesses. It is not benefiting our large companies, which depend on the roads network daily to move their products to the ports to be exported. It is not benefiting our daily commuters, who continually struggle with the slow-moving traffic on the A5. It is not benefiting our local people. We can conclude, therefore, some 14 years later, that the only beneficiaries have been the consultants and solicitors who are involved in a project to the tune of £83·407 million on which no work has been done on the ground as yet. After 14 years' consultation, the Minister is asking for more of the same. I do not know of any other country in the world where progress on such a major road infrastructure project has been so slow.

Minister, you, and, indeed, every politician in the House, will be aware of the importance of the A5 project for the entire western area of Northern Ireland. It is important for a number of reasons, and I will touch briefly on a few of them. The first is road safety. The A5, as we know it today, has been branded one of the most dangerous roads in Northern Ireland. Time without number, we hear on the news of certain stretches of the A5 being closed due to a serious road traffic accident. Unfortunately, in most of those cases, someone loses their life or sustains serious injury. It was recorded that 30 people lost their life on the A5 in the 10-year period between 2006 and 2016. A number of families have lost loved ones and a number of businesses have perhaps gone to the wall because of a poor road network. We do not enjoy the same road network as the rest of Northern Ireland in the form of a dual carriageway. The loss of life speaks volumes about the dangers associated with the road network and the urgent need for the project to proceed.

Then, of course, there is the economic benefit. Businesses in west Tyrone, in Omagh and Strabane, have been struggling for many years to get their products to the ports to be exported. The Minister will know that west Tyrone is known for its engineering industry. That involves the moving of large items of machinery daily, yet the current conditions on the A5 create all types of problems for those companies. In the absence of a dual carriageway, traffic movement is slow and there are often delays. That is piling extra costs on our companies. They could use that money for further investment to expand their businesses, create more jobs and strengthen the economy. I pay

tribute to Houston Precision Engineering in Donegal. That manufacturing firm is looking at setting up in Strabane Business Park. It wants to bring its business into Northern Ireland from Donegal and expand there.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am afraid that the Member's time is up.

Mr T Buchanan: Despite our road network, we still see that interest. I have a lot more here, Minister, but I hope that you will step up to the plate and ensure that this road is delivered without further delay.

Mr McHugh: Minister, as we all know, the A5 is an arterial link to the north-west. It links Dublin, Belfast and Derry in particular. It goes right through the county of Tyrone and services the people of Fermanagh and Donegal. If one includes Donegal, the population of the north-west is almost 500,000. We are talking about a road that could create opportunities for businesses to locate in the north-west. I had the pleasure, which I enjoyed thoroughly, of representing the north-west region, along with representatives from Donegal County Council, when we went to America to argue the case for investment in the north-west. I also went to China and presented the same argument. We also argued for the north-west in London, at the heart of government in Westminster.

For the north-west to be attractive, it all very much depends on connectivity, not just through broadband or by air or sea but by road in particular. The people of the north-west deserve that type of service. They deserve to have a road that will open up opportunity for all: for businesses and for people to come and live, build their home and rear their family there. Our message got through, because we now have the city deal that provides for the north-west region. Not only do we have the city deal for the Derry City and Strabane District Council area but we have the Dublin Government now recognising the potential of the north-west in every respect. They will complement that city deal investment with investment on the Donegal side of the border, particularly in education at the Letterkenny Institute of Technology, and in our education establishments in Derry. One can therefore see just how vital that is in every respect for all the people of the region.

We must ask ourselves the question that has been suggested by other Members: if it is so obvious and clear, why has it taken so long? There has been one obstacle after another. This is not the time for finger-pointing at Ministers or whoever was in charge at a particular time. I know, as do all Members, that, irrespective of whose name is on the door, the Minister will be confronted with exactly the same problems that are instigated in particular by people who are able to use the legal system. Although we appreciate that that instrument of democracy is there to allow a citizen to challenge decisions one way or the other, there is no doubt about it, and I have to make the point, that, at present, the same system is there to abuse the democratic wishes of many people who live in the north-west region.

Serious questions have to be asked, even in the Chamber, about judicial reviews and how easy it is for people to bring one in the North of Ireland. The faceless people of the Alternative A5 Alliance, as it is called, seem to be so well funded that they are able to bring one judicial review after another. There are serious questions to be asked there. People have to confront that. I know that, given

her statements to date, the Minister is quite prepared to confront it and move the issue on. I am a wee bit afraid to say "Get your ducks in line", because, if I mention ducks at all, there will probably be another judicial review on the environmental impact on those same ducks. *[Laughter.]* That is essentially what is required, however, to ensure that we realise all our ambitions for the north-west region. We need to get our ducks in line, deal with the environmental issues that have been raised and be prepared to deliver the project.

Mr McCrossan: I follow other Members in welcoming the Minister and thanking her for her presence at this all-important debate.

This has gone on for far too long. That has been well said in the Chamber. There is a sense of unity of purpose around the need and desperation to deliver that vital roads project, which runs right through the heart of our constituency, from Derry right through to Ballygawley, right through the very core of West Tyrone. It does affect us. It affects each and every person whom we represent in our constituency, the majority of whom are rightly overwhelmingly frustrated and demanding that the road be delivered. Equally, they are frustrated by the continual delays and, as Mr McHugh rightly pointed out, the ease with which troublemakers can, because of faults in the legal system, bring forth challenges that run against the greater interests of the people whom we represent in West Tyrone.

I admit that I am sad that there is a lapse in the sense of unity as the UUP continues to support calls to scrap the scheme. That is not what people in West Tyrone want. Mr Beggs would do well to understand what the people of West Tyrone want: they want that road. I welcome that Mr Buchanan had the courage and conviction to speak up and say that the delay over the last number of years has been fundamentally flawed and that he and his party support the project, as do the other parties.

Mr Beggs would do well to learn from the mistakes of the past, when, for over 50 years, he and his party presided over the neglect of the north-west. It is unfortunate that I have to say this, but the statements released by his party are hugely unwelcome in West Tyrone. In saying that, I speak for every person from every part of every community in West Tyrone, with the exception of the small minority that speaks out against it under the mask of the Alternative A5 Alliance.

Let us address the elephant in the room. The biggest hurdle to the project is a small minority who, day and night, spend seven days a week, 365 days a year, finding reasons —.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: I will not. You will have your opportunity.

They spend that time finding reasons to object to the project and to delay its progress. People have died in the time that has passed. In the past few years, 15 people have died. Sinn Féin and I have our fights and our arguments, as do the DUP and I, but we are all united to our core regarding the need to deliver this absolutely necessary infrastructure project. I am sick, sore and tired of constantly having to repeat my support for the project. Minister Mallon, thank God, is totally committed to the project. It could easily have gone into the hands of another

party across the Chamber, which, as is clear from recent statements, would not have delivered it.

To put it clearly: we need these roads so that our constituents can prosper and develop, our young people can stay at home, and our families enjoy better infrastructure. Unfortunately, looking at a map, it is as clear as the nose on my face that something went wrong many years ago when railways were removed from a specific section of Northern Ireland, never to be replaced. We now have a Minister who has the courage, foresight and vision to start talking about reconnecting this island, North and South.

No one in the House can disagree that my community, my constituency and my people have suffered considerable neglect for many decades. That is changing. I am delighted to hear that Sinn Féin, the DUP, the SDLP and the Alliance Party can stand together in support of this road project. It will not be a silver bullet, but it will be a launching pad from which we can transform the lives of the people whom we represent, attract business, investment and opportunities, and give people a reason to stay at home in Northern Ireland.

The A5 is vital. The SDLP is committed to the project, and Minister Mallon is dedicated to delivering it. With support across the House, we need to join together, with no jibes or bickering, to challenge our biggest opponent: the Alternative A5 Alliance.

Ms Brogan: I thank the Minister for attending the debate this evening. I also thank my colleague Declan McAleer for bringing the debate to the Assembly.

As a representative of West Tyrone, I am here to express my frustration and, more importantly, that of my constituents, at the delays that continue to thwart progress on the delivery of the A5. I also reiterate the resolute support across the north-west for this flagship Executive project.

As it stands, the A5 transport corridor is not fit for purpose. A significant portion of the road falls well below current road standards. I urge the Minister to commit to using all measures to ensure that the scheme experiences no further unnecessary delays. The latest delay to the project has to be the last, because every delay costs lives. As has already been mentioned, far too many lives have been lost on the A5; far too many people have been seriously injured while travelling along it — some left with life-changing injuries. It has been calculated that upgrading the A5 to a dual carriageway could prevent over 2,800 casualties and 19 fatalities over the next 60 years.

That is why it is so important that we come together and ensure that this project is progressed and completed.

5.45 pm

The upgrade of the A5 is also crucial to unlocking the economic potential of the north-west, and it will go some way to addressing the regional imbalances and infrastructural deficit that exists west of the Bann, which is part of the legacy of partition. It should provide access to greater education, training and employment opportunities for the local population, and it will enhance social inclusion, with improved access to wider services.

The most recent delays and the announcement of yet another inquiry are disappointing and frustrating, to

say the least. The scheme has faced repeated legal challenges from a minority group that does not represent the interests of the wider public and the local people. It is the responsibility of the Department for Infrastructure to present accurate, relevant and contemporary data so that the entire scheme stands up to scrutiny. According to the interim PAC report, that seems to have been a major stumbling block for the scheme. The PAC report was extremely critical of the Department and suggests a failure by the Department to prepare the scheme for construction. One obvious example is the flood risk assessment. It was outdated and did not take into account the most recent flooding events affecting the A5. The PAC made 30 recommendations, most of which required additional information on the environmental impact. There are significant questions as to why those issues were not sufficiently examined in previous environmental statements and at the inquiry last year.

Today, I urge Minister Mallon to ensure that her Department is properly prepared going forward and that there are no more delays with the A5.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have a bit of housekeeping. Under the rules, the Minister should be called no later than 6.11 pm. Three Members are left to speak, so we have time enough to allow those Members to have five minutes each, rather than the four minutes that I had originally intended.

Ms McLaughlin: All Members in this debate can agree on one thing: the A5 scheme has been plagued by setback after setback. Back in 2007, the new A5 road scheme was championed as the flagship peace-dividend project attracting cross-border government funding. As we have heard many times in the House this evening, in the past 14 years, not one metre of road has been built, despite huge amounts of money being spent on design schemes, multiple public inquiries and five Ministers working towards the development of the scheme.

There has been a lot of finger-pointing over the years about the lack of progress on this project, and, indeed, a lot of lessons should have been learned by our roads authority, as the scheme is the perfect example of how not to do road planning, community consultation, environmental impact assessments etc. The history of mistakes at key moments of the scheme has been well and truly discussed over many, many years. In my past life as chief executive of a Chamber of Commerce, I gave evidence to support the scheme progressing.

Another thing that we can all agree on is that the current A5 is not fit for purpose and needs to be upgraded. It cannot be overstated enough — I make no apologies for repeating what others have said — that the current A5 is one of the most dangerous roads on this island, with countless lives lost as a result. Far too many people have died on the road over far too many years. Too many of my constituents' families have been bereaved because of this dangerous road, and the slow journey times have played a significant role in others dying because it takes so long to get to any of the major hospitals in either Derry or Enniskillen. All Members will also agree that the A5 scheme will significantly boost connectivity, connecting the north-west and the west to Dublin and Belfast alike. The scheme will be a major boost to local economies and will be a vital catalyst in attracting jobs to and creating jobs in the wider north-west area.

The A5 is an absolute priority for the SDLP as a strategic road scheme, and I do not think that anyone would dare question my colleague Dan McCrossan's doggedness, tenacity and passion on the issue, but we need to do it right, because too many mistakes have been made in the past.

My biggest regret is that when the scheme actually got the final green light to go ahead back in 2016, the institutions collapsed in early 2017. As a result of it not commencing at that stage, we are now facing further challenges and delays on this scheme.

Finally, I hope all Members might be able to agree that we have the right Minister, in the right position, who will seek to move this project forward with due diligence and determination to ensure that it is delivered properly both for citizens and the environment. Much valuable time has been lost in progressing this project over many years. Inheriting problematic schemes is never an enviable position for any Minister to be in, and this scheme has been problematic. It has been on the books for 14 years, as we have heard, and our Minister has been in place for 14 months. However, I am confident that the matter is now in hand, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister towards the end of this debate.

Mr Beggs: I too thank Mr McAleer for raising this issue. I think it is important to discuss the issues and to try to get a solution and bring about improvement.

Everyone recognises the need for significant improvements to the A5. They are badly needed. The A5 provides an essential principal road linking Omagh and Strabane, onwards to Donegal and down to the M2 and, indeed, the road to Dublin from the north-west region. It is a significant route. The route is virtually entirely single carriageway, and there are limited overtaking opportunities. Delays occur. As others have said, there are serious accidents, serious injuries and even death. Improvement is badly needed. There is also traffic congestion in the urban centres of Omagh and Strabane, and there is an urgent need for new bypasses to reduce traffic delays and congestion in those town centres.

However, gaining planning permission for the dualling of the entire A5 route has been problematic, to say the least. I urge everyone, if they have not done so already, to read the entire report. I have read it. I urge you, in particular, to read the two and a half pages of the summary, to which I have not heard reference to date. Mr Buchanan has indicated that the scheme has been delayed for 14 years; actually, there have been plans to upgrade the A5 dating from even before that, since 2005. That is 16 years ago.

Minister, can we not at least get road improvements under way in uncontroversial sections of the A5, such as the town bypasses? In the report, the commissioner states that some sections indicate six times better economic value than others and that some are uncontroversial. In fact, the commissioner recommends that the Minister considers phasing. It is not guaranteed that the scheme will ever proceed in the current format, but:

"If the scheme is to proceed, phasing needs to be reviewed and priority given to those stretches of the proposed road that offer greatest benefit. Phase 3 is unjustifiable and should be removed."

What do you think a court would do with that being the view of the planners? We need to reboot on this issue and get improvements under way where they can be achieved.

Regarding the funding of the scheme, initially the Republic of Ireland offered some £400 million, and it was going to cost the Northern Ireland Executive £600 million. The Republic's Government have reduced that now to £75 million: that means that there is a cost of £1.1 billion, almost doubling the cost to this Executive. Worse than that, all that money is not in place. Some are advocating that land should be vested when there is no money to buy it all and no money to build it all. Blighting would occur: that would be a human rights issue, and that is highlighted in the report.

I urge people to look at the recommendations. There are many environmental issues still to be addressed in detail. There is the issue of the absence of the full funding from the Northern Ireland Executive. There is also the issue of building on the flood plain, the fact that flooding has recently occurred there and the need for modelling in terms of how this scheme will further contribute to flooding. Then there is the large-scale compulsory purchasing of land to consider — I am not saying this; the commissioner says it in the report — as well as the human rights issues that are involved in vesting excessive areas of land.

The commissioner then highlights that:

"Phase 3 ... offers no significant benefits and represents overprovision."

Minister, will you review the phasing of the scheme and enable badly needed sections of road improvements to get under way whilst you continue to strive to gain planning permission for the rest of the scheme? The word "if" was in the commissioner's report, and I fear that if you continue to push for the entire route, you may never get full planning permission for it. I urge that phasing progresses and that urgently needed improvements are put in place.

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for West Tyrone for bringing this important matter for discussion in the Assembly. The Alliance Party is fully committed to delivering connectivity west of the Bann. Partially as a result of decisions that were made under the old Stormont Parliament and that were continued under direct rule, roads and public transport networks in the west have been subject to endemic underinvestment for decades. That is unacceptable, and it has to change.

The Alliance Party supports major infrastructure projects that will deliver for the west. However, the Alliance Party cannot support spending over £80 million of public money, primarily on consultants, without a single centimetre of road being delivered. Yet that is the story of the A5 to date.

The people in the west are tired of watching their politicians use the scheme as a stick to beat each other with. That approach has not delivered for anyone other than consultants and lawyers over the past decade. A different approach is required if we are to deliver the improved connectivity that is so desperately required.

The chief planner's interim report spelled out as clearly as it could that committing to the current design of the scheme, including the existing phasing proposals, is suboptimal, to put it mildly, and has a very poor chance of success. The Alliance Party wants to get the A5 done, but

it is my sincere and genuinely held view that the current way will not succeed. I worry that that approach will just perpetuate delays and result in not one inch of tarmac being poured.

There is an alternative to the impasse through which it is more likely that some road will be built to the benefit of communities west of the Bann. If we continue with the current approach, I worry that all we will have are further legal challenges in court and potentially more road traffic collisions (RTCs) with injuries and fatalities, plus additional psychological strain for local residents and more money spent on expensive consultants. We must deliver the A5. I urge all parties to step back and look at different options in order to ensure that we fulfil that commitment.

In conclusion, I will touch upon judicial reviews. The Northern Ireland Audit Office is reviewing judicial reviews. It will be important to have sight of that report when it is published and to give it full scrutiny, because how judicial reviews have impacted upon major capital projects affects not only the A5 but many other projects. It is important that we consider that.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Muir: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member agree that there are legitimate concerns about the route, particularly if there is to be compulsory vesting of homes, land and property, when there is overprovision and no justification for sections of the route, particularly the Aughnacloy to Ballygawley section, and that there are basic human rights issues that need to be respected? There needs to be careful examination of the commissioner's comments, and they must all be adequately addressed if we are to proceed.

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for his intervention. Of course I believe in upholding human rights. I wish that others in the House had the same view. For me, the issue is that we have seen how judicial reviews have had significant impact financially upon not only major capital projects but people. I uphold the right to be able to take a judicial challenge to court, and I think it is important to be able to do that.

However, we need to look at why it is such an issue in Northern Ireland compared with the rest of the United Kingdom.

6.00 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon, will have 10 minutes to respond to the comments made in the debate.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): First, I thank Mr McAleer for instigating this important debate on the progress on the A5 dual carriageway. I listened with interest to the comments of Members and the issues that they raised, and it is clear that the delivery of the A5 project is of huge importance to them, as it is for me, as the Minister for Infrastructure. I wanted to come to the House today to reiterate my commitment to the project.

As all Members have highlighted, this is a project of huge significance. It is of significant strategic importance to the north-west region and our wider island, and it is strategically important if we are serious about tackling

regional imbalance, improving the economy, job prospects and prosperity and connecting communities. Of course, as all Members have highlighted, it is also hugely important for road safety. I have met families who have lost loved ones along that stretch of road, and road safety is a key driver in ensuring that we see delivery.

I very much share the frustrations of people west of the Bann and those expressed by Members today at the time that it is taking to get this transformative scheme through the statutory processes. However, my Department and I must follow due process and apply due diligence.

As all Members have highlighted, it is a long-standing project. As Mr Buchanan said, it can be charted back 14 years, if not further. It is an Executive flagship project, with its origins in the St Andrews Agreement, and it was agreed through the North/South Ministerial Council in 2007. As a project to deliver 85 km of new dual carriageway between New Buildings and the border at Aughnacloy, it is a significant and ambitious project by any standards and the biggest road project ever undertaken in Northern Ireland.

Following the first public inquiry in 2011, the statutory orders to allow the A5 to proceed were made in 2012, but those were subsequently challenged by the Alternative A5 Alliance, a group that has opposed the scheme from the outset. That challenge led to the quashing of the statutory orders in April 2013, as it was judged that the Department had not fully met its obligations under the habitats regulations. That was unprecedented and set a new compliance benchmark in the development of all major infrastructure schemes from that point on. Lessons were learned from that ruling, and further development work to address the deficiency followed, leading to the publication of and consultation on a new environmental statement and draft statutory orders in February 2016. With almost 1,000 representations made, a public inquiry was deemed necessary, and that second inquiry took place in the latter half of 2016.

The PAC report from that inquiry, which was received by the Department in May 2017, concluded that the scheme should proceed. That was a hugely significant step forward for everyone committed to and in full support of the scheme. In the absence of Ministers, a formal decision to proceed with the scheme was made in November 2017 by the then permanent secretary of the Department. That decision, if unchallenged, would have represented the completion of the statutory procedures and allowed the project to move to the construction phase. However, the Alternative A5 Alliance again legally challenged the decision in December 2017. Ten grounds of challenge were listed, including the power of the permanent secretary to make the decision in the absence of a Minister. Following careful consideration of the relevant High Court decisions made during 2018 in *Buick*, as well as the provisions of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018, legal advice provided to departmental officials indicated a high likelihood that the permanent secretary's decision would be quashed. It was concluded that it was not therefore in the public interest to continue defending the legal challenge, and the decision to proceed with the scheme was consequently quashed, taking effect from 16 November 2018. Essentially, the quashing of that decision took the scheme back to the February 2016 position, effectively knocking it back three years.

Since November 2018, the Department has been carrying out work to enable a new decision by a Minister. It is a requirement when assessing environmental impacts for decisions to be based on up-to-date environmental information. With that in mind, updated environmental information in the form of an environmental statement addendum was published for consultation in March 2019. By necessity, that information continued to relate to the base data contained in the original environmental statement of 2016. It is important to note — Members raised this point — that, with the passage of time, new and updated environmental standards are being continuously introduced through legislation and other technical guidance. That presents a risk of challenge on the grounds that base data can be perceived as being out of date. With 264 representations made to the 2019 consultation exercise, departmental officials concluded that a further public inquiry was necessary. That third inquiry took place over seven days during February and March 2020.

In September of last year, my Department received an interim report from the PAC on its findings from the inquiry — not a final report, as would be normal procedure. It contained two recommendations on the need for further assessments of the flood risk and scheme alternatives. The PAC recommended that those assessments be incorporated into a further addendum to the environmental statement and made available for further public consultation. The PAC has therefore adjourned the inquiry, indicating that it can be reconvened when the Department has taken those steps.

Since September, officials have carefully considered all of the recommendations made by the commissioner and taken legal advice. A number of potential options for taking the scheme forward were developed and presented to me. I assure Members that I gave careful consideration to all of the advice given, including legal advice, and decided, on a balance of risk against time, to comply with the key recommendations of the PAC and move towards a reconvened public inquiry in the shortest timescale possible.

Members have rightly expressed frustration at how long it has taken us to get to this point. My job as Minister is to do everything that I can to ensure that we develop the project and get it to the point of construction at the earliest opportunity. I assure Members that my officials have been working and will continue to work at pace towards the publication of a new environmental statement addendum later this year, followed by a mandatory six-week consultation period. Mr Buchanan indicated a concern that a second round of consultations may be required the year after: I assure him that that is not the case. It is anticipated that the public inquiry can be reconvened in early 2022, and it is hoped that the PAC will then be in a position to provide the Department with its final report later in the year. That should allow a new decision by a Minister later in 2022, and, subject to the successful completion of all of the necessary statutory processes and environmental assessments, as I have outlined, the construction of phase 1A, from New Buildings to north of Strabane, could commence during 2023. In recent years, the programme for scheme delivery has alluded to full scheme completion by 2028: although some slippage has occurred, that time frame remains achievable.

This is an issue of huge frustration locally, and I understand that. However, I take heart from the unity of purpose — I think that Mr McCrossan referred to it — that has been shown across the House. Mr Beggs raised some questions about my commitment to phase 3. My response to him is that the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government are committed to upgrading the A5 in full. My Department considers that it continues to be appropriate to implement that commitment, including the delivery of phase 3 of the scheme. There are many benefits to implementing phase 3, such as the continuity of route to meet the border and providing a high-quality link to the adjoining proposed improvements to the N2 in the Republic of Ireland. Further, the A5 is one overall project, and the Department considers that its stated aims and objectives will not be fully realised until the completion and linking-up of all of its phases. Mr Beggs also raised the issue of funding. The Irish Government have reiterated their commitment to the A5. He will also be aware of the Shared Island Fund. I will continue to engage with all partners, North/South and east-west — it is a strategically important corridor for Northern Ireland — to ensure that we get delivery in the earliest possible time frame.

Members referenced the frustrations around legal challenges. I, of course, uphold people's right to challenge, but there is an onus on us as an Executive to have a look at the judicial review process and, as Mr Muir said, at how the impact of it compares with that in other places.

In concluding, I reassure Members across the House that, for as long as I am the Minister for Infrastructure, I will do all that I can to see this long-overdue project realised for local communities, local businesses and all representatives who live in the constituency.

Adjourned at 6.10 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 26 April 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Members, before we start the plenary sitting, I want to make a few remarks. I regret that, today, I again have to start our business by addressing some outstanding issues of order. Last week, as you are aware, I wrote to all Members to point out that the standards of courtesy, good temper, moderation and respect do not prohibit robust debate. The majority of the debate on conversion therapy was a very good example of that. Given the differences in opinion in the House, there were inevitably some difficult and uncomfortable things said. There was also a recognition of the sensitivity of the subject, and it is my view that it was clear that most Members were mindful of the need to respond to that accordingly.

One Member, unfortunately, was the exception, and that is Jim Wells. I have given Mr Wells notice that I would be making reference to him this morning. During that debate, Deputy Speaker Beggs intervened and managed individual issues entirely appropriately at the time. Mr Wells, however, did not take the many prompts to adjust his approach that were clear in the Deputy Speaker's interventions. Mr Wells had the chance to make his own remarks last week, unfettered. Following his contribution, however, Mr Wells's behaviour was quite disruptive to the opportunity for other Members to be heard. In particular, Mr Wells persistently sought to make interventions when it was clear that they would not be accepted. That has always been viewed as being discourteous and disorderly. He interrupted a number of Members from a sedentary position, and he made spurious points of order on a number of occasions. I also note Mr McCrossan's point of order from last week that Mr Wells moved seat on a number of occasions and failed to sanitise the location that he was leaving. In my view, that was another example of a lack of courtesy to other Members. Having reviewed the Official Report, I feel that it is obvious that Mr Wells's behaviour in the final section of the discussion was detrimental to the ability of the Assembly to have a constructive debate.

I was very reluctant to come back to issues of order so soon. I have done so for a couple of reasons, however. First, I have written to Mr Wells privately twice about his behaviour, and, although I appreciate that he has always replied very promptly and courteously, it has not prevented a reoccurrence of unacceptable behaviour.

Secondly, I wrote to all Members last Monday, setting out in comprehensive terms what the standards of courtesy, good temper, moderation and respect mean. Finally, it was clear at the time, and from the feedback that I have had

from all sides of the House since, that there was a sense, almost, of exasperation among some Members at being interrupted by Mr Wells as they tried to have a serious, orderly and constructive debate.

I am particularly disappointed to have to make these remarks because, on a number of occasions on which he assisted the Assembly by presiding over debates in this Chair, Mr Wells did so fairly and professionally. I acknowledge that. In doing so, he demonstrated that he well understood the rules and conventions of the Assembly and the need to keep order.

I do not intend to take any action on this occasion, but I decided to address the matter in the Chamber today in the sincere hope that Mr Wells seriously reflects on how he will conduct himself and interact with Members in future. The number of Members who declined interventions from Mr Wells should, in itself, be enough cause for Mr Wells to reflect.

I consider the matter closed, and we will leave it there for today.

Public Petition: St Conor's Primary School, Omagh: Additional Parking and Traffic-calming Measures

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

Mr McCrossan: I present a petition on behalf of 1,301 parents, grandparents, carers, pupils, teachers, staff and residents who either attend St Conor's Primary School on the Brookmount Road in Omagh or live nearby. I would be grateful if it could be forwarded to the Minister of Education for consideration.

The petition reads:

"We, the undersigned parents, carers and teachers at St Conor's and local residents living near the school, call on the council, local authority and the Department and Minister of Education to work together to provide additional safety measures at the school."

St Conor's is a busy, vibrant school. It is on a small plot of land next to a busy road. There is no land on the school site that could be used for extra parking or to assist with or alleviate that serious concern. There are 440 pupils and over 50 teachers on the site, and it is clear to anyone who goes to the school at the start or end of each day that there is not sufficient parking or space on the existing school site to ensure the safety of children, teachers or parents.

The petition shows the strength of public support for a resolution of the situation. Some 1,300 people signed the petition in just under a fortnight, not online but in the old-fashioned way by hand. I have already flagged the issues with the Minister of Education, Minister Weir. To his credit, he responded promptly to confirm that departmental officials were working with St Conor's Primary School and other agencies to improve the situation.

The petition shows the strength of feeling in and around St Conor's. I have raised the issue with local council chief executive Alison McCullagh, who confirmed:

"The council would be willing, in principle, to facilitate the development of the car park on its land adjacent to the school."

I believe that we are making progress. The current situation is unsustainable, and the petition shows that people who live nearby and who use the school feel the same way. I hope that the Minister of Education and his officials can, in consultation with other agencies and the council, come up with a workable and practical solution to the problem.

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

Ministerial Statements

British-Irish Council: Misuse of Substances

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health that he wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members in the Chamber that, in 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 that by rising in their place or by notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking 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 thereafter.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Before making the statement, I take the opportunity to place on record my thanks and to pay tribute to the firefighters and the leadership of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS), the partner organisations and the wider community, who worked tirelessly over the weekend to bring the fire in the Mournes under control.

I thank them, as Minister with responsibility for NIFRS, for the work that they did over the weekend.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make the following statement on the British-Irish Council (BIC) misuse of substances work sector ministerial meeting, which took place in virtual format on Thursday 11 March 2021. Minister Hargey and I attended the meeting, and Minister Hargey has agreed that I make this statement to the Assembly on behalf of both of us.

The Irish Government lead the misuse of substances work sector, and hosted the ministerial meeting. As Chair of the meeting, Frank Feighan TD, Minister of State for Public Health, Well Being and the National Drugs Strategy, welcomed the delegations. The Northern Ireland Executive were represented by Deirdre Hargey MLA, Minister for Communities, and me, as Minister of Health. The Government of Guernsey were represented by Deputy Al Brouard, President of the Committee for Health and Social Care. The Isle of Man Government were represented by the Honourable Ray Harmer MHK, Minister for Policy and Reform. The Government of Jersey were represented by Deputy Trevor Pointon, Assistant Minister for Health and Social Services. The Scottish Government were represented by Mairi Gougeon MSP, Minister for Public Health and Sport, and Angela Constance MSP, Minister for Drugs Policy. The UK Government were represented by Jo Churchill MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Prevention, Public Health Care and Primary Care. The Welsh Government were represented by Eluned Morgan MS, Minister for Mental Health, Wellbeing and Welsh Language.

This most recent ministerial meeting of the misuse of substances work sector was an excellent opportunity to engage with Ministers from the other BIC member Administrations on an area that is as relevant and important as it has ever been, the harms caused to individuals, families and communities by alcohol and drug use.

The meeting focused on ways to reduce alcohol consumption and opportunities to measure the effectiveness of addiction services, and considered how the future work of the sector can progress.

Ministers considered and reflected on the papers that were formally presented to the meeting. Those included discussions on 'Financial Mechanisms to Reduce the Consumption of Alcohol' and 'Measuring the Effectiveness of Addiction Services and Harm Reduction Interventions'.

Ministers noted the efforts across all member Administrations to decrease alcohol consumption and agreed that there was value in comparing approaches and sharing learnings from the emerging evidence base. They also recognised the importance of effective monitoring and evaluation to ensure that policy and practice are developed on the basis of sound evidence and that sharing this diversity of knowledge, understanding, experiences and learning across member Administrations affords a unique resource for enhancing monitoring and evaluation.

Ministers noted and agreed the content of the forward work programme for the misuse of substances work sector. To address the challenges for the sector, they agreed that focus in the coming years should be on the following five themes: considering the lessons of COVID-19 and the delivery of drug and alcohol services; reducing the risk of drug-related deaths; reducing alcohol-related harms through the use of financial mechanisms; considering joined-up approaches to meeting the health and social needs of people who are homeless and use drugs and alcohol; and engaging with the voluntary and community sectors to consider their role in the provision of drug and alcohol services, and in the development and monitoring of policy.

Each of the five theme areas is being led by one of the member Administrations. The Northern Ireland Executive agreed to take the lead on moving forward with theme 4, which considers joined-up approaches to meeting the health and social needs of people who are homeless and use drugs and alcohol. We will do that in conjunction with the British-Irish Council housing work sector.

Ministers also had the opportunity to listen to a presentation by Professor Dame Carol Black on prevention, treatment and recovery, which was informative and timely. Professor Dame Carol has been undertaking an independent review of drugs in England for the United Kingdom Government Department of Health and Social Care. Her presentation focused on part 2 of her review and provided insight into lessons learned from the review study. The overarching aim of the review is to ensure that vulnerable people with substance use needs get the support to recover and turn their lives around in the community and in prison.

I take this opportunity to thank Minister Hargey and British-Irish Council ministerial colleagues across the Administrations who participated so productively in the meeting last month. I welcome the council's work sector activity and the way in which it provided us with a great opportunity to discuss the issues, look at emerging issues of concern, share information and good practice, and bring forward agreed actions and areas for collaboration.

I commend the statement to the House.

12.15 pm

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I thank the Minister for coming along today and giving us this statement. First, I join him in praise and acknowledgment of the Fire and Rescue Service for its work in very difficult circumstances in the Mournes over the weekend. I also acknowledge that many of us, beyond the people who live there, who enjoy and like to visit that area of natural beauty feel a sense of deep regret for that loss. I ask everyone to be conscious of fire safety and the impact that the damage caused by carelessness or, indeed, the deliberate lighting of fires can have.

I also welcome the fact that the vaccine programme is now rolling out fully to 35- to 39-year-olds and acknowledge the good work that is being done in that respect. I encourage everyone in that age range to avail themselves of the vaccine in order to protect themselves and their families.

The recent health inequalities report contains data that shows that alcohol- and drug-related indicators continue to show some of the largest health inequalities that are monitored in the North, with rates of drug-related mortality in the most-deprived areas five times those in the least-deprived areas. The rates of alcohol-specific mortality are four times those in the least-deprived areas. What is the Minister's Department going to do to begin to address that ongoing historical trend in inequalities?

Mr Swann: I thank the Chair for his question. Although the topic was not discussed at the British-Irish Council meeting, I know that it has been raised at the Health Committee and that the Chair has asked for a specific presentation about the health inequalities that we are seeing.

My Department continues to focus on a number of strategies and work streams that are already out there. The Chair will be aware of the new strategic direction for alcohol and drugs (NSD) phase 2, which has had £8 million of investment in health and social care provision for tackling and evaluating the work that needs to be done. The strategic framework to tackle the harm from substance use has been out for a public consultation, which closed on 12 February. My Department is analysing the responses that have been received, and a new strategy will be finalised before seeking ministerial and Executive approval.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his statement. The issues of drug and alcohol misuse have been ever more prevalent in society, and many people have concerns that, during the period of lockdown, substance misuse behind closed doors will have dramatically increased. The problem will have been further exacerbated by restrictions on, and withdrawal of, some support services for mental health and addiction. Will the Minister outline whether the Council will consider the importance of dual diagnosis services as part of its forward work plan? Often, the issues of poor mental health and addiction are intertwined.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her comments. Again, this was not specifically raised at the British-Irish Council meeting. However, my Department is actively engaged on those issues and, as the Member will know, they are part of the mental health strategy that is out for consultation at the moment to see how that service can be developed and progressed across Northern Ireland so that nobody falls

between the cracks. My Department intends to make sure that everybody gets the support that they need.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister for his statement and for his commitment to improving the lives of those who are struggling with substance misuse. The topic of alcoholism has touched all of us in some way. Was there any discussion about how we can best support the families and children of parents who struggle with alcoholism?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her comments. Our new substance use strategy will, quite clearly, deal with those issues. It is a commitment under New Decade, New Approach that the Northern Ireland Executive publish a successor to the current alcohol and drugs strategy. Our new substance use strategy, 'Making Life Better — Preventing Harm and Empowering Recovery: A Strategic Framework to Tackle the Harm from Substance Use' has been co-produced by the Department of Health, working in partnership with key stakeholders inside and outside government, including service users and their families.

Mr Chambers: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I concur with his remarks about the fires in the Mourne Mountains. They certainly could have been a lot worse but for the efforts of the firefighters.

Minister, as outdoor hospitality opens at the end of this week, followed by indoor a few weeks later, there is a real possibility that a large number of people from the Irish Republic, many of whom are still not vaccinated, will cross the border to socialise. Does the Minister believe that the PSNI, and the guards especially, have a role to play in emphasising the relevant travel restrictions and public health advice?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question and comment. Again, that issue was not covered at the British-Irish Council meeting, but I know that it is being talked and asked about.

Where cross-border travel is concerned, the Republic of Ireland's travel regulations are very clear: there should not be outside-county travel, and that includes coming into Northern Ireland. There is an onus not just on the guards and the PSNI but on those in the hospitality industry not to actively promote or seek cross-border business and trade while there is such a disparity in vaccination rates on either side of the border.

Ms Bradshaw: I thank the Minister for his statement. I also place on record my thanks to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service for its efforts at the weekend.

Minister, you will be aware that the Irish Government are proceeding with the minimum unit price for alcohol and are planning to have it in place by the end of the year. Will you please outline whether that was discussed at the meeting? What is your Department doing to proceed with that in Northern Ireland?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for raising something that was discussed at the meeting. *[Laughter.]* While drug misuse is a key issue in Northern Ireland, alcohol misuse still causes more harm at a population level in Northern Ireland. In fact, alcohol misuse kills up to three times as many people in Northern Ireland each year as drug use. It is fair to say that alcohol remains our drug of choice, and we have the combined alcohol and drug strategy in order to increase the emphasis that is put on the harm that is related to alcohol misuse and to raise the issue on the

public, media and political agendas. The harms caused by the misuse of alcohol are a major public health issue in Northern Ireland, and I believe that the introduction of legislation for minimum unit pricing for alcohol has the potential to be a key population-level health measure to address the issue. I have, therefore, made a commitment to have a full consultation on minimum unit pricing once our new substance use strategy is finalised.

The consultation on minimum unit pricing will examine a range of possible options for alcohol pricing, including the consideration of the emerging evidence on the effectiveness of minimum unit pricing following its implementation in Scotland and elsewhere. The policy considerations arising from the consultation will be brought to the Executive in due course.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for his statement and answers thus far. Minister, I welcome the important cooperation across these islands and the particular focus on alcohol abuse. However, in order to deliver services, we need staff. What measures is the Minister taking to ensure that we have the staff and resources in place to focus not only on this piece of work but on other work that is important to the health service?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his point. The strength of the British-Irish Council is shown because we can raise and discuss those issues, as they do not happen in isolation in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Jersey or the Isle of Man. There is a lot of challenging work that can be done on asking, "Have I enough staff in the Department?" We recently looked at recruiting and bringing across a number of officials to the Department. I am not sure whether the Member is aware that the Department of Health is one of the smaller Departments in the Executive, although a lot of our other work is done by arm's-length bodies. The focus that we have on our substance use strategy and all the other strategies involves a wide range of interventions and support. Thankfully, as we come out of the pandemic, we can release officials back to their key areas of policy focus, which look at those pieces of work. When we no longer have to put such an intense focus on COVID and COVID-prevention measures, the Department of Health and the officials who work in it can get back to their core service.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Minister for bringing the statement to the House today. This has been touched on, but it is disappointing that there is no mention in the statement of dual diagnosis. I am conscious that it was not on the agenda.

Will the Minister commit to putting it on the agenda for the next BIC meeting? We know that many people who are battling substance misuse are also battling mental health problems. I have regularly discussed in Health Committee meetings the number of cases that we, as MLAs, deal with of people in crisis who cannot get help and support. On Friday, I met the family of Jack Brennan, a young man who lost his life in west Belfast three months ago. Sadly, he is one of many. Can the Minister give any firm commitment on when a dual diagnosis service could be in place here or a timeline for that? It would be great to act as that voice in wider meetings on that important issue.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member, and I know her genuine interest in this area. It is something that she continually raises. Part of the mental health strategy and consultation

is the recognition of the need for support for dual diagnosis and how we look after that. Northern Ireland is leading on the work stream around the joined-up approaches of meeting the health and social needs of people who are homeless and use drugs and alcohol, so there is an opportunity to further explore dual diagnosis under that work schedule. Again, I lead on that with the Member's party colleague Deirdre Hargey, the Minister for Communities. I will raise it with Deirdre, and we will see whether we can get it on the agenda for the next British-Irish Council meeting.

Mr Robinson: I thank the Minister for his statement. What measures are being taken — North and South — by the PSNI and the gardaí to jointly apprehend the godfathers who are peddling the lethal drugs, particularly to our younger generation?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. Again, it was not raised in the meeting because it is wider than just North/South cooperation. With regard to working closely with the PSNI and the justice system, there is a sharing of information to take the appropriate joint action to reduce the supply of and demand for drugs. A subgroup of the organised crime task force meets specifically to share information on drugs and to take joint enforcement action, such as Operation Pangea. The medicines regulatory group and the Department also work in day-to-day cooperation with a wide range of local, national and international enforcement partner organisations. That includes the gardaí, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, Border Force, HM Revenue and Customs and the National Crime Agency. It also extends as far as Interpol, which addresses the illicit supply of drugs and prescription drugs.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his statement on this very important subject. Over the past number of years, we have seen an increase in the misuse of prescription drugs. Can the Minister tell us whether the situation is more pronounced here than elsewhere? Are there lessons that we can learn from other Administrations' efforts to tackle it?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. We have seen concern not just about the misuse of prescription drugs but about prescription drugs becoming a commodity and now being sold rather than being used by the people who need them. Operation Pangea brings in the cross-sectoral approach in trying to tackle that and to identify those who are not only misusing but selling drugs, whether illicit or prescription drugs. That is why we need to take the fuller approach in how we tackle that. Our new substance use strategy, which I spoke about earlier, will also look into those specifics.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, in theme 5, you talk about the community and voluntary sector's role. In Derry, there is a clear need for a detox centre of excellence for addiction. What priority have you put on that vital centre and the inclusion of the community and voluntary sector in working with it?

Mr Swann: Again, it was not something that was specifically covered in the meeting, but, under the heading "Addressing Northern Ireland's unique circumstances" in 'New Decade, New Approach', the UK Government committed to making funding available for a number of areas, which could include additional funding to support the Londonderry addiction centre. It is anticipated that the

funding made available currently will not be sufficient to cover all areas set out in 'New Decade, New Approach'. However, I understand that the specific projects that the funding is aimed at supporting are to be determined by a joint board that includes the Secretary of State and the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

12.30 pm

Mr McCrossan: Minister, thank you for your statement. Drugs are a scourge on our society. A few short years ago, in Christmas week, I saw the devastation and pain that they can cause as I watched my aunt and uncle bury their very young son. He took a pill whilst out on a social night with friends, and he died.

Given that we are seeing an increase in the level of drug misuse in our communities, among young people in particular, what message do you, as the Minister of Health, have for those young people to steer them away from that?

Mr Swann: The Member will be aware of the campaigns by the Public Health Agency and all the other organisations. One of the strongest messages has come from community activists on social media: "One pill can kill". It does not matter what or who is your source of information, it is about the recognition that one pill has the ability — the terrible ability — to end a life. Somebody may be seeking a release or think that it will bring about a good feeling, but it can cause the end of a life, and families and communities have to bear that pain and loss afterwards. I ask people to please step away from utilising illegal drugs, the misuse of prescription drugs and supporting what are criminal activities.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for his statement. I also thank the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service for its ongoing work in dealing with the tragedy in the Mournes.

One of the five themes of work mentioned in the statement is reducing risk and harm. That is welcome. Does the Minister agree that, fundamentally, addiction and substance misuse are health issues and that, if we are really intent on reducing drug-related harm, we need to destigmatise addiction and remove the fear of seeking help? Does he also agree that decriminalising vulnerable people and boosting professional help services is the way forward, an approach otherwise known as the Portuguese model?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. It is about destigmatising those who seek help and want to end their dependence on drugs or even alcohol. That is why that work is done through the Public Health Agency, the Department and very many in the voluntary and community sector. Given that those services are supported through Community Pharmacy, it is unfortunate that they are seen as a threat, rather than the solution that they bring, because of a misunderstanding by certain sections of the community. I agree with the Member that we will help people by destigmatising their problems. We also need to make sure that the real focus and ire are directed at those in the community who are exploiting the needs of those people and are involved in criminal activity.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two.

We have a bit of a dilemma. We received the statement from the Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural

Affairs only a few minutes ago, and it is a statement of, I think, nine pages. I propose allowing Members a few minutes to read the document. If Members will indulge me, rather than suspending for almost half an hour, we will suspend for 10 minutes. Are Members content to suspend for 10 minutes? May I take that as a yes?

Some Members: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much. We will suspend for 10 minutes.

The sitting was suspended at 12.33 pm.

The sitting resumed at 12.46 pm.

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

Wildfire in the Mourne Mountains

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I apologise to your office that we did not get the statement to you earlier. However, given that it is a very fast-moving situation and that people from various agencies are out on the mountain assessing things currently, we wanted to keep things as up to date as possible. Hence the delay.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide Members with an update on the wildfire that took place in the Mournes on Friday and the exceptional work by a range of organisations to get it under control, including cross-party working between the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) to protect that area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB).

I am sure that, like me, every one of you was heartbroken and sickened at the sight that unfolded on Friday evening. It is hard to grasp the scale of the fire and the devastation that occurred. While we do not know at this stage the full extent of the impact, we know that it will be significant for our environment and for the tourism economy that thrives on the unique natural beauty of that renowned area.

First, I pay tribute to all the responding organisations: the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service; the PSNI; Forest Service; the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA); the UK coastguard agency; the Irish Coast Guard; and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council. All played an exceptional role over the weekend. The local community and businesses also provided practical support to the responding organisations. The NIFRS firefighters put their health, welfare and, potentially, their lives at risk and worked tirelessly with others in extremely difficult terrain and challenging conditions. I was able to see that at first hand on Saturday. We can never overestimate the invaluable role of our emergency services. Like us, those firefighters have families, and their dedication to their work and to society and their professionalism and bravery in such challenging conditions are outstanding. I know that we all wish to put that on the record.

The latest report is that, thankfully, there has been significant progress and the wildfire is now under control. Only the extinguishing of any flare-ups by NIFRS continues. That is the result of an impressive sense of collective responsibility in all the organisations involved that was clearly evident when I visited the site on Saturday. What we witnessed over the weekend was all the preparedness and plans for tackling wildfires coming into action. There have been many years of collaboration and training and hands-on working on incidents each spring. Those well-honed arrangements, particularly across the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, the PSNI, the NIEA and Forest Service, ensure that we can respond to major incidents such as this in a coordinated and professional way.

For my Department, I assure Members that the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and Forest Service, working with the Fire and Rescue Service, deployed all the required resources and equipment to the scene and

took steps to ensure that additional resources were on standby and were mobilised over the weekend to respond to further escalation or new fire outbreaks. That included DAERA personnel who provided specialist subject matter expertise in forestry and ecology, helping to inform decisions on practical actions. I am pleased to say that my Department had provided additional supplies of vehicles and firefighting equipment last year to help the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service to tackle fires in such rough terrain, and I witnessed those being used. Those vehicles, as well as the coastguard helicopters, helped to transport Fire and Rescue Service staff to the best vantage points to deal with the fire. I instigated the DAERA emergency response plan and gold command to ensure that everything that could be done was being done.

I fully appreciate that we will all want to know the extent of the damage caused by the fire. There is no question that there has been extensive and widespread damage to wildlife and the environment. The area affected is part of the eastern Mournes special area of conservation (SAC) and area of special scientific interest (ASSI). It is of significant biological and geological interest due to the size, quality and diversity of the habitats in the area and the presence of particular plant and animal species. It is one of the largest and most natural areas of heathland in Northern Ireland, with a number of special heaths as well as blanket bog. Notable breeding bird species in the area include meadow pipit. High cliffs with ledges hold breeding peregrine falcons and ravens. The heathlands of the Mournes also support a variety of invertebrate communities. The summit heaths support one of the largest collections of specialist montane invertebrates so far recorded in Ireland, and the summit of Slieve Donard is the only known Irish site for a number of key invertebrate species, such as the dwarf willow-feeding sawfly.

Our focus in the immediacy of the wildfire has been on actions to control it, so we have not yet assessed the actual damage. However, the damage extends over about three and a half square kilometres. It will be significant. It is likely that it will take decades to recover from and there will be a long-term loss to our biodiversity. Over the coming months, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency will ensure that there is a full assessment of the biodiversity loss and the necessary recovery action.

This major incident also highlights the inextricable link between wildfire and biodiversity loss. The burning of vegetation and trees releases carbon, contributing to climate change. In addition, carbon-rich habitats will play a key role in providing nature-based solutions to combat the effects of climate change, as healthy vegetation, trees and peatland provide enhanced storage and sequestration. That is another reason that we need to stop the fires. Given that such sites are valuable to us for that carbon capture, we must do more to safeguard and sustain them, particularly in this key year for nature and climate. The fires are bad for climate change and biodiversity, and we need to stop them occurring. Enforcement and legislation must be strengthened to deal with the problem.

A detailed assessment of the impacts on biodiversity across the impacted areas and the wider SAC will be commissioned to inform appropriate restoration interventions, depending on the extent and depth of the damage. It will consider the effectiveness of the wildfire prevention measures that were implemented in the eastern

Mournes. As I said, at this stage, our efforts have been on working with other agencies to bring the wildfire under control.

We will work with others to fully understand the impact that it will have on the economy. Newcastle relies heavily on the tourism industry. The Mournes draw people from all over the world, such is their beauty. Already impacted by coronavirus, there will, no doubt, be a further impact as a consequence of the fire. What we have witnessed was a wildfire of a scale so significant that it was on the national and international news but not for good reasons. We must do everything that we can to avoid it happening again. At a time when we want to reinvigorate Northern Ireland as an attractive holiday destination, that is not the image that we want to be broadcast.

I cannot emphasise enough the need for responsible behaviour by all who use the countryside, whether for work or enjoyment. We all know that fire requires three components: fuel, oxygen and an ignition source. Oxygen is in the air and, obviously, in plentiful supply. The fuel supply is provided by the vegetation in the landscape, exacerbated by drying out during warmer, drier periods. The third component — the ignition source — is vital, and it is purely down to us. I want to turn to the strong and hard messages that we all need to support regarding wildfires.

The management of Northern Ireland's landscapes will be a key factor in managing the wildfire risk and protecting Northern Ireland's most precious habitats and flora. In March 2021, I established the strategic wildfire group, which is led by my Department in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and will look at a range of issues, including land management, undergrazing and overgrazing and controlled burning. We need to better tackle the fuel source issue. We must consider appropriate burning of habitat to preserve the overall habitat. That needs to deliver for agricultural productivity, conservation and vegetation and fuel management. Representatives from the relevant teams across my Department are involved, and other key stakeholders will be involved, as we work to find the best way forward. There is an opportunity to build on the work being done to manage upland habitats at DAERA's Greenmount Hill Farm, in particular the trialling of appropriate land management methods for heather moorland to enhance habitats for nesting birds such as the hen harrier, merlin and red grouse, while reducing wildfire risk. Those methods can be examined further through the strategic wildfire group.

The risk of wildfires already existed in Northern Ireland, but wildfires are rarely natural. They are almost always started either deliberately or by reckless burning of inflammable vegetation or material. We need to think about all the measures that can be put in place to deter people from starting such fires. Work flowing from the strategic wildfire group will consider the adequacy of the current legislation and enforcement procedures and what improvements may be needed.

I reiterate the message that I gave on Saturday: it is absolutely wrong and illegal to start a fire, and we will work closely with the PSNI and others to make sure that those who cause such damage are held to account. It is not a victimless crime. Lives and property are put at risk, and the environment is damaged. The economy suffers, both in the costs of fighting the fire and the impact on businesses

in the vicinity. Such fires release fine particles that have a negative impact on those with respiratory conditions. Damaged sites are no longer as attractive, which impacts on the local economy. Impacted sites are not as attractive for exercise and well-being. Valuable budget is also spent on resources for the Fire and Rescue Service, PSNI, DAERA, the coastguard and others who respond to the fire and get it under control. Those costs need to be recognised. If you see someone causing a fire, you should report them to the PSNI. It is in everyone's interests that that irresponsible behaviour does not continue.

In 2020, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service responded to over 1,000 wildfires. Forest Service and the Environment Agency deal with numerous wildfires every year. The size and scale may differ, but they have one thing in common: a devastating impact; a potential risk to home, life, businesses and the environment; and a considerable loss to the public purse. In 2020, Forest Service staff attended 22 fire incidents. As a result of those incidents, 70 hectares of forest and over 110 hectares of peatland were burnt. So far in 2021, we unfortunately continue to see serious fire incidents. The Slieve Donard fire was one of a number of fires to cause devastating damage during the last fortnight. My Department has dealt with serious incidents in Moneyscalp forest at Tollymore, Knocks forest and Tully forest near Lisnaskea, County Fermanagh, and Grange Park forest near Limavady. It was also involved in a fire that threatened the Moneystaghan block of Portglenone forest.

As a result of the continuing high fire risk, Forest Service has increased the presence and visibility of its staff in vulnerable areas to over 30 on patrol yesterday, with a further five on standby and six duty and coordinating officers. I say clearly today that we are still at risk of wildfires. Dry, sunny, windy weather increases the risk of wildfires. Those weather conditions will continue until Wednesday and will then occur on and off over coming weeks. We must all act responsibly. Every one of us, therefore, has to take personal responsibility for our behaviour. We must play our part in protecting our environment and our communities. I will ensure that there continues to be strong messaging, via social media and other communication methods to highlight the risks and the actions that are required. Whether you are a farmer or someone out to enjoy time in the countryside, do nothing to create a fire risk, and, if you do, contact the Fire and Rescue Service immediately so that it can be put out before it spreads out of control.

In dealing with the pandemic, we have worked collaboratively to deal with unprecedented economic and social challenges. The crisis has brought the interconnectedness of our economy, environment and people into sharp focus. It has shown how partnership working is not an option but a requirement. When we face a devastating wildfire on this scale, it reminds us just how much we value and need to protect our most precious natural assets. We have to join forces to do so.

We cannot afford to take our environment for granted.

1.00 pm

While I am glad today to be able to report that the fire is under control, it both angers and saddens me that it happened in the first place and could have been avoided. DAERA will continue to play its part in the response to

the fire and in the recovery plan. I know that the Northern Ireland Executive and my Department will send out strong messages about personal responsibility for protecting our wonderful landscape and environment and will work with DAERA on all the future challenges that we face in doing so.

In closing, I once again commend the work of all those involved and the local community, which supported their efforts. We are indebted to them, as is our environment.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his statement. We all, I am sure, are concerned at the damage that was done in the Mourne Mountains. Minister, could appropriate firebreaks have played a greater role in reducing the amount of damage that was caused in the Mournes?

Mr Poots: At the request of Mr Frew, who is not in the Chamber, I visited North Antrim last year when there was a particularly bad fire in a place called Altarichard. I think that around 360 hectares was damaged there. Individuals there made it very clear that firebreaks would have made all the difference. They also discussed undergrazing and overgrazing. If the gorse is not grazed, it dries off, and, particularly over the wintertime, it dies. When you get to the springtime, before the fresh shoots come through, you are left with all this dry stuff. Over the last couple of weeks, we have had fairly dry and windy weather. That gorse is tinder dry. If it is lit, the fire will go all over the place, and the only way to stop it is to have firebreaks. We have done that at Glenwherry hill, which the Department is responsible for a considerable part of, in conjunction with the local agriculture community. The result has been that there have not been significant gorse fires on that terrain, which is similar. It is much better to lose 2 metres of stripes as opposed to losing hundreds and hundreds of hectares of gorse land, especially given the damage that is caused to the heath underneath it, the peat, the wildlife and the biodiversity and all that. We can do that work in February and September in order to ensure that we protect the environment, not damage it.

Ms Ennis: I think that we will all agree that the sickening scenes of devastation that we witnessed in the Mournes over the last four days will live long in the memory, and I have no doubt that it will have an apocalyptic effect on our unique habitats in the Mournes.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, if you will allow me, on behalf of the people of South Down, I send heartfelt thanks and gratitude to the women and men of the Fire and Rescue Service, who were aided by the Irish Air Corps, for battling the fire courageously for the last four days. Their heroic effort will not be forgotten by the people of County Down.

Approximately £4.5 million has been spent by the Fire and Rescue Service on dealing with fires in the Mournes over the last number of years, and that pales in comparison with the money that has been given to local management groups such as the Mourne Heritage Trust. Does the Minister agree that that shows that we got our priorities wrong in that regard, and will he commit to prioritising a partnership approach between central government, councils, local agencies and landowners in order to ensure that necessary resources and action plans are put in place urgently so that we will not see the scenes that we witnessed over the last four days and there will be no more looking down the back of the sofa for pennies to protect our most precious habitats?

Mr Poots: If only everything in life was as simplistic as you paint it, things would be so easily resolved. Wildfires take place over areas of expansive territory, and, therefore, the management of those areas is critical. That is why I set up the group in March this year, having visited areas that were damaged previously. I note that previous Ministers did not do that. In any event, we have set that up so that we can work across agencies.

I was in the Mournes on Wednesday. It was stunningly beautiful. We looked at some £140,000 worth of funding that had been spent and added to by the National Trust to enhance the pathways in the Mournes. The pathways act as a firebreak and reduce erosion in the area, so it is money well spent.

When I was in the Mournes, I announced a further £2 million for similar schemes for environmental NGOs. I want to raise the plastic bag levy, and that amendment will come before the House. The levy money will go back to environmental NGOs, so we will see a substantial increase if the House supports me on that.

We recognise that funding is important. It is important to be well resourced. However, the biggest issue in the heathlands is management. Undergrazing and overgrazing are problems, so we need to manage that side of it well. We also need to look at the firebreaks. I mentioned Glenwherry. There has been a significant uplift in the numbers of ground-nesting birds in that area as a consequence of the actions that have been taken. Sometimes, folk suggest wilding as a way forward: it is not. Good management is the way forward, and, in some of those areas, the management is not as good as I would like to see.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister for his statement today and for his significant interest in the Mournes. I know that he was there this morning, as was I, and he was there over the weekend. There was considerable disruption, and people were very fearful and sad about what they saw. Whilst I echo the thanks to the Fire and Rescue Service, I also commend the community spirit that there was, especially efforts such as those by young Charlie Thomson, which raised thousands of pounds in a very quick time to help and support the Fire and Rescue Service in the work that it has done.

Following the remarks about the comprehensive management plan that is required, can the Minister provide any funding that might not be competitive, in the first instance, but might be available for inter-agency work that would help for things that he has mentioned, such as the firebreaks? I appreciate that groups have to fill out forms in a competitive process for available funding. However, if they could come together — if some funding allowed immediate works — it might help us to get through the summer without seeing a repeat.

Mr Poots: The Member makes an entirely reasonable request, and I thank him for his comments. We will work closely with the National Trust in particular, which has responsibility for a considerable part of the upper Mournes, to identify the scale of the damage, the consequence of that damage, the recovery plan for it and how best we can invest resource to ensure that the recovery happens as quickly as possible. That said, whatever human interventions we do now will take many years to manifest

themselves, whereas the human intervention of lighting that fire took seconds to do the harm.

Mr Butler: First, I thank the Minister for going to assist the Fire and Rescue Service on Saturday with his shovel. However, you were not the first MLA to have a shovel on that mountain; that accolade went to me many years ago.

With Members across the House, I reiterate and reaffirm our thanks to people like Charlie Thomson. The shops, not just in Newcastle but across Northern Ireland, provided pizzas, water and all sorts of stuff. I know that the fire service personnel were very grateful for that. I know that the Minister will agree that the management and safety of the crews on that mountain are paramount. I want to mention a number of people, if you will indulge me. Mark Smyth, the wildfire lead, Alan O'Neill, the incident commander on the ground, and Aidan Jennings, the gold commander of the incident from HQ, deserve our thanks today.

Minister, thank you for the strategic wildfire group that you have set up. Do you agree that, in fire prevention, education is perhaps our most valuable tool? If you do, in that context, what resources and purpose will you give to the education of those who own land and have the responsibility for managing it in these instances?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for a lot of valuable points. The community response that Mr McGrath mentioned was absolutely incredible. I know that a pizzeria in Belfast sent 40 pizzas up to the fire personnel. They had so much food sent to them that, had it not been for the fact that they were working so hard, they would have been rolling back down the mountain. It was a demonstration of the appreciation and goodwill towards not only the Fire and Rescue Service, which was leading on it, but lots of other services, which I mentioned at the outset of the statement. They were all working hard to ensure that this was brought under control.

The issue of education is a critical one. Again, I look forward to the recommendations coming from the multi-agency group, and I am sure that Minister Swann and I, and any other Minister who might be involved, will respond well to whatever recommendations are brought before us from that body.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for the statement. I also thank him for the detail in the statement, which was a stark reminder of the biodiversity lost in the fire in the Mournes and in other fires, including the one on Cave Hill, which is close to my constituency, about a week before the fire in the Mournes.

A number of days ago, I tabled a question to the Minister on what progress the Department has made on implementing a ban on peatbog fires. I totally accept that the Department is still within the time to answer that question, but, given the urgency of the matter, will the Minister consider implementing an urgent ban on barbecues etc on protected peatlands?

Mr Poots: We will certainly look at that. As the Member knows, one of the things that I have requested since coming into office is a peatlands strategy, and that will come forward in the very near future, hopefully. How we manage our peatlands is absolutely critical. We have the whole climate change issue, and Members know that I have climate change legislation that I wish to bring forward. I am waiting for the Executive's approval to do

that. They know that we are doing this peatlands strategy. We want to ensure that we maximise our protection of peatlands, because they are critical to capturing carbon. If managed incorrectly, they are also big emitters of carbon, so we must ensure that we are utilising them correctly, capturing that carbon and ensuring that these wildfires do not take place. The Member raises a valid point about barbecues being one of the potential risks to peatlands.

Mr M Bradley: I join other Members in offering praise for the Fire and Rescue Service, the PSNI, DAERA, Forest Service and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. They have all done a sterling job in trying to bring this wildfire under control, which they have successfully done. Does the Minister think that new technology could play a part in the early detection of wildfires across Northern Ireland, and will he identify the ways in which the new technology could be used by the Department to do this?

Mr Poots: We have various types of technology that can assist in this, but, ultimately, stopping the fires happening in the first instance is the most important thing. Over recent years, DAERA has purchased equipment, which is held by Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, for immediate use, including all-terrain vehicles. Some of these are fitted with wildfire suppression units, knapsack sprayers and drip torches. The NIEA is a member of the European wildfire network and can access advice and support during wildfire incidents from experts across Europe, and further afield if necessary. We will work very hard with others in doing this.

Forest Service has significantly stepped up its surveillance and patrol programme to help to reduce fire incident levels and for early detection purposes to initiate an effective response. As well as having trained staff, the Department holds specialist all-terrain vehicles and combined air and foam dispensing units. These are made available to support and extend the Fire and Rescue Service's firefighting capacity, particularly on hostile terrain like the Mournes. Considerable investment has been made, and modern technologies that we can utilise to identify smoke at an early point may also be of assistance to us. The only thing that I will say is that these fires, once they start, spread so rapidly. As I indicated earlier, it takes many years to recover the damage; it takes only seconds to cause it.

1.15 pm

Mr McAleer: Has the Minister had any early indications of the long-term biodiversity loss in the Mournes? We experienced the exact same episode last year in the Murrins in Tyrone. It was devastating; the biodiversity has not even nearly been fully restored since then. Does he have any assessment of the long-term impact on the richness of biodiversity in the Mournes?

Mr Poots: As I indicated in the statement, there are species that are particular to the Mournes. A full assessment has not been done, but all the indications are that it will take many years for some of those species to come back to where they would have been. Meadow pipits, for example, are ground-nesting birds that have been laying and hatching eggs. Sadly, it is probable that hundreds of fledgling birds and eggs have been destroyed as a consequence of the fire; there was no means of escaping it. That is appalling. We would love to see more red grouse up on those hills than is currently the case.

There are some pairs. We need to look at other areas where good management has encouraged red grouse back. The species damage is extensive. The gorse will grow again; it will probably recover more quickly. The other element is that there is absolutely no doubt that it released substantial amounts of carbon. It will not be as good at sequestering carbon going forward; it will take many years of rainfall for that peat to get back to a reasonable condition.

Mr Harvey: I thank the Minister for his duty of care to the firefighters and to the landowners whose property was decimated by the mountain fire incident. Our grateful thanks goes out to all the fire crews who attended the fire over the past weekend.

Minister, given the dry springs that we have had in recent years, what steps are you taking to reduce the potential impact that climate change is having on such wildfires?

Mr Poots: We in Northern Ireland want to play our part in the climate change challenge. That is why I indicated some time ago that I was bringing forward legislation, which is now sitting with the Executive. I hope to present it in the House in the very near future. It will ensure that Northern Ireland plays its part fully in achieving its contribution to net zero for the United Kingdom by 2050. It will also ensure that we do not decimate the largest section of the economy: the agri-food sector. I hope that the Executive will have the opportunity to progress that legislation and allow me to come to the House with the energy and purpose that is required; we really need to drive those things forward. We need to move swiftly, so I do not want any delay in the Executive when bringing it forward.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for the detail in his statement. I also commend the work of the men and women of the fire service in the difficult and dangerous task in which they were involved over the weekend. In addition to that, I reflect on the heartbreaking loss of biodiversity and natural habitat in the Mournes that we have witnessed. I represent North Antrim, which, as the Minister stated, has been the scene of a number of wildfires in recent years; I think of Craigs Road outside Rasharkin, Slieveanorra in April last year, and, as the Minister mentioned in his statement, Moneystaghan block near Portglenone forest very recently. Minister, over and above the work of the management plans that you detailed in your statement, will you give an assessment of whether the current legislation is robust enough to thwart wildfires?

Mr Poots: I have asked officials to look at the legislation to identify whether enough is being done. My suspicion is that not enough is being done in terms of dissuasion. One of the problems that we have is that those places are remote by nature, with not a lot of people around, so catching someone doing it, either purposely or recklessly, is extremely difficult, as is reaching the bar for prosecution, and therein lies the difficulty. We can have tough-looking legislation, but, if we cannot catch the individuals doing it, that is a different matter. We perhaps need to speak to the judiciary about the evidence base for such a circumstance to ensure that we can demonstrate to the public that there is punishment for such activity.

As I indicated, it is not a victimless crime. Ultimately, dozens and dozens of men and women were up those mountains putting their life at risk to put out the fires.

This is the ultimate wrong: lives being put at risk as a consequence of such behaviour.

Mr O'Toole: I echo the words of the Minister and others in congratulating and thanking all the emergency services, from the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service all the way down and through, for their amazing courage and work over the past few days, and all the agencies, local businesses and individuals who supported and helped in that effort. People are devastated to see the scenes of biodiversity being lost and of destruction in the Mournes. As someone who comes from the area, I found it particularly difficult to watch, as, I am sure, did lots of people.

The Minister mentioned the strategic wildfire group and said that he will look at the legislation, which I welcome. Can he give a timescale for doing that? Legislation will not happen overnight, so, before then, will he look at providing better information? Can he and his Department commit a budget to that ahead of this summer? Can signs be put up or some kind of communication provided to make it absolutely clear so that no one, be it a landowner or a recreational user, is in any doubt that starting any kind of fire, either deliberately or inadvertently, is unacceptable?

Mr Poots: It is not that steps have not been taken. Many steps have been taken, and the public should know better. There are those on the farming side who deliberately burn off gorse to allow for fresh growth to come through. That does not take place at this time of year. If they are doing that, they are breaking the law and should be prosecuted. I make it very clear: any farmer who engages in that at this time of year is breaking the law and should be prosecuted.

As for the general public, I have to say that most people who go up the mountains or go walking in those areas have a love for the environment, appreciate it and are responsible. Others sometimes take a notion to do those things. They go up in their flip-flops. They perhaps drop cigarette butts that are not extinguished. They might have a wee campfire or a barbecue and do not extinguish it properly. Those are the people who really need to recognise the harm that they can do as a result of their day trip to a wild and remote region. We need everyone to pull together and recognise the harm that is done.

The only good thing that has come out of this is the fact that the public are now much more aware that those fires take place. I mentioned that there have been four fires of significance in the past two weeks. We drove five minutes just over the hill from where I was on Saturday to an area just above Tollymore, where 6 hectares of young forest had been damaged. We are trying to get more trees planted, yet, because of someone's irresponsibility, another forest has been destroyed and set back.

We need really good cooperation from all sides, and we need to be very firm to ensure that the law is strong. We also need to find a means of enforcing it, however, so that, rather than just having something on paper, it can be demonstrated to the public that the law is working and that people are being prosecuted for such activities.

Mrs Barton: Minister, thank you very much for your statement. Like others, I reiterate my thanks to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and all the other emergency services that helped put out the fire. I also thank you and Mr Swann for being available at the weekend to help out and support the people on the ground.

Minister, while travelling from Fermanagh to here, I listened to commentary on the radio about the fire. Reference was made that a number of Fire and Rescue Service personnel had quite a distance to walk to get to the source of the fire. Have you given any thought to perhaps providing vehicles that could be more adaptable than a fire engine to move personnel much more quickly to the source of the fire?

Mr Poots: Fires in places such as these mountains are very difficult. Last year, we spent £180,000 on all-terrain vehicles, which were used at the weekend to ferry Fire and Rescue Service personnel to the locations. The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service has ultimate responsibility; it does not lie with my Department. However, one of the things that we could have done with last Saturday was a helicopter to do water drops on the Kilkeel side of the mountain. We had anticipated getting helicopter support from Ireland and from GB, but unfortunately, those became unavailable. The fact that there is a road leading up to a quarry enabled water to get so far, but fire personnel ended up having to beat the fire out with shovels. That is how crudely it was done. Hundreds of acres of land were on fire, and they were beating it out with shovels. When you get it out, it can flare up again, so you can see the work that was involved.

It was a warm day, there was the heat of the fire, and the fact that personnel had to wear their uniforms and personal protective equipment. That led to an immense amount of work being carried out by those individuals. Therefore, we cannot speak highly enough of their efforts. We need to ensure that they have as much equipment as possible to enable them to do their work as safely as possible. They were very challenging circumstances, but a lot of people rose to them. We talk about heroes in the context of COVID; these people were heroes working up the mountains.

Mr Robinson: Considering some of the recent wildfires, including the one outside Limavady in my constituency, has there been an estimated cost to put them out? Maybe it is too early for that yet. I commend all the firefighters and other agencies for their diligence in eradicating the fires at the weekend.

Mr Poots: Earlier in the year, the Fire Service indicated that, over the past 10 years, about £4-5 million has been spent on gorse fires. Therefore, we really need to ensure that we minimise the amount of public money expended on them. More importantly, we need to minimise the damage done to the environment and reduce the risk to individuals who could get caught in these fires and, indeed, the risk to the personnel putting them out.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Maolíosa McHugh.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you, deputy Prime Minister. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have been promoted.

Mr McHugh: Good man.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Not yet.

Mr McHugh: You have an elevated role. *[Laughter.]* Minister, where I live in the Derg valley, each and every year, I see gorse fires. Some are extensive, some are controlled and some are otherwise. Can you expand on the work that the strategic wildfire group does?

Mr Poots: I will bring you back down to earth, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

The group identifies the risks and identifies the mitigations that it can carry out to reduce those risks. It looks at how it can respond to fires and how teams can work as multi-agency teams in their response. There is a whole series of things. Mr Butler mentioned education, and that will be a key part of it.

1.30 pm

In all that we do, whether it is through the NIEA, Forest Service, PSNI, Fire and Rescue Service or local groups or local authorities, we must do it together and ensure that we respond in the best way possible. The issue is not going to go away, and we are not going to eliminate it, but we can certainly mitigate it and, in particular, the damage that it does.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for his statement. I, too, send my gratitude to all those who helped over the weekend. Coming from a neighbouring constituency, I am a regular visitor to the Mournes. I cherish the beauty of the area and what it provides for us.

Brexit will starve Northern agencies of vital conservation management funding. We need an all-island approach to address the issue. As we have seen over the weekend, the same pressures, caused by human behaviour, have affected the kingdom of Kerry, in Killarney National Park, and the land in the kingdom of Mourne. The prescribed period for burning in the South ends on 1 March, whereas in the North, it ends on 14 April. That is far too late. We need an urgent reassessment of the applicability of brush burning, and we should invest in moving farmers and landowners away from such practices. Will the Minister, therefore, engage with his counterparts in the South and look at how we can come together to address the issue?

Mr Poots: We probably need to put our own house in order in the first instance. Where there are cross-border fires, which do happen occasionally, the level of cooperation is fantastic. That is not an issue. Where there are resources, either in the Republic of Ireland, for a fire in Northern Ireland, or, for a fire in the Republic of Ireland, in Northern Ireland, they are already available. There is already good, close cooperation. I will always encourage that because it is absolute common sense. It is not a political thing; it is a practical thing. I have every intention of helping neighbours and, indeed, of calling on neighbours when I need help in circumstances like those.

Ms Bailey: I am from a family of firefighters, and I have the utmost respect for the work and dedication of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and, indeed, of all our emergency services, particularly when they face such personal risk. I, too, take the opportunity to thank each and every one of them for their efforts over the weekend.

In the past week alone, we have seen serious fires on Cave Hill, there have been oil spills, or dumping incidents, in Donaghadee, and there has been devastation in the Mourne Mountains. Our environmental record in Northern Ireland should shame us all. The Minister tells us that there were 22 forest fire incidents in 2020 and that, this year, we continue to face many threats. How many of those incidents led to enforcement cases? While strong words and signage are good steps, what real environmental and climate education strategy is being planned?

Mr Poots: As I indicated, whilst I support a strong legislative base, and I am happy to amend legislation to make it tougher, you can only enforce something where a case is presented. The difficulty, about which we need to be realistic, is that many individuals who engage in that activity do it away from the gaze of any other individual. It is tricky, in the first instance, to identify the individuals who engage in establishing the fires. However, it is worth our while to have a conversation with other bodies that are involved in enforcement to identify, for example, what level of evidence the courts require to prosecute someone successfully. I will not hold back, whatsoever, any prosecution that NIEA, Forest Service or any other agency brings forward. I encourage them to do that, and it is something that needs to happen on a much more frequent basis. I would like to see people punished for this awful crime, because it is an awful crime that has been committed against other human beings and against the environment.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his statement. I thank everybody for their work over the last few days in tackling this fire, particularly the Fire and Rescue Service for its critical work. It is, of course, gutting to see such devastation to an area of diverse flora and fauna. I have spoken to Fire and Rescue Service people and I know how overworked, under-resourced and overstretched they are. Given the events of the last weekend, the high number of fires that took place last year, the possibility of more fires, climate breakdown and uncertain weather patterns, how confident is the Minister that our excellent fire service is adequately resourced and financed to deal with these challenges?

Mr Poots: That is a good question, but one that you need to put to the Health Minister, as he has responsibility for the Fire and Rescue Service. Previously in my career, I had that task, and I know that the Fire and Rescue Service, like everyone else, has its funding challenges. However, it has an excellent team of people on the ground who do magnificent work, not just in this type of situation but in many others, such as road traffic incidents and others where the Ambulance Service needs help to rescue people. The range of work covered by the Fire and Rescue Service, and its skill and innovation in dealing with those problems, is probably not as well recognised as it should be. I, for one, greatly appreciate the work that it carries out for us.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. I was grateful that you outlined the wide range of organisations and individuals involved in this incident. It is truly wonderful to see so many people put their lives on the line.

You mentioned the issue of emission of carbon as a result of the fires. I sit on the all-party group on lung health. This might be a naive question, but is there anything that your Department can do, alongside other agencies or Departments, to mitigate the impact on local residents from those emissions?

Mr Poots: Getting the fire out as quickly as possible is probably all you can do. There is a release of particle emissions. A very fine particulate comes from the material being burnt. It gets ingested into people's lungs and, because it is such fine material, it is very difficult to get rid of. These fires are a health hazard for people; let us be

absolutely clear about that. It is another reason why they should not happen.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Members. That concludes questions on the Minister's statement.

Executive Committee Business

Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill: Second Stage

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

That the Second Stage of the Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill [NIA Bill 20/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has not allocated any time limits to this debate, but first I ask Members to allow a few seconds for a change at the top Table.

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

Mr Poots: I have been looking at introducing the Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill for some time now. Over the last number of years, the two main horse racing tracks, Down Royal and Downpatrick racecourses, have received a levy from the turf accountants at those courses. Consequently, over time, that has been impacted as a result of the sale of Down Royal racecourse. The previous legislation specifically named the two racecourses as opposed to ensuring that, if there was ever a change of ownership of them, that change would be covered. Consequently, we have not been able to provide funding or to ensure that the levy has been disbursed to the racecourses.

One can imagine the issues with that in that it costs considerable amounts of money to maintain and run a racecourse each year. The funding that was available through the levy on the bookmakers helped to enable the continuation of the racecourses. As a result of losing the levy, the racecourses have been put under significant financial pressure. Whilst it may not be altogether popular with the bookmakers that they have to provide that funding, nonetheless, it is an important part of the horse racing industry, because the racecourses can be maintained, safely and appropriately, in a safe condition for the welfare of the animals and for the safety of the staff and the public who are on-site.

The legislation is about ensuring that we are capable of continuing to provide support to the racecourses. It is a relatively short and simple piece of legislation, and I appeal to the House to support it.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I welcome the opportunity, as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, to outline the Committee's views on the Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill. The Committee received an oral briefing on the Bill on Thursday 22 April. As the Minister said, the Bill is intended to amend the Horse Racing (NI) Order 1990 regarding the named beneficiaries of the horse racing fund. As we can see, the Bill is very focused, short and concise, and the aim is to get it completed before the end of the mandate. It will enable payments of the fund to resume at the racecourses at Downpatrick and Down Royal.

In providing evidence to the Committee, the Minister's officials outlined some of the history of the fund. It was developed in order to address declining gate receipts at the racecourses following the introduction of legislation that meant that people who wished to place a bet on a horse race no longer needed to attend the racecourse.

As some of the bookmakers' income is obtained directly from betting on horse racing, there is an obvious and clear link between the two. It seems only fair that bookmakers should pay a levy to the racecourses from the profits that they make from their activities there.

The horse racing fund was established here in 1976 and is currently administered by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) in line with the Horse Racing (NI) Order 1990, which requires that bookmakers make an annual contribution to the fund of an amount that is determined from time to time by the Department. The amount is also set after consultation with the bookmakers.

As it stands today, the levy is £99 for on-course bookmakers and £1,123 for off-course bookmakers. That rate was set by the Horse Racing (Charges on Bookmakers) Order (NI) 2010. The levy was to be uplifted in 2017, but that did not happen because of the absence of the Assembly. The rates, therefore, remain as I stated. Officials noted that it is not the Minister's intention to consider an increase in the levy at this point.

The Committee was told that a targeted consultation took place in May and June 2020 on the proposal to add the new operator of Down Royal to the 1990 Order.

Furthermore, as the legislation for the horse racing fund is now quite dated and is in need of review, the Department intends to undertake a wider, long-term, more comprehensive review of both the Order and the fund. Therefore, during the consultation, respondents were asked to comment on those longer-term review issues as well.

1.45 pm

Members had received a written briefing on the consultation and were aware of the respondents' names and the main issues raised. The Committee heard that, because of the change of management at the end of 2018, the new operator at Down Royal had not been eligible for support under the 1990 Order, as it is not specifically named in the legislation. Payments to the previous operator of the Down Royal racecourse ceased from 1 January 2019.

Payments to Downpatrick racecourse also ceased while DAERA sought a decision from the EU Commission on the application of EU state aid rules. It became clear that an EU state aid application would be unlikely to succeed. However, following the end of the transition period on 1 January 2021, EU state aid rules no longer apply and any payments must instead comply with the UK subsidy control requirements, and that seems to be less problematic.

The Committee heard that £680,000 was sitting in the fund and no payments have been made since 2018. Members asked questions about how racecourses apply to the fund and the criteria for those payments. Officials told us that the purposes for which payments can be made are laid down in the legislation and include items such as prize funds and technical and other services. The two named beneficiaries apply by presenting a business plan that lays out how they will use the fund, and the business plan is assessed by DAERA staff. The use of the funding allocated to the racecourses is also audited.

The Committee also considered the situation in other jurisdictions. It was noted that both Britain and the South of Ireland have recently reviewed their arrangements. In Britain, the fund is administered by a non-departmental public body (NDPB) and includes income derived from online gambling, and the levy is set at 10% of profits. Meanwhile, the fund in the South of Ireland covers greyhound racing and 24 horse racing courses, and the levy is provided by way of the excise department.

The Committee questioned officials on the issue of a levy for online gambling and the possibility of widening the fund to greyhound racing and other local racecourses that may open in the future. We heard from officials that gambling and the licensing of bookmakers rests with the Department for Communities and that DAERA officials are working closely with their Communities counterparts on that aspect. We understand that Communities will undertake a wider review of gambling legislation at some stage in the future and that that will consider that aspect.

Some of the wider issues to be considered in the forthcoming DAERA review have already been mentioned, such as the inclusion of online gambling. Another issue is whether the Bill should have been widened to include greyhound racing. When questioned on that aspect, officials referred to the origins of the fund. Members will recall that I said earlier that the fund was developed to address declining gate receipts at racecourses, following the introduction of legislation that meant that people wishing to place a bet on a horse race no longer needed to attend the racecourse. To remain true to that fundamental principle, an assessment would be needed on whether gambling on greyhound racing was on-course, off-course or a combination of both.

Another issue raised by members was the potential to widen the fund, if required, to other racecourses that may be established here. Officials noted that they were aware of some discussions by third parties on the potential for a further racecourse at Giant's Park but that is only discussion and there are no firm proposals.

In summary, the AERA Committee noted the narrow scope of the Bill and discussed with DAERA officials other matters that may be presented at Committee Stage as areas for possible amendment. Overall, the Committee expressed no concern at the narrow scope of the Bill and looks forward to working closely with the Minister and his officials at Committee Stage.

Mr Irwin: The issue before the House is one of which many members of the public may never had had any knowledge. It is legislation required to put right an issue that has arisen on the funding of Northern Ireland's racecourses and the blockage to assistance that has prevailed since late 2018.

The legislative angle is that there is a need to change the existing Order to allow payments to be made from the horse racing fund to racecourses in Northern Ireland. I understand that the consultation and the normal practices have been carried out and that the responses received have been taken on board in the formulation of the amendment. I note that the consultation responses were largely supportive of the change.

The fund is made up of a levy collected from licensed bookmakers in Northern Ireland, and that finance provides support for horse racing at Northern Ireland's two

racecourses at Downpatrick and Down Royal. The Horse Racing (Northern Ireland) Order 1990 is the legal basis for the horse racing fund in Northern Ireland. The change of operator at Down Royal meant that it was ineligible for support from the fund. That issue will prevail until the current work to adjust the legislation to allow payments to recommence has run its full legislative course. COVID-19 has been another limiting factor for the two racecourses, as has been the case with much of sport over the last number of months. With support being withheld for the reasons outlined, it will be all the more required moving forward.

Discussions have taken place on widening support to include other venues, such as greyhound racetracks and other venues not involved in horse racing. I urge that any further discussion on those points take a firm view on the wider societal impact of off-course and online gambling. Those issues should not be treated in isolation. In recent times, we have heard of the societal impacts of gambling and the negative impacts that it has. Currently, there is discussion on our laws on the matter and on the prolific nature of online betting. I welcome any steps to consider the matters effectively, including the impacts on society of online betting, which has seen a particular increase over lockdown. Cross-departmental cooperation will continue to be important in considering those issues further, ensuring that politics and decisions on competitive sport in this regard are fair, reasonable and balanced against a number of important factors. That said, this legislation is required, and neither venue should be disadvantaged further by its legal, albeit temporary, blockage. I support the Bill.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for moving the Bill's Second Stage. The SDLP has no fundamental objection to the Bill because there is little in it to object to. However, a number of issues definitely merit consultation. I would appreciate further deliberations with the Minister — perhaps he will disclose later what those are — to bring us into line with the Republic and the UK.

Since 2019, no financial support has been paid out from the horse racing fund, because the original legislation did not take into account the possibility of a change in ownership of one of the two racecourses that the fund was designed to support. Given that the levy involved continues to be raised from licensed bookmakers as a condition of the licence, it seems perverse to prevent the owners of those racecourses from applying for that financial support.

I believe that the fund currently sits at around £600,000, with about £350,000 raised annually, and the Bill could be described as a simple piece of legislative bookkeeping by the Minister and the Department. That said, as we move into more contemporary times, a number of questions could be asked of the Department's approach: for example, is the legislation fit for purpose? In many ways, it is long out of date compared with the rest of the legislation on gambling in the North. For example, there should be a levy on online bookmakers, as a considerable amount of betting is now done online as opposed to in bricks-and-mortar bookmakers.

The fund was set up by legislation in the 1970s and amended in 1990. The vast majority of the fund is, as I said, raised from licensed off-course bookmakers, but the licence issued by the Department for Communities does not cover online betting. The two racecourses involved now have a more varied source of income than in 1990.

If the fund is still necessary, should similar venues be able to apply for that support? Should it be extended to cover dog racing, for example? I would make the case that it should. Drumbo and Brandywell compete with Dundalk and other racecourses in the Republic that are substantially underpinned and supported by the state. They get significant drawdown to continue with their activities. Should a non-departmental public body be established for the purpose of oversight, as is the case in the rest of Ireland and GB? Stakeholders raised many of those questions during the limited consultation that the Department carried out in May and June last year. Those are issues and cases regarding the collection of moneys and funds and their distribution in a more equitable way to other courses, especially greyhound courses.

It is understandable that the Minister seeks a remedy as quickly as possible to the position in which the two current racecourses — horse racing courses, obviously — find themselves due to a flaw in the original legislation. However, we would like a firm commitment from him to a comprehensive review of the operation of the horse racing fund, its extension to greyhound racing and the provision of support to horse racing and similar activities for which he is responsible. That would enable the Minister to address some of the many issues raised by stakeholders and others in the sector during his Department's consultation on this short and limited Bill.

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

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Health

Paediatric Ankle Foot Orthoses

1. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the quality of paediatric ankle foot orthoses provided by health and social care trusts. (AQO 1919/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I thank the Member for her question. The clinical service that provides paediatric ankle foot orthoses (AFOs) is provided mainly by orthotists through contracted services to the health and social care trusts. There are two service providers in Northern Ireland, one of which manufactures AFOs in Northern Ireland. The production lead times for AFOs are about three weeks from assessment to delivery to the trusts, with urgent orders being able to be completed within a week for inpatients or patients who are post-operative.

Service levels for orthotic services vary across trusts. In some trusts, children with SEN are able to access the service via a consultant, GP or allied health professional (AHP) referral, while, in others, the referral sources are more limited. Some of the paediatric caseload is seen in a special school clinic by orthotists. School clinics are weekly, fortnightly or monthly, depending on the school. Most children who attend those schools should be cast and supplied with their AFO within a month. Only pupils who attend those schools are able to be seen in those clinics. All other paediatric cases are seen in general clinics across a variety of hospitals.

Typically, waiting times can vary from trust to trust and depend on how the services are delivered. At clinics, the availability of appointments determines delivery of, speed of and access to services. Paediatric patients are usually prioritised over routine patients who are seen at the clinics, but, in the main, they will be seen in a general clinic, where adults are also seen. The typical waiting time between paediatric appointments is between six and 12 weeks.

I fully recognise that there is a constant need to review service delivery models, including paediatric orthotics, as children's needs for replacement devices are often more demanding, because of children's growth and general wear and tear. As part of the AHP workforce review programme, an orthotics workforce review was taken forward. It identified a number of issues, including variations in service delivery and access to services. As a result, the Chief Allied Health Professions Officer has asked for one of her trust paediatric heads of service to take forward a review of orthotic services across Northern Ireland. The intention is to have that review completed by October 2021.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for that comprehensive answer. I have been contacted by constituents who have children who require orthoses, and I have written to the Minister on a couple of occasions about one child in

particular. Those constituents have found that the orthoses provided cause pain and injury to the children's little feet and have been forced to source alternatives, privately, which is expensive. As the Minister mentioned, children's feet grow. Will the Department commit to evaluating the quality of the paediatric orthoses provided to ensure that they are fit for purpose?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. I know that she has written to me on that point. She asked about the quality of the orthosis provided. The device can be custom-made for the child from an impression that is taken of the child's leg and foot, or, if suitable, an off-the-shelf, prefabricated AFO can be utilised. The regulations provide more stringent requirements on the manufacture of any medical device, including orthotic devices that are manufactured by orthotic services. The guidance and standards for best practice are those from the British Association of Prosthetists and Orthotists guidelines for the provision of orthotic services. The guidance sets out the quality of the fabrication of devices, and those standards will apply to all patients. As I said in my response to the Member, our Chief Allied Health Professions Officer will undertake a review. It is due to be completed by October 2021. I will ask her to include the Member's query in her review.

Ms Bradshaw: I recently had a meeting with a consultant orthotist, who echoed the Member's comments on the issue. On a broader point, one of the consultant's concerns was that health trust managers are not allocating enough theatre time for procedures on children's feet and legs. How does having insufficient theatre capacity fit into the regional prioritisation programme, considering that the earlier the intervention to correct the issue, the better?

Mr Swann: The Member will be aware that the trusts have published their rebuilding plans for the next three months, and we are looking at the rescheduling and utilisation of our theatre capacity at a regional level rather than solely at trust level. It is about how we rebuild core services across the entire spectrum, including some of the invaluable preventative operations that can take place. However, first of all, we are tackling red-flag cases and making immediate urgent responses while we rebuild our service back to where it should be and where it can be.

Mr Allister: How has the supply line of medical devices, products and medicines been impacted by the protocol? Where do we source most of our supplies? How is the protocol impacting on that? How does the Minister anticipate how that will work at the end of the grace period? What awaits us on 1 January 2022 when we come fully under restrictive EU laws?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for that point. It is topical, and it was raised at the Health Committee last week. We currently receive 98% of our medicines and medical devices directly through GB, so the protocol will have an implication. It is not currently having an implication because we have a derogation until the end of this year. However, the triggering of article 16 towards the end of last year, around vaccines, has unnerved suppliers. There is work in progress between my Department, the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) who are also involved. That incident had an unsettling effect. Consistent suppliers are now asking more questions and are concerned about the implications of the protocol.

That is why we engaged with those companies to give the reassurance that our Department and the Department of Health and Social Care are doing all that we can within our remit and our power to ensure that those supply lines are as seamless as possible.

In addition, the Northern Ireland Office holds a not insignificant financial pot to facilitate and support that, and we have engaged with it on how we can utilise that best to make sure that there is no disruption to the supply of medicines or medical devices in Northern Ireland due to the protocol and its outworkings.

Lisburn Primary and Community Care Centre

2. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the development of the Lisburn Primary and Community Care Centre. (AQO 1920/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. Lisburn Primary and Community Care Centre at Lagan Valley Hospital will provide fit-for-purpose accommodation for seven GP practices, selected acute outpatient services and a large number of trust services, many of which will be relocated from Lisburn Health Centre, Warren Children's Centre and other leased premises, namely TSL House. The new development will help to enable greater management of chronic conditions in the community and will be closer to patients' homes through the collocation and integration of GP practices alongside multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) in a functionally suitable building.

Construction of a new primary and community care centre is progressing well and is scheduled for completion in June 2021. Following a period of commissioning, it is anticipated that the building will open to patients in late autumn or winter this year.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his answer. He mentioned the role for multidisciplinary teams. Does he agree with me that their inclusion, particularly with regard to mental health, in settings such as Lisburn Primary and Community Care Centre, will result in a more holistic approach and better well-being for our community?

Mr Swann: I know that the Member has an interest in this issue, especially in regard to mental health support and provision. The primary care multidisciplinary team model introduces new physiotherapy, social work and mental health roles into GP practices to work alongside enhanced levels of nursing staff and the existing practice team. It aims to move from a system of treating illness to holistically supporting good physical and mental health and social well-being.

In the South Eastern Trust, MDTs have been fully implemented in the Down GP federation, accompanied by a small introduction jointly in Ards and north Down. While a formal evaluation of the MDT programme is under way, it is clear that the model is already impacting positively on some of the core services in the South Eastern Trust, such as physiotherapy and mental health.

My Department and the Health and Social Care Board are engaged in a process to develop a road map for the implementation of MDTs across all the remaining GP federations, including Lisburn. That involves engaging with those in general practice and the health and social care trusts to agree realistic and achievable proposals, which

will then be aligned with overall strategic priorities and the current or emerging pressures.

Development of the road map is expected to be completed before the summer. It will enable robust planning on the cost and timescale of the roll-out of the model for the remainder of Northern Ireland. Further roll-out of the model is, however, dependent on the availability of a suitably qualified and experienced workforce, readiness of accommodation, and the appropriate funding. However, MDTs are not the only initiative in place to support those working in primary care.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for his answer. It is good to hear about the progress in Lisburn. As a former employee at Lisburn health centre, I know that a lot of my former colleagues will be delighted to hear that it is progressing as it is.

Minister, will you provide an update on the Newry Community Treatment and Care Centre, and what funding has been set aside for new primary care hubs?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her support. I am sure that her former colleagues, too, will be pleased that we are making positive progress in that area.

The Newry Community Treatment and Care Centre project involves the provision of a new 12,600 square metre primary care facility to provide fit-for-purpose accommodation for general medical services (GMS), selected acute outpatient and diagnostic services and a large number of multidisciplinary teams, many of which will be relocated from outlying sites and leased premises.

The Newry project was initiated under ministerial direction in March 2013. It experienced delay, primarily as a result of protracted negotiations over planning permission between the contractor and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council. Planning permission was approved on 1 July 2020. Departmental officials are considering whether the project should now move to full business case stage. I will update the Member when that is received.

GPs: Multidisciplinary Team Support

3. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the roll-out of multidisciplinary teams to support GPs. (AQO 1921/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. The primary care multidisciplinary team (MDT) model introduces new physiotherapy, social work and mental health roles into GP practices to work alongside an enhanced level of nursing staff and the existing practice team. It aims to move from a system of treating illness to holistically supporting good physical and mental health and social well-being.

Like many transformation projects, the expansion of the programme has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the MDT model is in development in five areas across Northern Ireland: Londonderry, west Belfast, Causeway, Newry and district, and north Down and Ards. It is fully implemented in the Down GP federation.

Across all the areas, the programme supports 300 members of staff. My Department and the Health and Social Care Board are engaged in a process to develop the road map, as I indicated. That involves engaging with all those in general practice and the trusts to agree

realistic and achievable proposals, which will then be aligned with the overall strategic priorities or current and emerging pressures.

That road map, as I said, is due to be completed before the summer, and will enable robust planning on the cost and timescale for the roll-out. However, further roll-out of the model is dependent on the availability of a suitably qualified and experienced workforce, readiness of accommodation and appropriate funding.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that if we are to turn around the oil tanker that is the health service, we have to concentrate on primary as much as acute care, and perhaps more on primary? I understand that only five of the 17 multidisciplinary teams have been established. If we were to establish them, surely that would take significant pressure off GPs and acute services.

The Minister may be interested to know that, recently on social media in my area, patients were asking one another how often they had to phone their GPs to get through. The dubious winner was hitting redial 400 times to get through. Many of those patients will be seeing their GP simply to be directed to another service. It would appear to me that MDTs would be the answer to much of that problem.

Mr Swann: I fully agree with the Member about the benefit that MDTs will bring because it is about that multidisciplinary team aspect. When they were initiated, or even first talked about here, there was much reluctance about somebody going to a GP thinking that they had to see the GP, but they saw the benefits when they could see a physiotherapist, a nurse practitioner or even a pharmacist face to face rather than having to wait to engage with a GP.

Our GP colleagues see the benefits as well. Experience to date has shown that many of those working in MDTs were recruited from existing roles within health and social care trusts. Recruitment to our MDT roles must be progressed through a measured approach so that we are not robbing Peter to pay Paul and shifting the same staff around the service.

2.15 pm

The Member made the analogy of the health service being an oil tanker that needs turned around. We need to start turning it around very fast. The health service has been able to reposition itself pretty quickly over the past 14 months, but we need to make sure that the support is there to turn it around, get it parked and get it to a place where it supports the entirety of Northern Ireland, including through investment in primary care, in secondary care and across the workforce of the health and social care family.

Mrs Cameron: Minister, we realise that the roll-out of the multidisciplinary teams is vital. As Mr O'Dowd has just said, it is very important to note that the pressure that GPs are under is much greater. That is primarily due to the switching off of healthcare appointments during the pandemic. Many of these calls and queries are from patients who have not been dealt with in secondary care. Given the disparity in access to GPs across Northern Ireland, what work is being done to ensure that GP access does not continue to be a barrier to early diagnosis of life-threatening conditions? Basically, Minister, what I am asking you is when we will see face-to-face GP appointments being made readily available to the public.

Mr Swann: I thank the Deputy Chair of the Committee for her points. I do not agree with the use of the term "switching off". We had to take drastic steps during serious waves of the COVID pandemic that put serious pressure on the entirety of our health workforce.

I want to be clear that our general practices are open. They have been open throughout the pandemic. I pay tribute to GPs' hard work, commitment and innovation as they continue to provide a critical service for us all. GPs have continued to see patients. Indeed, the number of consultations is now close to pre-pandemic levels. The most recent figures, for the week ending 16 April, show 83 consultations per thousand, compared with 87 consultations per thousand in November 2019. Despite the need for social distancing and infection control, GPs have been able to maintain face-to-face consultations at a level. Of those recent consultations, 37% were face to face, compared with 50% in November 2019.

As has been clear from the outset of the pandemic, our GPs are working tirelessly for the good of everyone in the community. They have not only delivered a range of additional services, including COVID centres and vaccinations, but have remained focused on continuing to deliver core, vital services. We owe all of them a huge debt of gratitude for the work that they have done. I acknowledge that that level of service is not consistent across all GP practices. A small number have not stepped up to the mark and the expectation of even their own colleagues.

Ms Hunter: My question refers to the point made by the Members who have spoken. Understandably, people have deep frustration and concern about not getting face-to-face appointments. We are all hearing it from our constituents. Off the back of that, what conversations are you having with patients and GPs about face-to-face appointments resuming as soon as possible?

Mr Swann: As I have said before and referenced in the answer to the previous question, we have seen an increase in face-to-face consultations and how we are now, compared to where we were in November 2019. The situation in regard to face-to-face GP consultations is improving. However, we need to be clear that many patients' experience of trying to access GP appointments is comparable to what it was pre-COVID. It was not a good level of service then either, because we saw a decrease in the number of GP practices and GPs across Northern Ireland.

I pay tribute to and support my GP colleagues in the healthcare family, who have stepped up and gone above and beyond to work in COVID and vaccination centres and who have supported their patients throughout this time. Like me, they will want to get back to as normal a health service as we have seen in the past. That will be replicated in the Royal College of GPs and British Medical Association. The Member has heard those representations at the Committee. She knows the input that health professionals and organisations are putting into returning our health services as much as possible to face-to-face consultations while realising that those services are still under pressure.

Mrs Barton: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Hopefully, the all-in-one stops will improve the accessibility

of care for all patients. Will you, Minister, give your assessment of the impact of the MDT model so far?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her point. As I indicated in my original answer, the impact of the MDT programme has been to provide more care closer to people's homes and to improve access to early support and diagnoses by proactively managing patient need in the local GP practice setting through a multidisciplinary early intervention team. In my answer to the original question, I talked about the professionals that patients can actually access.

During 2019-2020, across the five sites, a total of 41,459 first-contact physio appointments were made, 86% of which were managed in primary care and only 12% of which received onward referrals. Continuing the roll-out of primary care MDTs will support the transformation of service provision in the context of a rapidly changing landscape of treatment options, workforce gaps and opportunities for change. Given the innovative nature of that approach, learning and evaluation are key elements of the MDT programme. The effectiveness of MDTs is being reviewed on an ongoing basis through an independent evaluation. Although year 1 of that evaluation has been heavily impacted by COVID, work is ongoing to address those challenges.

Addiction Support Service: North-west

4. **Ms Mullan** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the provision of an addiction support service in the north-west. (AQO 1922/17-22)

12. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of addiction services in the north-west. (AQO 1930/17-22)

Mr Swann: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take questions 4 and 12 together, and I ask for additional time to give my answer.

Alcohol and drugs services across the north-west are provided through a combination of primary and secondary care services that are commissioned by the Health and Social Care Board, along with the prevention, treatment and support services that are commissioned by the Public Health Agency. All those are in line with the regional alcohol and drugs commissioning framework, Northern Ireland's overarching public health strategy, 'Making Life Better' and the Executive's current substance use strategy, the 'New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs Phase 2'. Resources for alcohol and drugs services will continue to be managed on a regional basis. Future funding for addiction services will be reviewed in line with the forthcoming substance use strategy, which addresses the needs of the Northern Ireland population as a whole, including that in the north-west.

The Western Health and Social Care Trust community addiction service consists of a core multidisciplinary team that is supplemented by a number of more specific services, including link and liaison nurses, opiate substitution therapy services, home detoxification services and an eight-bed complex detoxification and stabilisation inpatient unit. The service offers the full range of treatment options and receives approximately 2,500 referrals per year. For the majority of patients, where detox is required, withdrawal can be managed in the community as part of the shared care detox programme. The Western Trust

is the only trust that provides a home detox service in Northern Ireland.

For the most complex cases, the Asha Centre addiction treatment unit in Omagh is one of the three regional inpatient complex detoxification and stabilisation units, the other two being Shimna House in the South Eastern Trust and Carrick 1 in the Northern Trust. Together, those three units provide 30 inpatient beds for complex detoxification and stabilisation across the region. Residents from any trust area can avail themselves of treatment in any of the units of their choice. The Asha Centre is an eight-bed unit that provides a six-week inpatient programme. It currently has seven beds in operation, with the eighth bed being utilised for isolation, if required, due to COVID.

That unit currently has a waiting list of 25 individuals for inpatient treatment.

As an independent provider of tier 4 rehabilitation services, the Northlands centre is part of the regional network of tier 4 addiction services for Northern Ireland, providing counselling, inpatient treatment and aftercare counselling services, along with support counselling for families, to achieve recovery for those with alcohol and drug addictions. Northlands offers a range of addiction treatment services, both residential and within the community, for individuals, couples and families with drug and alcohol problems. Most of its services are provided in its purpose-built facilities in Londonderry, with outpatient counselling services also operating in Coleraine and Magherafelt.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I remind the Minister of the two-minute rule. Given the importance of the topic, I allowed him to continue.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for his extensive answer. I also thank him for agreeing to meet Tamzin White, who recently lost her mum. You will hear from her about the lack of detox services in the north-west region, particularly for females, and the real impact that that has.

The Minister responded to me earlier about the New Decade, New Approach commitment. He said that funding will be decided by a joint board of the Secretary of State, the deputy First Minister and the First Minister. Will the Health Minister take forward, to that joint board, the message that this is a commitment that needs to be funded and that it should be a priority?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her point. As I said earlier, there are a number of funding shortfalls in the "Addressing Northern Ireland's unique circumstances" section of 'New Decade, New Approach'. It is anticipated that the level of funding that is made available will not be sufficient to cover all the areas set out in 'New Decade, New Approach'. As I said, however, it is my understanding that the specific projects that the funding aims to support are determined by a joint board that includes the Secretary of State and the First Minister and deputy First Minister. To date, my Department, the Health and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency have not been involved directly in that process, but we would welcome any further investment in substance use services. That investment must be in line with the identified need and the priorities for service development within the strategic commissioning and planning processes.

The Member is aware that the challenge is that there are a number of funding shortfalls in my departmental budget due to New Decade, New Approach agreements that were made without the necessary funding being attached. I therefore encourage her to lobby her party member, who is part of that assessment board, about the funding process.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. My supplementary question is almost as similar as my original was to Ms Mullan's. I also look forward to meeting the Minister when he comes to meet young Tamzin in Foyle. Karen, the other reps and I look forward to that engagement.

Will the Minister give a commitment that he will use his office and influence, along with the undeniable evidence of need, to exert pressure on the Executive Office and the Northern Ireland Office to honour the pledge made in 'New Decade, New Approach' for a new addiction unit in the north-west? He will have no shortage of support in doing that.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his commitment to offering support. He is aware that there are many health-specific proposals in 'New Decade, New Approach'. I do not have the reassurance of funding in this year's Budget or the coming year's Budget. At present, no funding allocation is aligned directly with those proposals. Priorities and promises have been made by the Finance Minister with regard to funding those. It will be up to the project board, which includes the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Secretary of State, to prioritise those proposals and the funds that are made available to them.

The Member will be aware that, as Minister of Health, I will push for as much of that money as possible to come in our direction. Many of the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' are necessary not just for the advancement of the health service in Northern Ireland but for much of the sorely needed transformation.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): There is time for a very quick question from Roy Beggs.

Mr Beggs: A minimum price of alcohol can contribute to a reduction in the consumption of alcohol and in levels of associated addiction. Can the Minister provide us with an update on minimum pricing? If we reduce the consumption of alcohol, the pressures on our addiction support will be reduced.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. That was raised in the British-Irish Council statement earlier, because it was discussed at the British-Irish Council. I believe that the introduction of legislation for minimum unit pricing for alcohol could be a key population-level health measure in addressing the issue. Therefore, I have made a commitment to have a full consultation on minimum unit pricing once our new substance use strategy is finalised. That consultation will examine a range of possible options for alcohol pricing, including consideration of the emerging evidence of the effectiveness of minimum unit pricing following its implementation in Scotland and elsewhere.

2.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes the period for listed questions. We will now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions. Questions 6 and 7 have been withdrawn.

Abortion Services: Western Trust

T1. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Health to clarify to whom the conscientious objection provisions in the Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations 2020 apply, given that he will be aware that early medical abortion (EMA) services in the Western Trust were suspended on Friday 23 April. (AQT 1221/17-22)

Mr Swann: I think that they will apply to anyone who wishes to take up that option. My Department was informed on Friday of a temporary pause to the Western Trust's early medical abortion service, and my Department will continue to monitor ongoing efforts by the trust to restore delivery of those services with minimum disruption. At this stage, it is not known how long services will be paused in the Western Trust. It is my understanding that efforts are ongoing to put additional staff in place as soon as possible and to resume provision of an EMA service with the minimum of disruption.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for his answer. It is my understanding that there have been instances of some staff working across trusts frustrating service delivery by refusing to, say, perform administrative tasks. Will the Minister outline what instruction or guidance his Department has given to all the trusts in Northern Ireland on that matter?

Mr Swann: The trusts deliver the service, and it is up to them to deliver the administration of that service. However, my Department has advised the trusts that abortion is now legal and that the regulations require such terminations to be carried out on health and social care premises by registered medical professionals. The EMA pathways were put in place by the trusts, starting from April 2020, in line with their statutory duties and functions to provide medical care and treatment in accordance with the needs of the patients and subject to the law.

Abortion Services: Western Trust

T2. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, after stating that he wholeheartedly welcomes the suspension of abortion services in the Western Trust, which he believes is an answer to prayers and about which he will continue to pray in the hope that the service remains suspended and does not resume, to outline the extent of the resource issue that his Department will face should it be compelled to commission such services across the health and social care system. (AQT 1222/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. That scoping work is being carried out, as it was work that was commissioned by my permanent secretary during the period when there was no Minister in place. That has recommenced following an easing of COVID pressures, and it is being reported to the Northern Ireland Office, which is engaging with that.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response. It is of extreme concern that there are still those in the House who are constant advocates and cheerleaders for the premeditated murder of the unborn child through the mechanism of abortion. We saw that again in Saturday's 'News Letter'. Does the Minister agree that it would be much better to ensure that we have proper help and support services in place for mothers-to-be who may feel vulnerable and unable to cope, rather than advocating the

destruction of the unborn child? Will he advise where he and his Department are in ensuring that such services are readily available in every trust area for all those who need to avail themselves of them?

Mr Swann: I note the Member's point. Due to the decision taken during the period when this place did not sit, there is now a duty on trusts across Northern Ireland to deliver abortion services. There is also a duty on us to support mothers and potential mothers with every physical and psychological support that we, as a health and social care service, can provide, no matter what their decision on abortion. That duty is there. I, for one, think that the women of Northern Ireland deserve that we deliver that for them.

Victims' Pension: Health Budget

T3. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister of Health to confirm that his budget is under threat of being top-sliced by the Finance Minister in an effort to fund the Northern Ireland victims' pension. (AQT 1223/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I very much welcome the announcement of the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme, or the victims' pension, as it was previously known. TEO and the Department of Justice are leading on the design and administrative functions of the scheme, and there will be a cost associated with it. I am deeply concerned that it has been suggested, even by the Finance Minister in the House, that the associated costs could come from reductions to Departments' resource budgets simply on a pro rata basis and that that may be required to fund the payments. There is no doubt that the payments need to be made, but I hope that all Members agree that top-slicing a health service that has never been as stretched as it currently is would be deeply damaging and a detrimental step.

Mr Chambers: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, I, like you, certainly welcome the pension, not least because it is so long overdue. People will be deeply concerned if the Finance Minister is simply going to cut the budgets of some of the most important services in order to pay for it. What level of cut is the Minister's Department potentially facing, and what impact will that have on key health and social care services and, in particular, his recovery programme?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. Although the costs are still to be determined, on a pro rata basis, my Department could be facing a cut of many tens of millions of pounds each and every year. Needless to say, a budget reduction of that magnitude would seriously undermine our ability to fund all our most fundamental health and social care services. After a decade of underinvestment and a desperate need to rebuild after COVID, the last thing that our health service needs is such a deep cut to its annual budget. I sincerely hope that the Finance Minister will find an alternative way forward for what was, as I said, a welcome announcement about the payment of the victims' pension, or the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme, as it is properly known.

Face Masks: Post-primary Schools

T4. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Health, in light of the very impressive reduction in transmission and

hospitalisation rates, when the guidance from the Chief Medical Officer and the Department of Health on the wearing of face masks in post-primary education settings will be changed, which is something about which he has spoken to the Minister of Education and the Children's Commissioner, and he and others have received complaints from parents whose children are experiencing headaches and exhaustion as a result of wearing the masks for six hours a day, five days a week. (AQT 1224/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. The introduction of face coverings in post-primary school settings was done at the request of the Education Minister as a step to allowing their reopening. I am sure that, if he puts forward a request for that to be considered with regard to updated medical advice and guidance, the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser will do that.

Mr Givan: That is interesting. That is not what is coming back in response to written questions, which is that it is based on advice from the CMO and the Department of Health. I would welcome some clarity between the two Departments. There is certainly a concern about children as young as 12 and 13 being required to wear face masks for a protracted period of time. Everyone accepts that it is more than challenging to do that in a school environment.

Will the Minister also clarify why affiliated sports clubs are able to put on five-a-side football, for example, but an unaffiliated group of players is not allowed to play five-a-side football?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. With regard to his initial point about differentials in where responsibility lies, one thing that I have found in the past 14 months is that, if any Minister is queried about regulations, it usually ends up being my fault or turned round so that it is on the basis of guidance from my Department, the Chief Medical Officer or the Chief Scientific Adviser. I am not surprised that the Member has had that response. We will certainly follow up on it.

The process of easing restrictions and regulations is now being handled by the Executive's COVID task force, and the steps that we will utilise are set out in the Executive's COVID task force pathway. If I remember correctly, there is a step under sport. It is the one of the natural steps that we take, because affiliated organisations have the ability to manage and control the necessary requirements for sporting activities in order to allow the restrictions to be relaxed. Given our vaccination uptake and the low number of hospital and ICU admissions, it is my hope that we get to a point very soon at which we can move quickly and steadily along the pathway of allowing us to return to as much normality in Northern Ireland as is possible.

Mother-and-baby Homes: Support for Victims

T5. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Health to outline how the services and support that his Department is providing to the birth mothers who were involved in the mother-and-baby homes is being monitored and to state how he is ensuring that the people who were retraumatised by the launch of the report on the mother-and-baby homes are getting the support that they have asked for, given that, as Members may recall, when the report was published,

she did not share in their enthusiasm, in that she was frustrated that, after many years of banging on the door of his Department with the birth mothers and their children who were looking for justice, when, finally, it appeared that they were getting a bit of attention, she was very upset last week to meet with some birth mothers and hear that social workers who were meant to reply to them over a month ago regarding the family tracing service had not done so and that, although the victims had reached out for counselling a month or six weeks ago, they had received no response. (AQT 1225/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Member will note that the report was co-sponsored by the Executive Office and my Department. Work has been done on that, and a management board has now been established. I would appreciate it if the Member could write to me on the specifics about social workers and access so that we can follow up on those individual cases. That is not something that I want to reflect. When we, from our side, launched the report, which was a necessary and long-overdue piece of work, I think that I gave Members an assurance at the time that we would put as much effort as possible into supporting the birth mothers. I am therefore disappointed to hear of those failings and gaps. I will certainly follow up on the detail that the Member asks for.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for your commitment. I take you to be sincere there.

You will be aware that the Executive Office has started a reference group on historical clerical child sex abuse. You will also be aware that the like of Nexus, which provides counselling for sexual abuse victims, has hundreds of people — perhaps over 500 — on its waiting list. I am concerned, Minister, that, as this gets a bit of momentum and there is a wee bit more public discussion about bringing people forward to disclose that they have been a victim, the support will again not be there for them. Can we pre-empt that a wee bit by making sure that counselling in that very sensitive area is in place?

Mr Swann: Again, I thank the Member for her very specific question, on what is a very sensitive but important piece of work. Those support mechanisms should be there. I know that we have engaged with voluntary and community organisations to ensure that they are there as a backup and as support in many cases. Again, I will follow up on the specifics and get back to the Member.

Autism Strategy

T8. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the development of a long-term autism strategy. (AQT 1228/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question about the long-overdue update on an autism strategy. I am aware of the increase in waiting lists for autism assessments and the distress that that has caused to children and to families who are managing challenging circumstances. The pandemic has exacerbated some of that. We are progressing the specifics of the autism strategy. I announced the consultation on that a few weeks ago. I will write to the Member with specifics on the dates and on how to access it.

Mr G Kelly: Will the Minister commit to involving those who have autism, their families, their carers and a wide range

of community and voluntary sector groups in designing a future autism strategy?

2.45 pm

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. As I said, he may be aware that I recently announced and published an interim autism strategy. The action in that strategy is to implement a new framework of care to deliver a proactive, integrated and streamlined pathway for children and young people across the region and to provide a range of early intervention approaches and support to meet their needs and the needs of families and carers. I will make sure that that includes service users and those who depend on those services to make sure that there is co-production and co-design.

Mr Gildernew: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): We have to wait until the end of Question Time for points of order.

That concludes topical questions. Members should take their ease until we move to the next question session, which will be with the Minister for Infrastructure.

Mr Gildernew: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): No, I mean that we have to wait until the end of Question Time, including Infrastructure questions, Colm. Sorry about that.

Infrastructure

Schools: 20 mph Speed Limit

1. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure why she did not introduce a speed limit of 20 mph at Grey Abbey Primary School. (AQO 1933/17-22)

4. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what schools across North Down will be included in the 20 mph speed limit schemes for this financial year. (AQO 1936/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I was pleased to be able to commit funding towards the first tranche of part-time 20 mph speed limits at 103 schools across Northern Ireland. Those measures will increase driver awareness aimed at reducing vehicle speeds outside and near those schools to provide a safer environment for parents, children and staff as they go to and from school on a daily basis. Six schools in the Ards and North Down Borough Council area were included in the first tranche of the part-time 20 mph speed limits at schools programme, which is currently being rolled out and is due for completion in June.

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 in the programme to about 100. Unfortunately, on the basis of the assessment scores, Grey Abbey Primary School was not ranked as highly as the schools that were included. However, I intend to take forward a further tranche of part-time 20 mph speed limits at schools and can assure the Member that Grey Abbey Primary School will be considered for inclusion in the programme. Programmes across all council areas are being developed. Therefore, I am not in a position at this

time to identify what schools in the north Down area might be included.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Can I clarify whether the Minister is taking question 1 with question 4, as we were pre-notified?

Ms Mallon: Mr Deputy Speaker, I was advised that question 4 had been withdrawn by the Business Office.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): No, the Member is here.

Ms Mallon: Yes, I am happy to offer my answer as a grouped answer, with your agreement, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Please do. Thank you. Do you want to add to that answer now?

Ms Mallon: No, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will offer that answer as the composite answer for both questions, and I am happy to answer the supplementary questions.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Yes, the Member will have a supplementary question.

Mr Harvey: I thank the Minister for her answer. What is the total cost to the Department of implementing the 20 mph limits at schools, considering that the cost of safety cannot easily be measured?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The budget that I allocated for the roll-out of the first tranche was £2 million. While I have yet to make final decisions on the allocation of this year's budget, I am committed to the roll-out of the scheme because I believe that many more schools should be included in the 20 mph programme. That is my intention. I hope to finalise budgetary details in the very near future.

Mr Easton: The Minister knows what I will ask. Minister, can you explain why not one school in the North Down constituency has been included in the first tranche? Can you guarantee that Millisle Primary School and Crawfordsburn Primary School will be considered for the next tranche? It is unfair that North Down has missed out.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He has made representations on the issue, so I realise its importance to him. To be fair and objective, the Department operated from an assessment framework that is long established. While it was not possible to extend the scheme to schools in the Member's constituency, I am committed to rolling it out further, and, as I have indicated in correspondence with the Member, all the schools will be considered for inclusion in that programme. As soon as I am in a position to confirm the details, I will ensure that the Member is made fully aware.

Mr Nesbitt: As it happens, I spoke this morning to the chair of the board of Grey Abbey Primary School, who left me in no doubt about the deep anger in the community about the failure to provide the 20 mph zone. The community will note that, to date, the Minister has committed to nothing further than assessing Grey Abbey for tranche 2. I put it to the Minister that, if process is seen to take precedence over protecting the children whom we are here to look after, that anger will not dissipate.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I have received a number of items of correspondence from the principal, the chair of the board of governors and other

elected representatives in respect of that school, so I certainly understand the frustrations. I am advised by my officials that the principal has, for some time — a number of years, in fact — been in correspondence with the Department. I have offered to meet the principal of Grey Abbey Primary School as soon as I can get clarity on the second tranche. I want to do what we can to extend road safety and improve the safety of all our children. That includes the pupils who go to and from Grey Abbey Primary School daily.

Ms Armstrong: I have written to the Department on the issue, and, on several occasions, I have met officials about the 20 mph limit. I thank the Minister for that. I am probably the only Member who drives past Grey Abbey Primary School every day, several times a day.

Could the criteria be reviewed? While Grey Abbey Primary School is on a 30 mph zone of the A20, articulated lorries pass within two feet of the school wall. It is an extremely dangerous, blind corner where children run across the road with the lollipop person to avoid being run over by the many milk lorries and tankers. I ask the Minister to consider, in respect of the second tranche, that Grey Abbey could never have been included in the initial tranche because it is in a 30 mph zone. In fact, it is one of the most dangerously located schools in Northern Ireland.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. I am happy to give that feedback to my officials for their consideration of the second tranche of funding.

Ms Kimmins: It will be no surprise to the Minister that I ask a question on the issue. As she knows, while the scheme is welcome, a very small number of schools in Newry and Armagh were included in the first tranche. I ask that any future roll-outs focus on areas that were not covered, so that schools in my constituency, such as Killeen Primary School, St Clare's Abbey Primary School and St Joseph's High School might be included. Can the Minister also provide detail on how the Department decides which schools will be included?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. We had to limit the number of schools in the financial year just past, owing to the practicalities of delivery. I was keen, when we set out my ambition around the scheme, that we were able to deliver on it. That is why we thought carefully about the 100 schools. I am committed to continuing the roll-out. We have a departmental assessment framework that I have shared with a number of Members who have corresponded with me on the matter. The fact that we now have the limit present at 103 schools means that there will be many more schools that will be considered for it, including schools in the Member's constituency. I am happy to keep her updated. I have no doubt that she will continue to write to me on the matter as well.

Ms Hunter: I welcome the installation of 20 mph speed limits at many of our schools and the fact that protecting children is a priority for you, Minister. With your commitment to do more this year, from a financial perspective, have you received enough money from the Finance Minister to facilitate that?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. My Department has received an increase in capital funds from the 2020-21 opening capital budget. The resource budget, as always for my Department, is challenging, and that will have an impact as we seek to deliver on the range

of capital projects in the Department. As I said, we have had budget allocations across from the Department of Finance. I am now working with my officials on the details of that to make the specific allocations in my Department. I assure Members that, as I have said since taking up the post, road safety is a priority for me. I am very aware of the great enthusiasm across the House and in communities to ensure that we do much more on school safety. That is why I remain committed to the project and to the further roll-out of the 20 mph speed limit across many more schools in this new financial year.

DFI: Temporary Promotions

2. Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the use of temporary promotions within her Department. (AQO 1934/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Day-to-day staffing issues, such as temporary promotions, are the responsibility of management, not Ministers. However, I am aware that temporary promotions are routinely used across the Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments as cover for vacant posts, where there is a clear business need and no immediate alternative available. Temporary promotions are, as the name suggests, temporary arrangements that are intended to be in place only until a permanent appointment can be made.

At the end of February, my Department had 159 temporary promotions in place from a workforce of 2,973 staff. That represents 5% of the workforce and is below the Northern Ireland Civil Service average of 9%. Indeed, my Department has the lowest percentage of temporary promotions in place across the Northern Ireland Civil Service. The Department for Infrastructure departmental board regularly monitors the number of temporary promotions across the Department. My officials are also working with the Civil Service Human Resources to do what is required to fill all affordable vacancies as quickly as possible.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for her answer. I note the figures that she gave, but, obviously, they are still too high, in the opinion of many people. Has the Minister or her Department carried out any research into the impact of the temporary promotion of staff in her Department, including the retention of workforce or the mental health and well-being of staff? Many will think that, if they are fit for a temporary promotion, why not a permanent one?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. As I said, they are matters that are dealt with by management, as opposed to the ministerial side. Of course, as Minister, I very much care for the health and well-being of my Department's staff. I am not aware of any research that has taken place, but that does not mean that it has not been done. I am happy to take the issue away, discuss it with my officials and provide the Member with an update.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her answers. I understand that vacancies have affected the delivery of services, including in Roads. At a Committee meeting recently, you said that you recognised the importance of improving rural roads. A 2019 audit report called for the structural maintenance budget to be more fairly allocated across the rural road network. Will the Minister commit to greater coverage of the rural roads network in the

structural maintenance budget, and will she cover those vacancies to deliver that programme?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. On the issue of vacancies, at the end of March 2021, the Department had 2,991 staff in post and 418 vacancies. It is important to point out that, of those vacancies, 86 were industrial posts and 332 were non-industrial, so they were administrative and part-time grades. We are working hard to ensure that we can fill affordable vacancies as quickly as possible. On the issue of structural maintenance, the Member will be aware that I set up a rural roads fund in the previous financial year and allocated £10 million to it.

I recognise the importance of trying to address regional imbalances across the North, but I also recognise the state of some of our rural roads and the impact that that has on local communities and businesses. Although I have yet to finalise my budget for the new financial year, I appreciate the importance of rural roads and the need for significant improvements to them.

3.00 pm

I remain committed to a rural roads fund, but the consideration that I have now is the amount of money that I will allocate to it. My intention is that, certainly, there will not be any reduction in the rural roads fund in the new financial year.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her answers. Whilst we all recognise that many civil servants have been working very hard throughout the pandemic, a recent court judgement gave a damning indictment of civil servants in her Department. I hasten to add that their time predated her tenure as Minister. Does she share my concerns about that, and what actions will be taken as a consequence?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. The Court of Appeal finding that the Member referred to relates to a procurement competition that was run in 2015. The court found that there was a manifest error in the Department's approach to the awarding of multiple term-type contracts across Northern Ireland. I am advised that the procurement process for those contracts has been amended significantly since 2015. In 2018, the Roads centre of procurement expertise (COPE) was reaccredited through a rigorous external assessment examination. However, as the Member says, the ruling is a cause of concern; it certainly is for me. As the Minister now in post, I obviously want to understand what happened, how it happened and what steps have been taken to ensure that it can never occur again. That is why I met my permanent secretary after the ruling, and I am now considering the next steps.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Rosemary Barton.

Mrs Barton: Thank you. No; I do not have a question.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her responses thus far. As she will be aware, she got a significantly increased capital budget for this financial year but the resource budget is largely standing still. Is she confident that she will be able to deliver on the capital budget with the allocations that have been made, particularly for the human resources in her Department. Cathal Boylan raised roads resurfacing, and I have a list the length of my arm of roads that need to

be tackled in North Down. If you get the money, will you be able to spend it?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He is right to make the point about the capital budget. We can do a lot with that budget in this financial year, but, of course, it requires an accompanying resource budget. The resource budget allocation is a real-time cut when you consider inflation. The truth is that it will be challenging, but I assure the Member that the matter is very much on my radar. I have been meeting my permanent secretary and senior officials in order to ensure that we have measures in place to allow us to maximise our capacity and to deliver on schemes right across Northern Ireland, given the capital investment that we have at our disposal this financial year.

Rail Halt: Craigavon

3. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether a rail halt for central Craigavon will form part of the regional strategic transport network transport plan. (AQO 1935/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. It is an issue that he has raised with me on a number of occasions. As previously stated, my officials are developing a new suite of transport plans, and the regional strategic transport network transport plan, which is known as the RSTNTP, is the first in line for completion. That plan will set out future investment and improvement for our strategic transport networks by road, rail and bus and will reflect my commitment to improve connectivity for the benefit of our economy and communities across the North.

Travel by rail is something that I feel very passionately about, and I am ambitious about what we can do to deliver better rail connectivity. Since coming into office, I have been clear that my priority is addressing regional imbalance, better connecting communities and, importantly, ensuring that we shape our places around our people, for our people and with our people. On Wednesday 7 April, along with the Transport Minister, Eamon Ryan TD, I was delighted to announce an all-island strategic rail review that will allow us to consider our rail network across this island and how we can improve it for everyone. Officials are working together to progress the review, and, in addition, my intention is to put the strategic transport plan out for public consultation later this year.

I recognise the potential that additional halts on our rail network could provide for areas such as Craigavon. I encourage the Member, when he is responding to the consultation, to reflect his views so that we can consider them as we shape our rail services in particular.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister. I have raised the matter with her several times to keep it in her head when it comes to the report's conclusions. Will the Minister agree that, if the only outworkings of the Belfast to Dublin high-speed rail link are for the benefit of the Belfast-Dublin economic corridor — the most recent report published by her Department said that it will get people into Belfast or Dublin more quickly — we will not provide economic opportunities to people who live along the railway line and that will be a totally missed opportunity?

Ms Mallon: I share the Member's analysis of that. We have had previous exchanges on transport as a key driver of regeneration in communities. Of course, when you want

to expand rail, there is the reality of budgetary constraints as well. The wonderful thing about the all-island strategic rail review is that, yes, it is looking at enhancements to the existing rail network, but it is also looking at opportunities to expand and to see rail as the regeneration catalyst that it is. I am hopeful that, by bringing all those strands of work together, we can see better rail connectivity for communities right across the island.

Mrs D Kelly: I join my Upper Bann colleague to promote the central area of Craigavon as a suitable location for a rail halt. I welcome the commitment by the Minister and Translink to the improvements at Lurgan railway station. However, Minister, there is a lack of integration between bus and rail services. The central area has a huge manufacturing base. What dialogue have you had with your Economy Minister colleague in the Executive about the integration of transport? What consultation or information is shared between Ministers on those matters?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. The regional strategic transport network plan, which I will be consulting on later in the year, is about looking at our road, bus and rail network up to 2035. That will provide an important opportunity for all of us to feed in to and shape that process. I am committed to working with all of my Executive colleagues as we try to deliver on our Programme for Government commitments. The Member is right to talk about the importance of transport corridors for economic growth and business links, and that is why I am very pleased that one of the strands of the all-island strategic rail review will be to look at rail connectivity to our international gateways, which are our ports and airports. We recognise the important role that transport corridors play in growing the economy and tackling the climate emergency.

Mr Beggs: The Minister's answer to date has been focused on road, rail and bus. Will the Minister acknowledge that to have a successful integrated transport system, we also need to have effective park-and-ride schemes and a network of walking and cycling routes?

Ms Mallon: I absolutely agree with the Member on that. I can see the conversion that is happening with Mr Beggs, which is great to see. In all seriousness, I say that park-and-rides are really important, which is why, as part of my blue-green fund, we are advancing a number of park-and-rides across Northern Ireland. The Member is right that it is about improving and strengthening our public transport network but that we have to encourage people to make that shift out of their private car into active travel and public transport. In order to do that, you have to give people choice. We need to make sure that we have safe active travel infrastructure for people and an inclusive, accessible and attractive public transport network. Recently, I was pleased to meet the Member and others at the all-party group on cycling to share some of the progress that my Department has made in that area. I very much appreciate the support from across the House in trying to progress that agenda.

Casement Park: Update

5. **Mr McCann** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Casement Park planning application. (AQO 1937/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since my announcement in October recommending planning approval for the redevelopment of Casement Park, my officials continue to make considerable progress towards issuing the final planning decision. Departmental officials have been working at pace to progress the required planning agreement, which must be in place before the final planning decision can be issued. The Departmental Solicitor's Office (DSO) and the GAA's legal team remain in regular contact about the details of the planning agreement, and both parties are keen to reach an agreement as soon as possible. I look forward to the final planning decision being issued for the project, as I am of the view that the project will give a real boost to sport across our island and to the local economy and will, finally, give the GAA its home in Ulster.

Mr McCann: The Minister is aware of the importance of the Casement Park project for the west Belfast community and, more widely, Gaels in Ulster. Will the Minister indicate when we can expect the final planning decision so that this highly anticipated investment can finally proceed? She knows that people have been waiting for years and years for this decision, and, hopefully, it can be made shortly. It can be done only when people have an indication of when that will be.

Ms Mallon: I agree with the Member that this will be an economic driver for the local economy in west Belfast and greater Belfast. It will also give a real boost to sport and all the benefits that come with that. I assure the Member that my officials are working at pace to progress this. It is, of course, right that we progress it at pace, but we must do so properly. My officials and I are committed to ensuring that all of the statutory processes are correctly completed in the quickest possible time frame.

Mr Humphrey: What meetings has the Minister or her officials had with the Mooreland and Owenvarragh Residents' Association (MORA) about Casement Park? Will she enlighten the House on the outcome of those meetings?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. My decision on 13 October to recommend planning approval for the new stadium at Casement Park followed a comprehensive assessment of the planning application by my officials, including extensive consultation with the relevant statutory consultees and the public. As Minister, I took all issues into consideration and all of the different views that were represented. I appreciate that this is not the decision that some residents wanted, but I have previously explained the reasons why I arrived at that conclusion. In doing that, I did not have any meetings with residents. However, as I said, I have closely examined and very carefully considered the representations on this planning application.

Hightown Incinerator

7. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has received a letter signed by some Members of Parliament in relation to the Hightown incinerator. (AQO 1939/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I confirm to the Member that I received a letter from the office of Sammy Wilson MP on 11 February of this year. The letter, which was endorsed by the eight DUP Members of Parliament, outlined strong support for the delivery of planning approval for the proposal and asked that I make a quick determination on the application. I

received further communication from Paul Girvan MP on 1 April to clarify that this letter did not represent his views on the proposal and that his view remains that my Department must decide on this application to bring the matter to a conclusion. He asked that the Department update its record to ensure that this view on the application is properly reflected.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am sure that she is as confused as I am by what the MP for South Antrim said.

Given representations from the council, councillors and many elected representatives across the entire region, not just south Antrim, will the Minister confirm the continued opposition to the Hightown incinerator, to which many, including me, have referred to as "RHI 2"? We want this incinerator planning brought to a conclusion rapidly so that we can bin this ridiculous project.

Ms Mallon: This application has attracted huge interest. In excess of 5,200 letters of objection and around 160 letters of support are associated with it. The Member will appreciate that, within planning, there are proper processes to be followed. That is what is occurring in this case, as in all cases. As soon as my officials are in a position to be able to make a recommendation to me, I will ensure that they do so.

Mr G Kelly: It is not often that I agree with Steve Aiken, but he described the position exactly as I would. Does the Minister agree that the assessment of the amount of waste that would be necessary for the capacity that has been talked about does not exist?

3.15 pm

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The question of the need for the facility is a matter for the applicant and DAERA. Given the passage of time and in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, my Department asked DAERA for an update on a statement of need in the context of the proposed development and the strategic and long-term needs for waste management and its circular economy in the North. A response is awaited from DAERA. However, the need for the facility is a key material planning matter for my planning officers to consider when making a recommendation to me on the application.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): A very brief question from Mr Allister.

Mr Allister: Does the Minister not agree that it is ridiculous to have waited for over seven years for a decision on that planning application? Meanwhile, councils cannot properly meet their statutory obligations, and we are exporting waste to be incinerated and dumped elsewhere. How is that helping to clean up our world?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I am keen to reach a resolution to that long-standing application for all involved. If a sound decision is to be reached, it is important that the planning process is completed properly. The necessary administrative processes are being undertaken, including requesting consultation advice from the necessary interested bodies and public authorities. Once all the processes have been undertaken, I assure the Member that my officials will make a recommendation to me.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes the period for listed questions. We now move to topical questions. Question 1 from Mr Doug Beattie has been withdrawn.

Harmony Lane, North Belfast

T2. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to state why her Department has been singularly unhelpful in blocking off Harmony Lane in North Belfast, given the considerable criminality that is happening in that area, about which he and his Court ward councillor colleagues recently met with the Housing Executive and Belfast City Council, when they outlined the problems that include illegal dumping; pollution of the river; antisocial behaviour; illegal traffic, including lorries crossing a bridge that is neither regulated nor checked; and drug dealing. (AQT 1232/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He highlighted a number of difficulties and problems that fall across a number of statutory agencies: my Department and DAERA, given that there is fly-tipping; the PSNI, given that there is drug taking; and the council. In fact, the Lord Mayor of Belfast wrote to my Department about that matter and my officials are engaging with him. I am happy to get an update on the latest position and provide that to the Member.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister. It is my understanding that the Lord Mayor has not yet had a response.

This morning, my party colleague the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Edwin Poots, visited the site, along with council colleagues and local residents. The Minister agreed to convene a multi-agency round-table discussion, including representatives from the Departments that the Minister mentioned and the police. Will the Minister assure the House, my constituents who live in the Glenside area and me that her Department will play an active role in that round-table discussion and multi-agency meeting?

Ms Mallon: I assure the Member that my Department proactively engages in a range of multi-agency meetings across Northern Ireland. My officials work and live in their communities, care deeply for them and are considerably proactive in addressing the multifaceted problems that are visited on many of our communities across the North. As my Department has always done, it will continue to engage proactively. It will certainly engage in the multi-agency meetings to which the Member referred.

Mid and East Antrim Borough Council: Concerns

T3. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she, as a Minister in the Executive, shares her concerns about the unfolding situation with the chief executive of Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, who authored an extremely contentious letter to the UK Government under the advice and direction of three DUP MPs. (AQT 1233/17-22)

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before the Minister answers, she will, of course, be aware that an inquiry by the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs is ongoing into matters relating to some disclosures on the withdrawal of staff from Larne port.

Ms Mallon: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have some very serious concerns about what appears to have

happened in this instance. As the Deputy Speaker said, I am also aware that the matter is subject to an inquiry by the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

I have no doubt that Members will have real concerns about what has emerged in recent days. One of the key questions that many people have is this: on whose behalf is the chief executive of Mid and East Antrim Borough Council acting? Is it the council members or a consortium of DUP MPs?

Ms McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for her answer. It is clear that she is as concerned as I am. Does the Minister agree that, regardless of whether it is on this issue or the DUP Minister messing about on other issues, the DUP is the common factor? Whether or not they agree with the protocol, its Ministers have to fulfil their legal duties.

Ms Mallon: The Northern Ireland protocol is a legally binding obligation, and all Ministers are required to fulfil their legal responsibilities. The SDLP has put forward a proposal to take a twin-track approach to the issues around the protocol, and it is that we work together to find pragmatic solutions to the difficulties that have emerged but that, at the same time, we work to maximise the opportunities that are there for our economy and communities, given the uniqueness of the situation in which Northern Ireland finds itself. Of course, I will continue, as Minister, to fulfil all my legal obligations in that regard, and I am very much committed to working with all Executive colleagues to ensure that we get the best possible outcomes for the people of Northern Ireland.

Unadopted Roads

T4. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what she is doing to address the issue of unadopted roads, which affects every constituent in the North of Ireland. (AQT 1234/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. My Department holds information on roads in private developments that are determined for adoption, and we manage the adoption of the road infrastructure through the private streets determination process. Unadopted private street sites are at various stages of progress, ranging from sites that have recently been granted planning permission to those that are largely complete. There are approximately 67 unadopted streets in the old Strabane Council area, and my officials continue to inspect those sites and engage with developers to encourage them to bring the infrastructure up to the required standard for adoption.

Mr McHugh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answer. Considering the impact of unadopted roads on communities, what enforcement strategy, for instance, is the Minister adopting to ensure that those roads are brought up to a standard that will allow people to have something as simple as getting their bins collected?

Ms Mallon: That is an issue in communities that are experiencing this. As I said, my officials work with developers to try to achieve the completion of developments, but, where required, the Department will not shy away from taking enforcement and legal action, given the importance of the issue to communities right across Northern Ireland.

Glider Phase 2: Update

T5. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on phase 2 of the Glider scheme, which will service north Belfast. (AQT 1235/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. Again, it is about providing attractive, inclusive and accessible public transport options. That is important, particularly given the climate emergency, and the Belfast rapid transit (BRT) 2 scheme is an important element of that. DFI teams, along with the consultants Atkins are actively continuing to work remotely on the development of the project, which is also a Belfast region city deal infrastructure project. A feasibility and options appraisal is being developed, and I hope to be in a position to consider its outcome shortly. An interim outline business case for the BRT 2 project was forwarded to the Belfast region city deal executive board on 12 August.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer, which has closed down my supplementary question. Is there any more detail on the route option and the indicative timeline, which the Minister touched on? The service will be a welcome addition to the green economy and to green recovery following the pandemic.

Ms Mallon: Officials are working through options for the routes, but I assure the Member that we will go out to consult on the options for north Belfast and for south Belfast. I encourage businesses, residents and elected representatives in north Belfast and south Belfast to feed into that consultation so that we can arrive at the best outcome for the preferred route.

Narrow Water Bridge: Update

T6. **Ms Ennis** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Narrow Water bridge project. (AQT 1236/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. The Narrow Water bridge project is of huge importance for boosting the local economy. It will also greatly enhance the tourism offering in the region. It is a commitment in New Decade, New Approach, and I recently met both councils in the area to hear their views and to reassure them of my commitment to the project. Work is ongoing on options, and I have given a commitment to visit both councils again to give them a progress report in the summer.

It is very important that we continue to work to advance the project, and it is particularly pertinent in the context of Brexit. I remain committed to working with Minister Eamon Ryan and the Taoiseach's office — I am very mindful of the Shared Island Fund — so that we can move the project forward because people have been waiting a very long time to see it realised.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Minister for her continued commitment to the bridge. She knows that I never miss an opportunity to raise it with her. As she said, it would be a massive boost to the connectivity around the lough for Counties Down and Louth, for the economy and, of course, for tourism.

When the Minister goes back to meet Louth County Council and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council, will she be in a position to present the options being discussed

between her and her counterpart, Minister Ryan? How soon after a final option is settled on does the Minister anticipate that we will see boots on the ground, ground broken and the start of construction of the Narrow Water bridge?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question and for her steadfast commitment to the project. We are due to discuss the Narrow Water bridge at the NSMC transport sectoral meeting, which has been rescheduled for early May. That will give me an opportunity to discuss the project with my ministerial counterpart, Eamon Ryan. I gave a commitment to both councils in the area that, when I go down in the summer, I want to give a progress report. Hopefully, after we have the transport sectoral meeting and the full NSMC meeting in the summer, we will have a much clearer picture of how we will take the project forward.

Castle Barracks, Enniskillen: Security Breach

T7. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what investigations she has carried out following the breach of security between last Friday evening and last Saturday morning at Castle Barracks, Enniskillen, a section of which is occupied by her Department, which also controls the use of the flagpole. (AQT 1237/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. The Member is referring to an incident where a tricolour was put up on DFI property at the DVA. Action was taken very quickly by our facilities staff, and the flag was taken down.

Mrs Barton: It happened in an area of historical and architectural significance in Enniskillen. What added security will you put in place to ensure that there is no breach in future?

Ms Mallon: I am not aware of an incident like that having taken place before, but I will ask my officials to look into it. It is important that we understand how it happened, and, if required, additional measures will be taken. I want to put on record my appreciation for DFI staff and their swift action in ensuring that things were taken down and normality was restored.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes Question Time. I invite Members —.

Mr Gildernew: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will the Speaker look at the language that was used by Mr Thomas Buchanan in the Chamber earlier in his question to the Minister? I have informed Mr Buchanan that I would be raising this point of order. During his question, Mr Buchanan referred to Members of this House advocating premeditated murder.

I believe, given the sensitivity of the subject, that that language is inaccurate, it is inappropriate and I believe that it could and will cause untold harm to people who are struggling with these situations and who are accessing services to which they are legally entitled.

3.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I appreciate the Member raising that point. We are all responsible individually for the use of moderate and sensitive language within the Chamber and, indeed, without it. I will reflect on that, and pass it on to the Speaker for his deliberations. Thank you.

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

Executive Committee Business

Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill: Second Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Second Stage of the Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill [NIA Bill 20/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, we now return to the Second Stage of the Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill.

Mrs Barton: This Bill has been brought forward to make minor amendments to the Horse Racing (Northern Ireland) Order 1990 to reflect the recent change in the named operator at Down Royal racecourse and to amend it accordingly. Making this change will allow for the reinstatement of payments to Down Royal and the racecourse at Downpatrick. Because the payments to Downpatrick were suspended, paying one racecourse and not the other could have created unfair competition in the market.

The fund that provides the payments is made up from a levy that has been collected from licensed bookmakers since 1961 and is administered by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. It was established to provide financial support to horse racing at Northern Ireland's two racecourses because of a decline in revenue, such as from gate receipts, as it was no longer necessary to attend a race to place a bet.

The payments go towards the cost of ensuring adequate safety measures for spectators and riders and that there are improved technical and personnel services in place to ensure proper operation of the races. However, there are issues in relation to online gambling on horse racing. Those are not for this Bill, but will have to be considered at another time. I support the Bill.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for his earlier explanatory introduction of the Bill. On behalf of the Alliance Party, I can say that we are content with the proposed amendment to the Horse Racing Order to amend the name and beneficiaries of the fund so that the current operators of Down Royal racecourse are eligible for support. We also recognise that this is an outstanding and necessary measure that the Minister has had to take.

Speaking separately as a member of the AERA Committee, I am acutely aware of the significant impact that COVID-19 has had on income streams for the horse racing industry and for bookmakers. I welcome the Department's consideration of this in its amendment to the 1990 order. Amending the 1990 Order as proposed will ensure that support is available under the fund to both current Northern Ireland racecourses. It will enable the resumption of payments from the fund and support the industry in its recovery from the impact of the pandemic. I do, however, remain hopeful that a future review of this legislation will consider the remit of the fund in respect of the numbers and types of sports, as well as venues, that can receive support. I hope that the Minister can respond positively in that regard later.

Additionally, I recognise the opportunity that the discussion presents for a review of gambling legislation and to move responsibility for the fund so that it sits alongside the responsibility for gambling and sport. I welcome the Department for Communities' consultation on the regulation of gambling in Northern Ireland and look forward to seeing further progress, and indeed specific legislation, on this matter to protect people as much as possible, particularly from addiction.

On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the proposal to amend the Horse Racing (Northern Ireland) Order.

Mr Harvey: I am happy to support the Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill at Second Stage. Given the difficulties that Down Royal has met with recently, it is evident that amendments to legislation are urgently required. The changes provided for in clause 1 will amend article 2 of the 1990 Order's definition of "horse racecourse operator" to include Downpatrick Race Club and Down Royal Park Racecourse Limited, the current operators of the racecourses at Downpatrick and Down Royal. I note that there is broad support for the proposed legislation from respondents to the consultation that was undertaken by the Department, including from Lisburn and Castlereagh Borough Council, the local authority for the area. I welcome the flexibility at clause 1 in respect of the future definition of a "horse racecourse operator", which will allow amendments to be made by resolution with the approval of the Assembly.

There should, of course, be an opportunity to reflect on the general merits of the legislation. There have been calls to extend support to greyhound courses and other businesses connected with racecourses that are not directly involved in horse racing. This must be balanced against the wider societal impact of on- and off-course gambling as well as online gambling. These issues cannot be viewed in isolation.

We must be mindful of the wider implications of change. It is my understanding that the Department for Communities, which has responsibility for gambling legislation, is considering a wide-ranging review of that legislation. I urge the Departments to work collaboratively. Cross-departmental cooperation will continue to be crucial to ensuring that policies on competitive sport, business activity and gambling are fair and balanced.

As a result of the express text of the 1990 Order, both Down Royal and Downpatrick have been unable to avail themselves of support for some time. Action is required to rectify that situation, particularly given the impact of COVID on those businesses. More generally, the intention of the current legislation should clearly be honoured in good faith. As such, I support the Bill and thank the Minister for bringing it to the House today.

Mr Carroll: This proposed legislation has moved through the Assembly quite quickly. While I do not sit on the Committee that scrutinises it, I do have some concerns that I want the Minister to address as best he can.

This legislation is being presented as a minor technical change to allow the new owner of Down Royal racecourse to avail itself of a system of funding that has been in place for decades. However, it appears to me, and indeed to some who responded to the consultation, that the outworkings of the Bill would or could further deregulate funding in an industry that is in need of more regulation.

By my reading, this Bill will allow a fully commercial and for-profit firm owned by the Dublin-based Merrion Property Group to avail itself of subsidy based on taxation of other companies — often, smaller traders.

Whatever purpose the legislation might have had in past decades, the amendment would be much more of a change in direction than just a technical tweak. My worry is that it will open the door to a worse problem, with big businesses able to avail themselves freely of a state-directed subsidy in order to maximise their profits. The industry is already known for questionable practices on gambling and animal rights. Anyone who knows anything about the gambling industry will tell you that the bookie always wins, not the punter. It is always the working class and poor people who lose out to the gambling industry, in devastating ways at times. When we consider the impact of gambling addiction on society, we see that there is clearly a great need for tighter regulation, but the Bill would see the deregulation of funding and those who stand to make a profit from gambling gaining even more.

In the light of all that, I find it disappointing that the Minister and the Committee seem to have agreed to plough ahead with the amendment when the option was on the table to conduct a fundamental review that would explore future options. In the context of a pandemic, when large businesses have availed themselves of significant government money and smaller businesses, traders and workers have suffered comparatively, it is simply not good enough to say that we do not have time to complete such a review. I find it difficult to support the legislation going forward without a better explanation for not conducting a proper review and a proper explanation of how the Bill could guarantee that a for-profit organisation is not set to line its pockets further with the subsidy. For that reason, I look forward to some clarity from the Minister.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I thank the Members who spoke on the Bill and for the widespread support across the House for the legislation moving to the next stage.

I appreciate the points that have been raised by Members. Some raised the issue of the ability of dog tracks to draw down funding of this nature, which is not available at this time. The Bill really picks up what was available under previous legislation, which ceased to happen after the sale of one of the racecourses. Consequently, both racecourses lost out. We did not think that that would be the case, but, in 2019, we were informed that, because of state aid issues in the European Union, Downpatrick would lose out as well the Down Royal.

Mr Carroll raised the issue of gambling per se. It is not a pursuit that I have ever engaged in, and, frankly, I do not understand those who do. I know that it can be addictive, but the bookmaker always wins ultimately. In essence, it is the bookmaker who will pay this, not anybody else. That will ensure that the industry of equestrianism — the keeping of horses, having high standards for the participation of those horses and providing appropriate support and all that — which is entirely different from the gambling side of it, is maintained. That is the situation with that, and it is not something that we can conflate with the issue of gambling, because that is dealt with by a separate Department — the Department for Communities — which has the responsibility for gambling and gambling legislation. I believe that it needs to be addressed and

renewed. My colleague Jim Shannon was one of the leading people to bring the issue of one-armed bandits to the attention of the Westminster Parliament. They were in many bookmakers' shops, and people lost massive amounts of money on them. Thankfully, he had some success in bringing that forward. Therefore, whilst I respect what Mr Carroll says, this is not the appropriate legislation to deal with it. That legislation would need to be brought forward by the Minister for Communities.

3.45 pm

I recognise that a fundamental review of the legislation and the fund is necessary. That review needs to deal with a wide range of complex matters, some of which Members have raised today, and will, by necessity, take place over a longer time frame. I brought the Bill forward to lift what is there already and enable it to continue. I will ensure that the matters raised today that are not covered in the Bill, such as extension beyond the currently named locations, are included in the scope of a future review, so that they can be addressed. My officials and I look forward to working closely with the AERA Committee as it begins the detailed and important scrutiny of the Bill. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill [NIA Bill 20/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Private Members' Business

'Academic Selection and the Transfer Test'

Mr Sheehan: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the recent publication of Ulster University's Transforming Education project's research paper on 'Academic Selection and the Transfer Test'; further notes that this is yet another report that outlines the psychological harm that academic selection causes to children; acknowledges the finding within the report that there is little evidence that social mobility is increased by academic selection; agrees with the conclusion articulated in the report that the current arrangements for school transfer at age 11 are damaging the life chances of a large proportion of the school population; and calls on the Minister of Education to act in the interests of children and the wider education system by ending the use of academic selection as a means of determining post-primary transfer.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List. Please open the debate on the motion, Mr Sheehan.

Mr Sheehan: At the outset, I want to say that we will also support the amendment.

The debate comes on the back of the publication of Ulster University's Transforming Education project's research paper on 'Academic Selection and the Transfer Test', which is the latest in a long line of reports and research that outlines the psychological harm that academic selection causes to children. The research also debunks the argument that academic selection leads to greater social mobility. The report tells us:

"There would seem to be little evidence that social mobility is increased by academic selection and there is considerable evidence that it generally does not happen."

In fact, it goes on to say:

"The evidence overwhelmingly indicates that the current arrangements for school transfer at age 11 contribute to the social and financial costs of a stressful process that serves to benefit a few (generally already privileged) pupils while damaging the life-chances of a large proportion of the school population."

I know that many in the Chamber went through the grammar sector, and I am aware that some who come from relatively disadvantaged working-class backgrounds attribute their life chances to the education and experience that they enjoyed in grammar schools. I respect that position, but they were the lucky ones, because they were among the less than 40% of 11-year-olds who passed the transfer test and were accepted into the school of their choice. Unfortunately, the flip side of that is that more than 60% of children failed the transfer test. The other side of

the academic selection coin is academic rejection, and that rejection falls mostly on children from a disadvantaged background. According to the report:

"the odds of a child securing a place at grammar school [are] five times less if they are entitled to free school meals compared to all other children."

Of those on the opposite Benches who had a positive experience of the transfer test and academic selection, I ask this question: how many youngsters, particularly boys, from the Shankill, Sandy Row or other unionist working-class districts are attending grammar schools? Much has been said over the past few years about underachievement among working-class Protestant boys, and it has been highlighted by many Members. I ask Members to look again at the evidence. Underachievement among that cohort of boys is the result not of their religion but of their working-class and disadvantaged backgrounds. Catholic boys from a similar socio-economic background suffer very similar levels of underachievement. Academic selection serves neither Catholic nor Protestant working-class children well.

The transfer test acts as a filter for social selection. Well-off children go to one type of school, and poor children get what is left. That is not to say that non-grammar schools are bad schools, but, again, the evidence shows that, when you end up with high concentrations of poverty in schools, which is what happens when you have a selective education system, those schools will struggle. That research evidence goes back many years. The Coleman report of 1966 and all research since tell us that the most powerful predictor of academic achievement is the socio-economic status of the child's family. The second most important predictor is the socio-economic status of the child's classmates. Quite simply, when children from disadvantaged backgrounds are concentrated in the same schools, disadvantage is reinforced.

The OECD has consistently argued for a better social mix of pupils in schools as a way to boost the educational performance of disadvantaged students. Learning in socially mixed classrooms where students from different backgrounds communicate their different experiences and perspectives encourages students to think in more complex ways. The evidence shows that high levels of social integration in schools create a win-win situation in which disadvantaged students and the high-flyers benefit, with increased educational attainment being the outcome. Positive peer role models are a vital component of any education system.

Of course, some will argue that our results at GCSE and A level are consistently better than students' results across the water in England and Wales. Be that as it may, but focusing on that aspect ignores the long tail of underachievement. In 2015, the well-known and respected educationalist, Sir Bob Salisbury, with whom many in this place will be familiar — he has done a lot of work in education in the North and with the Education Committee — told the Policy Forum for NI that the achievement gap here was the widest in Europe. He reported that no schools in England had such poor achievement as the lowest-achieving schools in the North.

The Minister needs to start a process that leads to improved educational outcomes. He should begin by setting aside his ideological support for academic selection

and looking at the evidence instead. Read the report: it tells us that selection does not raise achievement across the system and may be one of the main contributors to the long tail of underachievement in NI.

There is no other area of public policy that has so much academic and research evidence stacked against it. The evidence could not be clearer. That is why so many are opposed to academic selection for 11-year-old children. Let me list a few: the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child; the Equality Commission; the Human Rights Commission; the Children's Commissioner; the OECD; the trade union movement; and the Catholic hierarchy. It beggars belief that the Education Minister wants to continue with this failed and discredited policy of selection. It is time to stop defending the indefensible.

Underachievement does not just happen; it is the inevitable outcome of a policy that brands 60% of children as failures. The Ulster University report highlights the negative impact on the self-esteem of those who failed to gain a place at grammar school and how that trauma was often carried into adulthood, even by those in their 60s.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Just for clarity, can he inform the House whether he is calling for the abolition of grammar schools?

Mr Sheehan: No, I am not calling for the abolition of grammar schools; I am calling for the abolition of academic selection, which is completely distinct.

There are costs associated with underachievement other than the personal cost to children. People who leave school without educational qualifications are more likely to end up in the criminal justice system, and the rest of the population pays for that. They are more likely to end up in chronic ill health, which is another cost to our health service.

There has been considerable commentary about integrated education over the last number of weeks. A really integrated system should not be based solely on religion or community background; it must also take account of the socio-economic status of children and be a proper integration of our whole education system. That can never happen while academic selection is persisted with. It is time to end it now and create an education system that gives all our children the opportunity to realise their potential rather than end up on the scrapheap of failure.

4.00 pm

Mr McCrossan: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "school population;" and insert:

"further notes that the right to use academic selection is currently enshrined in law; and calls on the Minister of Education to give notice that he will repeal this legal provision by 2023 and replace it with a system that has the widest support and prioritises educational excellence for all without academic selection."

Mr Speaker: The Member 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 McCrossan: As SDLP education spokesperson, I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. The

issues surrounding transfer tests in Northern Ireland are controversial and divisive, but it is important that we have a mature and considered debate on the issue today, given the huge failings that we have all witnessed in the current system. The SDLP believes that it is imperative that pupils, parents and schools have clarity for the future, especially given the impact that the current pandemic is having on education in its entirety.

Before I move on to the details of the motion and our proposed amendment, I will take the opportunity to put on record my appreciation for the many teachers and school staff who have gone back into classrooms and schools across Northern Ireland in the past few weeks. It is important that we put on record our solid appreciation for our teaching and non-teaching staff across all schools. Despite working in intolerable conditions and being in uncharted waters, they are doing a fantastic job, and I wish them well in the weeks and months ahead.

In the context of today's debate, it is especially important to put on record that I fully appreciate, acknowledge and respect all parents who are pushing for the betterment of their children's education and future prospects. Today's debate should not target those parents. Rather, it should acknowledge their effort in manoeuvring through what, unfortunately, is a transfer-test mechanism that is the only game in town at present. Those parents need to be commended today and not vilified or shamed for wanting the best possible outcomes for their children, and I think that everyone in the House agrees on that.

Over the past year, the pandemic has had a major impact on education and on children's learning opportunities and educational attainment. We are not out of the woods yet, and a huge amount of work still needs to be done to ensure that the current cohort of children does not become the generation that lost out through no fault of its own.

The SDLP believes that, at its core, academic selection is grossly unfair and in major need of an overhaul. We have consistently called for that, and it remains deeply disappointing that, in 2021, the North and this Executive have continually failed to bring forward reform to better the educational outcomes for all our children. As SDLP spokesperson for education, I have consistently called on the Minister to intervene on transfer tests, especially given the events that have happened over the past year. It remains disappointing that those requests have fallen on deaf ears, as the Minister has continued to defend academic selection through the current unfair and unregulated process.

By way of background, academic selection and transfer tests have a long and chequered history in the North, from the Butler Act, which enshrined academic selection in law here in 1947, through the Dickson plan in 1969, which introduced a two-tier model of post-primary education in and around Craigavon, to the Burns committee established in 2000, which recommended the end of academic selection in the North. Perhaps the most fundamental move came in 2006, when the then Education Minister, Caitríona Ruane, abolished the old 11-plus examinations, with the last tests occurring in 2008.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: I will in a second. Despite the intentions of the former Minister and rather than its being a silver bullet for resolving the issue, the decision eventually led to the

opening up of unregulated transfer tests, over which both the current Minister and the Department of Education have deliberately had no control. I will now give way.

Mr Stalford: That segues neatly into what I was going to say. Is it not a fact that organisations such as the Association for Quality Learning (AQE) and Granada Learning (GL) simply would not exist unless there was parental demand for them and the services that they provide?

Mr McCrossan: The point is well made, and I thank the Member for raising it. This is a controversial debate, and there are many views in each and every household and community across Northern Ireland on it, and, indeed, in education itself, but we need to do what is right by our children and ensure that we protect them.

Following on from my previous point, the relationship, or lack thereof, has been found massively wanting during the pandemic. It is clear that the lack of oversight, especially with transfer tests going ahead, led to significant confusion, frustration and anxiety for many pupils and parents across the Province. That has once again reignited the debate on what the best way forward is that is sustainable, has political buy-in and represents the best interests of all children across Northern Ireland.

Many schools have taken the decision not to use transfer tests at all for their 2021 enrolment. A number have stated that they will not use transfer tests in 2022, either. Those moves have been welcomed by the SDLP, and I have publicly congratulated schools for taking that strong position in light of current circumstances.

The motion refers to Ulster University's very factual paper on academic selection and the transfer test. There are a number of key issues that I want to raise from it. Perhaps one of the most shocking statistic concerns social mobility in grammar schools: the paper states that only 13.7% of the grammar-school population is made up of children who are entitled to free school meals, as Mr Sheehan pointed out. It adds that the odds of a child securing a grammar-school place are five times less if they are entitled to free school meals. The report also raises considerable concern about the fairness of the old 11-plus exam paper. It claims that up to 30% of young people who took the exam could have been given the wrong grade, and it highlights the lack of regulation in the content of the current transfer exams, which are not aligned to the school curriculum.

Other key findings in the report concern the psychological impact that failing a transfer test can have on young people and their self-esteem well into adulthood. Those findings are startling and clearly show that there are major flaws in the system of administering transfer tests in Northern Ireland, particularly since children develop at various stages. It is cruel that 11-year-olds sit those tests; it needs to change.

I turn to the SDLP amendment. It is our firm belief that academic selection will continue well into the future in an unregulated and inconsistent manner, which will achieve very little in terms of providing better educational outcomes for all our children, certainty and clarity for parents, and a fair and equitable educational system. The first port of call must be to remove academic selection from the statute books and provide a firm date for that; otherwise, we will continue on the same unpredictable, grossly unfair and cruel path.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: Yes.

Mr Allister: Does the Member think that having another chest-beating debate about this issue so that certain Members can parade their socialist credentials stands in sharp contrast to the fact that, although all those people have been in the House for many years, none has taken the opportunity to change the law by bringing forward a private Member's Bill? Some of the same people, of course, had the benefit of a grammar-school education but come to the House to rail against such opportunities for others. If you are serious about this, would it not have been better to have brought forward a Bill rather than yet another wasteful motion?

Mr McCrossan: I have not had the luxury of lingering round these corridors for as long as the Member, but these institutions have been down for three years. I hope that, in the time ahead, we can have debates that are in the best interests of our people.

The date of 2023 would give sufficient time to the Minister and the Department to consult widely on the issue, finally deal with the fundamental flaws of the current system, and bring forward serious alternative proposals to be considered by the House on the future of educational excellence in the North.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: I want to get finished, Minister; you will have your chance later.

The SDLP believes that the amendment is a practical step in the right direction rather than having a vague and aspirational motion. We also recognise that we need consensus on the issue if we are to realistically offer an alternative system. We hope that other parties have thoroughly considered the amendment and, equally, can support it.

The issues around transfer tests are not easy fixes, and there may not be a one-size-fits-all solution to them. Nonetheless, they have to be addressed in a realistic and pragmatic way by the House and the Minister. We cannot afford to bury our heads any further in the sand for any longer than they have been to date, nor can we continue to allow countless numbers of children—

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: — to be consistently failed by our education system. I will let the Minister in.

Mr Weir: I appreciate that the Member's time is brief. I have been listening intently to the Member for the past nine minutes. He rightly says that he wants clarity and certainty. Will he outline what the SDLP, or his own, alternative is to academic selection? We have heard about abolishing something, but, as yet, he has simply said, "We want to have agreement on something else"; no proposal on what the alternative is has been put forward by the Member.

Mr McCrossan: The Minister makes a valid point. I have recognised quite publicly that there is no alternative to the current situation, but that does not mean that those who are in a position of influence and power, such as you, Minister, should not be exploring what is in the best interests of our children. One thing is certain: a bad

system should not sit there because there is no alternative. It should be replaced or removed in its entirety, in the interests of our children. The current system is absolutely cruel and needs to be looked at immediately. Minister, you are the Minister for all of the children in Northern Ireland, not just those at grammar schools.

Mr Newton: I oppose the motion and, indeed, the amendment. It is predictable that, of the 12 reports produced, Sinn Féin selected the one on post-primary selection and transfer tests. This is yet another attempt by Sinn Féin to destroy Northern Ireland's grammar schools. For Sinn Féin, it is about getting rid of the transfer test and thereby destroying grammar schools.

Sadly, the outline of the motion is in line with the approach taken by the Chair of the Education Committee, Alliance's Chris Lyttle. Across the mandate, Chris Lyttle has demonstrated that his objective is to reject the ambitions of the vast majority of East Belfast parents who support the constituency's grammar schools. No matter how he tries to dress it up, removal of selection will destroy the grammar schools in all but name. The question to the Alliance's Chris Lyttle, in calling for the removal of selection tests, is similar to that posed by the Minister: does he advocate the English-style comprehensive system? What impact would that have on our current non-selective schools?

In East Belfast, we have three non-selective schools.

Mr Lyttle: Does the Member wish to give way?

Mr Newton: We have Ashfield Boys' High School and Ashfield Girls' High School, both of which have excellent records of achievement, and Dundonald High School, the principal and staff of which are working extremely hard, and they need support and investment. Those three schools need to be aided and encouraged. What they do not need is the destruction of East Belfast grammar schools and the implications that that would have for them as non-selective schools.

In the report, the authors confirm —.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for giving way. It is a shame that the debate has descended and turned quickly into some sort of constituency-based attack on me. There are multiple other non-selective systems across the globe that we could study and draw from in order to improve our system. I would be glad to engage with the Member on those issues. I always enjoy supporting all of our excellent schools in East Belfast, which are envied.

Mr Newton: The question is this: if we remove selection, do we destroy the grammar schools? Yes, we do.

In the report, the authors confirm that transfer tests remain popular with parents. Around 50% of pupils sit one test or the other, and a proportion of pupils even sit both tests. The authors have challenged the social mobility aspect of grammar-school attendance and measure it only by school meals, and I will come back to that. The DUP supports parental choice. We support the right of parents to opt out of selection. However, we also have to respect that there is strong parental demand for selection. We also support the legal rights of schools to use selection for post-primary education.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Newton: I do not have time.

The Alliance Party still pretends to support grammar schools. That is being politically dishonest. Alliance, like Sinn Féin, wants to get rid of the transfer tests. If selection falls away and transfer tests are done away with without having a sustainable alternative, Northern Ireland would be left with a small number of private schools that are accessible only to a small number of affluent families. Since 2010, what sets a grammar school apart is the ability to charge fees. The private schools will be unaffordable to the vast majority of the population.

That narrow position, concentrating only on selection, does nothing to address the issue of underachievement. Too often, we have focused on the narrow debate around selection without giving full consideration to the range of other factors that contribute to educational underachievement.

The expert panel established by the Minister under New Decade, New Approach to address educational underachievement has identified a range of issues and policy changes that are needed. It says that, first, we need to redirect the focus to early years and, secondly, to champion the mental health and well-being of pupils, which is particularly important as we come out of the pandemic.

However, important overall is promoting a whole-community approach to education and supporting the professional leadership and continuous professional development in our schools and investing in our school teaching staff.

4.15 pm

I want to finish with this story about a family who are my constituents. Dad was a motor mechanic, and he also worked part time during the evenings in another job, two evenings a week. Mum worked in a local shop. They lived in a terraced house in the inner-city area of east Belfast. They had two children. They were ambitious for their children, a son and a daughter. Their daughter first took the transfer test and went to a local grammar school. She did not go to university but followed a professional career in the financial services sector. The son passed the transfer test and attended a different local grammar school. He went to the University of Oxford, where he was top of his year.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr Newton: He went on to the University of York and is now working as a corporate lawyer.

Mr Speaker: The Member needs to conclude his remarks.

Mr Newton: Neither pupil got free school meals, thereby confusing the statistics.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Robbie Butler, I say to Members that, at the moment, you will not be allowed any additional minutes for interventions. Otherwise, we will not get all the Members who want to speak included in this session in the time that is allocated, if every Member takes their five minutes. As I said, I will not give one minute for interventions.

Mr Butler: As the education spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party, I put it on notice that we will not be supporting either the motion or the amendment. However, we welcome the debate. At the outset, I will say that most

of the debate so far has been well intended. I do not believe that there is anyone in this Chamber who does not want the best outcome for each of our pupils in Northern Ireland, regardless of whether they are absolutely opposed to academic selection or a champion of academic selection.

I would much rather that today's debate were about the transformation of education. What does the transformation of education look like? I have some ideas, but I do not know exactly. The people who do have a good idea are the parents and the pupils out there. Today, we are telling them what our ideology is or what your ideology is, and we do not have pupil and parent participation. They would be the recipients of what we would do today, and we would not have designed something better than what is there. That could not be better drawn out than by the year that we have just had. I make no apologies for resting on what I learned over this past year and a bit through COVID when we had some protracted discussions and some non-discussions about what we would do for the P7s of 2021. I am going to rest today's argument on what we did with those children and the inflexibility of some people to, perhaps, courageously move to identify what should have happened for those pupils.

I welcome the report. Not one of us needs to be afraid of an academic report on trying to do things better. It talks about the psychological harm. Let me put on record that I have constituents — pupils — who have been psychologically harmed by the fallout from the transfer debacle this year.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way and for pointing out that very important reality. Does he agree that the reason for that damage to those young people is the uncertainty and the flip-flopping by the current Minister?

Mr Butler: I cannot say that, but I will say that I believe that, had there been political support across this House, we could have done something. It was done for GCSE and A-level pupils. I accept that there are difficulties with that, and there are well-made arguments about that. However, when you look across the educational stakeholder groups and those who feed into it, you see that perhaps there is a fundamental problem where power lies and maybe the inability of the Minister, to give him his place, possibly to act in that regard. I disagree with the answer that I got on that, but the answer may well be right.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: If you do not mind, I will reiterate this point on the psychological impact. Let me talk about our failure to adequately support somewhere in the region of 14,000 to 15,000 pupils who, in good conscience, went through P1 and P2 right up to P6 and P7 and entered into a process that was not facilitated in the end. I have a number of pupils, but I am thinking of one in particular. I will not name her, because I do not have permission. That young girl is in a position that I have not known any child to be in. I know that there are well-made arguments about the psychological impact on other people. I am one of those children who went through secondary school education. I failed the 11-plus. I wrote a letter to myself about a year and a half ago, and I put it out there, because I understand that. If we are going to have a discussion about it, we need alternatives. At least I put an alternative to the Committee and to the Minister. It was not taken up.

We should not be afraid of change, but, unless the change is better and can be proven to better the lives of those children and to tackle educational underachievement, you deal with what you have got. Guess what? That is parental choice, and it is pupil choice. It is not perfect. I accept that. There might be something better that suits and that is designed by parents and pupils, but even academics do not agree on that. I engage with academics across grammar, secondary and primary schools. There is passion, but everybody has a different idea about how the process should go and what is better. I will give way to the Chair of the Committee for Education.

Mr Lyttle: I will be brief, given that the Member does not have an extra minute. Does the Member agree that the Education Committee commenced last May the type of engagement that he called for in order to avoid the chaos that has ensued for this year's P7 cohort? Does he agree that we have to do all that we can to ensure that nothing like that chaos occurs for next year's P7 cohort?

Mr Butler: Absolutely. I welcome the Committee Chair's intervention. To be fair to him, in the conversations that we had, he was very proactive about trying to find a solution. He is right that we have a cohort of P6 pupils who do not know what is happening. Perhaps the better and stronger debate would be to sort out what we are doing this year.

I will put on record again — I am not getting my extra minute, guys — that if there is a discussion to be had, it is about the transformation of education. If you have the answer, bring it to us. When you have the answer, we will look at it. The answer is not there yet.

Mr Lyttle: Alliance Party policy is that academic selection is an unfair, unnecessary and flawed approach to post-primary admissions. The Ulster University research is yet another report that supports that position, stating:

"Rather than promoting social mobility and opening pathways through merit, academic selection seems to achieve exactly the opposite. While promising increased choice, it actually diminishes it, as it increases social segregation within communities. Selection does not raise achievement across the system and may be one of the main contributors to the long tail of underachievement in NI. It is traumatic for many children, creating damage which often endures into adulthood. It often distorts the curriculum of children in primary and post-primary schools and achieves little other than protecting the advantages of a few."

The report goes on to state:

"the DUP seem to ignore the negative impact of selection on ... working-class"

communities, while:

"Sinn Féin continue to be somewhat ambivalent despite their public pronouncements about removing selection."

That is an important point, and it is perhaps a fair challenge that Sinn Féin will want to respond to. When Sinn Féin had the Education Ministry, its Minister abolished statutory 11-plus tests but did not prohibit the use of academic criteria for post-primary admissions. The Sinn Féin Minister of Education could have introduced

legislation to prohibit the use of academic criteria for post-primary admissions. It is fair to acknowledge that, ultimately, the reform will require a courageous Minister of Education to mandate non-academic criteria.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: I will give way briefly. Be brief, though.

Mr O'Dowd: For Members' information, Caitríona Ruane brought draft legislation to the Executive. It was blocked.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Lyttle: That is a helpful clarification, and it is something that we need to look at.

Other Members mentioned that legislation on the issue ought to be brought and debated in order to, as I say, deliver non-academic criteria for post-primary admissions in a way that is similar to how it is done for primary admissions. Alliance will, therefore, support the motion and the amendment, but they will not deliver the change and reform that are needed.

Furthermore, whilst we continue to debate the issue, this year's cohort of P7 children has been subjected to post-primary transfer chaos because of the failure of the Minister of Education to introduce fair common contingency criteria after the disruption of transfer tests by the COVID pandemic. Children and families were failed. A better approach should have been taken for them this year. This chaos cannot be revisited on next year's cohort. Common contingency criteria must be put in place.

Whilst Alliance has a clear policy against academic selection, this cannot be reformed without adequate planning and preparation. There are alternative approaches. The World Economic Forum produces a Global Competitiveness Report on the state of the world's economies, which ranks countries according to pillars of competitiveness. Frequently, countries such as Finland and New Zealand are cited as exemplars in successful approaches to education. Finland has selection at age 16. However, its choice is augmented by examination results and interviews. New Zealand has a comprehensive, all-ability approach to education. Other countries, such as Belgium, have genuine, different pathways in general, technical, vocational and arts approaches.

We need fundamental reform of education and the independent review of education, recommended by the Alliance Party, gives an opportunity for robust consideration of this matter and for an Education Minister, from whichever party, to give full consideration to the implementation of whatever recommendations come forward from that.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you.

Mr M Bradley: I speak against the motion and the amendment as they stand. This call, which seeks to cease academic selection, could lead to the abolition of grammar schools in Northern Ireland. Are we advocating the introduction of a fully comprehensive system?

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to my friend for his giving way. Does the Member agree with me that it would be a brave MLA for East Belfast to go to the parents of kids at Grosvenor, Bloomfield Collegiate, Strathearn — all the

grammar schools that exist in that constituency — and tell those parents that they seek the effective abolition of those schools?

Mr M Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention. An MLA saying that about any grammar school, in any county in Northern Ireland, would have difficulties.

Ms Armstrong: Will the Member give way?

Mr M Bradley: I will.

Ms Armstrong: Does the Member agree that a motion was accepted by every single person? The House did not divide on the independent review of education. That does not protect any sectors. We have already done this.

Mr M Bradley: I thank the Member for her clarification.

It is my understanding that the abolition of selection and the removal of grammar schools could see a proliferation of private schools across Northern Ireland, which will serve only those with significant income, who can afford to pay for such schooling.

What are the proposers' preferred criteria for selection? That is unclear. Is a criterion some sort of hereditary selection, based on an older brother or sister or a family member being in the school or having attended the school? Is it based on proximity to the school? Academic selection may not be perfect, and I would like to see some adjustments to the selection process. Children have a right to apply and to influence the choice of the school that they wish to attend, based on what is best for their needs and interests.

Current academic success should be valued and enhanced. Both grammar and non-selective schools offer a fantastic opportunity and deliver excellent academic outcomes for our young people. Our pupils continue to consistently outperform their counterparts elsewhere in the UK in examinations, as has been alluded to. Many schools across the education system have never used academic selection or use it only partially, and they also get absolutely exceptional results. We welcome and support those schools and do not intend to force academic selection on anyone.

The DUP supports academic selection and the legal right of schools to use it for post-primary admissions. Unless schools choose an approach that takes them beyond what is in the law, admissions criteria are up to individual boards of governors. We fully respect that. We also support parental choice, and we respect the fact that there is strong parental demand for selection. Abolishing transfer tests will restrict choice and opportunity, and one cannot support grammar schools while wanting to get rid of transfer tests.

This party will support a single system of transfer test to make the process as accessible and straightforward as possible, unlike the current system where pupils have to undergo two systems and multiple exams. Change is inevitable.

The Assembly needs to address educational attainment beyond fixed positions on selection; not focus on the narrow debate around selection but give weight to the range of other factors that contribute to educational underachievement. The expert panel established by the Education Minister under NDNA to address educational underachievement has identified a range of areas where

policy changes are needed: early years; championing emotional health and well-being; promoting a whole-community approach to education; and supporting the professional learning and well-being of school leadership — all have yet to be brought to the Chamber.

However, we need to commit to addressing those issues, and we should be under no illusion: that will require broad political support and appropriate funding. The expert panel will consider necessary actions as part of its final recommendations. I acknowledge that change is needed, but that change must have buy-in from all political parties, not just a few.

4.30 pm

Ms Brogan: I support the motion and the amendment. Twenty years ago, the United Nations committee monitoring the Convention on the Rights of the Child described the academic selection practised here as an “excessive burden” on the child. In 2016, the UN committee called for the practice of unregulated post-primary admission tests to be abolished. In 2017, the Children’s Commissioner called for an immediate end to the use of academic selection. She described it as “discriminatory” and as having:

“a further detrimental impact on the educational outcomes of economically deprived children and young people.”

In 2018, the Human Rights Commission criticised the current two-tier system of education within which children from poorer socio-economic backgrounds are disadvantaged. The most recent research undertaken by Ulster University has found that academic selection:

“facilitates a form of social segregation”

that results in a “concentration of disadvantage”.

Supporters of academic selection talk of social mobility and level playing fields. They suggest that every child has an equal chance of climbing the ladder of opportunity, but the evidence does not support that.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. On that point about social mobility, is the transfer test the problem, or is the problem, perhaps, that we are measuring success by pupils attaining five good GCSEs and A levels? For example, when I joined the Fire Service, I did not need GCSEs or A levels. Now, the entrance level for the Fire and Rescue Service is GCSEs, and I can tell you that GCSEs do not make you a better firefighter. Are we looking at the right things when we look at how we value our children and what they are good at?

Ms Brogan: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree that there are other issues that we can discuss, but academic selection is a good starting point.

The Ulster University report notes that a child entitled to free school meals is five times less likely to secure a place at a grammar school, as has already been mentioned today. To me, that is not equality or a level playing field; it is inequality and the transfer of privilege.

Serious concerns have also been raised about the effect of the transfer test on the mental health and well-being of children. Stormont’s mental health champion previously made calls for transfer tests to be cancelled, given the

additional stress and anxiety that children and young people have faced because of the COVID pandemic. She noted that such stress and anxiety can:

“increase their risk of developing mental illness in later life.”

In fact, in the last academic year, many school leaders were ahead of the Minister and cancelled transfer tests in their school for that year because of the pandemic. Again, a range of schools across the North has cancelled the transfer test for this academic year. That indicates to me that there is a will and a way for change. It is certainly time for change.

Research indicates that some children who were not successful in attaining a place at a grammar school never regained their confidence or overcame that sense of having failed. I do not want any child across the North to feel at the age of 11 that they have failed. We must do better for our children. We need a fair and inclusive education system that works for everyone. I call on Minister Weir to listen to the evidence. Academic selection puts immense and unnecessary pressure on our children, and it creates an unfair divide. Now is the time to end academic selection and end those inequalities.

Mr Stalford: I intend to speak in defence of the concept of parental choice and in defence of grammar schools. First, I have to declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Braniel Primary School. My daughter is in P6, so she is going through the transfer process at present. The reason why that is happening is because I do not believe in denying others the opportunity that I had. I consider it to be the greatest start in life that I managed to secure an education at Wellington College Belfast, an excellent school in the heart of my constituency. That was achieved through academic selection. The alternative to academic selection is not selection on the basis of ability but selection on the basis of ability to pay. My family could not have availed itself of that option. Mention has been made of kids —.

Mr O’Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: Just one second. Mention has been made of kids who were entitled to free school meals: I was one such child at Wellington College.

Mr O’Toole: I really appreciate the Member giving way. I agree with him that Wellington College is an absolutely excellent school. It is one of the schools in south Belfast of which we can all be proud. Does the Member agree that Wellington College is excellent not because of what happened to the kids before they went there but because of the excellence of the school and the teachers and the kids’ experience there? We should try to broaden that out to as many kids as possible.

Mr Stalford: I certainly feel very strongly that, when English direct rule Ministers came here, they did not understand the concept of a working-class grammar school. By and large, such institutions do not exist in GB, whereas many grammar schools in Belfast are attended by children and young people with an extremely diverse socio-economic background.

Mr O’Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: Just one second. That was certainly my lived experience at Wellington College, as is the case in other schools.

I hope that those in favour of the motion have the courage to go to the doors of their constituents and tell them that they are in favour, effectively, of abolishing grammar schools. If you do not have selective criteria, that is exactly what you are in favour of: you are advocating for the abolition of grammar schools. There is no point in giving your constituents honeyed words about supporting grammar schools when you know that the abolition of academic selection —

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: Just one second, Mr O'Dowd.

Mr O'Dowd: You let Mr O'Toole speak.

Mr Stalford: I like him more *[Laughter.]* If you remove academic selection, you know what you are doing to grammar schools and the implications of that.

Mr O'Dowd: Flattery will get you nowhere.

The Member claims that there are socio-economically mixed grammar schools in Belfast. The evidence does not stack up to back his claim.

Mr Stalford: As I listen to some contributions, I am minded of Churchill's quote:

"Socialism is the philosophy of failure, the creed of ignorance, and the gospel of envy."

I do not want to deny any child the opportunity to take their academic career as far as they wish to take it, and grammar schools are an excellent way to do that.

Quality education accessed on the basis of ability or on the ability to pay is the choice with which we will be faced.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: I will give way if Mr Lyttle wants to tell us why he thinks that Grosvenor Grammar School should be abolished.

Mr Lyttle: This East Belfast Alliance MLA's vision is for equal educational opportunity for all children in East Belfast. I am privileged to have been given a mandate for that vision on three separate occasions and will happily do so again.

If children are entitled to free school meals, they are five times less likely to secure a place at a grammar school.

Mr Stalford: As I said, I do not know whether the Chair of the Education Committee attended a grammar school, but I find it remarkable that so many people who attended grammar schools are determined to tear them down. They availed themselves of the opportunity provided by a grammar-school education, but they wish to deny my children that opportunity. I do not wish to deny my children that opportunity. I want my children to enjoy the same benefits that a grammar-school education afforded me in my life.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. It is interesting to listen to those socialist Members who would remove grammar schools and have consistently taken that approach. It is rather like pulling up the drawbridge.

They have almost the same attitude when they oppose the public's right to buy Housing Executive properties.

Mr Stalford: The Member is absolutely right. It is kicking the ladder away and preventing other people —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Stalford: — from taking the opportunities that they had.

Ms Hunter: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion on the important issues of academic selection and the transfer test. I support the amendment tabled by my party colleagues.

I will focus my remarks on the mental health and well-being impact that academic selection and the transfer test can have on our young people. The Ulster University report to which the motion refers outlines the impact that failing the transfer test can have. I feel strongly that academic selection at the age of 11 is quite simply wrong. As my party colleague said, the SDLP believes that academic selection is unfair and in need of reform. I agree with him that it is disappointing that, in 2021, we still have not done enough to ensure better educational outcomes for all our young people in Northern Ireland.

As the Ulster University report states:

"It is challenging to find any arguments made by researchers in favour of a selective system of education and, indeed, there is 'a broad consensus against grammar schools among Educationalists.'"

Mr Butler: Will the Member give way?

Ms Hunter: Not at this time, because we do not get an extra minute. Sorry.

The report goes on to state:

"There is evidence that failing to gain access to a grammar school has a negative impact on self-esteem."

It does, and I have seen that at first hand, especially in my time at school. Children feel humiliated if they do not get into the school that they want or perhaps if they do not get the result that they want. It weighs heavily on their shoulders and continues to, way past the time that they go to university or choose not to. It is ludicrous that, in this day and age, when we have such a better understanding of issues surrounding mental health and well-being and know the impact that our formative years can have on us later in life, we continue to have an education system whereby a real outcome for our children can be low self-esteem.

This was mentioned by a Member who spoke previously, but a notable concern for me is that greater opportunity can be available to children from affluent families, who have access to more money. That perpetuates, in many ways, the postcode lottery and inequalities, because a child from one side of the town may have easier access to education-based opportunities than a child from another side of the town. We can do better than that.

The report also states:

"these effects can endure into adulthood with attitudes to education, even by those in their 60s, influenced by whether they 'passed' or 'failed'"

an examination that took place around half a century before. That is shocking and, indeed, very sad.

Our education system should be building up young people, supporting them and making them resilient, confident and capable of tackling life's many challenges. It should not contain an integral process that impacts on their mental health, well-being and level of self-worth. Members across the House will share my concerns about the scale of the mental health crisis here in Northern Ireland. The pandemic has greatly exacerbated that crisis, especially for our young people. A survey last year found that 12.6% of children and young people here suffer from common mood disorders. As was mentioned previously, the mental health champion, Siobhán O'Neill, has warned of the devastating effects of the pandemic on children. In that troubling context, this debate is taking place today. I have said today and previously in other debates that, as we begin to emerge from the pandemic, we have an opportunity to reshape our society and make much-needed changes to several of our systems and to public services —.

Mr Butler: Will the Member give way?

Ms Hunter: I am not done just yet. Sorry, Robbie. If I finish within time, absolutely.

We have an opportunity to reshape our society and make much-needed changes to several of our systems and to public services so that they work better and for everyone, whether those changes be to healthcare or, indeed, our education system.

To conclude, although I have focused my remarks —.

Mr Butler: *[Inaudible.]*

Ms Hunter: No, you will get in at the end. Although I have focused my remarks today on the well-being impact of our academic —.

A Member: It had better be worth it, Robbie.

Ms Hunter: Sorry?

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to continue. Do not invite anyone else to speak, because others will not get the chance at all.

Ms Hunter: As others have outlined, there are many reasons to end the use of academic selection. There have been interesting contributions today, and I recognise that this is a controversial debate.

My background is that I was educated in Northern Ireland in a grammar school, but I was also educated in the States, both for primary and secondary education. I found it really interesting there that there was no test at 11 years old, but some of my classmates chose not to go into higher or further education, while others ended up attending Yale, Stanford or even Harvard. Today is an opportunity to see and explore, to look outwards for opportunities for how we can reform and to collaborate while doing so.

There are 15 seconds left, if the Member wants to come in.

Mr Speaker: We are excluding Members. Unfortunately, I cannot cut the time any more than it is being cut. The Member has been offered an intervention. If you want to take it, you have one second. Your time is up.

Some Members: *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: I am just making the point that we do not have enough time to bring in all Members. I regret that.

Mr Nesbitt: That one second could have been his most famous intervention of all time.

I stand both as a grammar-school boy, from a grammar school in east Belfast, which seems to be the centre of the academic universe for this debate, and as the current chair of a board of governors of a non-selective post-primary school in my constituency. I have seen both sides of the argument. It seems that we are discussing just one small piece in a very large jigsaw.

We send children to school at the age of four and hope that they will stay there until 16, 17 or 18. We need to take a bigger look at what we are trying to achieve for our children.

4.45 pm

I have always believed that there is a spark of ability, creativity and talent inside every child. It is our job, and that of parents and teachers, to create the circumstances in which the child can find that spark and develop it. A lot of my thinking is influenced by the writings and thoughts of the late, great Ken Robinson, a professor of creativity, who talked about the "element" in children.

When I went to post-primary school, I did so, in the language of the day, as a dunce. That is how I was regarded. In any academic test, you could guarantee that I would come twenty-third out of 24 in the classroom. My peers and teachers had written me off. I suspect, although they were too polite to say so, that my parents had written me off too. Do you know what changed everything? A wet Wednesday afternoon. It rained so hard that the playing pitches were flooded and, for something to do, the teachers sent us on a cross-country run. It turned out that I could run. I was challenged that if I could do so well out there, could I not find a classroom in which I could do a bit better than twenty-third out of 24. That was the first time that a teacher or adult gave me a reason to believe that my natural place in life might not be twenty-third out of 24. That transformed me, and I left school with an Irish schools athletics vest and a ticket to a fairly famous university.

Was that because it was a grammar school or was it because it was a school that realised that there are multiple intelligences? Do we not put too much emphasis on one intelligence, which we call "academic"? Should we not think about the fact that, inside every child, there are multiple intelligences and that one can spark the other?

When it comes to selection, I remember the late Gerry Burns. It must be over 20 years ago that Martin McGuinness commissioned him to look at the issue. As part of that research, the Department of Education conducted what it claimed was the biggest public opinion survey that we had ever undertaken in this country. It was a household survey. I do not have the results to hand, but I remember that a significant majority of parents were in favour of academic selection. Equally, however, a very large majority of parents were against the 11-plus. They wanted something better and fairer. However, I have not heard that fairer/better alternative in the debate. If we could only step back and look at the full jigsaw, we would probably find how we want to recalibrate and reconfigure it.

I would love to support the motion or the amendment, but I am afraid that I can do neither. I was tempted by the amendment, but the time frame is not realistic.

We also need to think about social mobility, as that is part of the debate. Was it not the late, great John Hume who said that it was the 11-plus that allowed him to be socially mobile?

There is merit in selection. Would a school select its choir by saying that the first 50 children through the school gate on Monday morning were the choir? Would you select your Gaelic football team, Association football team or rugby football team from a ballot? No, there is selection in life. We know that. We had to be selected to stand for office and be picked by the electorate at the election.

There is merit in looking at it again, but this debate is too narrow.

Mr Speaker: I call Kellie Armstrong. The Member has approximately three minutes.

Ms Armstrong: I will talk fast, Mr Speaker, and will not take any interventions, especially not from those on this side of the House who have been giggling. Like my colleague Chris Lyttle, I support the motion and the amendment.

I am just a mummy and have come to the House as a mummy. I did not put my child through the 11-plus or the post-transfer test, as she was going to an all-ability integrated school where it was not needed. That is what we should be thinking about.

I heard Members saying that the Alliance Party is attacking grammar schools. We are not. Just do a different transfer test or something that does not test children at the age of 10 or 11. Over the past number of years, the Alliance Party has put in its manifestos that the age of 14 would be a better time to test, but that has been completely ignored by many. Fourteen is the age at which children pick their GCSEs, so that is a better time to decide whether their future is going to be down an academic path or a more practical path. It is about giving all children the opportunity.

I did the 11-plus, back in the bad old days. I am sorry to burst people's bubbles, but it has changed, completely and fundamentally. It is nothing like what it was in those days. Children are sitting five or more tests, and parents have paid for tutors. People in my area have to pay £10 for the boat, plus all of the mileage, there and back, to go to the post-primary school that is holding the test. It is an expensive test that we are forcing 10- and 11-year-olds to do when they do not need to do it. I say that they do not need to do it because enough grammar schools have chosen not to use that private test, which is managed by a private company, outside of our Minister of Education's control, to test our children. Those grammar schools are able to do that, and they have not closed, so I ask all Members to think again.

We have already agreed on the independent review of education. What happens if that independent review says that there will be no different sectors? Grammar schools are gone and integrated education is gone; it is all one. It is time for us to stop putting money into the pockets of the private sector, off the backs of our children. We need all children to be offered the best education possible. I do not make any apologies for that.

We have a skills shortage in Northern Ireland. We should be reviewing our education system to ensure that the curriculum is able to bring children out of our school system and enable them to stay here and work in jobs that will make them money and keep them here. We need to work towards our children's future and not protect adults who have an interest in a particular school and grammar stream, an integrated school, a Catholic school, or whatever it is. We need to think about the children. Children are being harmed by the test. It is time we stopped it.

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Education, Peter Weir. He has 15 minutes.

Mr Weir: At the outset, I thank everybody who has contributed to the debate. Unsurprisingly, there has not been a meeting of minds, but, in general, the tone has been reasonable.

Our education system, particularly post-primary, has two great advantages. First, regardless of what position Members have on academic selection, I am sure that they will agree that we, in Northern Ireland, are fortunate to have a strong network of post-primary schools — selective and non-selective — that deliver well for our young people. I praise all those who offer those fantastic opportunities. Secondly, our system is based on choice, one of which is a choice for parents who wish to pursue the route of academic selection. It seems that we can have various sectors, such as Catholic maintained, controlled, integrated and Irish-medium, but one choice that others are keen to deny is any form of academic selection. That academic selection route is not compulsory on any family, nor is it compulsory on any school. I do not seek to force any school to take the route of academic selection, and nor should I. Many schools do not use it.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: I will give way to Mr Allister because he has not had the opportunity to take part in the debate.

Mr Allister: In light of what the Minister has said, does he share my disappointment that so many Members are not pro-choice and want to deny choice to parents? They want to have choice, as Mr Nesbitt said, when it comes to selecting their football teams and their choirs, but, when it comes to the critical decision of to which school a parent should send their children, they want those parents to be denied the choice on the phoney basis that all kids are of an equal academic, or non-academic, bent, when the reality is that some are suited to academic pursuit and some are suited to others. That is why we need schools to match that.

Mr Weir: I share the Member's disappointment, and I am sure that he shares my lack of surprise on the issue. I am not particularly surprised by the motion. To be fair to the party opposite that tabled the motion, its sentiment reflects a long-standing approach by that party, so its position does not in any way surprise me. It will not come as the greatest shock to them either that —

Mr McCrossan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: The Member has already spoken. I would be able to respond better if we got some clarity out of the SDLP as to what actual alternative was there.

It will not come as any great surprise to anyone to know that I do not support the motion or the amendment, and I will not give an undertaking to remove academic selection.

Ms Brogan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: No, I have a lot to get through. If someone has not had the opportunity to speak, I will give way briefly. From that point of view, I have a lot that I want to get through in relation to this.

I turn briefly to the SDLP amendment. It is at best naive and at worst disingenuous. I say "naive" because it says, "Let us abolish academic selection and get something sorted out in the next year or two by way of agreement." The debate around academic selection predates the existence of most people in the House, me included. It goes back to shortly after the Second World War and, particularly, the 1960s. To suggest and try to pretend that there is some magic solution out there that there will be some common consensus around is naive. To be fair to the proposer of the amendment, when pressed on this, he did not offer any alternative. While I may disagree with the Chair of the Committee, at least he did throw out a number of other locations where alternatives have been looked at, but the Member, in his honesty —

Mr McCrossan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: — at least admits —.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: I waited for a long period of clarity, and I did not get it. I think that your opportunity has gone in relation to that. It is also disingenuous because it says, "Let us find some form of compromise or agreement", but predicated on the assumption that you automatically abolish academic selection before you even have that debate, which seems to be utterly disingenuous.

It is also the case that, regardless of their views, Members know that opinion in our society is deeply divided on the issue. There is no universal agreement. Indeed, we were told, when the formal state transfer tests were abolished, that transfer and academic selection would wither on the vine and fall under myriad legal challenges, yet, on the last occasion when the unofficial tests took place, there were more sitting them than at the time of abolition.

If we look at the Ulster University report, we see that there are two key issues. First, at the heart of this is what would replace academic selection at the age of 11. Is the alternative better, fairer and more equitable? The short answer is no. Selection will take place in this society. I have some sympathy, particularly for Mr Butler, in his efforts to try to find ways forward on this. What was the alternative that was produced? Well, actually, many of the schools that Members are commending effectively select on the basis of family connections: "Does your brother or sister go to the school? Did your parents go to the school? Do your parents teach at the school?" We have a short-term alternative being proposed for those schools of hereditary grammar-school places to a greater extent than would happen in the House of Lords, yet that is what is being proposed.

Ms Brogan: Thank you, Minister, for giving way. Do you and your party think that post-primary selection is fair and just to all post-primary schools? Grammars are allowed to fill their numbers to the detriment of our non-selective

schools. Should we not be looking at a system where every school is a good school and every child gets the same opportunity?

Mr Weir: Grammar schools are not simply able just to fill their numbers. All schools have a cap on numbers, so I reject that.

In the short term, it will lead to selection by way of family connection, but if we move to a situation where academic selection —

Mr Lyttle: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: No.

Mr Lyttle: Your criteria list "sibling" as recommended —

Mr Weir: And in the absence of academic selection, the problem is that there is not really any viable alternative. That is the problem. We need a bit of honesty in this debate. I am not going to throw this at any particular party, but, in the long run, the scenario of non-academic selection will mean the ending of grammar schools as we now know them. That is what has happened —

Ms Brogan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: No, I am not giving way further. I have a lot to get through.

Mr Carroll: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: In the same way as we have seen, with the exception —. Yes, I will give way to Mr Carroll. He is always entertaining, if nothing else.

5.00 pm

Mr Carroll: Thank you, Minister, for giving way. You may have noted that Chris Cook of the 'Financial Times', which is hardly a radical organisation or publication, stated:

"the net effect of grammar schools is to disadvantage poor children and help the rich."

What is the reason for maintaining the grammar system?

Mr Weir: I appreciate that the Member has at least a fairly clear-cut and honest position, which is that he wants to see the abolition of the grammar-school system. I assume that that is the case.

The reality is that, in the long run, you cannot divorce academic selection from the existence of grammar schools. It is disingenuous to pretend otherwise. What, then, do we see as the alternatives?

Mention was made of a postcode lottery, but what we see in England with comprehensive schools is that what are perceived to be the best schools then create a situation in which house prices close to those schools rise enormously; indeed, if you have enough money, you can effectively buy your child a place in those schools. There is no doubt that the same would happen here. We also see, whether it is in England, Scotland, Wales or the Republic of Ireland, a situation in which the choice is not between selective and non-selective or between grammar and non-grammar; it is between comprehensive schools and private schools. In England, 7% of parents pay an average of £30,000 to get a child into those schools.

I genuinely want to see a level of social mobility. I do not want to see the situation that we have with, for instance,

the leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister, who is privately educated; the leader of the Labour Party in England, who is privately educated; or, I have to say, the leader of Sinn Féin in the Republic of Ireland, who is privately educated [*Laughter.*] I want to see opportunities for all. The reality is that, whatever the flaws in the current system, we see, for instance, in Queen's University and Ulster University probably greater social mobility mix than in many universities throughout the United Kingdom. The pathway to greater fairness is not clear-cut. The Ulster University report signals New Zealand, and I think that that was quoted by the Chair of the Committee. In New Zealand, no fewer than 15% of pupils go to fee-paying schools. Is that the potential alternative? Is selection by wealth better than selection by ability?

I support the right of schools to select on the basis of academic ability. I also support their right to say that they do not want to use that as a methodology. I support a system in which every child, regardless of background, postcode, social group, religion or ethnicity, has the opportunity to get into any of those schools.

I have to say that I do not recognise much of the education system that is portrayed in the university report. Post-primary numbers are increasing, not decreasing; indeed, enrolments in non-grammars have been rising in recent years. The report advises that our primary curriculum is distorted by the presence of selection, yet international studies tell us that we have a truly world-class primary education system and a consistently excellent international performance. In maths, we have the highest performers in Europe and the seventh-highest performers in the world.

Mention was made of results. Yes, we have, and it has been well highlighted that we have —.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: No, sorry. I presume that you will be summing up, but my time is short so, unfortunately, I am not in a position to give way. I apologise to the Member for not giving way.

The position with our results is that, not simply year-on-year but generation after generation, our results have outperformed those in England, Scotland and Wales. We are the leader throughout the United Kingdom. It is also the case that we have seen, over a number of years, an improvement of over 14 percentage points for school-leavers in receipt of free school meals. There is a need to tackle underachievement, but, leaving aside the results for 2020, when GCSEs were done, effectively, through a non-examination system, the number leaving school without any qualifications or GCSEs in each of those years has been less than 1%, so progress has been made.

The other concern I have is that, when we constantly go at the subject, it provides a great opportunity for a certain amount of Punch and Judy on selection at 11.

The other issue is that it takes the focus away from where it needs to be in respect of underachievement. The focus needs to be on the wider context of our education system and not driven by ideological considerations. The principal problem, and where we need to tackle areas of underachievement, is in a lack of early intervention. It is about parental support. It is about community buy-in. If we simply talk about problems not being solved by the age of 11, we miss the real problem. Areas of emphasis need to be supporting whole-school improvement, building and

spreading leadership capacity, strengthening collaboration and partnership and embedding technology in educational pedagogy. I pay tribute to the professionalism of our teachers who have worked hard to do that.

If we remove choice, we lift the ladder away from a generation of children who will not be given that opportunity. I appreciate the points that my Strangford colleague made about parental choice. It is perfectly her right to choose not to go down that route. What she does not have a right to do is to try to impose that choice on everyone else. People have the opportunity —.

Ms Armstrong: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: I will give way briefly.

Ms Armstrong: Minister, I appreciate what you have just said. However, if grammar streams are so important to the success of children, why have you refused grammar streams in integrated schools?

Mr Weir: I have not. There has been no development proposal for a grammar stream for any —.

Ms Armstrong: Strangford College.

Mr Weir: You will find that the development proposal for that grammar stream was turned down by the permanent secretary. It was before my time, so that is not accurate. I am very happy to see bilateral education. Where a bilateral choice is made, that is perfectly people's right. For instance, Lagan College let in a percentage of pupils from an AQE background. For reasons, it has moved away from that in the last two years. I have not denied any form of streaming at all. It is about choice, which is why I reject both the amendment and the motion.

Mr Speaker: I call Matthew O'Toole to wind on the amendment. The Member has five minutes.

Mr O'Toole: I have a lot to wind on in respect of the amendment proposed by my colleague Daniel McCrossan. I will try to take brief interventions, but I cannot promise that I will give way in all cases. We welcome the fact that the motion was tabled in the first place. As has been said, our amendment seeks to improve on the motion by clarifying and making crystal clear the action that we want to see from the Minister. It must be said though that, based on what the Minister has just said, it does not seem as if he is going to act on the instruction that we hope to give him.

In any case, Mr Speaker, as you said, I have five minutes in which to wind. In truth, if I were to devote all my allotted five minutes to outlining the arguments and evidence in favour of academic selection, I would be sitting down fairly quickly. The truth is that all the investigation of and academic research into academic selection struggles to provide any robust evidence that academic selection provides good outcomes; good outcomes for pupils writ large or, indeed, good outcomes for our economy overall. The evidence simply is not there.

I proudly represent a party that is a member of the Party of European Socialists. I am a proud social democrat. I believe in broadening opportunity for all. I believe in social democratic goals. However, the truth is that you do not have to be a socialist, a social democrat or a dyed-in-the-wool lefty to believe that academic selection does not deliver for kids. Literally every single serious academic researcher who looks into it comes to that conclusion.

That is why I am glad that the original motion mentions the paper that was put out by Ulster University.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I will give way in brief, yes.

Mr Stalford: Speaking as a dyed-in-the-wool, true-blue Conservative, I say to the Member that you will not improve academic outcomes by destroying the best-performing schools. Instead of dragging down that which is working, we should be dragging standards up in that which is not working.

Mr O'Toole: I am glad that the Member said that because, in a sense, that is exactly what we want to do by getting rid of the unfair and unjust nature of academic selection that exists in Northern Ireland. So much of what we have heard so far in defence of academic selection has been based on anecdote rather than true robust evidence. That is understandable because there is no real robust evidence in favour of academic selection.

I will offer a bit of an anecdote of my own. I went to a grammar school. I had a very good education there.

Looking back on it now, though, I find it hard not to feel guilty. This is not a criticism of my school or anyone who worked in it. I went to a Catholic boys' grammar school. Immediately behind it was a non-selective secondary school for 11- to 16-year-olds that was run by the same order. At my school, we wore maroon blazers with gold brocade. We were in a big, glamorous building — not glamorous; statuesque — with a Latin crest over the door. Immediately behind my school was a brutalist breeze-block building, which was where boys in plain grey and black blazers went. They were amazingly talented young men, and great teachers worked in both schools. This statement is not meant to demean the non-selective school or lash out at the selective school that I went to, but do you know what? Looking back, I feel guilty. I almost feel slightly ashamed of that. Thinking about it, I remember that, at the time, those boys walked up to their school, which was hidden away. My school was on one of the main streets, and the non-selective school was behind it. Do you know what? Looking back, I do not think that it was right that I got to feel —.

Mr Butler: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I will very briefly, yes.

Mr Butler: The Member makes a really good point. I was one of those guys who wore a secondary school uniform. He is absolutely right about how that is viewed. I will take the geography of Wallace High School and Friends' School in Lisburn as an example of why his proposal would not fix that. Many grammar schools sit in more affluent areas. If there were a proposal, perhaps we could look at it, but there has been none. That does not fix the problem.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am in my final minute. That brings me on to a key point, which is that people who oppose my party's amendment and the motion say that we have not provided an alternative. Here is the thing: we want the Department to go away and look at it. An independent review of education is happening. As regards the idea that there is no alternative, what gives the lie to that is the fact that we are the alternative. We are the outlier. Ours is the only jurisdiction in the developed world that has academic selection at age 11. If it is so crazy and

mad to abolish academic selection at age 11, why does every other jurisdiction in the Western world not have it? My God, if academic selection at 11 is so great, why are jurisdictions across Europe and the Western world not rushing to do it? Surely, that would be the upshot. Surely, if it were so great and delivered such great outcomes for working-class kids, jurisdictions everywhere would be seeking to take it up. They are not, I am afraid, because it is not good enough. It is not good enough for the economy —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: — which has poor skills. In closing, I commend the amendment and motion to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call John O'Dowd to make the winding-up speech on the motion and conclude the debate. The Member has 10 minutes.

Mr O'Dowd: I will start where Mr O'Toole ended and, indeed, where my colleague Mr Sheehan started the debate. The motion and amendment call for evidence-based policy. I cannot think of any other area of public policy, within the Assembly's remit or beyond, where legislators are allowed to make legislation or continue a policy when all the evidence is stacked against it. I cannot think of any other area. I am happy to take an intervention if somebody can point me to such an area. However, here is the reality: in this debate of approximately one and a half hours, Members who support academic selection have not been able to produce or cite one academic, international or local report that supports academic selection. What does that say about their argument?

Anecdotal evidence is all very good. We have heard evidence about constituents. Indeed, the anecdotes that came from Mr Stalford would warm the cockles of your heart. However, it is not evidence on which to produce Government policy. It is certainly not evidence that should dictate the future of our children and the economy. Mr Nesbitt said that the best members are selected for a choir or football team. That is true, and that is why I was on neither. However, we are talking about the education system. We are talking about schools. What is the purpose of a school? Its purpose is to educate young people. I will always remember the principal who told me when I was Education Minister that, when she greets a pupil for the first time, the question that she asks herself is not whether they are clever but how.

We do not have different teacher training colleges for grammar-school teachers. They go to the same training colleges as those who teach in non-selective schools. Why is that? It is very simple: they teach the same curriculum.

Whatever happened in 1947, 1957, 1967 or after that, today's education system teaches one curriculum. A selective school teaches the same curriculum as a non-selective school. The teacher who teaches in that classroom was taught their profession at a teacher-training college here or elsewhere, but there is no grammar-school teacher-training college.

5.15 pm

What is going on? What is at the heart of this? People tell me, quite rightly, that the transfer test is popular with parents. It may be popular with some parents. I am a parent, and my children will not sit the 11-plus. I care

deeply about my children's education. I care deeply about that. People will say, "You have no right to take that choice away from someone else", but academic selection takes choice away from thousands of children every year, and we let that continue. We are denying —

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for giving way. I have much to say about this, but I have no time to do so. On the subject of choice, does the Member agree that the viewpoints and the voices and choices of children and young people are fundamentally missing from today's debate? In 2009, the Northern Ireland Youth Forum conducted a study with young people about their views on primary to post-primary transfer. Its key finding was that young people expressed a strong desire to be more involved in shaping policy. Today, I ask that the Minister and the MLAs on the Education Committee engage with and listen to children and young people. This is not a debate about the interests of schools or parents; it is about children and young people.

Mr O'Dowd: Of course I agree that children's views have to be heard throughout this process.

The Member brings me on to the subject of public opinion on these matters. I was talking about parental support, or alleged parental support. If government policy were based on whether or not it was popular, we would be in difficult waters. I do not mean to pick on Mr Stalford, but he said that it would take a brave MLA for East Belfast to go around and tell people that things are changing. Guess what, folks? We are in the business of having to be brave. We are leaders. We do not have the luxury of standing up on this hill and saying, "There go my people" as they march past. We are supposed to lead them, and, when you look back through the years at the unpopular public policy decisions that people had to make, it was the right thing to do.

I always use the following example. It does not directly match across, but it is a worthwhile example. Smoking was very popular, but — guess what? — the evidence told us that it caused significant harm; drinking and driving was OK 20 or 30 years ago, but — guess what? — the evidence told us that it did us harm; and — guess what? — the evidence tells us that academic selection is harming our young people. It is harming our education system, our economy and the well-being of our citizens, so let us do something about it.

Mr Carroll: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will give way very quickly.

Mr Carroll: Is the Member concerned, as I am, that those who defend the current system tend to focus on "pulling up your socks" stories and not on the people who are being failed by academic selection, including grammar schools?

Mr O'Dowd: Very much so. We always hear anecdotal stories about those who have done well, but they are conveniently quiet on those who have not done well. They are very quiet on that subject.

Dr Archibald: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes, certainly.

Dr Archibald: This is on the issue of how the ending of selection will also end grammar schools and how the DUP is apparently very concerned about social mobility. I went to a grammar school — Loreto in Coleraine. That school

abolished selection in 2013. That did not drag it down. It is still one of the top-performing schools in the North. That is because it is a good school, and that is what the focus should be on.

Mr O'Dowd: Exactly. The debate about grammar schools being destroyed is false. It is a distraction. The status of a grammar school is set out in legislation, completely separately from academic selection. It is about management type and is nothing to do with academic selection. Indeed, there is a non-selective grammar in my constituency. At the time that academic selection was done away with and unregulated tests were coming in, there were messages of doom about grammar schools coming to an end. A significant number of grammar schools have moved away from academic selection since then, and a significant number are planning to do so. It is slowly ebbing away.

Mr Weir: There are more doing the test.

Mr O'Dowd: There may be more doing the test, but there are more pupils about. I also know parents — we all hear this — whose children sit the test and have no intention of going near a grammar school, and they do not support academic selection. A school does not have to be a grammar school to be a good school. As a result of the entitlement framework and measures that were introduced by me and other Ministers, including Caitríona Ruane, we now have a non-selective post-primary sector that has the ability to deliver high-class and world-class education.

That socio-economic mix at Queen's University, Ulster University and elsewhere that the Minister talks about is as a result of non-selective schools producing high-quality education for their pupils. As long as the system is against it, however, the challenge will always be one for the non-selective sector. As long as we ignore the evidence, the non-selective sector will always face pressure. The non-selective sector has the majority of working-class kids in it, so who is being served by protecting academic selection?

Often, when we are discussing Brexit in the Chamber, the DUP will tell Sinn Féin, "You used to be opposed to the European Union". Guess what, folks: the DUP used to be opposed to academic selection. It had a policy of being against it right up until, I think, the 1980s, for the reason that it discriminated against working-class kids. As is the DUP's right, it changed its policy, but who is being defended? Those who benefit from the system are being defended. Those who benefit from academic selection are being defended, and the evidence shows us that, at the upper echelons of that, there are higher earners, those who are in positions of influence and those who are in positions of power. It is like Mr Stalford's comment that it would be a brave person who commits to change. If those holding the power are being defended, we have to ask ourselves a serious question, which is this: if all the evidence tells us that academic selection is damaging our education system, damaging working-class communities and damaging non-selective schools, why protect those who are in power? Surely our job is to stand up for those without a voice. Surely our job is to ensure that everyone in society is given an equal opportunity. That is our role. Our role as legislators is to make change, so do not continue to suggest that there is no alternative. There is an alternative. The vast majority of post-primary schools currently use it, and it is a successful way of transferring children from primary schools to non-selective schools.

Will change happen overnight? No. Will social mobility improve overnight? No. Will the practice of hereditary grammar-school places that the Minister talked about change overnight? No. Unless we start to make change, however, it will never happen, and the working-class kids who are let down by academic selection will continue to be let down by academic selection. The people who support academic selection have shown no evidence today that it is a good policy. Those who oppose it have rhymed off list after list after list of why it is a bad policy, so let us remove it.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that, while they are in the Chamber and are casting their votes, social-distancing requirements still need to be adhered to.

*The Assembly divided:
Ayes 48; Noes 37.*

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Brogan and Mr Carroll.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr M Bradley and Mr Stalford.

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

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

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford [Teller, Noes] and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan [Teller, Ayes], 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 O'Toole voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin and Mr McNulty.

Ms Bailey voted for Ms Sugden.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put.

Mr Speaker: I have been advised by the party Whips that, in accordance with Standing Order 113(5)(b), there is agreement to dispense with the three minutes and move straight to the Division.

*The Assembly divided:
Ayes 48; Noes 37.*

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Brogan and Mr Sheehan.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr M Bradley and Mrs Cameron.

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

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

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan [Teller, Ayes], 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 [Teller, Ayes] and Ms Sheerin.

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

Ms Bailey voted for Ms Sugden.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the recent publication of Ulster University's Transforming Education project's research paper on 'Academic Selection and the Transfer Test'; further notes that this is yet another report that outlines the psychological harm that academic selection causes to children; acknowledges the finding within the report that there is little evidence that social mobility is increased by academic selection; agrees with the conclusion articulated in the report that the current arrangements for school transfer at age 11 are damaging the life chances of a large proportion of the school population; further notes that the right to use academic selection is currently enshrined in law; and calls on the Minister of Education to give notice that he will repeal this legal provision by 2023 and replace it with a system that has the widest support and prioritises educational excellence for all without academic selection.

Adjourned at 6.00 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 27 April 2021

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Muir: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, you made a ruling on the conduct of Mr Wells during a debate last Tuesday. Since then, I have received direct correspondence from Mr Wells challenging the authority of that ruling. I have been in politics for very many years and can take the cut and thrust of debate, but — I do not say this easily — what I am seeing now is homophobic harassment from Mr Wells. I wish you to consider the matter.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for raising the point of order and for advising me and, as I understand it, Mr Wells that he intended to do so. I am completely unclear as to the background to this. I am aware of the correspondence. Mr Wells released a press release yesterday morning after my office informed him that I intended to refer to him in my remarks. His press release was issued long before I made my remarks, so it did not connect to them. All that I can say at the moment is that I will consider the matter. As I said, I am totally unclear as to why the correspondence was sent to you or anyone else beyond the press. I thank the Member for raising that point of order, and I will seek to address it in due course.

Ministerial Statement

2021-22: Final Budget

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance that he wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members 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 contribute 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 but may do so by rising in their place and notifying the Business Office or Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise when asking their questions. I also remind Members that points of order are not normally taken during a statement or the question period afterwards.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): On 1 April, I provided a written ministerial statement on the final Budget that was agreed by the Executive. Today, I will follow that up with an oral statement to the House.

After the announcement on 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 for the start of the new financial year. 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 have been three main changes in the financial context. First, a small degree of funding was released following the reassessment of central items. That will be now be used to continue schemes under the Shared Future umbrella and to meet the budget requirements of independent bodies. Secondly, additional funding for the Executive was announced in the Chancellor's Budget on 3 March, and a more recent announcement of further funding for health in England will provide Barnett consequential. Finally, Treasury agreed that some of the COVID funding provided in the latter part of the 2020-21 financial year can be carried forward into 2021-22. That is on top of the usual Budget exchange scheme amounts. Unfortunately, although that funding, like the anticipated funding mentioned in the draft Budget, has been confirmed by Treasury, it has not been confirmed by the Secretary of State and therefore cannot be included in the final Budget. It is frustrating that the legislation means that we are at the behest of the Secretary of State for what we can and

cannot include in our Budget, regardless of what has been confirmed by Treasury itself. However, we cannot allow that legislative hurdle to delay decisions on COVID support. It is imperative that decisions be made now on how that funding will be allocated.

I turn to funding for what might be described as “business as usual” issues. As well as significant COVID funding, the Chancellor’s Budget provided an additional £4.2 million of resource DEL from non-COVID measures. Although that funding cannot be included in the Budget outcomes of Departments, it will be allocated to the Bright Start school-age grant scheme, which provides much-needed support in disadvantaged areas and rural communities. It will also fund the continuation of the public service route between Derry and London and the translation hub committed to in New Decade, New Approach (NDNA).

The Executive had previously committed to funding teachers’ pay and safe staffing through the in-year monitoring process. To provide more certainty for those important issues, it has been agreed that those costs will instead be met up front from the funding confirmed for 2021-22. The Executive have also agreed to allocate £12.3 million to the Department of Justice for PSNI staffing. Again, that will be met from the funding 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, and public services will have to be prioritised.

I now turn to COVID funding. The Executive had allocated the majority of COVID funding available at the draft Budget stage to the Health, Education and Economy Departments, leaving some £126.9 million for allocation at the final Budget stage. In the final Budget, the Executive have allocated all of that £126.9 million of funding to Departments, and the allocations are set out in the Budget document. The Executive have also considered the allocation of funding made available since the draft Budget. Due to the requirement for written confirmation from the Secretary of State, that cannot be included in the final Budget. However, as I mentioned earlier, to allow Departments to plan now, the Executive have agreed a number of allocations that will be formalised in-year. Those confirmed in-year allocations are also set out in the Budget document.

As set out in the draft Budget, in recognition of the impact that COVID-19 has had on businesses and households, we are freezing the regional rate for domestic and non-domestic customers. In addition, earlier this month, I announced a further rate relief package that will deliver additional support to almost 29,000 businesses in the form of a rate-free period for the next 12 months. That support will cost £230 million, and it will be funded from the additional COVID funding that has now been confirmed. Other allocations from that funding include £9 million to tackle homelessness and £50 million to further support our health service. Those allocations reflect the priority that the Executive place on protecting the vulnerable and supporting front-line health and social care staff who have been at the coalface of the fight against the virus.

To help to deal with the economic damage inflicted on our economy by COVID, we have allocated £275.8 million in

resource and £11 million in capital to the Department for the Economy to fund in full the economic recovery strategy. A total of £12.5 million is being made available for Northern Ireland Water pressures, and £6 million is being provided to the Department for Communities for its Supporting People costs. Some £28.3 million of funding is being made available to the Department of Education to meet pressures in relation to recovery and support, and re-engagements for children and young people. In addition, the Executive have set aside £81 million to extend existing support schemes while lockdown restrictions continue to apply.

The remaining £103.9 million will be held for allocation early in the new financial year following a further assessment of health pressures.

On capital funding, the draft Budget provided investment funding of £1.75 billion, including funding from its reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) facility of £140 million. The Executive have now agreed to borrow a further £30 million to provide additional funding to Northern Ireland Water due to the strategic nature of its pressures. That brings the total departmental capital allocations to almost £1.8 billion. That will enable investment in our infrastructure while supporting the construction sector.

The Budget seeks to protect key public services in a very challenging financial context. Members will be aware of my frustration that we have not been able to set a multi-year Budget due to restrictions that Treasury has set out in its spending review. I hope that this one-year Budget acts as a bridge to a multi-year Budget that allows the Executive to re-prioritise spending properly and plan for the longer term. Members will have received a Budget document detailing departmental funding by spending area, and I will return to the Chamber later this month to allow for a debate and vote on the 2021-22 Budget. That will allow Members further time to scrutinise the spending proposals in the document. The confirmed in-year allocations, while 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.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I thank the Minister for his oral statement and for the previous written statements and the correspondence to the Committee on the 2021-22 Budget. The Committee will welcome the £13 billion of budgeted resource spending, including £450 million of COVID money for Health plus around £500 million for business support and economic recovery measures. Members will welcome the £687.4 million in anticipated in-year allocations, including, it appears, money to address some of the PSNI’s staffing issues. Members will also welcome the £1.7 billion of capital spending, including a somewhat larger than expected RRI figure, and it is good to see that we are spending the money that is, indeed, available to us.

The accompanying final Budget document makes repeated references to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and his apparent failure to sign off on some of the much-needed allocations that I have just mentioned. Minister, why has the Secretary of State declined to sign off on those allocations? Is it linked to the continuing issues relating to the victims’ pension scheme, or are there other issues? Will the Minister advise on the way forward for those areas of expenditure that have not yet been agreed, including certain aspects of New Decade, New

Approach; pay, transformation and transport; growth deals, particularly for the Mid South West and Causeway Coast and Glens; and the excess on confidence-and-supply money?

Will the Minister do some analysis for the Assembly? If he takes our new resource baseline and adds to the carry-over plus the Chancellor's statement and the Barnett health consequential money and then subtracts the COVID allocations, the anticipated in-year monitoring and the centrally held funds, what is he left with? We consider that it will probably be about £100 million of unallocated money. Can the Minister say whether that money could be used to pay for the victims' pension scheme without having to top-slice departmental budgets?

Finally, I notice, Minister, that you said that you will bring the Budget back to us later this month. I do not think that we will be able to do it in the month of April. I do not think that that will happen somehow.

Mr Speaker: I call Michelle McIlveen.

Mr Murphy: *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Speaker: Sorry, I call the Minister of Finance.

Dr Aiken: Have you something to tell us, Conor? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Never let it be said that I try to silence a Minister.

Mr Murphy: That arrangement suits me fine, a Cheann Comhairle. *[Laughter.]* I thank the Chair for his comments and his questions, and I look forward to continuing to work with the Committee in the time ahead to make sure that it can properly scrutinise all these matters.

Some time back, the Secretary of State said that he wanted the fiscal council to be progressed before he could sign things off. Of course, as the Chair knows, the fiscal council was established some time back. I have heard nothing else since by way of explanation. I do not think that it is anything to do with the discussion around victims' payments issues, so I am not quite sure what the hold-up is. It is not ideal, because we want all the figures that are available to us to be included.

10.45 am

That takes me on to some NDNA funding commitments and other funding commitments, and there is a table in the document that addresses some of the issues, including some of the NDNA issues that the Chair mentioned, such as Agenda for Change pay and the medical school in Derry, as well as a range of other issues, including confidence-and-supply money for deprivation, mental health and broadband. There is city deals money as well, which the Government were to allocate to us. We anticipate receiving that, and we have had no indication that it will not be forthcoming. We have had no indication to the contrary, so we are preparing on the basis that it will be forthcoming.

As the year rolls on, we will see what comes back in-year and what we then have to operate with. The overall picture for Departments is not good, however. There will be huge financial pressures on them throughout the year. This is a flat-cash Budget, even with the additional COVID money that has been made available thus far. We are not

certain whether there will be anything more, but we do not anticipate receiving anything like the same level of COVID spend that we had during the previous financial year.

There will therefore be ongoing challenges. Anything in-year relates to this year only, and, as the Chair will know, the projected cost of victims' payments is very substantial over the first four or five years. Although we have given a commitment at the courts to ensure that those payments will be covered and paid for, the question is this: from where will that funding come? That is an ongoing discussion with the British Government that is necessary.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his statement. The Department for Infrastructure budget for this year sees a modest 3% increase in resource and an almost 30% increase in capital. That will create a significant pressure, particularly in the delivery of much-needed road maintenance. Will the Minister provide the rationale for the disparity, and can he suggest how he believes the Department will be able to manage such an uplift in capital without a commensurate resource budget?

Mr Murphy: The Member will know that we did not get the Budget outcome that we wanted. We have essentially had the same Budget allocation as we had last year, by which I mean the same amount of money. We have been able to stretch that through some carry-over of money through increased access to RRI borrowing, of which the Department for Infrastructure will be a beneficiary, and through making some upfront payments in the previous financial year that take the pressure off Departments for this year. For instance, we got some flexibility to purchase PPE for the Department of Health. Those are all small things that will ease some of the more acute pressures.

There are still substantial pressures on all Departments, however. The only way in which we could give some Departments all that they wanted was to take from others. Given the time frames involved, there was not time for a significant reprioritisation exercise to be done. That would have seen some Departments, arguably including the Department for Infrastructure but perhaps not, depending on the Executive's discussions and decisions on those matters, getting additional money but other Departments losing money. The Executive therefore agreed to go forward with a rollover Budget from last year, with Departments getting the same amount. We have been able to add to the capital amount for the Department for Infrastructure but not to the resource amount, because we do not have that resource funding available.

We will continue to work with Ministers as time goes on. I have to say that there were opportunities in the latter part of the financial year to bid for things such as funding for road maintenance, but those bids did not come. We will continue to make best endeavours to work with all Ministers and Departments to see how we can assist in easing their pressures in the time ahead. For all the Departments, however, this will not be an easy year.

Mr McHugh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement. Only last week, we discussed in the House the development of the A5 road and its implications for the north-west region. Given the recent announcement of delays to the A5, will you clarify for us the status of the £75 million committed to it by the Dublin Government?

Mr Murphy: In NDNA, the Government in Dublin reaffirmed their commitment to providing that £75 million to fund the A5 project up to 2022, but no profile of the spend was stipulated. The A5 scheme has been the subject of a public inquiry, which has delayed progress. As such, no contribution was requested from Dublin in 2020. The 2021-22 forecast expenditure for the A5 is approximately £6 million at this stage. We anticipate that that will be funded from the Irish Government contribution, although that will, obviously, be kept under review. I understand that engagement is ongoing between the Infrastructure Minister and the Irish Transport Minister through the North/South Ministerial Council and, directly, on the delivery of the project and future capital contributions.

Mr O'Toole: I welcome the fact that we will have more opportunity to debate the allocations and the Budget document in detail in the weeks ahead. However, specifically in relation to what the Secretary of State has not signed off on, what is the quantum of that and, when it comes to in-year spending now, is that simply allocations that were made or agreed under NDNA or earlier? Precisely when do you expect him to update you on when that is signed off?

Mr Murphy: It is in table 3.3 of the document. We are expecting £306 million from specific financial packages as well as additional money from the Chancellor's March Budget, which agreed to carry forward further Barnett consequentials. Some of that is money from previous commitments such as confidence and supply and NDNA. Of course, as the Member will know, what we received fell well short of what was committed in NDNA, so that is not included in the final Budget. In order to ensure that there is no delay in taking decisions, we have gone ahead and indicated allocations against that.

We have no reason to believe that any of that funding will not be made available, but I have no idea when it will be announced by the Secretary of State: that is a matter for him. I have no rationale for his delay in confirming that funding, but we have to have confirmation in order to include it in our final Budget.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for his responses thus far. The Minister of Health came to the Chamber two weeks ago to outline the situation regarding rebuilding the health and social care system following the pandemic and to address the desperate waiting lists. I am sure that many of us in the Chamber know people who are suffering as a result of them. One of the key issues is to have multi-year Budgets. Can the Minister give us an update on representations to the Treasury on getting multi-year Budgets so that the health service can continue to assist people? Has the Health Minister given the Minister of Finance any indication of the envelope that he needs to rebuild the health and social care system?

Mr Murphy: We all recognise that a substantial amount of money is needed to rebuild the health service. The difficulty for us with a one-year Budget, particularly when it is a flat-cash situation, is that we do not get the necessary money to invest in reforming the health service. Therefore, we end up treading water and continuing to try to support health provision as best we can, but without making the improvements necessary to get more efficiencies into the system. It is a cyclical thing, where we do not get the necessary money for reinvestment.

As I said in my statement, I hope that this is a bridge to a multi-year Budget settlement. Over the past year, we operated on advice from the Treasury that we were going to have a multi-year Budget, only to get very short notice in November that that would not be the case. It is frustrating, and it severely restricts the Executive's ability to plan and prioritise when we do not know, year-on-year, what funding will be available to us. I certainly hope that we will be in a changed situation next year. We will continue to engage with the Treasury, as I intend to do in the near future, hopefully by meeting them over there. We will press them on all those matters and on other outstanding matters.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the carrying forward of the COVID-19 money from last year into this year and hope that it goes some way to helping those most in need. There has been a huge increase in the universal credit caseload over the past year; we know that it goes beyond the Department for Communities and impacts all Departments. We know that when furlough ends, we will see another increase. Does the Minister know whether other Departments are prioritising that as part of their spend?

Mr Murphy: It will be a matter for Departments to prioritise. The difficulty with a flat-cash Budget is that you end up not being able to deal with new areas. As the Member said, the increase in the numbers presenting for universal credit means that there will be a significant increase, particularly for the Department for Communities. We have managed to find some funding to support that Department with the additional staff that it will undoubtedly need. The Department's figures have doubled over the course of the past year, so it will need significant additional staff resource to cope.

The Executive's priorities throughout the pandemic have been to protect the health service, protect the vulnerable and support the economy, and I imagine that we will continue in that mode over the year ahead, even if we have less COVID money. We want to ensure that vulnerable people are protected, and I expect all Departments to play a role in that.

Ms Dolan: Minister, can you outline how the £73.6 million of financial transaction capital will be allocated in 2021-22?

Mr Murphy: That information is in the chart. It is an increase on the expenditure that we have had previously. Some can be taken up through housing, and that will require a change to the rules and regulations on how the Housing Executive does its business. However, it is an improvement. It is not the total usage that we wanted to see, but there is an ability to carry over some of that. While we have managed to access most of the reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) funding that was available to us, Departments need to continue to improve access to financial transactions capital, although I understand that everyone has focused on the response to the pandemic this year and, perhaps, people did not have the focus that that required. It is an improved position on previous years, but, nonetheless, there is more work to be done.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Finance Minister for his statement to the House this morning. Can he confirm what funding will be allocated to the Department of Health in the June monitoring round? What additional funding can the Department of Health expect in the financial year to help with COVID recovery and to address the waiting lists?

Mr Murphy: We will not know what can be allocated in the June monitoring round until the Departments make returns. As it is the first monitoring round of the year, it is generally not the highest level of return. The tendency is that, as the year rolls on, Departments get a sense of what they can and cannot spend. Therefore, there is usually a limited return in June.

We have held back a significant amount of COVID money pending Health's assessment of its needs, and there will be Barnett consequentials from health spending in Britain. We are asking Health to make the earliest possible assessment of its requirements. If you like, Health is getting the first call on that pot of money, and when it makes its assessment, we will get a sense of what it needs to spend. The pot is unlikely to meet all the requirements of the range of services provided across the Department of Health because it is, like all other Departments, very challenged. However, we are giving Health first shout on the June monitoring round, and we expect it to come back with a formal assessment of its needs. Hopefully, there will be enough in that pot, and there may be some to allocate to other Departments at that time.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for the statement. In a number of his answers, he mentioned RRI borrowing. Can the Minister outline the reasons why the Executive agreed to an additional £30 million of RRI borrowing for NI Water?

Mr Murphy: As people will know, NI Water has a significant infrastructure backlog and deficit, and not only is that important for its work but, in turn, it is holding back other private sector developments that need the necessary sewage and waste water treatment infrastructure to proceed. We have committed a further £30 million of RRI borrowing to NI Water. NI Water's funding requirements are determined by the Utility Regulator, and increased investment is required to ensure that levels of service are maintained and that environmental and public health standards can be met.

The Department is investing, I think, £200 million in a number of areas such as the essential drinking water programme, the living with water programme and waste water treatment infrastructure, as required in the current price control period. It will be up to the Minister to allocate the funding to the programmes. However, there is a recognition that the infrastructure deficit has the knock-on effect of holding back NI Water from what it is required to do by the regulator and also from other potential investment and development from the private sector. The more we can get into that, the better. It is never going to be enough for every Department's needs, but the increase will be welcomed by the Department and NI Water.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Minister. Minister, I welcome the extra money for health and business. However, we know that this is a flat Budget. For most Departments, the Budget outcome represents a flat cash settlement.

We will have to make hard choices. Bearing it in mind that £306 million is being held back by the Secretary of State, are you guaranteed that that money will come forward and that there will not be any major holes, even looking into what we have already stated, because of it being a flat Budget and the pressures of inflation?

11.00 am

Mr Murphy: We have no indication that there is any difficulty with that. We anticipate it, and Departments are operating on the basis that the money will come through. The Member will know that it is way short of the NDNA commitments that were made when the agreement was reached. Nonetheless, those are financial commitments that were made to us, and we expect them to be followed through this year. It will assist with some of the more acute pressures but obviously will not manage the significant pressures facing all Departments.

Mr Beggs: In your statement, Minister, you indicated that there were significant levels of COVID funding and that the Chancellor's Budget provided an additional £4.2 million resource DEL from non-COVID measures. Subsequently, you indicated that you intended to allocate it to the Bright Start school-age grant scheme and to support for the public service route between the City of Derry Airport and London. How much funding will go to each of those schemes? How many young people will benefit, and how many passengers will benefit? What is the degree of subsidy?

Mr Murphy: I do not have the exact breakdown between the two. That is the additional £4 million that we got in this Budget. I would not be so dismissive as to say it is a drop in the ocean, but it is not a substantive increase. That is why we have categorised it as a flat-cash Budget. It is for the Minister of Education to answer about the number of children who will benefit. Connectivity is hugely important. I had the opportunity to visit Derry airport yesterday when I was in the north-west. For that entire region, the connectivity that the airport provides with direct flights to Britain and Dublin will be hugely important for investment and ongoing business. We had an opportunity to speak to the airport operators and to council officials, who are the sole contributors to the airport, and we have managed to give them some support. Those public service routes are hugely important to the north-west region as a whole, and we commit to continue supporting them and to try to find the necessary support in the Executive to ensure that the airport continues its business.

Mr Frew: Minister, the Executive have agreed to allocate £12.3 million to the Department of Justice for PSNI staffing levels. Can you present to the House the impact that that will have? Will staffing levels remain static, or will there be an increase in police numbers?

Mr Murphy: Again, the detail of the numbers is more for the Department of Justice to respond on. There was concern that the loss of money for Brexit that had previously been provided would see a reduction in staff. I understand that the Department of Justice wants to ensure that that does not happen and to see, as was committed to in NDNA, an increase in policing personnel. I am advised that this is to assist in getting to that objective. It does not bring it up to the full level, but, of course, recruitment is a progressive issue. You cannot just recruit 700 new personnel in one fell swoop. It was, as the Member will know, part of discussions between the draft Budget and the final Budget outcome to try to give additional support to the Department of Justice to move towards those targets for additional staff. The Minister of Justice will be able to provide the exact figures, but I understand that it will be an increase in staff.

Ms Anderson: Minister, you were in the town I love so well yesterday, and people were delighted to see you there. As you said, the NDNA commitment to the Derry to London route was widely talked about. We look forward to hearing about the NDNA commitment to 10,000 students in Magee; hopefully, that will come forward at some stage as well.

Has the Department for the Economy received funding for the high street voucher scheme? Like all Members, we look forward to our constituents receiving that.

Mr Murphy: The bid from the Department for the Economy was funded in full and included a number of interventions, one of which was the high street voucher scheme. Initially, the discussion was around £90 million: it is now up to in and around £140 million. It will be a question of timing for the Department when it will bring it forward. Clearly, with retail not being open or opening with the necessary continuing restrictions in the time ahead, the question will be about the timing of that intervention. I know from having discussed it with business organisations that they want to talk to the Department for the Economy about that timing. It will not necessarily flow through immediately as non-essential retail opens up again next week; it is about bringing it in at the most effective time of the year, perhaps when there might be a dip again in spending on the high street.

It is a significant intervention, but the COVID money is one-off money and needs to have the maximum impact. I am sure that business organisations and chambers of commerce throughout the various towns will talk to the Department for the Economy about when, they feel, would be the most effective time to spend that money out.

Mr Dickson: Minister, thank you for your statement. I turn again to the Department for the Economy and the economic recovery strategy. Given the well-documented difficulties that that Department has had in distributing funds in the last financial year and in administering support schemes, what action will your Department and, indeed, your Executive colleagues take to ensure that we see a smoother distribution of the remaining COVID funds and a move to an economic recovery strategy on a cross-departmental basis?

Mr Murphy: As the Member will know, the localised restrictions support scheme (LRSS) and some of the other schemes are coming to an end. They will continue, largely, until the indicative date for the full reopening of hospitality and retail on 24 May. Thankfully, that is the direction that we are moving in. Certainly, from my Department's perspective, the sooner we are out of the grant-giving work, which was not the natural position of the Department, and get back to concentrating on some of our main functions, the better for us.

We understand that businesses will continue to struggle. Even as the economy reopens, we are still in the middle phase, if you like, of moving out of COVID, so there will still be restrictions. We need to ensure that lessons are learned from some of the schemes that we had over the last year or so. We have done that by trying to target some of the additional money that we have given out. Yesterday, I had the opportunity to visit a medium-sized manufacturing company that had not received any grant support. We have targeted something like 850 businesses in that sector for the £25,000 grant.

It is incumbent on us to use that money, channel it as much as we can to people who did not receive it, make sure that it is delivered efficiently and learn lessons. Inevitably, as we tried to do things at pace during the last year, we made mistakes. We need to learn from some of those mistakes, get a more efficient and targeted delivery and ensure that people get the full benefit of the restricted amount of money that we have this year in comparison with last year.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the £28.3 million of funding that will be made available to the Department of Education and specifically the funding for the recovery and support and re-engagement of our children and young people.

It is generally recognised by professionals in the field of mental health that we will face an increase of something like 20% of cases where there are mental health issues. That issue and the recovery of our young people cannot really be addressed by the Department of Education alone. The feeling, certainly in the Education Committee, I believe, is that there is a need to involve the Communities and Health Departments to address the issues professionally. Is there a plan? Does the Minister have any word of proposals coming forward from the Health or Communities Departments for a holistic approach to that issue for our young people?

Mr Murphy: The Member is correct in that it is not the responsibility of any single Department. In promoting things like the Engage programme, the Department of Education has recognised that substantial work is needed to get young people back into the schooling rhythm and make sure that some of the loss, which is not just the educational loss but the loss of social contact, that has been experienced over the last number of months is engaged with.

The Member will know that the Executive have a subcommittee on mental health and resilience, so it is recognised in the Executive that it is a cross-departmental responsibility. It is not for Health, Communities or Education on their own or even collectively, as other Departments are involved in the subcommittee. We have set aside money for the Health Department as it analyses its needs, and, when it comes back with an assessment, funding will, hopefully, be available. I look forward to having, as early as possible, an assessment of the mental health requirements. It will be difficult work, as we are just beginning to emerge from the situation and have not yet seen the full effects of lockdown on people. However, I look forward to an early assessment, and I hope that, when we make an assessment of what COVID money is left, we have support to put it across the range of Departments that have an interest in the matter.

Mr O'Dowd: Does the Minister have any indication of how much funding will come through the community renewal fund? Does he expect it to fully replace the EU structural fund?

Mr Murphy: The community renewal fund is to provide £220 million of additional funding across Britain and here in preparation for the introduction of the Shared Prosperity Fund. However, there are no guarantees about what future amount might come to the North from that. We have continued to suffer from a lack of information in that regard, and I continue to be concerned that the prospect of having the full replacement of EU funding that had been

available to us through some of the funds that the Member mentioned will not be realised in the time ahead.

Mr Allister: As an Irish republican, the Minister will, I am sure, be as happy as I am unhappy that, in the centenary year of Northern Ireland, he can produce a Budget that does not mention the centenary or provide one penny of funding to mark that centenary. When putting forward their needs and bids for what they required in their budget allocations, did any of the Departments seek money to mark the centenary? Did anyone in the Executive seek to insert such into the Budget?

Mr Murphy: As an Irish republican, I see no role for myself in celebrating partition on the island, but I recognise that there are people here who see it as something to celebrate. I have no difficulty with how they propose to celebrate, as long as they do so within the law and without annoying anyone else. The Member has answered his own question, in that the Budget is based on Departments identifying their pressures and trying to meet those pressures. I have no recollection of any bids for that. I know that the NIO intends to provide funding for centenary celebrations and those who wish to engage in them, but I have had no such request. Therefore, it is not included.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his statement. Given that the Minister's party colleagues have been rightly critical of the 1% pay offer made by the Tory Government to our healthcare workers and described it as "a slap in the face", is it hypocritical of him to make a 1% pay offer to public-sector workers? If that 1% pay offer for healthcare workers was a slap in the face, is the 1% that he proposes a slap in the face?

Mr Murphy: The Department has made a two-year pay offer to Civil Service trade unions. That represents a 4.8% increase in the pay bill for the Civil Service over two years, at a cost of £44 million. The offer is in contrast to the position in England, where, as the Member mentioned, there was the 1% for health workers, but he will know that there is a pay freeze for all other public-sector workers. We have not gone that route; we have gone with a pay increase for our public-sector workers here. That is the maximum amount possible, taking account of the standstill Budget that we received from Westminster, the current financial pressures and the need to ensure that increases are affordable, while ensuring that a sufficient budget is available for essential public services. That offer was agreed by the Executive on 16 March. Further meetings have taken place with the trade unions since then, and a final offer was put to them on 13 April. We expect to hear back from them. I say, again, that that is in stark contrast to the approach taken in Britain, where a pay freeze has been imposed for one year, and, on the basis of previous experience, I expect that position to continue. We have ensured that there will continue to be an increase for public-sector workers here.

11.15 am

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

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

Private Members' Business

Programme for Government: Inclusion of End-of-life Outcomes

Ms Bunting: I beg to move

That this Assembly believes that everyone impacted by death, dying and bereavement should receive the care and support they need; expresses its concern that demographic trends in Northern Ireland predict a significant increase in chronic illness and palliative care demand in the years ahead; notes that Scotland and Wales have current palliative care strategies and that the Republic of Ireland's Programme for Government contains seven clear commitments on end-of-life care; further notes the New Decade, New Approach agreement commitment to invest in palliative care service improvement has yet to materialise; recognises that the care and support available to people as they die has an enormous impact on their quality of life and that each death leaves a number of people bereaved; and calls on the Executive to ensure that the draft Programme for Government outcomes framework includes indicators around death, dying and bereavement and the importance of a good end-of-life experience for people in Northern Ireland.

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 in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Ms Bunting: I am grateful to colleagues from across the House for adding their names to the motion, which I tabled in my capacity as chairperson of the all-party group on terminal illness. Given its subject matter, I trust that the spirit of collaboration will continue when the Question is put on what is a very serious issue, which will, literally, affect every person in Northern Ireland.

We are told that there are two sure things in life: death and taxes. On one of those, we are in the blessed position to be able to make a significant difference to each and every one of our citizens at what will be one of the most vulnerable times in their existence: when they receive a terminal diagnosis, when they need to make plans, when their life is coming to an end; or when they love someone who is going through those things and they have to face a life with the void of that loss.

We have not all received bad news ourselves — some among us do know that devastation — but we have each grieved and we know the pain and panic.

As the Programme for Government (PFG) plots a way through our lives from birth, with strategies, indicators and outcomes for almost everything, there is one glaring omission: what happens when life is ending? The existing PFG outcomes framework rightly emphasises the importance of giving young people the best start in life and keeping people healthy and active throughout. However, it fails to recognise the end phase of the life cycle and a number of critical points that are associated with that:

demographic trends predict that there will be a significant increase in chronic illness and palliative and end-of-life care demand in Northern Ireland in the years ahead; that the care and support that is available to people as they die has an enormous impact on their quality of life; that many groups face inequities in accessing care and support when they are impacted on by death and dying; that each death leaves a number of people bereaved; and that, because of the previous point and the impact of the pandemic, demand for bereavement support will continue to grow.

Unquestionably, the PFG, including the outcomes framework, should recognise and include issues around death, dying and bereavement, and the importance of a good end-of-life experience for people in Northern Ireland. For over a year, we have taken drastic measures to protect life from a virus. We will now have to deal with the aftermath. Those issues have been brought into sharp focus. Embedding them at the strategic policy level is needed now more than ever and is the next natural step.

The local population is ageing rapidly. That trend has been accompanied by growing numbers of people living with multiple chronic and incurable illnesses and complex needs. If we look at the stats, we see that the average healthy life expectancy in Northern Ireland is just 60 years of age. Disability-free life expectancy is worse still at 58 years of age. Those trends have had a significant impact on the end-of-life sector. For example, since 2011, the number of people on the local palliative care register has doubled, while deaths from cancer have increased by 10%, chronic lower respiratory diseases by 17% and dementia by a staggering 65%. Looking ahead, the population of over-85s is expected to grow by more than 100% by 2043, with an associated rise in palliative care demand of over 30% by 2040 — in around 20 years' time. We are far from ready.

Those issues have not been appropriately recognised at the strategic policy level in Northern Ireland. No regional palliative or end-of-life care strategy is in place, with the last strategy, Living Matters, Dying Matters, now six years out of date. Despite a commitment to invest in palliative care service improvement in the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) agreement, there is no mention of palliative or end-of-life care in the PFG. Northern Ireland is already falling behind its neighbours in that area. Scotland's strategic framework on palliative care has been in place since 2015. The Welsh Government have had a palliative and end-of-life care delivery plan in place since 2017. A new five-year palliative care strategy is being developed in England. The Irish Programme for Government, which was published in 2020, contains seven clear commitments on end-of-life care, including the development of a new palliative care policy and greater research on the impact of bereavement.

It is imperative, then, that the end-of-life challenge in Northern Ireland is recognised and prioritised in the PFG. We need policy levers to ensure that palliative care, which is shown to result in better quality of life, better symptom management and lower rates of mental ill health, is available to everyone who needs it and that the other financial, practical, emotional and spiritual issues that affect people who are at the end of life, as well as their loved ones, are addressed and met.

That would be important under any circumstances, but it is especially so in the context of the recent pandemic. Since the end of March 2020, nearly 170,000 people in

Northern Ireland have been impacted by a bereavement. That represents a huge increase in the number of people who require bereavement support, but many of those who have been impacted by the death of a loved one during that period will be living with complex grief reactions that have arisen from the circumstances of the restrictions. For example, one of the consequences of social distancing and visiting restrictions in care settings such as hospitals and nursing homes is that some people did not have the opportunity to say goodbye to their dying loved ones. The ability to say goodbye is associated with better outcomes on measures of depression and complicated grief among bereaved people. The Department of Health's draft mental health strategy acknowledges:

“the restrictions on funeral rites during the pandemic have had an impact on the emotional wellbeing of many”.

It is an area about which I feel particularly strongly. Some years ago, I spent three nights and three days with my dad at my gran's bedside in her nursing home as she was dying. I am so grateful for the time that I got to share with them both at that time, because my dad died not long afterwards. I cannot imagine my dad or me having to do that alone: being the only person allowed in, bearing all the responsibility alone, for as long as it takes, and being afraid to leave for a cup of tea, a bite to eat or a shower, in case you are not there when the time comes. I am an only child, and so was my dad, but you could add into that mix having to choose who will be that one person and who will have to be excluded from the funeral. All of that is compounded by knowing of the indignity with which your loved one's remains will be treated should COVID be cited on the death certificate.

Statutory and community and voluntary sector (CVS) bereavement support services were struggling to cope with demand before COVID-19, and it is very likely that the situation has only worsened as a result of COVID-19. The effect of the pandemic on bereaved people will be felt for a long time to come and will require a strategic response from government, working in partnership with key stakeholders. The inclusion of an additional outcome in the PFG framework that is focused on death, dying and bereavement is a must. That additional outcome could be supported by key priorities that are relevant to palliative and end-of-life care issues, as identified by expert stakeholders in the sector. Along with pre-existing relevant indicators, there are further indicators that could help monitor progress on the outcome, such as the number of people on the regional palliative care register and the percentage of the population that is given the opportunity to discuss advanced care planning. I will leave it for others to go into the details and merits of those when it comes to statistics, but we should be enabling such conversations to happen long before people are in a highly charged emotional state, having received a devastating diagnosis. In so doing, we would also move towards removing the stigma surrounding death and dying.

It was superb to see the joint response from so many charities and hospices across Northern Ireland to the Executive's public consultation on the draft programme. I am grateful to all those — there are too many to name — that do so much work in this area, both in policy and in practice. In particular, I am grateful to Marie Curie in my constituency, which worked with me on the motion. Others will mention those in their constituency. I also

praise the 10,200-plus people who took the time to sign the Marie Curie petition calling for greater end-of-life and bereavement support to be included in the PFG. Again, I will leave the detail of their comments to others to include in their remarks.

When considering the issue, we need to walk in the shoes of those who are in this situation, and we need to make it better for them. We are in a position, here and now, to make a change for the benefit of every citizen. Is that not why we are here? I urge colleagues to support the motion.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I am very pleased to be a signatory to the motion. I acknowledge the work of Marie Curie and of Joanne Bunting, as chair of the all-party group, in tabling what is a very important motion.

Every one of us will agree that those impacted on by death, dying and bereavement should receive the care and support that they need. It is crucial to note that demographic trends predict a significant increase in chronic illness and demand for palliative care in the years ahead. Now is the time to consider how we can address concerns and develop strategies that will lead to a better end-of-life experience for people in the North. I recently chaired a research launch event by Marie Curie and Queen's University that outlined how it is expected that, by 2040, there will be a 30% increase in demand for palliative care and how the population of over-85s is predicted to increase by approximately 100%.

If we do not start to make changes now in how we deliver end-of-life care, difficulties will result in the coming years, especially in relation to end-of-life care in the community and capacity issues for care homes and hospices.

11.30 am

I pay tribute to all the health and social care workers in our community, care homes, hospices and hospitals, who have provided support to those most in need over the past year when restrictions have made it difficult for families to provide that support themselves. We thank you all for your work and emotional support in what have been very difficult times for patients and their families and, indeed, for you, their carers. We recognise the impact that it has had and the contribution that you have made.

During the Committee's inquiry into COVID-19 and its impact on care homes, the issue of advance care planning was raised on a number of occasions. Everyone who responded outlined the importance of sensitive and compassionate conversations about advance care planning. It is crucial that these conversations are on an individual basis, are supported by the appropriate professional — ideally, the one who knows the person best — and take into account the unique needs, preferences and changing wishes of the individual. It is also important that these conversations do not happen only once but are an ongoing, dynamic process.

The Committee made a number of recommendations on advance care planning, including:

"The Department of Health should clearly outline and communicate the rights of older people and families regarding end-of-life planning"

and

"that relevant professionals have access to appropriate training in advance care planning."

The recommendations were all accepted by the Department, and we look forward to discussing this issue further with the Department.

I want to make some remarks as Sinn Féin spokesperson for health, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I was disappointed with the response that I received from the Department to a question about bereavement services. I think that it will come as something of a surprise to Members and the public. In relation to a question on the commissioning of bereavement services regionally or within the health and social care trusts, it stated:

"The Department for Health does not commission bereavement services regionally or within health and social care trusts."

It went on to state:

"while the public health agency provides funding for various bereavement services, projects and groups across the North, bereavement services within each HSE trust have traditionally been provided by third-sector, community, voluntary and Charitable organisations."

While we all acknowledge and value the work that those organisations do, a more statute-based strategic and commissioning process is needed.

Facing the end of our life, or that of a loved one, is a sad event. However, it is unavoidable and therefore must be planned for. We know our demographics; we know that our population across the island is aging. That will ultimately require practical, emotional and spiritual needs to be addressed as people face the final times of their life. Therefore, we have a duty to prepare. That preparation must take into account the financial resources that we need and the practical and emotional support and assistance needed for families. With all those resources in place, we can — we must, Members — ensure proper symptom management, active and considerate planning and quality of care and choice as we tend and support our loved ones and their grieving families through the end phase of life.

I support the motion, and I urge Members to do likewise.

Ms S Bradley: First, I place on record my thanks to Joanne Bunting for tabling the motion and to Marie Curie, which, I know, has supported her role on the APG.

When the motion was presented to me, I put my name to it without hesitation. As the mover of the motion quite rightly pointed out, it is a glaring omission from our Programme for Government that this issue has not been tackled. It is important that we have the motion and discussion today. I say that at a very poignant time. During COVID-19, the many horrendous stories of people dying without a loved one at their bedside will resonate with all of us, and beyond this House, for a very long time.

The difficulties and situations that we faced, which were, largely, beyond anyone's control, led to the passing of individuals in a way that has traumatised family members because they have so many questions about their passing

and how different it might have been if only they had been able to be by their side.

I could not make that comment without putting on record our absolute indebted thanks to the NHS staff, who were there with those people, for the comfort that they were able to offer to the family members, who knew that their loved one did not die alone and that somebody was there and held their hand. That is a huge comfort. To those NHS staff who had to do that routinely, I thank every one of you. I know that that cannot have been an easy task, on top of dealing with COVID and managing those wards.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. I wholeheartedly agree with her sentiment towards the NHS staff, but does she agree that, equally, our praise must go to those care home staff, who had such difficult circumstances to deal with and who, quite often, were the mediators between the family at the window and the resident in the care home as, sadly, they went through their end of life in an isolated place?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention. He, quite rightly, pre-empted my next comment.

It was not just in the hospital setting; there are people across our community who stepped up, be it in care homes or in their own homes, and they were reliant on the palliative care workers and community care workers. At the outset, I mentioned the Marie Curie organisation as one such example of people who step up and step in to support people at their most vulnerable time, but there are also the hospices and the services that they provide.

In my constituency, the community response to the void in our Programme for Government has seen the creation of Life & Time, which is a charitable organisation that recruits nurses and trains them up. Those nurses then go to the homes of people who are dying and in need of palliative care. An example of some of the amazing work is shown by Deirdre Morgan and Michaela Kane, who recently successfully completed the European Certificate in Essential Palliative Care. They are able to take that resource and go to the homes in our communities, and we are so thankful to them and others like them who help people at that final stage of their life.

We have to recognise that there is a void in strategic policy on this whole issue. The motion is a call to fill that void. I call on everybody to support it, and I do not doubt that everybody will.

It is important that we plan for good end-of-life care. It will not just happen. Like everything in life, it has to be planned for. In the Marie Curie submission, they talked about the issues that we should consider in that planning. They talked about the care register and how a relatively small number of people are on it. I think that they suggested that more than 15,000 deaths are recorded in Northern Ireland in a normal year, meaning that 11,250 people should potentially be on the palliative care register who are not. The actual number during the past five years has been less than half of that.

It is important that we have these conversations, and, as other Members have said, advance care planning brings some element of certainty where there is none. That is a really important conversation and a difficult one to open

up, but if it is scripted, planned and prepared for, people can grab the mechanisms and the framework, and use that as their lead to take them through a really difficult, vulnerable time in their life.

In conclusion, I support addressing the glaring omission in the Programme for Government, and I hope that the motion will be the catalyst to allowing the issue of end-of-life care and the bereavement that comes with it to not only be taken seriously and acknowledged but resourced. Again, I thank the Member for tabling the motion.

Ms Armstrong: I support the motion, of course, and thank all those who brought it to the House. Later, my colleague Paula Bradshaw will make a winding-up speech on behalf of the parties that co-signed the motion.

As Benjamin Franklin said:

"In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes."

Death impacts every family and every individual, and it is a fact of life. In my past career, I have been a volunteer bereavement counsellor. It is a fact that the better we die, the better the quality of life for the person who is dying and for the people who are left behind. Death is a subject that people find it hard to talk about. Even amongst families, they find it difficult to discuss. It is the one aspect of life that impacts us all, and it is the aspect least addressed in our Programme for Government. Today, I hope that we will redress that issue and that it will finally come forward for consideration.

We need a regional palliative care or end-of-life strategy. As we know, and as Ms Bunting said, Living Matters, Dying Matters is six years out of date. With an ageing population, the doubling of the number of people on the palliative care register and the impact of COVID on the ability to say goodbye, we need to address the issue as a matter of urgency. It is one of the key components of our mental health concerns across Northern Ireland. I know that support services are struggling to cope with demand. They struggled before COVID, but they are struggling even more now. Those support services are the other volunteers and organisations and charities that I know are helping families through a very demanding time. The need for sustainably funded bereavement support necessitates a strategic response from government.

As Ms Bradley said, we can only thank all those healthcare workers who break the news that a loved one is dying. I had the privilege of being alongside midwives as we discussed how to break to a mother the bad news that she was about to be told. Those people break that news, they console, and then they go about their daily work. They are amazing. I pay tribute to each and every one of them.

I welcome the information provided by Marie Curie, which suggests that we add to the Programme for Government indicators to confirm the number of people on the palliative care register and the percentage of the population that is given the opportunity to discuss advance care planning. As we all know, data is the key that unlocks funding, and it is data that enables resources to be invested in key issues and priorities.

For those of us who have been through bereavement, I am very sorry. It is horrendous. We know how important it is to support our loved ones at their end of life and to help

those of us who are left behind to be allowed to remember and grieve. I believe that we owe it to ourselves to learn about death at a much earlier age. That is not to scare any young person but to introduce death as a fact of life. Being prepared goes a long way in helping to cope with one of the most difficult times in a person's life. Why does our national curriculum not include the subject of death? Surely we could include a module on death and dying in a subject such as the personal development section of the learning for life and work area. I know that helping people to speak about death, about life and about coping with life during the time before, at and after death can help a family to grieve. It can help the health staff and volunteers on whom we so depend during end of life.

On behalf of all who are going through their end-of-life journey and in memory of all who have died and their loved ones, I ask that we include indicators on death, dying and bereavement in the Programme for Government. It is privilege to support the motion.

Mr Clarke: When this motion was put forward, I was, like others, very happy to sign it. It reminded me of what I went through 16 years ago, when my father, a healthy man working with me at home on a Friday, went into hospital on the Sunday, with no diagnosis or prognosis to indicate that that was his last journey. It was thrust upon us. My father was in hospital after an operation when we were told the news reflected by the contribution from the previous Member to speak. It was difficult for us as a family, because we had no understanding of it. That was pre-devolution. There have always been shortcomings on end of life. This is not an attack on the current Minister or the Ministers before him. It was pre-devolution.

11.45 am

I remember that my father was transferred from Antrim hospital to what was described locally as the workhouse, which was then in Braid Valley in Ballymena, where he got excellent care from the Macmillan team. That was a comfort to us. Like many patients, he suffered in silence. The nurses went above and beyond in providing excellent care. I had conversations with nurses and asked, "How do you do this job?". We always assume that a nurse is there to help you get better, not to help you pass. The professionalism of those nurses was unquestionable. I remember that, at that time, they were talking about a Macmillan unit in Antrim hospital, which, thankfully, came some years later.

Roll forward to 10 years ago, when my mother went onto a main ward in the hospital and was never to come home. Having dignity is very difficult for a family. My mother spent 11 days on a general ward with six patients and a curtain around her. The family spent precious time with her in the full knowledge that she was not coming home. It was difficult for us. It was difficult for the other families on the ward. Where was the dignity for the other five patients, not just for our family? I ask that because there was a lack of provision. There was, dare I say, competition for accessing the capacity of the 12-bed unit. That is no reflection on Macmillan and the work that it does, but there was competition for those beds. My mother's dignity was removed because she had to die on a ward with five other patients. She was not allowed the close family network that you would get in a normal setting.

I fully support the motion. The call that it makes is appropriate, long overdue and should have been included in the Programme for Government before. It is very touching that everyone signed the motion so easily. We have to bear in our hearts that many people have not gone through this situation and do not understand it. Until people are thrust on that journey of death, are they prepared? Do they know what is going to happen?

Reference has been made to the charities and the work that they do. They have stepped up when people get those diagnoses. Many people survive, but those charities have given them care and support, which is also very important. We need to be sure that all those charities and the service are properly funded.

Another thing strikes me; I remember this from when my mother passed. Like a lot of people, I, in my ignorance, associated end-of-life care with cancer. My mother did not have cancer. I remember the Macmillan nurses being brought to me a few days before my mother passed. I said to the nurse, "But my mother has not got cancer". I was ignorant to the fact that end-of-life care is not just about cancer. Macmillan is not about cancer. Marie Curie is not about cancer.

I remember when they were administering the medication my mother needed a number of days before she died the nurse on the general ward telling us that Macmillan, or it could be Marie Curie depending on the setting, knows the appropriate time to give that level of treatment and that the general staff do not. That is no reflection on them. Again, my view is that they are there to nurse people to get better, not to nurse people to die. The dignity and the care that those people give is unquestionable. It is concerning that some people do not get the opportunity for that intervention. Some people die at home in pain and agony because they never got that level of care. That is shameful.

Reference has been made to taxes and death. That is true. However, I want to say briefly that, before you pay taxes and reach death, there is life. There is also perinatal care, and we are failing there as well. I know that the debate is not about that, but that is an issue that it will be important to come back to. We will never avoid taxes, but, to get to taxes, we have to be born. If we are born, we will have our taxes and our death.

We need to be sure that people and their families are cared for in a dignified manner and that they get the best care possible at that time. I commend the motion.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Like others, I thank Joanne and the all-party group for bringing the motion. I also thank Seán McGeown for his research paper. I looked through it a couple of times.

I agree with the motion wholeheartedly. When I looked at Seán's paper, I also looked at the draft Programme for Government and 'New Decade, New Approach'. There is a lot about life and about helping and supporting people in the Programme for Government. That is the right thing to do. However, there is very little about palliative care, even just in terms of what support is out there as part of health and social care.

As Kellie did, I would welcome an opportunity to talk about dying. I am of an age where I was heart-scared of people dying when I was younger. No one spoke about cancer when I was growing up. People went up the stairs to die.

No one talked about it. That is quite horrific when you think about it. My family and I were privileged. My father is dead just four years. It was his explicit wish that he wanted to die at home, if at all possible. I think that, when he said that, we all looked at each other. We did not know what to be prepared for, but, at the end of the day, he lived a good life, and his wish was to have a good death. He was very open about that. The mission statement in 'Living Matters, Dying Matters' is exactly what we, as a family, received. A palliative healthcare team gave us an understanding of what was involved. He received the best and most appropriate care. He, along with the staff, spoke to us about what would happen and what would be expected of us. We also received timely information. He definitely had choices. His care was supported and coordinated through not just a health and social care team and a palliative care team but Macmillan nurses and others. We, as a family, will be forever grateful for that. When I looked at Seán's paper, I felt sorry for the people who did not have that experience. It helps with your grief and bereavement. Working with the team and knowing what to expect, which meant that we were able to cope, helped us as a family.

I looked at the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) review. I understand why it said that there is a lack of clarity among organisations about how the range of regional structures work and fit together. That is something that we will constantly strive to achieve, particularly given the year and more that we have all come through. Joanne spoke very movingly about the number of experiences of families during the pandemic who did not have what I had. My heart goes out to them. As Trevor outlined, palliative care is not about just cancer. One of my neighbours died of motor neurone disease and had the same palliative care team in and out. Their family was forever grateful as well. That was just before the pandemic. As we, as a community, did for other neighbours whose family members died, we brought bins in, did shopping, made a pot of soup and all that sort of stuff. That goes along with it.

It is also about advice and guidance. That is critical. It is really important that we have that as a Programme for Government target. It is important, as Kellie mentioned and as others have said, that families have as much information as possible and as much support as possible to help those who are dying to get that support and those choices. We had only weeks from when my father was diagnosed until he passed — he had very aggressive pancreatic cancer — but those weeks were filled with information, care and support. As Joanne said, we are people, too. Some people look at MLAs and say, "What would they know?". We do know what it is like. I think that you, Minister, have a coalition of the willing to get that into the Programme for Government. The people who have done all the work to bring the motion to the House and those who support people to have a good death deserve our support. I support the motion.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Members who brought this most important issue to the Assembly Floor this morning. I particularly thank my colleague Joanne Bunting and, of course, Marie Curie for its campaign on the matter.

Every day, thousands of people, sadly, lose their life due to chronic and terminal illness. While many of those illnesses, such as cancer, get a lot of publicity, one condition that continues to fly under the radar is idiopathic pulmonary

fibrosis (IPF), a severe lung condition that scars the lungs and makes it harder to breathe. We do not know what causes the condition, and, at present, there is no known cure for the damage that it does to lungs. People living with IPF see their life turned upside down by the condition, with everyday tasks becoming impossible and exhausting. As the condition worsens and the scarring of the lungs increases, symptoms such as coughing become more common and severe. Through the use of antifibrotic medication and specialist treatment and support, we can slow the development of more scarring, enabling people to live better for longer. After being diagnosed with IPF, the average person has a life expectancy of just three years. That makes it a more deadly disease than leukaemia and some forms of cancer. The only long-term treatment for IPF is a lung transplant. However, due to long waiting lists, many people, sadly, do not live long enough to receive that type of treatment.

Just recently, at a meeting of the all-party group on lung health, which I chair, MLAs heard from Pauline Millar, a South Antrim constituent of mine who is living with the condition. We heard about the real impact that it has had on her life: she had to stop working and has found the support available patchy at best. Pauline is lucky, however, because her condition was diagnosed early, and she is able to access some specialist support. For too many people across Northern Ireland, that is not their reality. With over 1,200 people living with IPF in Northern Ireland, it is a serious issue, and hundreds of people lose a loved one to the condition every year. People should be able to access specialist treatment where they live.

In 2018, the Department of Health discussed overhauling the way in which specialist services were provided for those with IPF, but little came of it. At present, health and social care trusts do not provide specific funding to provide the services needed to support those living with IPF. That creates unacceptable inequalities, as many cannot afford to self-fund services. People living with IPF should not fall victim to a postcode lottery whereby where they live determines the level of support that they receive. We can and must do more to ensure that people get the support that they need, particularly when their condition worsens and they rely on palliative care.

Although my focus today has been on that specific group, that in no way takes away from others who need the same support as they reach their end-of-life journey. We welcome the fact that more and more people in Northern Ireland are living longer, but we must recognise that, with that, many will face that point and need specific care, including end of life.

As the motion notes:

"the New Decade, New Approach agreement commitment to invest in palliative care service improvement has yet to materialise".

I therefore urge Ministers from all parties to make progress on that commitment, which was made to all of the people of Northern Ireland on the restoration of devolved government.

The pressures brought by the COVID-19 pandemic have caused much pain and suffering for many families. Many were unable to see their loved ones in their final weeks and days or, because they obeyed the Government safety

restrictions on gatherings, pay their respects at funerals. End-of-life care should also have a strong focus on the families, who are often affected not only emotionally but financially.

In finishing, I put on record my sincere gratitude to all members of our health service, the hospices, the charitable organisations such as Marie Curie and the other care providers that have looked after loved ones under the most difficult of circumstances in the last year.

Now is the time to drive forward a new progressive vision for improving and enhancing our end-of-life palliative care provision and support in Northern Ireland. That will take serious investment and health transformation, but we owe it to all of our citizens. I support the motion to include such a vital topic in our Programme for Government. Let us work together to ensure that we support everyone living with and affected by a terminal condition.

12.00 noon

Ms Flynn: As other Members have done, I thank Joanne for bringing the motion to the Assembly today, and I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of it. Thank you for that.

The issues around death, dying and bereavement deserve to be treated with the utmost respect and compassion, and, through their remarks thus far, Members have all done that justice in today's debate. At some point in all our lives, we will face the illness and end-of-life care of a loved one. With that in mind, we need to make decisions on how end-of-life care should happen. When faced with the inevitable responsibility of caring for and supporting a loved one as they die, we need to ask what we would like to happen. Of course, we want to see our loved ones free from pain and discomfort and ensure that their financial, physical, emotional and spiritual needs are addressed as they face the end of their life.

Living through that real-life experience and even just having to undertake those conversations and decisions is really challenging and traumatic for any family to go through. Members have expressed that in the Chamber today. Many of you have endured that difficult journey through the process of losing loved ones from your family. My Uncle Jodie lost his battle with bone cancer a number of years ago. He was still in his 40s when he died. Only a number of weeks ago, my cousins buried their father after a really long and difficult fight with motor neurone disease. Both of them were still so young when they passed away, and both battled with life-changing and painful diseases. As a family, you can only witness and watch the people whom you love gradually slip away, and, at times, you feel powerless to help them. It is really important that the needs of people of all ages who are living with dying, death and bereavement, including the families and the carers involved, are addressed, taking into account the preferences of those people and their wishes, because every family and every circumstance will be different.

As Kellie and Carál mentioned, bereavement supports are a vital part of palliative care. In many cases, it is only when a loved one has died that the family has that space to feel the impact of the loss fully, and it is usually then that they need that emotional support most of all. As part of the recent mental health consultation, we in Sinn Féin called for a specialist bereavement service to be established,

even if it is on a regional basis, because we know that specialist services such as bereavement services are a necessity to help to support the families and carers, who, sadly, a lot of times, can be left to navigate the situation and learn how to cope by themselves.

It is my belief that we can go further and should consider the establishment of a psychological autopsy service, particularly — this is a bit more specific — for those who have been bereaved by suicide, who will have many unanswered questions about a loved one's death and whose grieving process is even more complicated by the effects of the stigma and trauma around people who die by suicide. That process could act as an additional avenue of support and could develop into a system of learning around the difficult and complex issue of someone who has completed suicide and died.

I will finish by taking the opportunity to join other Members in acknowledging the significant work of all our voluntary and statutory organisations that are providing those bereavement services at present and doing much more. Once again, I emphasise and support the need for enhanced investment in those sensitive services, which are doing their very best to help people at the most difficult points in their life. I am happy to support the motion.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Joanne, for tabling the motion. I was not going to speak today until I listened to the unity of purpose that we all have. Later today, we will have a debate on antisemitism. That brings me to the Jewish faith, which has a prayer:

"May you see your children's children."

For some of us who reach my age, however, that can be difficult. I think of a young boy, Charlie Craig, who passed away about a year and a half ago in Lisburn. I think of how he suffered and the care that he got. My friend Carmelita, who will not mind me using her name, is an educationalist in the hospital. Little Charlie went to St Joseph's Primary School. They built his little toys in the playground for the kids. The school always tried to remember him and to bring him into the class setting.

The nurses, the doctors and all others who are there make the end of life so special. I know that everyone has spoken of their experiences of death. I remember my father saying that he had lost his brother, who was blown up off the coast. He lost one of his sons, who was killed in an accident, and he lost his eldest grandchild, who drowned. All of that is the experience of life, and death is part of life, but we need to give that care. That care can be given so gently with a caring hand or a kind word from our nurses, who make it so dignified when it comes near the end, when we are there to say goodbye to our loved ones — to our mothers, to our fathers or to our brothers — as life would have it. When death comes, there is so much knowledge that leaves us and so many questions that we have not asked, but we are given that little bit of time. When I was young, I probably did not realise what it meant, but there was a prayer that was always said:

"May you have a happy death."

It is very strong in my faith. I did not know what a happy death was then, but I know now.

To Joanne and the other Members who signed the motion, thanks very much. I hope that, with help, we can

make end-of-life outcomes part of the Programme for Government, if that is at all possible.

Mr Butler: In listening to some of the very personal testimonies today, I am mindful of the fact that a number of people listening in today across Northern Ireland will be going through that very process at the moment. In my time on the all-party groups that we all sit on, I have become aware of an excellent charity and facility that people need to be aware of: Cruse Bereavement Care. To anyone who is listening in or who wants to pass on their details, I say that it is important that they reach out for that help and know that it is there. As we know, bereavement can have a serious effect on all of us.

I welcome the motion. I thank Ms Bunting and all the other co-signatories for tabling it. It was a pleasure to sign it, for the purposes of the debate. There are more than two aspects to it, but two jump out at me. One is to protect the dignity of the person who is dying, and the second is to support the living. Every one of us will experience death in some form or fashion, whether through managing the bereavement of someone else or when it comes to us. I hope and pray that we are in a position to do so with dignity.

I thank the palliative care community, as others have done and, I am sure, everyone else and the Minister will do. While this is missing from the Programme for Government at the moment, we are all of one voice when we say that there are professionals and volunteers out there who are providing the pathways as we speak. Whether that is in a hospital, a hospice or a community setting, our nurses, doctors, health professionals, care staff and many dozens, if not hundreds, of volunteers are absolute heroes for what they do. I particularly thank the policy team at Marie Curie for providing the support for today's motion.

I have to declare an interest, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I often blow about my wife a little. She is a nurse, but she also is a palliative care nurse. She worked for Northern Ireland Hospice, although she does not work there now. When I ask her what her favourite role as a nurse has been, she says that it was in the hospice. She epitomises the people who are called to work in those places. I used to ask why that would be. It is the most personal journey that you could ever have. Birth and death: those are the two journeys that you can go with someone on that will bring you closer than anything else. My hat goes off to those nurses.

Death will affect everyone. Therefore, the omission, if we can call it that, of end-of-life outcomes from our Programme for Government is an anomaly that needs to be addressed. It must be addressed as soon as possible. As we have said today, it is not within the purview of the Minister of Health alone. There are fiscal and financial, educational and community aspects.

I think of something that we have talked about a lot in the Chamber since we came back. We have paid tribute to a number of former Members, and that has been hard. As the Member for Lagan Valley outlined, this is not just a matter for the elderly. You have only to go to the Children's Hospice, paediatric care, the Cancer Centre or any of those places where we have young people on that palliative journey. That is incredibly tough.

We often talk about stigmas and taboos, and cancer was one of them. When my grandparents were alive, you could

not have used the word. When my grandfather was ill, we were pretty certain that he had cancer, but he would not go for tests and you could not mention the word. "Mental health" is another one. We know that, because we talk about mental health quite a lot now, but we are still breaking down the barriers and the stigma attached to it. However, death is the one that will come to us all. We may not all suffer mental ill health, cancer, heart disease or any of those things — I pray that you do not — but we will all die, as will all those we love. Therefore, there is an omission from the Programme for Government. Trevor Clarke talked about that. It is nobody's fault. It is not a political thing, and it is not the former Minister's fault. However, we need to address it, and it is our job collectively to do that.

I have one final thing to say. Kellie Armstrong touched on it, and it is the impact of death. I had a private Member's Bill out for consultation, which has since closed. It is about addressing post-traumatic stress disorder in emergency responders. Reading through the findings of the consultation, one thing jumped out at me: how hard it is to deal with death. In particular, police officers responding to the consultation have written about how hard it is when they have to go to someone's door to report a death. I also think of the nurses, the doctors or the care staff who have to give that news and the impact on them. Therefore, this is something that I would like to see included as a Programme for Government outcome.

The Ulster Unionist Party will support the motion.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No other Members have indicated that they wish to speak. Therefore I call the Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, to respond. Minister, you have 15 minutes.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I welcome the debate, brought by Joanne Bunting and sponsored by an all-party group, because it gives the opportunity to highlight the importance and value of palliative and end-of-life care and bereavement support. I respond to what is a call to the entire Executive.

I thank the palliative care community and bereavement support providers for the flexibility, resilience and dedication that they have shown during the COVID-19 pandemic. They have worked tirelessly to plan and provide holistic and person-centred treatment, care and support for those living with palliative and end-of-life care needs and those who are important to them. They have ensured that, despite the many challenges of the past year, essential palliative care services, advice and medicines have continued to be available. They have also been there to support and care for those who have experienced the loss of a loved one and whose grief has been compounded by being separated from family and friends.

The motion includes a call for the inclusion of dying, death and bereavement in the Programme for Government and emphasises the importance of a good end-of-life experience. Many in the palliative care community have highlighted their concern at the exclusion of palliative and end-of-life care and bereavement from the draft outcomes framework. I agree that the exclusion is an anomaly that needs to be addressed. I do not believe that anyone in the Chamber thinks otherwise, and I commend those who have highlighted the need for dying, death and

bereavement to be an integral part of our Programme for Government.

I want to assure Members that I, my Department and my party support the correction of that omission so that palliative and end-of-life care and bereavement support are an intrinsic part of our Executive's collective vision to support all our citizens from the start to the end of their lives.

12.15 pm

The rationale for that is very clear. As has already been said, our population is ageing: in 2019, the number of people aged 65 and over increased by 2.1%. Projections indicate a continued ageing population. The number of people aged 65 and over is projected to grow by 25.1% by mid-2028. The proportion of the population aged 85 and over is projected to double by the middle of 2043. The population need for palliative care in Northern Ireland is predicted to increase by 31% by the year 2040. There are approximately 16,000 deaths each year in Northern Ireland, with an average of five people assumed to be significantly impacted by each person's death. I welcome the input of the 10 contributors to the debate today, all of whom are members of the Executive parties, which were the authors of the Programme for Government. I encourage them to raise the issues and the anomaly with their Executive colleagues so that it can be addressed.

While the statistics underline the evidential need to include dying, death and bereavement in the Programme for Government, importantly, how we care for people who are towards the end of life and how we support people in bereavement is a measure of our compassion as a society and of how we value our fellow citizens. The mover of the motion outlined how the draft outcome framework, rightly, highlights the importance of giving every child and young person the best start in life, encouraging and supporting people to enjoy long, healthy and active lives, and of fostering a caring society that supports people throughout their lives. However, the importance of care and support towards and at the end of life must also be recognised. The effects of illness, disability, age or frailty, loss and bereavement are shared experiences that make up our common humanity, and the way in which we respond must also reflect that.

We need to recognise the universality of those life experiences as we develop a vision for the future of our society and for our citizens. Access to quality palliative and end-of-life care and bereavement support when it is needed is what we would wish for ourselves and for those who are important to us. As has been stated, in 2010, my Department published 'Living Matters Dying Matters: A Palliative and End of Life Care Strategy for Adults in Northern Ireland'. There has been significant progress over the past decade since the strategy's publication. The palliative care in partnership programme, which has been co-led by the Health and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency, brings together a range of stakeholders from the statutory, independent and community and voluntary sectors to support the development and improvement of palliative care services for adults in Northern Ireland. That partnership has been a driving force in supporting high-quality palliative and end-of-life care, irrespective of a person's condition and across all care settings. It has extended education and training in

palliative care across health and social care, including in care homes. It has worked with general practice so that people with palliative care needs are identified earlier, supporting timely intervention and the better coordination of treatment and care.

Together with Marie Curie, the partnership has supported the development and roll-out of a rapid response service to provide out-of-hours support for people with palliative and end-of-life care needs in their own homes. It has also developed a role description and competencies for a palliative care key worker, typically the district nurse, for those who would benefit from a palliative care approach. Through the ambition and actions of the palliative care in partnership programme and its member organisations, collectively and individually, there has been real progress in how we design and deliver palliative and end-of-life care in Northern Ireland.

However, there is a growing recognition that dying, death and bereavement are not just matters for Health and Social Care. They are societal issues that require a societal response: in effect, a public health approach to palliative care that draws on the expertise and experience of the wider community, working in partnership with Departments and other organisations.

My Department is leading a programme of work to develop and implement a public health approach to palliative care that recognises the role of society and community in enabling and supporting people with life-limiting conditions, and those important to them, to live well with flexible, holistic and person-centred care based on positive and collaborative partnership.

There are three key strands to this approach: first, increasing public awareness, understanding and discussion of palliative and end-of-life care; second, creating and building on the role of communities in supporting people living with life-limiting conditions and those important to them; thirdly, encouraging people to think and plan for their future physical, emotional, social, financial and spiritual needs as part of that holistic approach to advance care planning. That is appropriate at any stage of life. As part of that approach, we must all be part of a society-wide conversation that helps to destigmatise not only dying, death and bereavement but also palliative care, so that we can be clear about how palliative care can support a good life as well as a good end-of-life experience.

There are many misconceptions about palliative care, and Mr Clarke and Ms Ní Chuilín mentioned some of those, such as the belief that it is only for people with cancer, that it means that nothing else can be done or that it is only for the final weeks or days of life. We need to be clear in our message that palliative care is for anyone living with a life-limiting illness. We also need to emphasise the holistic nature of palliative care in addressing people's social, emotional and spiritual needs. It is about helping people not simply to live with their illness, but to live well, whether that be for years, months or weeks.

As part of the public health approach, work is progressing to develop an advance care planning policy for adults in Northern Ireland. Advance care planning focuses on what is important to a person in their life and, if they become unwell, what will be important and what they will prioritise in the future. Although traditionally driven by the palliative

care community, it is relevant at any stage of life and provides the opportunity for people who wish to do so to think about their present and plan for their future.

We know it is important to people. In 2016, 68% of respondents to the Let's Talk About research by the All Ireland Institute of Hospice and Palliative Care (AIHPC) said that:

“planning for the future was their biggest practical worry.”

However, that is not something that many of us do. A recent research report by the University of Ulster, 'Where Are We Now?', found that whilst 28% of respondents had heard of the term “advance care planning”, only 7% had engaged in that conversation. Despite that, four fifths of respondents felt it would be comforting to know that their family knew about their wishes. I encourage everyone to think about advance care planning. Speak to those who are important to us and those involved in our care about our wishes, feelings, beliefs and values. If we take the opportunity to make choices for our future care, then, if the time comes, those choices can help inform and support good palliative and end-of-life care.

I also want to acknowledge the work that has been progressed to support palliative care for children, which was raised by Mr Catney and Mr Butler. It is underpinned by my Department's 10-year strategy for children's palliative and end-of-life care and is led by the paediatric palliative care network, and good progress has been made to implement that strategy. That includes the commissioning of a needs assessment for children's palliative and end-of-life care, including those with life-limiting conditions. Work is at an advanced stage on the development of a regional antenatal and perinatal palliative care pathway.

That work will develop a rapid discharge pathway to facilitate choice in the child's place of death and to raise awareness of the role of the medical needs of children's palliative care in each trust.

Unfortunately, over the past year, many people in our community have had to deal with the loss of a loved one. I know how profound the impact of bereavement can be, particularly during the pandemic, when the loss has been coupled with the pain of separation and when the support and comfort that would normally come from being with others has been curtailed by the restrictions. In April 2020, the COVID-19 Northern Ireland bereavement care work stream was tasked with producing a report on the needs of the bereavement service that arose during the pandemic. From that, a number of recommendations have been made on how bereavement care and support might be improved. I am pleased that a new, broader Northern Ireland bereavement network is being set up with representation from a wide range of organisations, including Health and Social Care and cross-departmental and community organisations and agencies. The new network will take forward the recommendations in order to improve bereavement care and support in Northern Ireland.

COVID-19 has changed the way that we go about our daily lives. It has also changed how we think about and see the world. Many people now have a keener recognition of the things that are most important to them. There is evidence to suggest that that is also the case in how

people are thinking about palliative care. A survey in July 2020 that was commissioned by the All Ireland Institute of Hospice and Palliative Care found that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 64% of respondents reported that they had been thinking more about death and dying than before. The same percentage stated that the pandemic had increased the importance of discussing palliative care if they or someone important to them had a life-limiting illness.

I hope that, as we set out our vision for our future society through the Programme for Government, we collectively recognise the responsibility that we have to ensure that good palliative care, end-of-life care and bereavement support are intrinsic to that. I support the motion.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Ms Paula Bradshaw to make a winding-up speech on the debate. The Member will have 10 minutes.

Ms Bradshaw: I thank all the contributors, including the Minister, for being here, and I thank Marie Curie and others for doing so much to inform our discussion.

I will go through some of the contributions from Members. We started with the Chair of the all-party group on terminal illness, Ms Joanne Bunting, setting out why we are here today and saying that the Programme for Government fails to recognise the end-of-life cycle and how it is becoming more important to cater for the increasingly complex needs of our changing and growing older demographic. She thanked those who sat at the bedsides of people who were dying during the pandemic when their loved ones were unable to be there. Colm Gildernew, the Chair of the Health Committee, also referenced the work of the health and social care workers not just in our trusts but in our hospices and care homes, and he acknowledged the sterling role that they played during the pandemic. He touched on the need for advanced care planning to be sensitive and compassionate, and said that conversations need to take place over time. They need to be dynamic, because people's needs and wishes change as they move through their illness. He talked about the need for the commissioning of bereavement services and the burden that is on the community and voluntary sector in providing that support.

Sinéad Bradley very much welcomed the motion and talked about the glaring omission of palliative and end-of-life care from the Programme for Government. She thanked the health and social care staff for providing support to people in their final moments who otherwise would have been alone.

Kellie Armstrong talked about how death impacts everyone and mentioned her role in bereavement counselling. A key point that she made was about the care that is provided to new mums who may be bereaved and the role of bereavement midwives in that. At the all-party group meeting that many of us, including Órlaithí Flynn, were at last week, we talked about the role of the new bereavement suites in many of our trusts. Those are quiet places for people to regroup away from the busy maternity wards, where people are welcoming their new healthy babies.

12.30 pm

Trevor Clarke spoke about his father's death and how that had been thrust upon his family in very quick time. I

think that he mentioned that he had gone in for a routine operation. He spoke about how the family had to adapt very quickly to his passing. He also referred to his mother, who was on a ward in her final days. My mother died from cancer in the Mater Hospital, and we were lucky that she had her own room. My family is big, and we were almost playing tag teams to visit her, so it was very comforting that we had that private space. People's experience can be very different. Trevor Clarke and Carál Ní Chuilín also acknowledged that palliative care is not just about cancer but about conditions such as motor neurone disease.

Carál Ní Chuilín thanked Seán from the Assembly's Research and Information Service. I agree with her. The papers that we received in advance of the debate were very good. She talked about how her father had wanted to pass his last days at home and what was called "a good death". Carál said that she appreciated the support that the palliative healthcare team had provided, not just to her father on his choices but with the advice, guidance and information that her family received at that time.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Health Committee, Pam Cameron, who is also the chair of the all-party group on lung health, talked about idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, which all of us at the all-party group heard about recently. My takeaway from that was that palliative care might be needed over many years, in contrast to the very short-term interventions that Mr Clarke spoke about. Pam Cameron also made the very important point that the five parties in the Executive signed up to a commitment to investment in palliative care in 'New Decade, New Approach'. We gave that not just to the Assembly but to the population in Northern Ireland when we restored this place.

Órlaithí Flynn talked about palliative care being not just about health support but about meeting physical, emotional, spiritual and even, potentially, financial needs at the end. She also shared stories of her family's personal circumstances and said that, when someone passes, they sometimes leave behind a young family, who have very particular needs in processing that at a young age. She spoke about the need for specialist bereavement services and mentioned a specialised psychological autopsy service to support families who have been bereaved through suicide.

Pat Catney talked about the unity of purpose in the Chamber and shared that lovely Jewish prayer with the line:

"May you live to see your children's children".

He also mentioned Charlie Craig. I thank him for that, and I will pass on his sentiments to Charlie's parents, Cliodhna and Fintan. They are friends, and, as he mentioned him, I recalled that my husband, Ian, who is a mad linguist, was providing wee Charlie with French lessons in his final months. We have to remember that those young people, or anybody else, are still living, still want to learn and still have a thirst for life. Ian told me that Charlie's younger sister used to pop in and out of the room and that there was a wee bit of fun. The palliative stage does not just have to be about healthcare visitors arriving. It can also be about still living your life through it all. Sorry, I am getting emotional.

Robbie Butler talked about the role of Cruse Bereavement Care and said that people who are listening in should reach out because there is support there. He recognised

that hospices are not just about health and social care staff and recognised the roles played by volunteers and those who do the fundraising. He also recognised the role of his wife in providing palliative care and working in hospices. Again, he said that it is not all about sadness. It is also about living and families coming together at that time.

Robbie also spoke about his research for his private Member's Bill on post-traumatic stress disorder and that he had found that people are involved in the process whether they are in the Police Service, the Ambulance Service or other bodies. There can be very tough discussions with families at the end of life.

Finally, the Minister thanked those who work in the health and social care sector for their role during and before the pandemic. He very much agreed that palliative care should be in the Programme for Government and that its exclusion is an anomaly. It should be in there. It is an omission that needs to be addressed. He recognised that there are five parties in the coalition and that it is not just for the Department of Health. There should be a cross-societal response, and it will require cross-departmental support.

The Minister also talked about the Department of Health's palliative care strategy. Recently, the all-party group on terminal illness received a great presentation from the Palliative Care in Partnership programme on its wide range of services and support. Generally, we do not see the wide breadth of that work, so it was a real privilege to hear about it. I am glad that it continues to develop.

That concludes my commentary. Again, I thank everybody who contributed. I put on record my thanks to Marie Curie, the Northern Ireland Hospice and others for the sterling work that they do every day of the week and year.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question, I say to the lady that there is no shame in showing emotion in a debate like this. It demonstrates how much you care. You should not be embarrassed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly believes that everyone impacted by death, dying and bereavement should receive the care and support they need; expresses its concern that demographic trends in Northern Ireland predict a significant increase in chronic illness and palliative care demand in the years ahead; notes that Scotland and Wales have current palliative care strategies and that the Republic of Ireland's Programme for Government contains seven clear commitments on end-of-life care; further notes the New Decade, New Approach agreement commitment to invest in palliative care service improvement has yet to materialise; recognises that the care and support available to people as they die has an enormous impact on their quality of life and that each death leaves a number of people bereaved; and calls on the Executive to ensure that the draft Programme for Government outcomes framework includes indicators around death, dying and bereavement and the importance of a good end-of-life experience for people in Northern Ireland.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: If Members wait for a few moments, we will change the personnel at the top Table. Take your ease, please.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Antisemitism: International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's Working Definition

Mr Easton: I beg to move

That this Assembly condemns antisemitism in all forms; notes with deep concern the findings of the Community Security Trust's (CST) 'Antisemitic Incidents Report 2020', which recorded 1,668 antisemitic incidents across the United Kingdom; stresses the need to tackle the scourge of antisemitism in every aspect of our society; and endorses the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism, including its examples, which states that "antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, Jewish community institutions and religious facilities".

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.

Mr Easton: Not too long ago, I ordered a DNA test from Ancestry.com. I was very surprised to find that 4% of my DNA is Jewish. Unfortunately, I have been unable to find out anything more other than it is from my father's side of the family. It was an interesting and worthwhile experience, and I would encourage Members to do it as what they find out might surprise them.

Hatred of the Jewish people is ancient. Ideas that Jews are untrustworthy, manipulative and selfish are long-standing. Conspiracy theories claiming that Jews have some sort of national or global control over political and financial events and institutions have always been around, and we know that they are complete nonsense. The Institute for Jewish Policy Research compiled a report that concluded that approximately 30% of people in the UK held antisemitic views. According to the Community Security Trust, over 100 recorded incidents each month is now commonplace.

As the motion states, there were nearly 1,700 antisemitic incidents last year across the UK. Northern Ireland has its fair share of such incidents. It was only recently that Jewish gravestones were damaged in a cemetery on the Falls Road in Belfast. That abhorrent incident saw 10 graves damaged in a walled-off section of the cemetery. Some of the graves dated back to the 1870s. That was a sinister hate crime, which was rightly condemned across the political spectrum. The same cemetery was attacked a few years earlier, with 13 graves damaged.

Destruction is nothing new in antisemitic attacks in Northern Ireland. In 2004, the blue plaque for Chaim Herzog, former president of Israel, who was born in Belfast, had to be removed from a house on Cliftonpark Avenue following such attacks. What is particularly worrying about the statistic cited in the motion is that, in 2008, the number of such incidents stood at just over 500. That means that such incidents of hate have tripled in the past decade.

Only two years ago, a Jewish director came to Northern Ireland as part of a tour of the British Isles that he was filming. Some Members may recall the video that he filmed at a bar in the Bogside in Londonderry in which many antisemitic comments were made. Those included, "The Israelis are scum", "Jews are the scourge of the earth" and, worst of all, "The only thing Hitler did wrong was that he didn't kill enough Jews". That is quite shocking.

When Mr Tenenbom finished his visit to Northern Ireland, he estimated that he had found antisemitic views in 70% to 80% of people whom he interviewed. He said that he had never seen such antisemitism as he had in Northern Ireland and that it was frightening. He claimed that that one incident was representative of his wider experiences here. That those individuals felt so comfortable expressing those views on camera is deeply troubling and should be a concern to us all. It shows us that those people do not fear any repercussions or feel any shame.

It is particularly alarming that that hatred, as old as time, is becoming increasingly apparent on our university campuses. The CST has found that antisemitic incidents have increased substantially on campuses over the past several years, recording a very concerning 40 incidents in a year in which most students were not even at university. It should be noted that reporting mechanisms are not always adequate, so it is likely that such incidents are under-reported to universities. The CST report recommended that universities adopt the working definition of antisemitism. Perhaps this debate will encourage them to do so.

12.45 pm

Several years ago, we saw the students' union at Queen's University oppose the visit of the then Israeli ambassador to the UK, Mark Regev, calling for his invitation to speak to be cancelled. The ensuing protests during his visit saw a participant having to be restrained from following the ambassador's car. Of course, people are entitled to protest. The IHRA is clear that criticism of Israel that is similar to that which is levelled at any other country is not antisemitic. Discussions, however, about Israel in a way that targets Jews as a collective, and the rhetoric surrounding discussions about Israel, can easily stray into antisemitic rhetoric. Universities should be places of open debate and discussion. It is better to engage with those with whom we disagree in a constructive way, perhaps through the well-known scheme in the Lessons from Auschwitz project that takes sixth-form students from different schools on trips to Auschwitz and includes several seminars. Students are also able to hear testimonies from Holocaust survivors. Having been to Auschwitz, I say this: go and visit, because it will change your life.

The increase in the prevalence of antisemitism in politics is also alarming. One has only to look at the Labour Party to see how commonplace and mainstream antisemitism is. The chairman of the Belfast Jewish Community (BJC) expressed his concern over the current state of the Labour Party, agreeing that comments made by the chief rabbi regarding antisemitism taking root in the party were reflective of how the local Jewish community feels. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) found the party to be in breach of the Equality Act 2010. Closer to home, in the Republic of Ireland, a Sinn Féin

TD was recently condemned for tweets that she put out. The tweets linked Nazism and Israel and called staff at the Israeli embassy "monkeys". At that point, the Jewish Representative Council of Ireland (JRCI) called on the party to adopt the definition in the motion. It is notable that the TD did not face a suspension or any other disciplinary hearing.

There are therefore two key takeaways on antisemitism that should concern us as we move forward. The first is the ingenuity of those who are determined to spread their hate and make comments about antisemitic attacks. The targeting of online meetings between local Jewish communities and relevant supportive institutions demonstrates the ability of those offenders to adapt quickly to changing circumstances. Secondly, more awareness is needed of how the incidents reported often relate to our news cycles. The hatred of Jews can be worked into stories with no links to Jewish people. The very beginning of the pandemic saw a high number of incidents linking Jews in some form or other to COVID-19. That follows a pattern. When the issue of the Labour Party and antisemitism peaked in the news, there was a peak in the number of incidents related to the Labour Party. Around Holocaust Memorial Day, there is a peak in the incidence of Holocaust denial and in comments that link Nazism to Jews and Israel. News cycles are heavily linked to the type of antisemitic abuse that is experienced by the Jewish community.

The real substance of the motion is to call on the Assembly to endorse the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism, which is as follows:

"Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities."

A list of examples of what antisemitism involves can be found on its website, at holocaustremembrance.com. The definition came about based on a simple premise: if antisemitism is to be tackled, we must know what it is. The IHRA committee on antisemitism and Holocaust denial then worked to build the definition to which the motion refers. It was formally adopted by the IHRA in 2016. The purpose of the definition is to set an example of what is reasonable conduct at an international level. It gives guidance to countries on what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. It is also useful as an educational tool. Importantly, it can also help relevant authorities in the collection of data on the prevalence of antisemitism in society.

The UK adopted the definition of antisemitism at a national level. It has been in place since 2016. It has also been adopted by the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Parliament. The Welsh Government have also taken further action to tackle antisemitism. They arranged training on the topic for government officials, which was delivered by a local leader from the Jewish community, with a focus on the IHRA's definition. They also invited a Holocaust survivor to speak to officials.

In Scotland, Jews remain 30 times more likely than others to be targeted for their religious beliefs. The UK is far from alone in holding this stance on antisemitism. There are too

many countries to list them all, but some of those that have adopted the definition include France, Germany, Canada, Spain, Italy and the United States. The definition also received support from the United Nations, the European Union and the Council of Europe. We are the only part of the UK that has not adopted the IHRA definition.

Antisemitism incidents have risen to an all-time high. Of particular concern is how mainstream antisemitism seems to have become, in our politics, in our universities and on our online platforms. Such views are being unacceptably legitimised, and I am deeply concerned about the lack of action being taken to tackle this growing problem. The IHRA definition of antisemitism and its examples have been adopted by many countries and organisations across the world. We remain the only devolved nation of the UK not to adopt them. Adopting the definition would clarify the meaning of antisemitism and what constitutes antisemitism; it would provide us with guidelines to assist in the recording these incidents. That would allow us to have a greater understanding of antisemitism in Northern Ireland.

I cannot accept the amendment. While it uses the right words, it leaves out the endorsement of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism and, because of that, I was surprised that the amendment was allowed.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Easton: One must question the motives of the amendment. By not supporting the motion, they are sending out the wrong message. I call on the Assembly to support the motion.

Mr Sheehan: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "society;" and insert:

"unambiguously condemns the most recent vandalism in Belfast City Cemetery of graves belonging to our Jewish community; recognises that antisemitism is a form of racism that is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews, that rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property and toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities; agrees that antisemitism is unacceptable and is totally, unequivocally and loudly rejected by this Assembly; and commits to combating antisemitism, as part of our commitment to prevent hate crime and racism." — [Mr Sheehan.]

Mr Speaker: 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.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. It is an issue that recently touched my constituency, with, as Alex Easton mentioned, the desecration of Jewish graves in the City Cemetery. Since then, Paul Maskey MP, John Finucane MP and I met a senior representative of the Jewish community in Belfast, who is also the person responsible for the upkeep of Jewish graves in the city. We had a wide-ranging discussion about this and previous attacks on Jewish graves, not just in the City Cemetery but in Carrmoney. We agreed to continue our discussions to see what we can do to end these attacks. The representative of the Jewish community felt that, in

many ways, education is at the core of how we should move forward. I also commend members of my party, particularly Stevie Corr, who is a councillor in Belfast City Hall, and Tom Hartley, who is a former councillor. They were involved in the clean-up following the destruction of the gravestones.

Antisemitism needs to be condemned in the strongest possible terms, wherever it comes from. Whether in west Belfast, east Belfast, any other part of Ireland or anywhere in the world, it needs to be condemned in the strongest possible terms. Much in the motion is positive, which we can support, but we have difficulty with the IHRA definition of antisemitism and the examples used, for the simple reason that, if it were codified in law, that would prevent legitimate political criticism of the state of Israel. It is not just Sinn Féin saying that. The man who took the lead in drafting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism, Kenneth Stern, warned the incoming Biden Administration not to adopt it. In a sensational article in 'The Times of Israel', Stern claimed that pro-Israel lobby groups have weaponised the definition in an attempt to silence critics of Zionism.

He said:

"Jewish groups have used the definition as a weapon to say anti-Zionist expressions are inherently anti-Semitic and must be suppressed. Reasonable people can have different opinions about when anti-Semitism is reflected in anti-Zionism. But is this — having the government label anti-Zionism anti-Semitism — the number one way we want to ask the new administration to fight the problem?"

Tracing the history of the IHRA definition, Stern pointed out that he drafted it in 2005, largely:

"to give European data collectors guideposts of what to include and exclude in reports about anti-Semitism, so data could be compared across borders and time."

He suggested that the allure of the definition for Zionists was in the specific examples relating to expressions about the State of Israel. Of the 11 illustrative examples, seven conflate racism towards Jews with criticism of the Israeli state.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I am pleased that Sinn Féin and the representatives whom he mentioned met Dr Les Leopold from the Jewish community, as I have done. Given what the Member has said today, will Sinn Féin put some distance between itself and the attendance of its chairman, Mr Kearney, at a meeting in Ramallah at which the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, said that Jews had been persecuted because of their "usury and banking", not because of their religion? Those are appalling remarks. Could Sinn Féin distance itself from them and from Mr Kearney's attendance?

Mr Sheehan: I have no knowledge of those remarks. I have been at meetings with Mahmood Abbas and other Palestinian leaders and also with many members of the Israeli community, including NGOs such as B'Tselem and Breaking the Silence, an organisation of former members of the military who oppose the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. When we talk about Jews, we are not talking about a homogenous group. There are many

different perspectives, views and opinions, not only in Israel but globally and even here in Ireland.

Yesterday, I received communication from the organisation Jewish Voice for a Just Peace. That is a diverse group of Jewish people in Ireland. They say:

"The IHRA working definition is not concerned with the actual dangers to Jewish or other ethnic minority groups. The working definition has been widely criticised, not least by over 40 Jewish groups globally. It includes 11 examples which link antisemitism with opposition to Israel's policies in Palestine. It is an extraordinary definition, attempting to impose specific limits on any discussion of Zionism and Israel's violations of human rights. The IHRA definition has been widely opposed by Jewish academics, including its author, Kenneth Stern, and many Israeli academics."

There is controversy around the IHRA definition, and there is an alternative definition of antisemitism. I ask Members who are here today to bear that in mind. It is 'The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism', developed by a group of Jewish and Israeli scholars in the fields of Holocaust history, Jewish studies and Middle East studies. These groups and individuals say that the IHRA definition:

"has caused confusion and generated controversy, hence weakening the fight against antisemitism."

Let us consider the implications of codification of the IHRA definition. Today, Human Rights Watch published an important document in relation to Israel. For those who do not know, Human Rights Watch is an international human rights organisation. Its head office is located in New York. The organisation publishes reports on the state of human rights in nearly 100 countries worldwide, with the objective of defending human rights and promoting respect for international humanitarian law. Human Rights Watch has covered human rights issues in Israel and Palestine for nearly three decades and, in that time, has regularly met and corresponded with Israeli officials. To summarise, Human Rights Watch has said that Israeli:

"authorities have dispossessed, confined, forcibly separated, and subjugated Palestinians by virtue of their identity to varying degrees of intensity. In certain areas ... these deprivations are so severe that they amount to the crimes against humanity of apartheid and persecution."

If the IHRA definition were codified in law, Human Rights Watch could not publish that here. If it were codified in the States, it could not publish that in the States. Yet it is a highly respected human rights organisation. That is the difficulty with the IHRA definition.

I will just finish by again reading what Jewish Voice for Just Peace said:

"We ask the Assembly to recognise the importance of freedom of expression on the issue of Israel and Palestine and our right as Jewish people of conscience to stand up for all those opposing Israeli human rights violations".

That is signed by Sue Pentel, Ronit Lentin, Seth Linder, Aisling McGeown, David Landy, Becca Bor and Gavin Mendel-Gleason.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to meet at 1.00 pm. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be questions to the Minister of Justice.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 1.02 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Justice

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Colin McGrath is not in his place.

Children Order Sitings: Backlog

2. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Justice what measures are being put in place to address the backlog of Children Order sitings. (AQO 1948/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): The limitations placed on the courts by the COVID-19 pandemic inevitably led to a decline in the number of family court receipts and disposals. However, the reduction in receipts was less marked than those seen in other business areas. A huge amount of work has been ongoing across the justice system to respond to and recover from the very significant impacts of COVID-19. All courthouses, with the exception of the three smallest hearing centres, have reopened. In addition, virtual courtroom capacity has been significantly increased, with videoconferencing technology being deployed to facilitate remote and hybrid hearings.

The published statistics show that, between July and December 2020, the number and length of Children Order court sitings increased compared with the same period in 2019. Consequently, the average number of Children Order cases being dealt with currently exceeds pre-lockdown levels by around 10%. The listing of court business is, of course, a judicial function. The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) continues to work closely with the office of the Lord Chief Justice with a view to increasing the amount of court business that can be progressed while complying with the public health guidance.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. Thanks very much, Minister. Does the Minister foresee any additional roll-out of the use of technology on a more permanent basis in those settings?

Mrs Long: There have been some challenges with the introduction of the use of technology, which was done at pace. However, it is our intention that, where we have been able to establish good protocols for working with that technology, we will maintain it post-COVID. There have been benefits from it for those who are bringing their cases to court, because it may provide a more accessible form of justice, and in terms of the cost to the justice system in, for example, the criminal sphere, where we can reduce the cost of remand hearings and, particularly, prisoner transportation. It is important that, where we find benefits through COVID of being able to accelerate the modernisation process in the courts and the justice system, we try to grasp those and ensure that they are embedded well.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra go dtí seo. I listened to the Minister's answer. She touched on the question that I was going to ask, which was whether

she has had any conversations with the Health Minister about better outcomes in the court system. I understand that we are dealing with a pandemic and welcome the technology that has been used, but are you looking at the court system in a holistic way, if I could put it that way, post COVID to get better outcomes, especially in disputes between parents?

Mrs Long: That is really important. Technology is one element, but, as you know, we are also looking to introduce assisted opportunities for mediation between couples in order to avoid the kind of family disputes that arrive in court and are often quite acrimonious and very sensitive. There are things that we can do to better support families as they go through the court system and before they get to it. That is crucial as well. I think that most of us recognise that the breakdown of a relationship is an incredibly stressful time not only for the parents but for the children in particular. Therefore, it is important that any differences between the adults are dealt with in a way that is child-centred and child-focused. The best way forward for that is via mediation as opposed to through the courts.

Victims' Payments Board: Update

3. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the appointment and work of the Victims' Payments Board to date. (AQO 1949/17-22)

Mrs Long: Mr Justice McAlinden was formally appointed president of the Victims' Payments Board by the Lord Chief Justice on 1 March 2021. A total of 26 legal, medical and lay members have now been appointed by the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission (NIJAC) to the Victims' Payments Board. Members of the board have been undergoing an induction and training programme, as well as considering a range of issues to progress the implementation of the Troubles permanent disablement payment scheme.

I am very grateful for the commitment of the president and members of the Victims' Payments Board to making the scheme operational, and I very much welcome the announcement by the president this morning of his intention that the scheme will open for applications on 30 June. I believe that that is good news for victims and survivors of the Troubles who have waited a very long time for that important scheme to be introduced.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her response. Is she aware of whether criteria have been set to identify those eligible for the scheme?

Mrs Long: The Member will be aware that the eligibility criteria for the scheme and the regulations were set by the Secretary of State. The Victims' Payments Regulations 2020 provide that a person is not entitled to a victim's payment where they were convicted of:

“conduct which caused, wholly or in part, that incident”

or

“where the Board considers that the person's relevant conviction makes entitlement to victims' payments inappropriate”

or

“where the President of the Board considers that the exceptional circumstances of the case, having regard

to material evidence, make entitlement to victims' payments inappropriate.”

The Secretary of State has also issued guidance on the circumstances in which a relevant conviction or exceptional circumstance would make entitlement to victims' payments inappropriate.

It would not be appropriate for me to comment on eligibility for the scheme or on the interpretation of that guidance, as that is very much a responsibility of the Victims' Payments Board. It will be independent and should be free to make its decisions on the basis of the regulations and guidance provided.

Ms S Bradley: Minister, have you been given any indication of the potential number of applicants and the cost of the scheme, and can you speak more to the money behind it?

Mrs Long: As the Member will be aware, the issue of addressing the number of applicants has been taken forward by the Executive Office, which retains, if you like, full responsibility for delivery of schemes for victims. However, the funding required to deliver the scheme will depend on the number of applicants who come forward. It is important to bear it in mind that decisions on awards will be made by an independent panel, so it is not entirely clear what those awards might be.

The Government Actuary's Department (GAD) has been engaged by the Executive Office to give a range of possible costings for the lifetime of the scheme, taking account of the full lifespan and a range of factors, including, for example, backdating and the number of people who may opt to take a lump sum for 10 years rather than receiving their pension on an ongoing basis. The estimates of the total cost of payments in the GAD report range from £600 million to £1.2 billion, with a central estimate of around £848 million, before administration costs are added. It is important to note that, while the GAD report provides indicative figures for the scheme, there are major uncertainties over some fundamental factors in the scheme that make the cost uncertain, including the numbers injured, the degree and permanence of their disability and the choices that will be made by applicants. Those will therefore need to be refined as we go.

With respect to the funding being made available, the Member will be aware of a recent court ruling that made it clear that that funding will have to be made and of the undertaking by TEO that it will provide that funding in consultation with the Department of Finance. All of the Executive remain of a mind that that is a matter for which the Secretary of State and the NIO have some responsibility, given that they drew up the eligibility criteria for the scheme. We continue to meet the Secretary of State. While that has not always been fruitful, we have agreed to meet again at the end of the year, when we will have a better idea of the application profile, in the hope that we can review and revise the offer that he has already made, which, I think, most Members of the House would consider to be less than adequate.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for the information given so far on the scheme. A number of victims have died before being able to make an application to the scheme, and, regrettably, others may die before the scheme becomes

operational. What provision is there in the scheme for those victims?

Mrs Long: The Victims' Payments Regulations 2020 include provision for an applicant to nominate a beneficiary to receive a payment should they die after submitting their application. There is also provision in the regulations for the board to decide whether someone may apply to receive such payments in the event that no such person has been nominated. The regulations also provide for posthumous applications and thus will ensure that, in cases where an individual who would have been entitled to victims' payments but passed away before being able to make an application, the application can be made by a person whom the deceased may have nominated under the regulations.

Mr Beattie: Minister, I apologise that I was late coming in and did not hear your previous answers on this. I welcome the news that the permanent disablement payment scheme will be open for applications in June. Can the Minister outline when, even at best, it is likely to start paying out?

Mrs Long: I will not say that that is like trying to estimate how long a piece of string is, but a number of issues will feed into when we are likely to be in a position to make payments. I agree with the Member that it is a positive development that the president has now indicated his intention that the scheme will open for applications on 30 June. That is a key milestone for many of the people who have been waiting for this. It is a complex scheme, and a number of operational issues are being processed in advance of it opening for applications, including the design of the medical assessment service by Capita. Ultimately, it will be a matter for the Victims' Payments Board to confirm when payments may be made from the scheme, but it will depend, obviously, on the number of applications and their complexity. I am aware, however, that the president and members of the Victims' Payments Board are committed to ensuring that applications will be processed as expeditiously as possible, and I think that all of those applying for the scheme will very much welcome that commitment.

Ms Dillon: Our concerns about the eligibility criteria are on the record, but can the Minister confirm that there will be a good communications strategy with the victims sector? We welcome the announcement today, but I know from our experience with historical institutional abuse, that it is vital that, in any of these processes, victims know what is happening, when it is happening and why it is happening.

Mrs Long: I agree entirely with the Member. It has been one of the priorities since I took over responsibility for delivering the scheme. We have had regular meetings with the victims sector and sent written information to the sector so that it can share that with its constituent members. We have also been able to share that information on the DOJ website so that other members who may not be linked to any of the advocacy groups will have the same information and updates. When people have contacted us proactively asking for further information, we have retained, with their permission, their contact details so that, when the scheme opens, they can be notified of any progress on an ongoing basis. Further, we are funding advocates to work in the sector. They will be based in some of the existing organisations but will be there to give support and guidance to anyone who wishes to make an application.

Communication is crucial, and Justice McAlinden has been clear that he also values that communication; indeed, he has now met, I think, each of the victims sector organisations on at least two occasions in person to ensure that he is able to maintain their trust and cooperation throughout the process. We all recognise that one of the big frustrations for many members, while they were waiting for the scheme to come forward, was that they often got no feedback at all about where things were. We have been candid and have operated on the basis of "No surprises". If we know that there is a difficulty or a challenge, we are upfront with people, and I think that they appreciate that candour. They have also been incredibly helpful to us when we have needed their guidance or assistance to take things forward.

Abuse of Trust Legislation

4. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the non-statutory sectors that will come within the scope of abuse of trust legislation following her planned amendment to the Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. (AQO 1950/17-22)

Mrs Long: As I announced last month, I intend to strengthen the current law on the abuse of positions of trust by extending its scope beyond those responsible for our young people in the statutory sector. That will be achieved through amendment of the Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill during its passage through the Assembly later this year. While I can reiterate my commitment to offer greater protection across a broader range of environments in the non-statutory setting, I cannot be specific at this early stage about how extensive that will be. My officials have begun work to develop this area in consultation with stakeholders, including the NSPCC, and are taking account of the experience of neighbouring jurisdictions to ensure that informed, well-targeted and workable legislation is achieved.

While I am very conscious of the specific impacts identified in the area of sport and in the religious sector, I am mindful that this type of predatory behaviour can occur in other environments where an adult has significant influence or power over a young person in their care. It is therefore important that we take steps to identify, as far as is possible, such other areas as need to be covered by the proposed legislation. That said, it is imperative that we make robust law that is able to withstand scrutiny and challenge in the courts to ensure that there is no wiggle room for offenders,

It is equally important that we do not create a law that has the effect of criminalising people unnecessarily, and, in that respect, it is crucial that we get it right and that the legal definition that applies in law strikes a proportionate balance.

2.15 pm

As Minister, I want to ensure that, in protecting our young people, we can safeguard their ability to enter into healthy sexual relationships. Enabling that will require a collaborative cross-sectoral approach, and that very much guides my Department's approach.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, you are aware that the current abuse of trust law contains a loophole that effectively enables the grooming of 16-

and 17-year-olds by adults who are in positions of power. Do you agree that the legislation should be broadened to cover all circumstances in which an adult is entrusted with power over 16- and 17-year-olds?

Mrs Long: There are complexities as people reach adulthood and go through that transitional phase in their lives when we consider the degree to which the state can intervene in their individual choices. However, I absolutely agree that, while they remain minors, it is important that they can be protected from grooming and abuse. Therefore, the Department will look at that area incredibly carefully, along with those in other jurisdictions who have introduced similar legislation, to try to understand the particular approaches that they have taken and, indeed, the areas where they feel that the legislation could be strengthened. It is also fair to say that it is our intention at this stage, when we table this amendment, to create the capacity for additional sectors to be added without the need for further primary legislation. It is important that we are agile in our response to this threat.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her Department's engagement with the Justice Committee on the Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. Can she provide an update on a possible introduction date for the Bill to the Northern Ireland Assembly?

Mrs Long: Mr Deputy Speaker, you will appreciate that, were I to give a date for introduction before the Speaker had given me one, I would be in significant trouble with the Speaker. However, I can assure the Member that we are still on target to introduce the legislation in May. That is still the intention. It is subject, of course, to approval from the Executive, which I am in the process of seeking, and subject to a date being set by the Business Committee and the Speaker. From my perspective, we are ready to go.

Prisoners: Terrorism Offences

5. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Justice how many people convicted of terrorism offences are currently incarcerated in Northern Ireland prisons. (AQO 1951/17-22)

Mrs Long: As of 15 April 2021, 17 individuals convicted of terrorism offences were in custody in Northern Ireland prisons.

Mr Stalford: Last year, the Minister revealed to the House, in response to a question from the Member for North Antrim Mr Allister, that the separated prison regime is costing roughly £2 million a year out of the Department of Justice budget. Given that that policy originates from the Northern Ireland Office, should it not be the Northern Ireland Office that is picking up the tab rather than the Minister's Department?

Mrs Long: There are two issues. First, there are more people in the separated regime than those convicted of terrorism offences. Secondly, there are some who are convicted of terrorism offences who are not in the separated regime. However, the decision on whether people are eligible to enter the separated regime is, as the Member said, a decision for the Secretary of State. I would like us to move to a position where we no longer have a separated regime, but I am cognisant of the challenges that that will create, in the prisons and in the community, so we need to approach the issue sensitively

and thoughtfully. I do, however, agree wholeheartedly with the Member that the Secretary of State's intervention on the funding of the separated regime would be more than welcome, particularly at a time when other justice delivery is facing significant financial pressure.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Minister give an update on her thinking on the merits of allowing those convicted of terrorist offences to continue to serve their sentences in segregated regimes? To be clear, that is to do with the merits for society, not for those prisoners.

Mrs Long: There are a number of elements: security and stability in a prison; the rehabilitation of offenders; and the impact on the wider community. The organisations to which some of these people ascribe loyalty should no longer exist in society, and it is part of the work of us all in the Chamber to ensure that that becomes the case. That requires all of us to work outside the prisons and not merely inside them, however, to tackle the existence of such organisations.

We continue to work within the prison system and its segregated regime to try to normalise it, as far as is possible. It is not as recognisable as it may have been at other times in the past. We continue to deliver the requirements of the Tackling Paramilitarism programme during this time.

Our focus is clear. We strive to offer an equivalent level of education and constructive activity within the separated regime to that available within the integrated one. It is my preference that all prisoners be integrated, but, as I said in my previous answer, that is an outside-in solution, as opposed to an inside-out one.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, do you know, or have you asked, whether there has been any information to link anyone convicted of terrorist offences, currently serving time in Northern Ireland prisons or out on licence, to the recent disorder that we have seen on our streets? If that were found to be the case, what consequences would you expect to see?

Mrs Long: The PSNI has given an assessment that it does not believe that the recent disorder has been orchestrated by paramilitary organisations, although known members of those paramilitary organisations were visible on the ground at some points during the disorder. What happens to individuals who breach their licence conditions [*Pause*] is a matter for the courts, rather than for me. My mind went blank there for a second. Anyone who breaches their licence conditions could face a return to prison, face a conviction for further offences or have to serve the rest of their sentence.

Domestic Violence Support Groups

6. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Justice, given the impact of COVID-19 restrictions, how she plans to assist support groups for victims of domestic violence. (AQO 1952/17-22)

Mrs Long: We are all too aware of how tackling domestic abuse has become even more important in recent times. Victims of domestic abuse should not feel forgotten or alone, particularly during these challenging times. It is vital they know that help and support continue to be available from our voluntary and community sector partners and, in particular, from the domestic and sexual abuse helpline, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

I have always been very clear that the funding of domestic and sexual abuse services should not be solely a matter for the Department of Justice but rather a cross-cutting Executive issue. There is a need for the Executive to support the cross-cutting work that needs to be taken forward to address the issue comprehensively. A range of domestic and sexual violence and abuse services is funded across a number of Departments, including my own, with around £7.5 million spent annually.

My Department has funded, or partly funded, a number of initiatives, including the 24-hour domestic and sexual abuse helpline; behavioural change programmes; domestic homicide reviews; independent sexual violence advisers; the "See the Signs" multimedia awareness-raising campaign; and policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs) for domestic and sexual abuse initiatives. Funding for a number of those initiatives involves voluntary-sector partners, who are key to work in that area, including in developing the new domestic abuse offence legislation.

A new advocacy support service, to be delivered by Women's Aid and Men's Advisory Project (MAP), will be introduced in September.

My Department is also working closely with voluntary-sector partners on developing an e-learning package on the new offence and will involve them in the new multimedia awareness-raising campaign to ensure that there are no hidden voices and that we reach the most vulnerable in society.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. I appreciate it. The lockdown has impacted greatly on unfortunate victims and other people, and they are being placed in further danger because of it. Support groups are having to work through operational matters in a more arduous way because of the lockdown. Is it time, given the Minister's answer about the cross-cutting nature of and all-embracing impact of domestic and sexual abuse on victims, that we strengthen the Programme for Government to assist victims in some way and, if nothing else, raise their awareness and that of Departments?

Mrs Long: The Member will be aware from his work on the Committee that tackling domestic violence and abuse is a priority in the Programme for Government and a strategic priority for the Executive. We have a seven-year strategy to tackle it. I believe that funding needs to follow form and, therefore, if we say that something is a priority, we need to fund it as though it were a priority. It is considered, of course, that there is a challenge to ensuring that we introduce new support mechanisms but also that we adequately fund them. Where the Department has introduced new schemes and services, we fund the organisations for those, but they will also benefit from a cocktail of funding, for example, by providing services for other Departments that intersect with the domestic abuse space.

Ms Kimmins: Does the Minister agree that early intervention and prevention is key to combating domestic violence and abuse? That said, when does she anticipate that the advertising campaign for the new domestic abuse offences will go live?

Mrs Long: I do not have a date for the new campaign, but I know that work on it is well under way. We are working with our public- and private-sector partners to raise awareness. As the Member knows, domestic abuse can

affect anyone, so it is very important that we address it in the round and that we look at raising some of the hidden voices on domestic abuse. The intention is that when the further multimedia advertising campaign is developed, we will consult on it with our voluntary and statutory partners to ensure that it is reflective of the wider issues raised. Once that is done, it will be delivered across a range of platforms. At this stage, however, I do not have a date for its launch. I will be happy to update the Member when it becomes available.

Mrs D Kelly: I support the Minister's assessment that the issue is a cross-cutting one. An advocacy service had been planned for later this year: I wonder whether she can provide the House with an update on it?

Mrs Long: Yes, I am more than happy to do so. We had hoped that the advocacy service would have been in place sooner and that we would have been able to get a consortium approach to deal with it. We worked with our voluntary-sector partners to develop it, but, unfortunately, that was not successful. We then had to go out to public procurement, which has slowed the process down somewhat. However, I believe that the advocacy service that we have now procured is robust and will be very helpful to victims. It will be introduced in September of this year.

Small Claims Courts: Reopening

7. Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Justice what plans her Department has for the reopening of Small Claims Courts. (AQO 1953/17-22)

Mrs Long: The scheduling of court listings and the listings of business is a judicial function. Since September, courts have resumed sitting at almost all venues, and all types of court business has recommenced. Only the three smallest hearing centres now remain closed. As much business as possible is being heard remotely or in the form of a hybrid hearing, as directed by a judge.

Small claim applications continued to be processed during the pandemic, including, where appropriate, the issuing of default judgements. From 12 April, a dedicated Small Claims Court has been held in the Nightingale Lagan facility every Monday to Wednesday. Furthermore, from 6 May, another dedicated Small Claims Court will be held in Downpatrick each Thursday and Friday. Those additional Small Claims Courts will be presided over by a deputy district judge.

The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service continues to work closely with the Office of the Lord Chief Justice with a view to increasing the amount of court business that can be progressed. All court business activity takes place only after it has been subject to the necessary risk assessments, in consultation with the Public Health Agency, the Health and Safety Executive, and other statutory agencies.

Mr Clarke: I welcome the Minister's answer. I am sure that she will appreciate that many small businesses suffered greatly because of the loss of opportunity to take cases to the Small Claims Court. I welcome the fact that some provision has been made, even though it was only from 12 April this year. Will she outline when she thinks all avenues of provision will be open as they were pre-COVID? For many, the small claims route is their only hope.

Mrs Long: As I set out earlier, in the majority of cases throughout the courts system, we are now processing

more business than we did immediately pre-lockdown. We are starting to eat into the backlog, and it is hugely important that we can do that. We also have activity in our review of the Small Claims Court. One of the reasons why the Small Claims Court is not accessible to some people is because its jurisdiction has quite a low threshold. We are out to consultation on that at the moment with a view to potentially raising the jurisdiction so that more small businesses, independent traders and others can get their business transacted through the Small Claims Court.

The Small Claims Court is an impressive part of the justice system here. It processes business and delivers faster judgements here than in any other part of these islands.

2.30 pm

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

Omagh Bomb: Public Inquiry

T1. **Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Justice whether she agrees that a public inquiry into the Omagh bomb is absolutely necessary and to outline the conversations that she has had with the Secretary of State, Brandon Lewis, in that regard, given that it has been 22 years since the bomb killed 29 people, including a woman who was pregnant with twins, and the families whose lives were put on hold are still waiting on that much-needed inquiry. (AQT 1241/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Member will be aware of my party's position on that matter. We very much support a public inquiry. However, it is not appropriate for me, as Justice Minister, to comment further on the matter, given that that would be seen as prejudging the outcome of any inquiry and, potentially, could be prejudicial. It is fair to say that when it comes to issues such as public inquires and the wider legacy piece, I have many conversations with the Secretary of State. I get few answers that are worth repeating in the Chamber, unfortunately.

Mr McCrossan: Sorry to hear that, Minister. I am glad that you share our frustration about that matter. Families have put their lives on hold to search for truth and justice, particularly in Omagh, which experienced one of the worst atrocities of the Troubles. Minister, at your earliest convenience, post-lockdown and post-restrictions, will you commit to meet the Omagh families with me and give an assurance that you, in your capacity as Minister, will leave no stone unturned to assist the Omagh families in their search for truth and justice.

Mrs Long: I have no qualms whatsoever in agreeing to such a meeting with people who have shown an incredible amount of restraint and dignity in their campaign. I am more than happy to meet the families and, indeed, other victims if they feel that it is of benefit. Of course, it has to be reiterated that I cannot interfere in cases that go before the courts or inquiries for fear of prejudicing the outcome. However, I am always more than happy, where possible, to meet victims. I am happy to accede to any such request.

PSNI: Additional Funding

T2. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her meeting last week with the British Secretary of

State in relation to her request for additional police funding to mitigate ongoing violence against the PSNI from paramilitary groups and crime gangs. (AQT 1242/17-22)

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his question. If you, Mr Speaker, and the Member will indulge me, I will take the opportunity to condemn the recent attack on a young mother who was serving her community. Thankfully, no one was injured, but it could have been a very different outcome had that officer not been so vigilant. Police officers continue to be at significant risk, and I commend their courage and bravery as they try to protect the community against the backdrop of a terrorist threat. I also recognise the huge amount of pressure on the police at this time due to the recent disturbances and the policing of other public order issues. Given that the police have come under such incredible pressure, I want to be clear about my unequivocal support for them in the work that they do.

When I met the Secretary of State this week, we discussed the general security situation and the types of challenges that the PSNI is currently facing. As we know, that has been brought into sharp relief for those working on the front line in recent days. The PSNI's final budget allocation for 2021-22 from the Executive, which is still subject to a vote by the Assembly, along with an in-year allocation of £12.3 million, will enable the PSNI not only to retain its current number of officers but to increase that to 7,100 by the end of this financial year. The increase in numbers is, at least, a gesture towards moving in the direction of the NDNA commitments.

I spoke to the Secretary of State and said that I intended to keep dialogue open with him and the Chief Constable about the PSNI's requirements for additional security funding to ensure that it is properly resourced both for day-to-day work in communities and to deal with an incredibly difficult security situation.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does the Minister agree that there is no place for violence against the PSNI? Under democratic accountability structures, the Policing Board is the correct place to raise concerns about policing.

Mrs Long: I agree. It is important for us, as politicians, to recognise the pressures that the PSNI faces. That does not mean that the PSNI is perfect or beyond criticism, but it is incumbent on each of us to work with it to build trust and confidence in the structures that we have. Where we have issues for complaint or inquiry, we should take them through the appropriate mechanisms. No violence in our society is acceptable. No violence against the PSNI is acceptable, excusable or defensible.

Hate Crime Legislation Independent Review: Update

T3. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her consideration of the hate crime legislation independent review, given that the final report was published almost six months ago. (AQT 1243/17-22)

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for her question. I will take this opportunity, if I may, to condemn the recent attack against the Syrian refugee family in Newry in the Member's constituency. I also condemn the attacks on Jewish graves in Belfast City Cemetery. The racism, intolerance and hate that result in these negative behaviours are a blight on our

society, and we need to address them. It is particularly heinous to attack people in minority communities for their perceived differences, given their significant contribution to Northern Ireland.

The issues involved are incredibly complex. I agree with Judge Marrinan that his recommendations merit a stand-alone hate crime Bill. That is planned for introduction in the next mandate to allow for proper consideration of the policy areas and public consultation where some of those proposals are novel. In the meantime, work on non-legislative recommendations and those relating to reserved matters has commenced, including providing a sustainable hate crime advocacy service to support victims of hate crime, creating a victims of crime commissioner who should have a particular focus on hate crime and domestic violence, and working with the UK Government on online hate issues as part of their wider online safety Bill. It is hugely important, as we go forward, to make sure that our legislation is fit for purpose. Hopefully, we will make progress on the drafting of that hate crime legislation and the consultation on the various elements towards the end of this mandate, in preparation for the new mandate.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her answer. It is good to hear the progress around that. It is unrealistic to think that the hate crime Bill will be achieved during this mandate — Minister, you outlined that — and the preparation for the next mandate is good to hear about. Thank you for the comments on the attack in my constituency, and I echo you in relation to the Jewish graves in Belfast City Cemetery. What work is being done in the here and now by your Department to tackle some of these attacks, while we wait for the legislation?

Mrs Long: Clearly, there is already the opportunity for crimes to be investigated and recorded as hate crimes, and it is important that that continues. There is also work ongoing with our partners, through the advocacy service, to support people who want to come forward and make a complaint, and to encourage people to have confidence in the justice system so that they feel empowered to do that. Those things are ongoing to try to help people in the here and now, but there is more to it than that.

The analogy is that we need to stop pulling bodies out of the river and move upstream to find out why they are falling in. We need to get upstream of this problem and look to see whether there is something that we can do, as a society, to tackle the underlying prejudice in our communities. That is a job for all of us. I know, from working with the Communities Minister, that she is looking at a series of strategies to deal with minority groups and also those who are subject to hate crime. Whether that is the racial equality strategy and action plan, the LGBTQI strategy and action plan or others, there is an opportunity in the work that we do on a cross-Executive basis to continue to try to change attitudes. Ultimately, when people arrive with us, they have already suffered harm. I want to work with other Ministers to try to prevent that harm from taking place.

Domestic Abuse Services: CJINI Report

T4. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of last week's Criminal Justice Inspection

NI (CJINI) report that criticised the slow progress in implementing recommendations aimed at improving domestic abuse services. (AQT 1244/17-22)

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his question. With regard to the CJINI report, first of all, it is incredibly important that, unlike other Departments, my Department is scrutinised regularly by an external body. I only wish that that were the case for all Departments. It is important that when we are scrutinised in that way, we take the time to digest the comments in the report. If I might be so bold, I will say that the report was much less critical than the press release that accompanied it. If you read it, you will see that the report is much more balanced on the significant progress that has been made in that space, considering the pressures that the Department has faced with COVID in the prisons, the courts and, indeed, its other service delivery areas.

I am confident that areas that were highlighted as not having been delivered, such as the new advocacy service and the pilot domestic violence court, are areas that we could not have progressed any quicker. In the context where we are already challenged in the court system, it is incredibly difficult to pilot new initiatives, but I am pleased to say that both those services will be happening in the autumn. Whilst there has been delay, I do not believe that the foot has been taken off the pedal, if you like.

If I may, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will pay tribute to my staff because, whilst I am passionate about the issue, my passion is matched every day by that of the people who work in the area. They are absolutely committed to delivering in the area and to ensuring that those who are subject to domestic abuse or violence have all the support and recourse to justice that they need.

Mr McGuigan: The implementation plan to deliver the recommendations from the Gillen review of serious sexual offences in July last year revealed that only 11% of the recommendations had at that point been implemented. I heard what you said, Minister, about the balance of the CJINI report and the press statement, but do you agree that much more could and should be done in a quicker fashion to implement the outstanding recommendations?

Mrs Long: No, I do not believe that more could be done, but I agree that more should be done, which is why we continue to work on the issues. Saying that more could be done suggests that we are not working at full capacity, but that is simply not my experience of the Department. We already have four Bills, and one Act has been completed. There are three Bills before the House, and another Bill, the Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, will come in May. It will cover many of the legislative aspects of Sir John Gillen's review. I keep in regular contact with Sir John Gillen, and I update him regularly on the work that he did not just on serious sexual offences but on civil and family justice in courts. Recently, I outlined progress that we are making in that following his much wider review of the civil and family justice system.

It is important that Members realise that the Department of Justice is not immune to the impacts of COVID. We are unique in these islands in being able to keep our prisons largely COVID-free. We have had no major outbreaks, and no one, thank God, has passed away in the prison system. That has taken up an immense amount of capacity. We have also been able to rebuild our courts so that they are

COVID-secure physically as well as everything else. I encourage anyone who wishes to see them to get a tour to see the work that has been done. That work comes at a cost. We have also been supporting other Departments in work, including legislating and regulations, that they have been doing on COVID. Could more be done? I think not, in the current circumstances. Should more be done? Absolutely, and it will be by the end of the mandate.

In-person Prison Visits

T5. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Justice when in-person prison visits will recommence, given that virtual prison visits, while necessary as a temporary measure, are far from ideal. (AQT 1245/17-22)

Mrs Long: In-person visits will start on 4 May. They will be for adults only at that stage, but we will continue to monitor levels of transmission in the community and, hopefully, will be able to relax some of the restrictions on the in-person visits as we move forward.

We will also maintain virtual visits because, for some people, particularly those with a disability, people who live in rural communities and people who have family overseas, those visits have proved to be a lifesaver for connecting with family members. We intend to keep virtual visits and in-person visits running.

2.45 pm

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. Thank you, Minister, for your answer. You alluded to the success of prisons in preventing COVID: will you update us on the vaccine roll-out in prisons and say what impact that will have on visits?

Mrs Long: Health and social care trusts continue to roll out the vaccine in prisons in line with the approach taken in wider society, so it is by age cohort. A significant number of our prison officers have, I think, been vaccinated, as has a significant part of the prison population.

It is, of course, a factor in deciding how we relax visiting but not the only factor. We know from recent reports that, depending on the vaccine and a person's reaction to it, they may still be vulnerable to COVID infection. We need to proceed with caution. The most important thing for us is the health and safety of those in our care. We take that really seriously, and we hope that that reassures families.

Prisoners have been incredibly cooperative with us during this period. We have managed to maintain an open regime, so we have not been in a situation where prisoners have been in lockdown for 23 hours a day, as they have been in other parts of these islands. We have maintained a bubble system on each landing, so that there is still association, exercise and education, albeit remote education. I continue to work, for example with the Department for the Economy, for the day when we will be able to get in-person training and skills training back into the prison system. We want to ensure that anyone who is in our care at this time is not in any way disadvantaged in their rehabilitation outcomes.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of our time for questions to the Minister of Justice. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments before the next item of business, which is the continuation of the debate from before lunch.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Private Members' Business

Antisemitism: International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's Working Definition

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly condemns antisemitism in all forms; notes with deep concern the findings of the Community Security Trust's (CST) 'Antisemitic Incidents Report 2020', which recorded 1,668 antisemitic incidents across the United Kingdom; stresses the need to tackle the scourge of antisemitism in every aspect of our society; and endorses the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism, including its examples, which states that "antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, Jewish community institutions and religious facilities". — [Mr Easton.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "society;" and insert:

"unambiguously condemns the most recent vandalism in Belfast City Cemetery of graves belonging to our Jewish community; recognises that antisemitism is a form of racism that is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews, that rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property and toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities; agrees that antisemitism is unacceptable and is totally, unequivocally and loudly rejected by this Assembly; and commits to combating antisemitism, as part of our commitment to prevent hate crime and racism." — [Mr Sheehan.]

Mr O'Toole: I welcome the fact that we are debating the motion today. Antisemitism has been a stain on civilisation for not just centuries but millennia. This form of prejudice has been not only durable but near-universal. In supporting the motion on behalf of the SDLP, I will reflect on the abhorrent and specific nature of anti-Jewish hatred but also explaining why we will not support the amendment, though we recognise and, indeed, empathise with some of the motivation underlying the amendment, which I will discuss.

Jewish people have contributed to Ireland for centuries. They have weaved into our complicated story in fascinating ways. Early in the last century, at the same time as Sir Otto Jaffe was sitting as a unionist member on Belfast City Council, Robert Briscoe was fighting as a republican in the war of independence. His brother, believe it or not, was named Wolfe Tone Briscoe. Gustav Wolff, one of the founders of Harland and Wolff, was from a family who converted from Judaism. A former president of the state of Israel, Chaim Herzog, was born in north Belfast. The central character in the greatest work of Irish literature, 'Ulysses', is a Jew, and, yes, one of the things that Leopold Bloom experienced on 16 June 1904 was raging, unreformed antisemitism. That oldest of hatreds appears in

the greatest work of Irish literature. In the same decade as that fictional account of Irish antisemitism, there took place one of the most notorious and shameful real-life episodes of antisemitism in Irish history: the Limerick boycott, waged against a small Jewish community in that city. The point of that preamble is not simply to dwell on local history but to highlight how real and durable antisemitism has been on this island. It is not enough for us to box off that form of hatred as if it belonged to other places and other people. We need only look at the appalling desecration of Jewish graves in Belfast in recent weeks. If that were sectarianism or hatred based on skin colour, we would not just call it out; we would name the specific kind of prejudice that underpins and sustains it.

It is not enough for us to condemn the Holocaust and pledge to remember it: we need to guard against incipient prejudice or stereotyping of Jews here and now, even when it seems mild or, perhaps, not worth calling out. Antisemitism is not a more acceptable form of intolerance than any other discrimination. It is distinct in its manifestations and expressions, which are often insidious and coded but are recognisable nonetheless. That is why attempts to define and characterise anti-Jewish prejudice are important. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition is a useful tool in that regard. The EU, UN and many countries and institutions have signed up to that definition and the associated examples. However, there has been significant commentary to the effect that some of those examples are phrased in a way that could be read as limiting the capacity of those who passionately oppose many of Israel's actions in relation to the occupied territories and, particularly, it should be said, the current Government of Benjamin Netanyahu. That is an important but sensitive area. Let me say that, while my party and I recognise some of the concern over the wording as genuinely held, we believe that it is possible to support the intent of the IHRA and its examples without compromising the capacity to be robust in criticism of the actions of the Israeli Government. Part of the reason why we know that is that people are being robust in their criticism of Israel. The definition should not and must not chill speech on the unacceptable conduct, where it happens, of the current Israeli Administration.

Earlier, the comment was made that, if the definition were codified, it would have a specific, limiting legal effect on speech. Of course, the motion does not codify it. In fact, today, Human Rights Watch has accused Israel of committing real crimes, such as apartheid and persecution, in its actions against the Palestinians. My party will not be found wanting in standing up for the rights of the Palestinians, who have been so sorely abused in recent decades, or, indeed, in calling for a return to the UN resolutions and the 1967 borders. We cannot and will not condemn those actions enough.

It is also worth putting it on the record that, since the IHRA definition is not in itself legally binding, it can be read in conjunction with other tools, including the more recent —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: — Jerusalem declaration, which seeks to offer added specificity and interpretative guidance. Endorsing the motion does not preclude the application of those definitions either.

We know a little in this place about ancient hatreds and the unchallenged prejudice that festers —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: — into acts of hate and violence. That is why we will support the motion.

Mr Muir: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the motion. My party has no hesitation in condemning antisemitism. Jewish people around the world have suffered persecution for millennia, as others have outlined. The memories of visiting Auschwitz and, in Berlin, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe and Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum will remain with me for ever. Antisemitism has always been and will always be wrong. We should never stop condemning it.

The Alliance Party fundamentally believes in a shared society that is free from intimidation, discrimination and fear and in which everybody is safe and can play their part and be treated fairly and with respect. That shared society absolutely includes the Jewish community in Northern Ireland. Given the history of endemic antisemitism across the world, we must continue to play an active role in stamping it out wherever we find it. The deliberate targeting and vandalism of Jewish graves in Belfast City Cemetery earlier this month is further proof that antisemitism remains a present threat in Northern Ireland. The PSNI is rightly treating that disgraceful act as a hate crime, and I urge anyone with any information to come forward to the police.

At its peak, the Jewish community around Belfast had roughly 1,500 members. Many arrived in this city in the 19th century after escaping persecution in Russia. From Otto Jaffe, who, as others outlined, was Lord Mayor of Belfast in 1899, to the sixth president of Israel, who was born in the north of the city in 1918, the Jewish community has had a substantial positive impact on Northern Ireland. The Jewish community in Northern Ireland is substantially smaller today, but it continues to play an active and important role in our society. I have visited the current synagogue on Somerton Road and the old building on Annesley Street, and I can say that I greatly value the Northern Ireland Jewish community and view any antisemitic attack as an attack on us all.

The Alliance Party has consistently endorsed the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism. Prior to the 2019 general election, Alliance Party Westminster candidates publicly signed up to that definition. Some state, however, that adopting the definition prevents legitimate criticism of the Israeli Government: I disagree. With regard to the Middle East, the Alliance Party continues to support a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We condemn the Israeli Government's illegitimate use of force and their abuses of Palestinian rights, as well as the annexation of occupied Palestinian territories. All that is entirely consistent with our support for the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism and will not in any way restrict us from speaking out on those issues. Human rights and the rule of law are core values of the Alliance Party, and we will continue to advocate for a lasting peace in the Middle East.

I conclude by remembering someone who left a lasting legacy in my constituency of North Down. This year saw the sad passing of Walter Kammerling at the age of 97. He

arrived in Millisle from Vienna in 1939 as a teenager and worked on a farm that was set up to offer a place of safety for Jewish refugee children. His family were not so lucky. His parents and his sister were murdered in Auschwitz in 1944. Later in his life, Mr Kammerling returned to Northern Ireland and spent time speaking to local schools to share his experience of the horrors of the Holocaust. I am proud to have previously successfully campaigned to secure listed building status for the Kindertransport farm in Millisle, because the lessons of the Holocaust must never be forgotten. Today we honour the memory of people like Mr Kammerling by rooting out and condemning antisemitism wherever we find it.

Dr Aiken: I rise to add my support and that of my party to the motion and our opposition to the amendment. As a declaration of interest, I state that our party has also a motion in the system on the recognition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism.

At the outset, I would like us all to condemn the disgraceful antisemitic attacks on the historic Jewish graveyard at the City Cemetery in Belfast. That was not the first attack on that hallowed ground of our Jewish community. It is just one of the many examples of hate crimes perpetrated on our friends across that old, established and proud community, a community that has made a huge contribution to life in Northern Ireland culturally, societally and in business and adds significantly to the richness and diversity of life here for us all.

The Jewish community here also has a strong connection to Israel and its proud history, with Chaim Herzog, the sixth president of Israel, being born in Belfast in 1918. It should be a point of pride for all of us that such a historic figure came from Belfast, but the mere fact that a commemorative plaque cannot be erected in the vicinity of his birthplace without being attacked, that the synagogue for our small Jewish community has been daubed with hate-driven and racist symbols and that the language of antisemitism seems to be pervasive among some shows that there is a real need to recognise that action must be taken.

3.00 pm

Many will be aware that, in recent years, there have been attempts to conflate the identity and religion of the Jewish people and the state of Israel. Although there are many views on Israel — we have heard some here today — and it would be disingenuous of me to say anything other than that I fully support the right of the Israeli state to exist, for others to say that the motion is in some way pro-Israel or supportive of any the policies of the current Israeli Government is just another attempt to disguise the very real problem of antisemitism that exists and that, regrettably, is so visibly manifest in Belfast and beyond.

There is also a rise in what are clearly attempts at historical revisionism, coupled with downright denial of facts of history. Three quarters of a century later, the fact that some still question the Holocaust and the extent of its genocidal intent goes to show just how far we still have to travel.

To counter anti-Jewish rhetoric and Holocaust denial, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance called for international and domestic institutions to adopt a set of

underlying principles. Those principles call on us to adopt the non-binding view:

"Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities."

Those principles have been adopted by our own nation, including by the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Parliament, and by 29 other nations, including the United States, France and, most tellingly, Germany, but unfortunately not by the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. The Member for West Belfast said earlier that there are Jews and Jewish organisations that oppose the definition in the motion that we are discussing today? Does the Member agree with me that the vast bulk of Jews and Jewish organisations across the world are completely comfortable with it and do support it.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Dr Aiken: Indeed I do. It is very clear that the vast majority of Jewish organisations, and those people who want to see the scourge of antisemitism removed, do support that definition. That is why it is so important to have it.

The Assembly can and must recognise that the attacks on our Jewish community, and all our other minority communities, are hate crimes. As such, they must be dealt with forcefully and with the full weight of the law. We must also recognise, however, that there is something particularly invidious about antisemitism that calls for wider action. That is why we must demonstrate that we, as an elected body, will not tolerate this blight on our society and show solidarity with our and the wider Jewish community by adopting the aforementioned IHRA definition. We have the opportunity to show, in the strongest possible terms, our commitment to stamping out the racist scourge of antisemitism.

Mr Frew: I support the motion before us today. I welcome the debate, which has been very good and informative. A lot of gems have come out of the discussion so far, which I welcome.

It was Edmund Burke who said:

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

Peace and contentment are not default positions. They have to be worked at. Edmund Burke also taught that history is not simply a forgotten past but an active inheritance. The cultural genome of a people forged in response to the agencies of the past remains intimately present in the DNA of a society. Society connects the visible and the invisible world.

When I think through my lifetime, what scares me most is the fact that understanding of history can be very shallow. People's mindset — I include myself in this — can be ignorant of history and of the facts of history. That scares me, because, even in our living history and the history of our generation, there are people who attempt to rewrite history, change fact and alter truth. It should not be tolerated. It frightens me.

I had the privilege of visiting the concentration camps and death camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau. It rocks you to your core. If you go there with a mindset of understanding and learning, it will rock you to your core. It hits you like a ton of bricks when you realise that mankind can be so evil. That is more our default position than peace, tranquillity and comfort, so it needs to be worked at constantly.

It is not just the evils that are inflicted on the Jewish community; it is about all the races and peoples who have been tortured, even despised, throughout the ages. The Jewish people are one of those. If you treat one of us badly, you treat us all badly. Surely that is a mantra that should be known worldwide and that we need to commit to in eradicating all injustices throughout the world. Of course, we should start in our home place and with ourselves. That is very important.

What strikes me about the debate is that victims will tell you about their lived experience and how they feel intimidated, discriminated against, excluded, undermined and victimised, but there is something fundamentally wrong when you do not listen to one of those victim groups, its definition, how it feels and its lived experience. We should listen to all victims who have been wronged in this lifetime and throughout history. The definition of how they have lived their lives should be the definition that we look to when we try to define what is meant by wrong.

That is why it is important that so many people have defined their lived experience with what we have in the motion. It pains me that it cannot obtain support across the House, as that sends a message. If we do not recognise the definition that most Jewish people have put down, it could be construed as antisemitic. That is a harsh thing to say, but it is true.

Who would dream of telling another race, colour or creed that how they live their lives, their experience of discrimination, or their definition of that discrimination, is wrong? That would not be tolerated. Why should it be tolerated with the Jewish community? It is wrong.

I have been to the death camps and have seen what evil can do. We need to recognise it in our community, in our country and in ourselves and try to do something about it. That is where we will start and succeed —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Frew: — in trying to do something about it.

Ms Kimmins: I support the amendment and welcome the debate.

Antisemitism is a form of racism that should be condemned by all. To tackle it, we must work together to eradicate all forms of racism and build a more equal society. In the years since the Good Friday Agreement was signed, we have made significant progress. That is evident when we see the diverse and multicultural society that exists across the island.

There can be no excuse for attacks on or discrimination against anyone, regardless of their race, religious belief, cultural tradition, sexual identity or national identity. Sadly, in recent weeks, we have witnessed a number of racist attacks in our communities, including, as other Members mentioned, the disgraceful vandalism of Jewish graves in Belfast City Cemetery and the writing of racist slogans in Jonesborough in my constituency. We also saw a horrific

attack on a Syrian family who had moved into the area just 24 hours before. Like millions of people from the Jewish community who had to flee their homes during the Holocaust 80 years ago, that family had to leave their home in Syria to escape the conflict and had come to Ireland to try to raise their young children in safety, with the hope of a better life for them.

Those attacks are not representative of my city or the people of Ireland. I unreservedly condemn them and, again, send my solidarity to all those who have been affected. However, these despicable acts have shone a light on the need for political leadership to stand together to challenge racism and discrimination in all forms.

It is disappointing that the PSNI's 2017 'Thematic Review of Policing Race Hate Crime' states:

"a race hate incident is reported ... every seven hours."

Let that sink in. That equates to at least three racist hate incidents being reported across the Six Counties every single day. It is important to note that, whilst these figures are shocking, they are only the tip of the iceberg, as we recognise the huge issue of under-reporting. If we are really serious about making effective change in order to tackle racism and discrimination, we must focus our efforts on addressing under-reporting.

A key factor in under-reporting is that victims do not report a crime if they feel that there will not be a positive outcome at the end of process. As the Justice Minister said during Question Time, we must ensure that everyone feels confident in our policing and justice system. As political leaders, the onus is on all of us to ensure that no victim feels reluctant to report incidents of racism or hate crime and that the processes are robust and effective.

The Executive Office's racial equality strategy provides a framework that will help us to drive forward the vital work required to ensure that this is a place where everyone can live, learn, socialise and work together, free from fear of discrimination and harm. Greater representation of ethnic minorities on decision-making bodies and in political life is crucial, as they are important stakeholders throughout society. A diverse range of voices is required to enable policymaking that properly incorporates the needs of and issues facing people from a broad spectrum of religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds living on this island.

The IHRA definition has been debated globally, and many groups from the Jewish community have stated that it does not go far enough and, in ways, actually weakens the fight against antisemitism. I welcome Mr Frew's comments about the importance of listening to all victims, and I think that that highlights my point. We must focus on tackling all forms of antisemitism as an important part of our wider approach to tackling all forms of racism and discrimination.

I finish on this: as children, we are born into society with no preconceived views or stereotypes. As we grow and develop, the world around us shapes how we see others and how we treat people. It is for this reason that education and early intervention are key to ensuring that our children and future generations have strong values of equality and respect for all. Only then can we be confident that our efforts to stamp out racism and to build a society free from discrimination and hate have had a lasting impact.

Ms Dillon: I support the amendment. Our current legislation on hate crime in the North is out of date and failing victims. The legislation does not frame racist violence appropriately; the police do not police it appropriately; the PPS does not process it appropriately; the courts do not penalise it appropriately; and the official statistics do not record it appropriately. That is not a criticism of those bodies. It is criticism of the fact that we do not have the correct legislation in place, and the hate crime legislation independent review has clearly set that out.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Ms Dillon: Absolutely.

Dr Aiken: I declare my interest as Chair of the all-party group on ethnic minority community. As legislative time is short, one of the things that we encourage the Justice Minister to do is to get hate crime legislation across the board and in place as quickly as possible. Will you join with me in asking the Justice Minister to make that happen? It is very important.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Ms Dillon: Absolutely, I will. That is part of my contribution today. I absolutely agree, but I will also be honest: the Justice Committee is already dealing with a number of pieces of legislation, and it would be disingenuous for us to say that further legislation will get through in this mandate. However, the Committee has called on the Minister to ensure that it is ready to go in the next mandate. All the preparatory work should be done. I absolutely agree with the Member on that.

There were attacks on Jewish graves in Belfast City Cemetery last week, and it was not the first time that those graves had been vandalised. That was a hate crime, and those responsible must be held to account. The hate crime legislation independent review concluded at the end of 2020. It reinforced how ineffective current hate crime laws are and made a series of recommendations on how we can improve this. At present, there are no specific hate crime offences in law in the North, and the review recommended the creation of aggravated hate crime offences, which was a key Sinn Féin recommendation during the consultation period.

3.15 pm

Whilst it was recognised that online hate speech is largely a reserved matter, the issue was, nonetheless, considered as part of the review, and it would be remiss not to mention the harm that is caused by online hate speech. Social media companies should be compelled, under legislation, to take steps to remove offensive material that is posted online. It is clear that self-regulation has failed.

Restorative justice affords a huge number of benefits as a means of dealing with perpetrators of hate crime, ensuring not only that the perpetrators are punished but that work is done to ensure that the offender does not offend again and that the underlying prejudices that led to the criminal act are tackled and changed. Hate crime in any form is totally unacceptable. Despite the fact that hate crime is rising in the North, the conviction rate is shockingly low and, as Liz Kimmins said, the reporting rate is even lower. We made representations to the Justice Minister to prioritise

the introduction of a hate crime Bill. I will not go over that because I have already responded to Steve Aiken on it.

My colleagues, particularly Pat Sheehan, have outlined the issues that we have with the specific IHRA definition. Across the House, we can all agree that antisemitism, or any type of racism, is unacceptable and must be dealt with appropriately. We must challenge it. We must challenge it in our workplace. We must challenge it in our communities. We must challenge it in our conversations with those around us. If you are in a conversation in which something that you think is antisemitic is said, you must challenge it. That is what being a leader is about.

As has already been pointed out, education will play a vital role on the issue. No one should be targeted because of their faith. Education plays a vital role in teaching our young people the art of acceptance and that we are all different. Different is good; diversity is a positive thing. As a mum, I can certainly say that I feel very proud of the attitude that my 12-year-old daughter takes towards those around her and of her positive approach to diversity. I do not think that it is arrogant to say that I bear some responsibility for that. I raised her to look not at the differences but at the similarities in others, to accept the differences and to be able to work with those people, play with them and enjoy their company.

My final point is that criticism of human rights abuses of the Palestinian people by the Israeli state should not be conflated with antisemitism. Let us not dilute the message that we want to go out from this House. We are united in our opposition to antisemitism in all its forms. We must make sure that the message that leaves the House today is that every single Member is opposed to antisemitism.

Mr Carroll: I will speak and vote in favour of the amendment and against the motion. We have seen a re-emergence of antisemitism, which is particularly worrying in the context of an advancing far right across Europe and the world. Antisemitism has a barbaric history. The onus is on all of us to challenge any form of antisemitism and stand in solidarity with our Jewish community when it experiences antisemitism, to challenge the rotten roots of all discrimination in society and to condemn all forms of antisemitism in my constituency, in other constituencies and across the world.

I find it disappointing, therefore, that the motion calls for support for the controversial and divisive IHRA definition of antisemitism. There is much that one can agree with in the examples given in the IHRA definition, but it includes other, highly problematic examples. For that reason, the IHRA definition has been opposed by over 40 Jewish groups globally, as we have heard already, including local groups such as Jewish Voice for Just Peace, Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign, and more than 1,400 lawyers and academics, including 56 scholars who specialise in the study of antisemitism. They oppose the definition because it wrongly conflates antisemitism with genuine and legitimate criticism of the state of Israel, despite what others have said in the debate.

I refer Members to correspondence from the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, which represents over 200,000 workers here. It says:

"We are also concerned that the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working

definition of antisemitism is open to the interpretation of opposing solidarity action for Palestinian people and has been weaponised, as such attempting to close debate and even criminalising international criticism of some political policies of the Israeli Government."

That is not from me; it is from the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. As referred to earlier, Kenneth Stern, the person who authored that definition, has criticised how it has been used to delegitimise criticism of Israeli policies. The Belfast Trades Council, in its correspondence with MLAs, stated how:

"the heavy emphasis on the arena of speech about Israel risks reinforcing a chilling effect on advocacy for Palestinian rights by casting a constant shadow of suspicion or doubt on any engagement on the issue."

Those are reasons enough, in my opinion, for people to oppose the motion.

It is incredibly significant that, today, Human Rights Watch published a report called 'A Threshold Crossed', which details how Israeli authorities have subjugated Palestinians because of their identity. That report states:

"In certain areas ... these deprivations are so severe that they amount to the crimes against humanity of apartheid and persecution."

On today of all days, if the Assembly were to support adopting the IHRA definition, which hampers our ability to condemn —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: No, thanks.

— the apartheid actions of Israel, the Assembly would be choosing to put itself on the wrong side of history and to see such a persecution buried.

It is also significant, as highlighted by Jewish Voice for Just Peace, that the DUP has chosen to support the adoption of the IHRA definition when others, such as the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, exist. That declaration is not perfect because it reinforces attempts to couple antisemitism with the struggle for Palestinian liberation, but it correctly aligns the fight against antisemitism with a struggle against racism. It recognises that antisemitism and anti-Zionism are "categorically different". It was developed by a group of Jewish and Israeli scholars who deemed the IHRA definition to have:

"caused confusion and generated controversy, hence weakening the fight against antisemitism."

I believe that the DUP has decided to recreate that controversy on the Floor by proposing to support the controversial, widely condemned IHRA definition in the full knowledge that it would quell condemnation of an apartheid state. The IHRA definition and its inclusion in the motion is wholly divisive, which is a quick way to neuter any challenge to discrimination, but, then, anyone with any interest in challenging discrimination and racism would not have paraded a Trump flag outside Westminster, which DUP MPs did. They would not have whipped up sectarian tensions in recent months. They would have no truck with the idea that LGBTQ+ people need to be fixed or that the Churches should be —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Carroll: — allowed to engage in damaging homophobic practices. If the DUP were serious about combating antisemitism, it would have denounced Trump's embracing of the antisemitic far right.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Carroll: I will be supporting the amendment and not supporting the motion.

Ms Sheerin: I am speaking in support of the amendment. I will say at the outset that it is fantastic that we are having this debate. We are now almost in a routine in the Chamber of having these really important conversations about systemic and societal discrimination, unpicking the thinking that leads to outward expressions of hatred and assessing the ramifications for anyone impacted by it. Last week, we voted to ban the cruel practice of conversion therapy. A few weeks ago, we discussed misogynistic violence. Today, we are condemning antisemitism. Although the terminology changes and the specific challenges for the respective communities vary, the key components remain the same.

Just like any other form of discriminatory prejudice, whether that be sexism, racism, sectarianism or homophobia, antisemitism is wrong. It must be called out and challenged. It has impacts that reach far beyond its most obvious manifestations. I echo the solidarity with the Belfast Jewish community on the recent awful attack on graves in Belfast City Cemetery. No doubt that caused hurt and anguish for the families affected. However, just as the murder of a black man on the street in Minneapolis affected more than just his friends and family and the legitimisation of conversion therapy hurts more than just those young people who have been coerced into thinking that they should be something other than what they are, those sorts of antisemitic attacks hurt more than just the loved ones of the deceased whose graves have been desecrated.

We have all heard the horror stories of the Holocaust and the terror that was imposed upon the Jewish people of Europe by the Nazi state. None of us should underestimate the intergenerational trauma that has been inherited by thousands of people from the Jewish community worldwide as a result. Your identity should not feel like baggage that you should be ashamed of, but that is what xenophobia, racism and antisemitism leads to.

The genocide of over 6 million Jewish people across Europe in the 1940s was harrowing. It has left a very real and lasting scar on our world. The ancestors of those survivors who fled from torture in concentration camps bear that hurt. They carry the pain and loss of their relatives, as well as the knowledge that, at one time across swathes of Europe, being Jewish was enough to make you a victim. Modern-day antisemitism, be it in the shape of graffiti on walls, online abuse or even just comedy based on untrue and hurtful stereotypes, further compounds that pain.

What unfolded in World War II was ethnic cleansing in preparation for domination; the eradication of an entire population driven by ignorance, intolerance and greed. Those same motives were at the heart of every colonising power that we can point to in our recent history. The number of examples that we have of that is a damning

indictment on humanity. They include the British Empire in Ireland, India, America and elsewhere; the Portuguese domination of much of South America and south-east Asia; and Dutch invasion and control of swathes of Asia and south Africa. The list goes on and on. The stories of colonisation, regardless of location, feature common themes: violence; supremacy; the eradication of indigenous people, language and culture; and, overwhelmingly, hurt.

Colonialism left us all a sad legacy of racism and xenophobia. That is where the IHRA definition of "antisemitism" is problematic. It prevents genuine and real criticism of an Israeli Government who, at present, are giving life to that same racism through discrimination and cultural supremacy. The definition conflates Zionism and Judaism. It cynically uses examples of antisemitism as cover for Israeli Government treatment of Palestinians today. The Palestinian people in 2021 are living under siege. They are denied their rights; they are unable to build homes, access basic utilities and travel freely.

As has already been referred to, the group Jewish Voice for a Just Peace, whose members are from the Jewish community in Ireland, has criticised the definition because of its attempts to impose specific limits on any discussion of Zionism and Israel's violations of human rights. Again, as others have made reference to, we had the launch today of a report from Human Rights Watch that concludes:

"the Israeli government has demonstrated an intent to maintain the domination of Jewish Israelis over Palestinians ... that intent has been coupled with systematic oppression of Palestinians and inhumane acts committed against them. When these —"

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Ms Sheerin: No, thank you.

"When these three elements occur together, they amount to the crime of apartheid."

It is imperative that we all condemn antisemitism and do so in a way that does not endorse the discrimination of any other marginalised communities or allow the criticism of oppressive states to be censored. I commend the amendment to the House. Sinn Féin will not push the amendment to a vote.

Mr Speaker: I call William Humphrey to conclude and wind on the debate. The Member has 10 minutes.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I am a Member for North Belfast, as is my colleague Ms Bradley. Chaim Herzog, who was the sixth President of Israel, was born in Cliftonpark Avenue in north Belfast. In 2018, his son — the former leader of the Israeli Labor Party — visited that constituency with other members of the family. I was privileged to attend lunch in the synagogue. Unfortunately, that family was not able to see the plaque that had been placed on the building by the Ulster History Circle; it had been removed because of antisemitism and intolerance. That is the sort of abuse that the Jewish community in this city has had to deal with. That Jewish community settled here in the early 1900s. They came largely from Latvia and Lithuania, and some came from Germany, to the Old Lodge Road, which was off the Crumlin Road. That community is Jewish, not Israeli.

However, we hear Members across the way conflating the issues of the Jewish religion and the state of Israel. That is a complete nonsense that feeds the antisemitism that we see happening on our streets. That is appalling.

Antisemitism is the most appalling of hate crimes. In May 2019, I visited Yad Vashem in Jerusalem with colleagues from the Assembly and Westminster. During that disturbing visit, I saw evidence of the scale of evil and the slaughter of innocents at the hands of Hitler's Nazis. The truth of what happened must continue to be told and forever highlighted not to only defeat the evil of antisemitism in today's society but to prevent a recurrence of such things in the future.

3.30 pm

Sadly, a survey in 2019 revealed that one in 20 adults in the United Kingdom did not believe that the Holocaust had taken place, which is a shocking and sad statistic about our nation. It must be stressed that antisemitism is racism and a hate crime. Today, across Europe and in other parts of our kingdom, the Jewish community feels threatened. Some attend worship in synagogues that have extra security around them, some worship in synagogues that have police or private security firms outside them, and some Jewish children attend schools that have huge security. That is no way for a community to live in 2021.

Attacking the Jewish community is wrong and must be publicly condemned by all right-thinking people across the political divide. All parties can demonstrate in this debate today — sadly, we have heard some outrageous contributions — a unity of purpose in taking a united position on opposing antisemitism by endorsing the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism. The House should unite to send a clear message from the Chamber on where the people of Northern Ireland whom we represent stand on those issues.

In 2016, I visited Belfast City Cemetery's Jewish plot. At that time, 13 Jewish graves had been desecrated. My colleague Brian Kingston, who was the lord mayor, and I worked with Belfast City Council to ensure that the cemetery was enhanced and the damage repaired, and the then rabbi, David Singer, re-consecrated the cemetery. Sadly, only a couple of weeks ago, 10 of those graves were damaged.

In 2016, the IHRA agreed the following definition:

"Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities."

In this city, over the last decade, pro-Palestinian rallies have been organised, with people brought into the city centre. In 2019, when party colleagues and I visited Ramallah, I spoke to Dr Shaath, who was one of the advisers to the Palestinian president and a negotiator during the peace talks. What happens in Ramallah and Jerusalem should not manifest itself in this city. Members who represent constituencies in Northern Ireland need to be very careful of their language and their actions, given how those can feed into the public domain and lead

to people breaking the law. After some of those rallies, there were attacks on Jewish members of the community. The former rabbi, David Singer, gave an interview to the 'Belfast Telegraph' about the abuse that he took. He was concerned about his security in his home and when he walked to the synagogue, which was attacked and graffitied. Therefore, we need to be extremely careful of the language that we use. Targeting anyone is wrong. People should be allowed to live freely and securely in their home. Rabbi Singer was a middle-aged man. Previous rabbis, however, had children in the house. As a community, particularly politicians and those in public positions, need to be mindful of the words and the language that we use. We should not inflame the situation out there and cause antisemitism to become something that is seen as an appalling norm.

I am disappointed but not surprised by the Sinn Féin amendment today. Sinn Féin is, I think, the only party at Westminster that has refused to endorse the definition. It is always keen to tell us that we are on the wrong side of history when it comes to certain issues, yet its approach to antisemitism and the state of Israel has, at times, been shameful. You cannot say that the Jewish people are to blame for the policies and behaviours of a particular Israeli Government — I am not getting involved in the politics of Israel — any more than you can say that the American people are to blame for what Biden or Trump said. That is a nonsense, and you hide behind that. It is for Sinn Féin to explain why its MPs have not endorsed this definition at Westminster.

I received this from the chair of the Belfast Jewish Community:

"The Belfast Jewish Community, together with the representative bodies of the Jewish communities in the UK, the Republic of Ireland and internationally, regard the IHRA definition of antisemitism and its examples as a vital tool to help identify antisemitism and to combat it at a time when antisemitic incidents and attitudes are increasing. The IHRA definition and examples have been adopted by the main political parties in the UK on well over 100 local government authorities. The Belfast Jewish Community urges the Northern Ireland Assembly and all political parties to show solidarity with it in the face of antisemitism by adopting this internationally recognised definition. Michael Black, chair of the Belfast Jewish Community".

The Jewish community, as others have said, has made a huge contribution to this city and this country in areas of industry and commerce, the legal profession, medicine and, yes, even in politics. I am pleased to have many Jewish friends. I am pleased and proud that the synagogue is in my constituency, and I visit it regularly. I urge the House to listen to the words of the leader of the Jewish community in this city and endorse and back the definition that is before the House. Therefore, I urge the House to support the motion and reject the amendment.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly condemns antisemitism in all forms; notes with deep concern the findings of the Community Security Trust's (CST) 'Antisemitic Incidents Report 2020', which recorded 1,668 antisemitic incidents across the United Kingdom; stresses the need to tackle the scourge of antisemitism in every aspect of our society; and endorses the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism, including its examples, which states that "antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, Jewish community institutions and religious facilities".

Mr Speaker: I thank everybody for their contribution to the debate. Members, take your ease for a moment or two, please.

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

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone).]

Adjournment

Downe Hospital, Downpatrick: Resumption, Retention and Development of Health Services

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): In conjunction with the Business Committee, the Speaker has given leave to Mr Colin McGrath to raise the matter of the resumption, retention and development of health services at Downe Hospital in Downpatrick. The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes.

Mr McGrath: I am pleased to commence this Adjournment debate on the retention and expansion of services at Downe Hospital. I promised the people of South Down that I would raise the issue of the hospital on every occasion that I could. Although cynics may find it hard to believe that politicians can keep their word, I certainly will hold true to my word on the matter.

In March of last year, we endorsed the Coronavirus Bill in order to respond quickly and effectively to the emerging and growing threat of the pandemic. All of us were aware that sacrifices would have to be made on all of our parts. I stood in the Chamber and said:

“I accept that there may need to be some reconfiguration of services in our health network, and I would not question that. However, I want an assurance from you, Minister, that any such moves will be temporary. Can I seek from you today on the record an assurance that any reconfiguration of health services is temporary and will be moved back again once this passes?” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 127, p188, col 1].

When an elected MLA gives acceptance to the removal of services from his local area, it does not go down well. We all did our bit to respond to COVID-19, however. The people of Down and Mourne accepted the temporary reconfiguration of services that were already in a temporarily reconfigured state. We accepted that temporary reconfiguration in the face of a worldwide pandemic. We accepted the temporary reconfiguration in spite of the fact that it was done without public consultation, without any equality assessment and without public approval.

We put our faith and goodwill in the Health Minister that, when it was possible to do so, services would be returned to the Downe Hospital. However, over one year on, they still have not been returned.

3.45 pm

I have stood in this Chamber on multiple occasions extolling the virtues of the Downe, saying that it could play its part in the fight against COVID. I feel that we have played our part, fair and square, and I want to know when we will get our emergency department back. That is only fair and square.

No one can deny how successful and well run the vaccination programme has been. It is exceptional. We are getting as many of the population vaccinated as possible, but are we ensuring equal access where possible? What about those in County Down? Where is the County Down vaccination centre? Is it in Downpatrick, the county town of Down, in the Downe Hospital or on the Downshire estate, where it could be equally accessible to all? No. The vaccination centre for County Down is in the Ulster Hospital, which is eight miles from the Royal and five from the SSE Arena. Does the Minister accept that, perception-wise, that is not a ringing endorsement for equal access of opportunity? It may be just a perception, but it feels that, if there is a deal to be cut, the Downe Hospital always gets the lesser end of that deal. Would we expect the public of Belfast to travel 30 miles for their nearest vaccination centre? Never mind “expect” them; they just would not do it.

As a result of COVID and other delays, waiting lists are affected further. We are now told that, without funding, it will take 10 years — a full decade — to clear the waiting lists. However, in England, it will take only five years. Why is there the disparity? To be blunt, it is because successive Health Ministers have presided over a service that is getting smaller and more centralised. The bed count has been reduced, the workload has increased, and the need for nurses has never been greater. We cannot even get our nurses' pay or working conditions right. All this time, we have huge amounts of money, structured investment and enhancement of the Ulster Hospital. Yet we continue to hear the message played and replayed, week after week, that there are significant pressures, delays and waiting times at the Ulster Hospital, even with all that investment. Something is definitely not working.

I wonder constantly at the contribution that the Downe could make to the wider network of health provision in Northern Ireland. We have delays in our health service, yet the theatres at the Downe operate about 60% of the time, and not at the weekends, for the health service. There is no anaesthetist based at the Downe, so all the provision is by local anaesthetic only. How much more we could be doing.

What of the adage trotted out that people are happy to travel for their healthcare? Why does the Department think that people will not travel to Downpatrick for their services? What have your officials got against our town and our hospital? By the way, to say that we offer regional services is not exactly justified. The cataract service is good, but it is mostly delivered to local people; to a few from beyond, but not many.

Let the Downe do more. Install our long-awaited MRI scanner. Let local people, and even those who you tell us want to travel, come to the Downe where healthcare will be delivered to the highest standard and help our health service. It will not hinder it. The Royal College of Physicians recently highlighted that one of the consequences of removing services from local and smaller hospitals is that you make them irrelevant. The Downe is not irrelevant. I have spoken about it many times in the Chamber. Last October, I asked the Health Minister about the delivery of specialist services in the Downe. In his response, the Minister said to me, and I quote from Hansard:

"I thank the Member and welcome him to his usual place as the champion of the Downe Hospital. He never misses an opportunity in the House to extol the skill set and dedication of the staff, of which I am ... appreciative. As I said in an earlier answer, as we get into the second surge over the next couple of months we will continue to look at where we can deliver services safely. If the Downe Hospital's footprint is one that we can use, I am sure that it will be explored." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 132, p81, col 2].

The cynic in me wonders just how much exploration has been done, given that, six months later, I asked the Minister again about the trust's rebuilding plans and how the Downe can play its part in that. The response was somewhat different. I was told the following:

"There is nothing more unnerving for people working in our health service than social media campaigns about saving their hospital when it is not under threat. Therefore, I ask the Member and some of his party colleagues to step away from the party political campaigns and support the staff who are working in the hospitals to deliver the entirety of the services in those facilities." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 138, p23, col 1].

The campaign for the Downe Hospital is a fight to support the staff and the public, but it predates my birth. In fact, it predates the birth of the Health Minister, so would I step away from a campaign to save it? No, not when Health Minister after Health Minister have insisted on taking services away from the Downe and leaving the people of County Down at a health disadvantage. That is why the voice of the people will be raised to the heights of central government and cannot be ignored.

Just a number of years ago, the Downe Hospital had a 24-hour emergency department and it delivered elective and non-elective surgery. It had a cardiac ward, an intensive care unit and a full maternity hospital. It had over 150 beds and was collocated with the Downshire Hospital, which was one of the main centres in these islands for the delivery of mental health services. Stop telling me that I am politicking when, in 20 years, we have had all of that stripped out and, now, even the ambulances bypass it.

I can be accused of being negative, but I think that I am being a realist as we stand by and watch what has happened. Suffice to say, at this stage, that whatever remnant of goodwill the Department had with the people of South Down, it is depleting fast, and further reconfiguration of services will simply not be accepted. We need our services back. The services that were promised need to come back, and we need them back now. It is what the people of Down and Mourne deserve.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before I call Mr Wells, I advise Members that they can have up to 10 minutes each in this debate.

Mr Wells: I wish you had told me that, Mr Deputy Speaker: I would have prepared something longer. However, I have no doubt that I will try to fill my 10 minutes.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Just for clarity, it depends on the length of other Members' speeches, which, unfortunately, I cannot predict.

Mr Wells: First, I congratulate my colleague and sworn bitter political enemy Mr Colin McGrath for having the diligence to secure this debate. He is not exactly shy and retiring when it comes to the front page of the local newspaper. He is in it every week about this issue, and quite rightly so. Everyone who reads what he has to say would agree with him on this issue.

He mentioned an issue that arose before the birth of the Minister and, of course, Ms Bradley, but, unfortunately, I cannot say that. As a rookie MLA in 1982 — I do not think that anyone else in this room was born in 1982 — one of our tasks on the then Health Committee was to visit the Downe Hospital. At that time, people were greatly exercised about the leaching of essential services from that site. Of course, we are talking about the old hospital, which was well past its sell-by date at that time.

At that time, as Mr McGrath has quite rightly pointed out, we had a full-blown A&E, a maternity service and a wide range of other services that were available to the people of Down, albeit in a building that was really not up to the task. I also remember numerous public demonstrations in the town, at that time, about the future of the Downe Hospital. I would say that, today, you could not get 20,000 people on the streets anywhere in Northern Ireland on a political issue, nor could you get them there on some major burning international issue and nor could you get them out for Brexit. However, the people of Downpatrick have shown that you can get 20,000 people on the streets about their local hospital. That shows you the strength of feeling.

I am not able to criticise the Minister here today — I hope that he does not use this against me in the next election campaign — because I think that he has done an excellent job so far in managing a tremendously difficult situation. I congratulate him and his team for vaccinating over 65,000 people in South Down, including many from Downpatrick, efficiently, quickly and with a minimum of fuss. However, I have written to him about the over-16s — the people who have turned 16 since 31 March — and I would like to see that issue resolved for the people of South Down.

An excellent job has been done, but I am going to let him into a secret: it is exactly the same distance from Dundonald to Downpatrick as it is from Downpatrick to Dundonald. Now, that revelation must be extraordinary. There was absolutely no reason why one of the main vaccination centres for County Down could not have been in Downpatrick. People from Dundonald and the leafy suburbs of north Down and Strangford could have got in their cars and driven to Downpatrick, where there are ample facilities. For instance, there is a brand new leisure centre that could have been dedicated to the vaccination programme. Therefore, if it is right to ask 65,000 people from South Down to travel either to Craigavon or Dundonald, is it not right to ask 65,000 people from north Down and Strangford to drive to Downpatrick? The road is exactly the same. I take the point that Mr McGrath is making: everything still seems to be Belfast-centric.

When the coronavirus issue arose, urgent action had to be taken. My party and most MLAs supported the Minister in taking radical action. Indeed, we were even prepared to vote for legislation that had been initiated two weeks earlier and was being delivered on the ground. Indeed, we were prepared to vote for legislation that had been implemented and superseded, such was our confidence in

his team and his advice. I do not regret any of that, and we are gradually getting through a very difficult situation.

However, two of the decisions taken as a result of coronavirus involved moving essential services from Daisy Hill Hospital to Craigavon Area Hospital and moving A&E services from Downpatrick to Dundonald. At the time, I was extremely suspicious that coronavirus was being used as a Trojan horse to permanently remove essential services from Downpatrick. However, Seamus McGoran, the chief executive of the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, said that I was scaremongering. A few other Members made the same point: that I was scaremongering and there was nothing to worry about. Well, here we are, a year later, and there has been no movement.

The Minister has a golden opportunity to, first, secure his place on the front page of the 'Down Recorder' and, secondly, reassure tens of thousands of people in Downpatrick and the surrounding east Down area by giving us a categorical assurance and a date for the return of services to the Downe Hospital, so I can eat my words and say, "Yes, I was scaremongering. It was not going to happen. All my concerns were ill-founded. As a result, I will say I was wrong". Not too many politicians are prepared to tell the 'Down Recorder' that they are wrong.

Mr Swann, it is a double-edged sword. Congratulations on what you have done for the people of South Down and the people of Northern Ireland as far as coronavirus is concerned. However, to complete the set, reassure us that services will be returned in a few weeks and that the concerns of Mr McGrath are unfounded. Perhaps that will take him off the front page of the 'Down Recorder' permanently.

Ms Ennis: Like Mr McGrath, I do not remember a time when there was not a campaign to retain services at my local hospitals, be that the Downe Hospital or Daisy Hill. For years, the community and ourselves as political representatives have been resisting and fighting the many attempts to remove and downgrade services. To be frank — pardon the pun — we are sick of it.

The unprecedented COVID crisis was met with understanding and generosity by the local community in South Down. However, there is now a growing belief in the community that health officials are using COVID-19 as a convenient cover to advance extensive reform plans at the Downe without any need for consultation. There is no doubt that the long-term viability of the Downe Hospital has been undermined in recent years by the reduction of specialities on the site, such as the lack of an inpatient cardiology service and the loss of our 24-hour A&E. As the local community argued at the time, not only have the cuts had a direct impact on local patients who need to avail themselves of the services, but the cumulative effect continues to limit the overall delivery model of services at the Downe Hospital. In recent months, the absence of critical care backup and anaesthetist cover made the delivery of emergency care very difficult to sustain at the Downe.

Unless something is done to protect and enhance the availability of specialities and critical care cover, the Downe will struggle to meet the emergency needs of the local community without relying on the Ulster Hospital in Belfast.

4.00 pm

In order to begin to rectify that, my Sinn Féin constituency MP colleague, Chris Hazzard, and I have requested that the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust and the Department of Health explore the possibility of establishing a pathfinder project similar to the recent Southern Trust pathfinder in Newry, which has had a positive effect on the protection of services at Daisy Hill Hospital. That will not only enable us to benefit from an interactive and consistent process of public communication and consultation but, perhaps most importantly, demand a real and meaningful process of co-design with staff and their trade union representatives.

Minister, I need to raise — hopefully, you will address them — the recent comments by a senior health consultant in which he revealed a plan to close half the hospitals across the North. That is a grim warning to rural communities that they face a huge battle to save their local hospital in the time ahead. In a recent meeting with Health officials from across the North, Dr John Maxwell, a senior emergency department consultant with the Belfast Trust, provided an update on the controversial review of urgent and emergency care in which he referred to a plan to:

"ideally see the number of hospitals halved over the next ten years".

The minutes of the meeting have been seen —

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Will the Member give way?

Ms Ennis: I will indeed. Go ahead.

Mr Swann: We have asked for those minutes, and, as yet, neither the paper nor your party has been able to provide them to substantiate that. The Member may be aware that Dr John Maxwell is now in Australia, where he has been working for some time. We have been in contact with him, and he has no recollection of that minute, meeting or presentation. I just want to put that on record. That was raised by the local MP in the local paper, but we sent in lines to correct that narrative because it is dangerous.

Ms Ennis: I appreciate the Minister's intervention, but my colleague Chris Hazzard has seen those minutes. Those of us who have been involved in the struggle to protect local health services and the sustainability of rural hospitals in recent times will not be shocked to hear a Belfast-based consultant speak of the need to centralise services. It is deeply worrying that he speaks of an actual plan to close half the hospitals. The public has not been made aware of any such plan and, indeed, as far as I know —

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ennis: Yes.

Mr Swann: Neither have I.

Ms Ennis: I will get to that in my comments. I appreciate that.

As far as I know, the Minister has never publicly discussed a plan that would:

"ideally see the number of hospitals halved".

There is an urgent need now for the Health Minister — I am sure that you will address this in your comments,

Minister — to investigate those remarks and publicly dispel any such notion.

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ennis: Yes.

Mr Swann: I will publicly dispel them now.

Ms Ennis: Will you let me finish? Sorry; you will have ample time at the end to respond.

Failure to do so will be hugely damaging to public confidence in the transformation process and a stark illustration that, once again, the unelected transformation management board in the Department of Health is driving the process of transformation, not the publicly accountable Minister.

The cumulative effect of all the issues I have outlined has added further weight to the argument that local services, staffing models and the long-term viability of emergency medicine at the Downe Hospital are being cannibalised in an effort to sustain the delivery of services in the greater Belfast area. It is clear that staff in the local hospital are being used to plug gaps elsewhere, and that is unacceptable. The desire to protect Belfast type 1 emergency departments at the expense of other areas is an equality issue and would undoubtedly fall foul of equality legislation if it were applied under normal circumstances. Rural communities such as South Down are now being left in a precarious situation with no recourse to equality impact screening or assessments. The fatal consequences of that are exacerbated by the fact that it is being done in haste with no forum for public scrutiny.

I will finish by reiterating my call for the Department of Health, in partnership with the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, to urgently establish a pathfinder model of engagement that will help support and protect the long-term sustainability of the Downe Hospital in Downpatrick.

Ms S Bradley: At the outset, I thank my party colleague, Colin McGrath, for bringing forward this topic for debate. It is timely because, as Mr McGrath and Mr Wells alluded to, we, as politicians, in good faith worked with the trusts and the Minister to respond to an immediate COVID need and the need to step down services in the Downe and Daisy Hill Hospitals. At that time, I spoke with the chief executive of the Southern Trust and assured him that I would give endorsement to that, but the Minister will appreciate that I did so with a caveat. I deliberately pinned down the wording on which the plan was presented, because I did not want a vacuum to be created that would give rise to a conversation around, "Can the trusts be trusted?".

At the outset, I thank all the staff at the Downe Hospital and Daisy Hill, who have endeavoured to maintain some safe services throughout the pandemic, as have many of their colleagues across the health service. That must be noted, particularly during these challenging times.

It seems that the whispers and rumours about the demise of services at the Downe Hospital started just a few years after the ribbon was cut at its beautiful new building.

That was in the lead-in to Bengoia, and the publication of Bengoia gave oxygen to that conversation. The narrative has always been about what will be taken away from the site and what will be taken from the Downe Hospital. It is the absence of any real access to information on the plans

for the hospital that has given rise to the speculation. That vacuum will be filled. As Members know, with access to social media comes an information flow that, sometimes, is inaccurate. That is not helpful. That said, there is a legitimate concern that should and must be heard. If there are inaccuracies, this is a good time to call them out, iron them out and offer reassurances.

I have listened to the Minister on the issue, and I have listened to many across the health service. I accept that it is not logistically possible to have every specialism in every hospital. That could not be delivered, and I do not think that anybody is asking or calling for that. We ask for the retention and resumption of services in the Downe Hospital, an estate and building that, by any measure, is underutilised. In the National Health Service's offering, the estate of the Downe Hospital is second to none, as are its staff.

When the Minister considers that people will have to travel to services, I urge him to consider a person who lives in Kilkeel. They will have travelled for the best part of one hour before they get to the Downe or to Daisy Hill. The travelling has happened, and that is for those who have the privilege of access to private transport. Try to make that journey by public transport — by bus. The roads that those people are being asked to travel, sometimes in distress, are far from suitable for anybody to travel in an emergency. We also know that our Ambulance Service can pick up only so many of the people who are called to hospital.

While I accept the argument that we cannot have every specialism in every hospital and that, even if we could, it might not be the best use of resource — that is a valid argument — it must never take away from the need for every person in Northern Ireland to have access to emergency service and general hospital provision. Nobody in south Down should be second-rate when it comes to that access. Therefore, when the Minister is injecting the realism about specialisms and doctors, I ask him to also inject the realism of the geographical nature of the constituency of South Down and recognise that those people are already travelling to be in the two hospitals that have served us well down the years. Understandably, people take great pride in supporting them, which, no doubt, is why campaigns that are years old have maintained that support across the community.

Minister, I talked about perception and the vacuum that can be created. The people of South Down need to hear two things. They need to hear an unambiguous statement from you that the emergency element and the general hospital care at Downe Hospital will be resumed without delay. Secondly, the staff need to hear from you today and the public need to know what the ambition is for Downe Hospital, in addition to the resumption of those services. People travel across Northern Ireland for specialisms here, there and everywhere. What exactly is the specialism and ambition for Downe Hospital? Will people travel to access specialist care in Downe Hospital or Daisy Hill Hospital? I cannot speak of one without speaking of the other because I know how critical both hospitals are to the people across South Down.

I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for extending the time allowed to speak, which has been helpful. I commend the motion. I put it on record that the reintroduction of services in both hospitals is critical. Its importance should not be underestimated. It is also critical that the constituency of

South Down is understood. Nobody in South Down should be treated as a second-class citizen.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you, Members. The Minister now has ample time to respond to all the queries that have been raised. Minister, I know that you will wish to respond to a number of issues individually, and you have quite a while — almost half an hour — to do so, although I am not suggesting that you take it all.

Mr Swann: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will start by being clear: as I have said before in the House, the biggest threat to Downe Hospital is not from any imagined or perceived desire to diminish or close it; it is the constant talking down of the breadth of services already available there. As all Members will be aware, we face serious challenges in recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of healthcare staff across the system. That is what a decade of underinvestment in the health service does.

In the past 15 months, I have approved 600 new nursing and midwifery training places and have increased the number of university medical places, but those take some time to come online. In the meantime, my Department, the trust and the hospital are working hard to recruit and, importantly, retain enough staff. That is especially the case in our general hospitals. Any newly qualified health worker researching which hospital to work from could be forgiven for thinking that there is some lingering threat of closure hanging over Downe Hospital. There is not, but that is what is being perpetuated by the constant scaremongering by some, including elected representatives — councillors, MLAs and MPs — who really should know better.

Mr McGrath: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Swann: Yes.

Mr McGrath: I understand some of the point that he makes. However, does he realise that what we actually hear from that is, “We will make the decisions that we want. If you don’t like them, don’t dare open your mouth and say anything about them, because you will be putting your hospital down”? We have to call out what we have seen. I read out a list of services that we had across the board in a fully fledged, fully run and proper hospital. We do not have half — we do not have even a tenth — of those services now. Is he seriously suggesting that, as elected representatives in a democratic country, we should sit down and say nothing about that?

Mr Swann: I put it to the Member that, as the chairman, I think, of a party that has endorsed many reviews of health and the work that needs to be done, he should acknowledge, as Ms Bradley did, that we are no longer in a position in which we can provide every speciality in every hospital across Northern Ireland. That is why, since becoming Minister, I have been clear when talking about regionalisation. The reality is that Downe Hospital is a vibrant healthcare facility.

It is a beacon of transformation — an exemplar of integrated working between primary, community and secondary care.

4.15 pm

The Adjournment topic is:

“Resumption, Retention and Development of Health Services at the Downe Hospital”.

We are already having that discussion right across Health and Social Care. As I told the Member when he raised the issue previously, that is about using every available resource as effectively as we possibly can, including the vital Downe Hospital, to recover from the devastating impact of COVID-19 on services across Northern Ireland. The Member who secured the Adjournment debate talked several times about where we were last year. What he forgets is where we were even a number of weeks ago with the COVID pandemic. In January, due to COVID, there were nearly 1,000 inpatients across the entirety of the system. Therefore, the issue is not where we were a year ago; it is where we were weeks ago. The Member seems to think that there is some magic switch that turns on the health service overnight.

I committed wholeheartedly to that when I published revised trust rebuilding plans on 13 April. Those plans are available on the Department’s website. I encourage Members to read them, because they give the detail of where we are and where the ambition lies. They are three-month rebuilding plans, because that is how I see our being able to take steps. They are three-month steps, because of the resources, facilities and staff that we have. The Downe Hospital is an important part of the recovery plan for the local population whom it serves, the role that it plays in the South Eastern Trust’s hospital network and the regional services that it provides to the population of Northern Ireland. Yes, COVID-19 necessitated some temporary downturns and changes in how services are provided. Yes, the challenge that now faces the health service is huge and unprecedented. The Member asked what was the difference between England, where it is estimated that it will take five years to recover, and Northern Ireland, where it will take 10 years. That is because, due to continued underinvestment in the health service and workforce, Northern Ireland was already five years behind before COVID hit.

The challenge that now faces the health service is huge and unprecedented. Yes, I would say that we can be sure that further change is inevitable but that it will be right across Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland. I want to encourage representatives from South Down and the South Eastern Trust area to play a constructive role in that discussion. We have a responsibility to move the discussion about the Downe Hospital or any hospital in Northern Ireland out of that negative space and begin to discuss how the entire health and social care system can work together as a true, united and joined-up system to serve the needs of the entire population and so that no Member or constituent, no matter which constituency they live in, feels that they are a second-class citizen. Unfortunately, at this time, many people who are in need of health services, no matter where they live, do feel second class, because we cannot provide the services that we want to provide. As Members of the House, the Department of Health, the Minister of Health and former Ministers of Health, we know our desire to deliver the service that we want: a National Health Service that is free at the point of use and delivery.

Ms S Bradley: I appreciate the Minister’s giving way. I accept what he is saying. There is a huge challenge for us all as public representatives to take a responsible approach. However, does he accept that the conversation will start only when a base level of service is available to all? We are talking about the restoration of emergency

care as part of the debate. Without that reassurance, there is understandable nervousness about what the future of the hospital will look like. May I remind the Minister that we would like to walk away with some reassurance in that regard?

Mr Swann: I will come to that issue shortly. First, I pay tribute to the health and social care staff and support staff who work at the Downe Hospital and across the South Eastern Trust, in hospitals and in the community, for their agility and the enthusiasm with which they have met the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic.

As we have seen right across trusts, that spirit has accelerated new ways of working, enabled staff redeployment to care for the sickest patients across the region and maintained vital services. In response to the Member, I acknowledge that there is concern locally that the pre-COVID-19 service level has not yet been reinstated at the Downe emergency department. In the meantime, the consultant-led Phone First urgent care centre provides safer and more timely access to unscheduled care services in the local area. In the first three months of this year, attendance steadily increased from 528 to 597 to 765 a month. Of those patients, 70% had their medical needs attended to in a scheduled slot at the urgent care centre. The remaining 30% were redirected to an appropriate care setting, such as a GP, an advice service or emergency care. For patient needs and health outcomes, that is clearly preferable to large numbers waiting in a crowded ED, where they have a high risk of contracting infection.

Most importantly, however, 14 patients a week, on average, are now being advised, on first contact, to attend an ED. That must be compared with the pre-COVID context, in which 14 patients a week experienced delays while waiting for transfer to definite care. Patients are now being directed to the right care in the right place at the right time, so it is not surprising that feedback from patients and users of the Phone First urgent care service has been extremely positive, with 100% positive reviews from patients in March 2021. As society reopens in the weeks ahead, the implementation of rapid-testing technology at the Downe urgent care centre will further enhance patient and staff safety and help maintain a high degree of confidence that the unit can be kept COVID-free.

I will turn, more generally, to the evolution of the Downe since the South Eastern Trust took over responsibility for the hospital in 2007. Most people would see that as a positive story. A new hospital was opened in 2009, with investment in excess of £60 million. In 2010, the trust began to transform its acute services across all three sites — Downe Hospital, Lagan Valley Hospital and the Ulster Hospital — in recognition of sustainability challenges faced by healthcare delivery across the UK and globally. During that time, the trust introduced new services to the Downe, including a regional centre for cataract services. I know that the Member opposite challenged that, because only a few people were coming to it from outside the region, but it is a regional service that we are constantly building on. I get the same complaints from people in North Antrim who have to travel for their cataract surgery, but I can tell you now that there are people in North Antrim who would quite happily travel to the Downe to get a cataract operation. That is where we have to be at as we move forward with our health service regionally.

The other new services that the trust has introduced are ophthalmology outpatient services; trust-wide bowel cancer screening; trust-wide sexual health services; maxillofacial surgery; frail elderly rapid assessment services; a midwife-led unit; two general practice services on-site; Marie Curie services on-site; orthopaedic integrated clinical assessment and treatment services (ICATS); multidisciplinary teams; and community respiratory services on-site. There is a range of other services, including outpatient physiotherapy; musculoskeletal and women's health services; podiatry; orthoptics; occupational therapy; rheumatology hand services; ENT services; speech and language services; and children's and social work services. I could go on, but suffice it to say that that clearly illustrates my earlier point about the Downe being a vibrant hospital that provides a rich mixture of important services to the local and regional population.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Swann: I will.

Mr Wells: I do not want to interrupt what I accept is a very well presented case. I note, with interest, that you are prepared to take interventions and defend your policy, and that is welcome.

The Minister has listed a series of services, and it is welcome that we have them in Down, but I hope that he is building to a crescendo, at the end of which he will give us a date that we can take back to our constituents so that we can tell them that, on a certain date, the services that were removed a year ago will be restored. If he is building up to that, I wait with great expectation. If he is not, I will be slightly disappointed.

Mr Swann: I will disappoint the Member now: I do not have a date for that. Everyone in the House has to be realistic about the situation that we are in. Elected Members have met the trust officials on numerous occasions. I do not have a date for the reinstatement. Looking across the entirety of the system, you will know well, as a former Health Minister, the pressures that we are under.

Since coming into post, I have done my best to keep politics out of the health service, especially during a pandemic. Politics, and especially political grandstanding, must not become a threat to our health service. By that, I mean easy-option politics, short-termism and politics that is only interested in point-scoring or landing a headline in the media.

Reforming our health service across Northern Ireland is challenging. The Member may shake his head, but every MLA wants the best for their region. I get that, but, as Minister, I have to deliver a health service.

Mr McGrath: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Swann: I will.

Mr McGrath: I really despair at that tone, Minister. What you are saying is that, if we see diminishing services or services that are not up to the standard that we want and raise our voices in this place, the elected Chamber in Northern Ireland — if we dare to do that — you will accuse us of being negative and trying to get a cheap headline in the local newspaper. That is a headline in the local newspaper: we are being told that we cannot raise issues.

You gave us a wonderful list of available services, many of them once a month. I gave you a list of services that were taken away. There is no comparison between the two lists. I do not begrudge the list that you gave us — give us every service that you can, and the staff will deliver it — I am simply saying that it is nothing compared to what we used to have. I do not think that that is being negative; I am simply pointing out the truth.

I do not accept that I am grandstanding when I raise the services that are being taken out of my area.

Mr Swann: The Member may not be grandstanding, but some of his party colleagues, some councillors, and MPs for the area have been. He knows the devastating effect that that has on the morale of the people working in that hospital.

I raised it at the start of my contribution. When I had this conversation with the Member a number of weeks ago, I raised the similarity that we had in North Antrim with the Causeway Hospital. One of the things that the chief executive asked us to do, as responsible local politicians, was to stop talking the hospital down because it was distracting and making it harder to recruit people to that hospital. As I said in my opening comments, we have so many vacancies across our health and social care system. Someone looking for a job may google the hospitals where jobs are available. If they click on the news and see a threat, or even the insinuation of a threat, that a hospital or service may be reduced, downplayed or taken away, they will become discouraged. That is when such language becomes very difficult and makes it harder for us, the hospital and those who want to work in it.

I know where the Member is trying to take the conversation. I have challenged. As I said, he quoted me in the work that he has done in promoting the Downe Hospital in this place.

We have to be realistic about the position of our health service, and his party has been part of all the reforms that have been brought forward over many years and supported them. It is about where we take political stances and looking at the health service as a whole, rather than as hospitals or units in isolation. That is what I want for the Downe Hospital.

As I said, I want the Downe Hospital to be a vibrant, integral part of the regional approach in the South Eastern Trust. I believe that it is. Ms Bradley indicated what an excellent facility it is. It is one of our newer hospitals, opening in 2009. Why not use that facility? That is what we want to do. Look at the three-month rescheduled building plans that are all based on available footprint and staff.

Everybody in the House knows — at least, they should know — the acute budgetary pressures on my Department, across government, and on the public sector. Single-year Budgets have only made a bad situation worse. I believe that I have cross-party support in calling for sustained investment and multi-year Budget settlements. However, I have been struck recently by how often political debate about our health service ignores basic financial realities. Barely a day goes by without an MLA, a councillor or an MP calling on me to significantly increase spending in a key area. The former Minister of Health will know that that is part of the job.

4.30 pm

The causes being championed are, like the Downe, invariably worthy. Rarely, if ever, do I hear suggestions about where I can get that extra funding. The impression is given that funding and staffing are unlimited and that I merely need to be persuaded to spend more or move more staff to a particular area. In reality, funding is very limited. At present, indeed, it is an increasing struggle to maintain our existing services.

Again — the Member will take this whichever way he wants — I am worried about petty, point-scoring politics when it comes to the vital task of reforming and transforming our struggling health service. Changes in clinical practice, standards, demographics, technology, and workforce challenges mean that we simply cannot have a conversation, in isolation, about the role of any one hospital. Medicine and treatments change, and we should not remain wedded to a 20th-century way of doing things. It is easy for parties across the House to endorse the general principle that change is needed. It is a different matter when specific changes at a local level are proposed. That is why, for some, the temptation proves too strong to grab those headlines or proclaim grand conspiracy theories about what is being done about the future of individual hospital sites at regional management board sittings or in presentations or minutes that nobody has seen.

Let me be clear — I will give you this commitment — there is no plan, hidden or otherwise, to close, downgrade or run down any hospital in Northern Ireland. That includes the Downe. That does not mean that every hospital will remain frozen in time. It does not mean that all services will be delivered in exactly the same way until the end of time.

Change can be positive. It can improve the quality of healthcare for local populations. Surely we should, collectively, try to do that.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Swann: Yes.

Mr Wells: Sadly, I understand much of what the Minister says. It is difficult when you know the other side of the story. I sat in his chair. He will recall that, when he became Minister of Health, I walked over to him and said, “Are you right in the head?”. That was before we had heard of coronavirus. I do not, for one moment, want to diminish the enormous task that he has had. However, I am disappointed because I thought he would use this debate as a platform to give us an announcement or to tell us privately, as we would not reveal it to anyone, the date of reopening of essential services in the Downe.

Could he pick up on one last issue of concern in the Down area? It is the refusal to vaccinate 16-year-olds who turned 16 after 31 March 2021. That was brought to my attention, and I did raise the issue in my speech. It is not directly relevant. They would be delighted to go to Downe Hospital to get that vaccination.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member.

I was going to come back to the vaccination programme because I know that it was raised. We shifted vaccination programmes to GPs and community pharmacies so that people could get the vaccine. We still see over-80-year-olds coming forward now because they have lost their

vaccine hesitancy. In respect of the over-16s, we have a licensing problem with the AstraZeneca vaccine, which is only licensed for over-18s. The Pfizer vaccine is licensed for over-16s for a number of specific medical cases, so it is not just the general over-16 population. If the Member has written to me on that, I will be able respond.

As we are having this debate, I note the change in health debates over the last few weeks. Let us be realists. We are a year away from an election. For all the reasons that I explained, I sincerely hope that the Downe Hospital does not become a political football. I sincerely hope that no hospital in Northern Ireland becomes a political football. I sincerely hope that our health service does not become a political football. After the next election, one of the other parties could, perhaps, pick up the Department of Health and nominate the Minister of Health, as they could have chosen to do last January. At that point, they actively chose not to do it. Next time, there may be a reversal of roles and arguments. Then others will have an understanding, as Mr Wells has, of the challenges of this job and that making sure that the health service delivers for everyone is not as easy as some may think. When those in elected office resort to point-scoring or repeating conspiracy theories, it has consequences. It creates misinformation and resistance to change but, most of all, it lets patients down.

I trust that my comments this evening will provide further assurance about what I value and how I see the Downe Hospital having a hugely important place in the COVID-19 recovery effort and in the vital journey towards health service transformation across Northern Ireland.

Adjourned at 4.35 pm.

Ad Hoc Committee on the
COVID-19 Response

Official Report
(Hansard)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

15 April 2021

Ministerial Statement: The Executive Office

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Alex Maskey (Chairperson)
Dr Caoimhe Archibald
Ms Clare Bailey
Ms Paula Bradley
Ms Paula Bradshaw
Ms Nicola Brogan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mrs Pam Cameron
Mr Gerry Carroll
Mr Alan Chambers
Mr Colm Gildernew
Mr Paul Givan
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Daniel McCrossan
Mr Colin McGrath
Mr Justin McNulty
Mr Robin Newton
Mr John O'Dowd
Mr Matthew O'Toole
Mr Pat Sheehan
Mr Christopher Stalford
Mr John Stewart
Ms Claire Sugden

Witnesses:

Mrs O'Neill deputy First Minister
Mrs Foster First Minister

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): Members, I am sorry for the delays. You will be aware that I have spoken to the party Whips this afternoon. We were advised that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister would be here at 5:00 pm and we had hoped to have the statement in advance of that so that members would have time to read it. All that I can do at the moment is suspend the meeting until the First Minister and the deputy First Minister arrive.

As soon as we have the statement in our possession, I will contact all members to advise them when the meeting will resume, which, hopefully, will be fairly shortly, even if I have to truncate the half an hour that members are entitled to have in order to read the document. If you read some of the media reports, a fair amount of stuff is already out there. Whether it is true or not — who knows?

We will have to suspend. I apologise for that.

Mr Stalford: On a point of order, Chairperson.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): We do not take points of order in a Committee meeting.

Mr Stalford: Maybe you will indulge me. *[Laughter.]* As an elected Member, I think that it is really poor that Assembly Members are getting more information from the Twitter feeds of certain BBC journalists than they are from the Executive. I hope that you will highlight that with the Executive, because it makes this place look really bad in a situation like this.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): It is fair to say that things have been particularly bad over the past few days in that regard. It is very disrespectful to all Members and also to the wider public because they are hearing information in a filtered way and certainly not from official sources. It is very disappointing that people continue to do that. There seems to have been a mad flurry over the past couple of days, which has been more than usual. However, that may just be a symptom of some of the other problems that are about the place.

We will suspend for now. I had thought of contacting one of the journalists you mentioned to see at what time we should reconvene, but I thought better of it. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McGrath: It is already on Twitter. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): Yes, it will be on Twitter anyway.

I will contact everybody immediately we get the statement. Thank you.

The Committee suspended at 5.05 pm and resumed at 5.41 pm.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): I welcome members back to the meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response. I welcome the First Minister and deputy First Minister to the meeting of the Committee. I invite the Ministers to make their statement, which should be heard without interruption. Following the statement, there will be an opportunity for members to ask questions.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): We are, of course, mindful that we remain in national mourning. We wish to make a short public statement.

The Executive met today to discuss the COVID-19 situation. We reached some important decisions, and

we feel that it is right to share the details first with MLA colleagues via the Ad Hoc Committee. Colleagues will know that today marks the first formal review under our pathway out of restrictions. We have reviewed the current situation, measured the risks and looked at the health, economic and societal data. We have been mindful of steps taken elsewhere and have taken our decisions on what is best for us here at this time.

We have taken a series of decisions in the interests of families, young people and children, in the interests of well-being and in the interests of our economy. We are bringing forward a balanced package of relaxations that will restore many of the familiar aspects of everyday life that have been missed dearly over recent times. There will be more to do and more decision points to come, but this is a landmark day as we step forward, firmly and with confidence, on our pathway to recovery.

All generations across society have coped with the most difficult of times, and we are proud of the way that the people of Northern Ireland have pulled together to save lives. The everyday positive choices made by so many have reduced the transmission of the deadly virus to the point where we are able to roll back a significant number of restrictions. We are doing so in a careful and considered way, taking account of the prevailing health situation and the robust mitigation measures that can be relied upon to help keep people safe.

We must also stress that while we take important decisions today, the virus is still with us. It is still dangerous, and we cannot drop our guard. People are still infected, hospitals are still receiving patients and, unfortunately, people are still at risk of serious illness and death. We ask everyone to be mindful. Step out, but step carefully. Please continue with the public health basics: wash your hands, wear your face covering, maintain distance and get fresh air around you.

The Executive discussed the need to reflect on the strategic context for our decisions. We are incredibly proud of our vaccines programme. To everyone who has responded to the invitations to take the vaccine, we thank you for doing that in the wider interests of your family and community. Please remember that the vaccine does not give you superpowers, but that it is a vital weapon in our fight against the virus. We continue to ask everyone to take up the jab when their turn comes. The logistical operations for the delivery of the vaccines are truly humbling, and we again want to thank everyone involved in that, from planning through to delivery. It is a truly impressive operation, to which we owe a great deal.

We are mindful that schools returned fully this week. We recognise the incredible efforts of everyone in the education sector, as well as parents and young people. This is where we need to be: children and young people engaged in their education, socialising in positive and constructive ways, seeing their friends in safe environments, investing in their futures and working towards their life aspirations. That is the future that we all want for our young people.

We have looked at the risks in different settings, whether that be inside or outdoors. We have agreed next steps that we trust will take us forward in a hopeful and positive direction. We have received advice from our Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) and,

as ever, we remain grateful to them for their professional advice.

Our decisions today are aimed at lifting restrictions where we can. We cannot do everything that people want us to. We are sorry about that and we know that it will be disappointing for some. We will pay constant attention to the steps needed to keep us moving forward. That is an absolute commitment across the parties in the Executive. The Executive have agreed that, alongside the decisions that we have made today, we will set out a series of steps that we wish to take next, if the conditions permit. We will do so with the clear understanding that we will remain driven by data and not by dates, in the knowledge that we have a clear commitment to this place and to our citizens to keep these steps under review, and in the knowledge that we will ratify these indicative dates only if the prevailing circumstances permit.

We have decided that the following activities can resume from 23 April 2021: driving instruction and theory tests; driving tests; close contact services, including training; access to outdoor visitor attractions, including outdoor activity centres; and equine-assisted therapy and learning, on an indoor and outdoor basis, in gatherings of up to 30 people. Outdoor sport organised by a club, individual or individuals affiliated with a club will be extended to include squad training. Competitive outdoor sport organised by a club, individual or individuals affiliated with a club will resume with participant numbers not exceeding 100 and with no spectators permitted. We have also agreed that static band practice or rehearsal will be permitted in agreed outdoor locations from 23 April.

From 30 April, we have agreed to increase the numbers permitted to gather in domestic settings outdoors to 15 people from no more than three households; reopen all retail; reopen and permit overnight stays in self-contained tourist accommodation for one household only; reopen unlicensed premises, outdoors only, with a maximum of six people from two households allowed per table, and with contact details being recorded; reopen licensed premises, including social clubs, outdoors only, with attendance limited to six people from no more than two households, and with contact details being recorded; remove the curfew on takeaways; remove the curfew on off-licences; permit individual activities in gyms, swimming pools and other large venues, including activities with a carer; and to allow one-to-one training and coaching if social-distancing measures are observed.

Mr Speaker, thank you for facilitating this statement.

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): Thank you for the opportunity to update members as we take the next steps on our journey towards recovery.

This is a good day. It is a day of optimism. It is a day on which we can all look forward with the hope of a brighter future for all. There is no doubt that these have been the toughest of times for people, for families, for businesses, for workers and for communities. The restrictions have been necessary to suppress the virus, to save lives and to protect our health service, but they have taken their toll. It is incumbent on us all to move forward as soon as circumstances allow us to, but we must do so with caution and with the maximum mitigations in place to avoid the virus reclaiming its grip on our society.

Today is an important milestone, which signals that we are moving in the right direction. As a package of measures, we believe that the easements that we have agreed today will make a fundamental difference to people's lives and well-being. We have been under the latest form of lockdown for 110 days. We know that people need hope and need us to take some steps out of restrictions. As an Executive, we recognise the pressures and the restrictions and what they have done to our people, who have been unable to see family and friends or go out and about and do the things that matter to them. It is important to note the cautious first steps that we have already taken as an Executive. Colleagues will know that, even before today, we had reopened primary and post-primary schools; increased the number of people who can meet outdoors in a garden from six to 10 from two households; removed the "Stay at home" provision in the legislation, moving to a "Stay local" and "Work from home" message; allowed contactless click and collect to resume for non-essential retail; resumed outdoor sports training for up to 15 people; permitted marriage and civil partnership customers to view venues' facilities; reopened outdoor retail, including garden centres and car washes; and increased the number of people permitted to attend marriages, civil partnerships and funerals, now informed by a risk assessment of the venue. We can now build on all that and walk us into the further lifting of restrictions for the benefit of all in a safe and sustainable way.

We need to remain mindful of the COVID situation, and we continue to be advised on all relevant factors. We are not out of the woods. We face risks from variants of concern. We face risks from social gatherings. We need to always remain mindful of the public health guidance to wash our hands, wear face coverings and limit our social contacts. Fresh air and ventilation are part of our protection, and we understand the desire to get out and about. We ask everyone to consider how they will make use of the decisions that we have taken today as an Executive. Take care of yourselves and each other.

We have reached our decisions carefully. We know that everyone is looking for certainty on the next steps. At this stage, we cannot guarantee every step towards the end of this, but we want to give that hope. We want to set out where we wish to go next, on the basis that it must be kept under review. We know that people will understand that.

Unfortunately, COVID has no respect for timetables or dates. It has no respect for plans or undertakings. Therefore, I will set out our aspirations for the lifting of restrictions in the coming weeks and months on a basis that, I know, will be understood. The following is an indicative date — a date by which we hope to be able to make moves — but it is a date that will be kept under review. In that context, from 24 May, we hope to reopen unlicensed and licensed premises indoors with mitigations; reopen the remainder of tourist accommodation; allow visits indoors in domestic settings; reopen indoor visitor attractions; and resume indoor group exercise and training in numbers that are limited to suit the venue.

Mr Speaker, we remain committed to the undertakings that we made this time last year. We will continue to keep this place apprised of our thinking, our rationale and our decisions. Thank you for facilitating us this evening after the Executive meeting.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): I thank the Ministers for making their statement. I now invite members to ask the Ministers questions. I will allow around one hour for the session. 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, that depends very much on whether members are focused and succinct in asking their questions. The Chair of the Committee for the Executive Office will be allowed a little more latitude than other members in asking his question, given his role.

Mr McGrath (Committee Chair - Committee for The Executive Office): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I thank the Ministers for their statement. We are in the position today where restrictions can begin to ease for two reasons: first, the incredible effort of the nurses, doctors and health service staff who have worked to exhaustion to keep us safe and roll out the vaccination programme; and, secondly, every person who has made sacrifices — some have made the ultimate sacrifice — over the past four months to keep themselves and their communities safe. They have created the conditions that have brought us from a difficult place to one where we can restore a bit of hope.

Scrutiny is not negativity. When the Executive's plan was originally published, there was no detail on the indicators and data that would be used to make the decisions on the dates on which restrictions would be eased. Despite promises of dates today, a lot of what has been announced is still indicative, which falls short of what many people want in their sectors. We are left in a position where we have no data and, in some places, no dates for people to move towards. Can the First Ministers commit to publishing the data and the indicators that will be used to make those important decisions?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not mind taking that question, a Cheann Comhairle. It is actually incorrect to say that a lot of this is not clear, because only one section of the announcements that we are making today is indicative, and that is the one at the further end, as you would expect. That is because we need to judge it based on the prevailing health circumstance at that time.

All the things that will change on 23 April — all the close contact areas, driving lessons, driving tests, outdoor sport, organised sport — have been confirmed, as has everything that will open on 30 April. The indicative section refers to 24 May, and that is because we are trying to give people the ability to plan. All being well, and with the public's support, that will be the confirmed date. It was the ask and the recommendation of the public health team, the CMO and the Chief Scientific Adviser that that be an indicative piece, because we will need to come back to it, given that it is so far in front of us. We promised people that we would try to give time to plan, so that is what we have done.

On the data that is being published, we have always said that we want to see all the data put out there. A considerable amount of data is put on the dashboard on the Department of Health's website, as you will know, and I am more than content for that to continue to be shared. You deserve to have the data; the House deserves to have the data.

It is unfortunate that, today, a lot of the information was leaked and was discussed in the media before the House

had a chance to discuss it and whilst we worked our way through the detail of it. It took us all to work together, but I am very glad that we have arrived at a collective Executive position after all our deliberations.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister for that answer. The point is that, if there is a date that is indicative and is based on data, we need to know the data so that we can get that we are working towards that indicative date, and it becomes more real.

Ministers, there was a sense of chaos, as announced by yourself in the briefing, and the leak that happened this morning fed the impression that some of the announcements are a result of private lobbying, rather than strategy based on science. To be assured that the decisions have been made in the best interests of public health, will you commit to holding a public inquiry into the decision-making taken by the Executive during this crisis as soon as possible afterwards?

Mrs Foster: Thank you for that question. Those of us who sit on the Executive are always interested to see people outside the Executive tweeting and putting out the dates. Before I left home this morning, I was interested to know that the SDLP Member for West Tyrone had put up a full list of what the Executive were going to “rubber-stamp” today.

I am pleased to say that we took the time, as the deputy First Minister said, to work through all the decisions today and to talk to our Chief Medical Officer and our Chief Scientific Adviser to discuss the economic impacts, the societal impacts and, of course, the health impacts. That allowed us to come to the House with this package. Whilst we would, of course, always like to do more in these circumstances, I think that this is a very balanced package that will allow shops and gyms to reopen on 30 April, and, goodness, we have had many people lobbying about those issues.

As for a public inquiry, we have always said that there will be an inquiry after the COVID pandemic; of course there will be. There will be many lessons to learn. Whether that public inquiry takes place at a United Kingdom level or at a locally devolved level, we will have to wait and see, but I have no doubt that the scrutiny that the Chair often talks about will continue, as it should, because what we have been dealing with are life and death decisions. We have been dealing with stopping the livelihoods of so many people to try to protect their life over this past year, and it has been hugely difficult to make those decisions. However, there will be a public inquiry after the pandemic, and that will include the House as well as members of the Executive.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for this very welcome statement to the House this evening.

I want to ask about the infection rate in the Republic of Ireland. Given the fact that, in comparison with Northern Ireland, our neighbours in the Republic are well behind in their vaccine roll-out, what concerns does the First Minister have about the information? Has there been any resolution to the issue over the passenger locator form for those arriving into Dublin and then travelling up to Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: Unfortunately, on the last issue, the passenger locator form issue still has not been dealt with satisfactorily. I really regret that, particularly because the Republic of Ireland added some countries to its red list recently. We do not have that data coming to Northern Ireland, and that is to be greatly regretted.

One of the issues that we were able to speak about with the Chief Scientific Adviser today was his modelling for the next six months and what he sees coming over the horizon. Of course, he is looking at worst-case scenarios, best-case scenarios and the middle way. He told us that the positive factors include the vaccination programme, the fact there will be increased immunity for the population and the seasonal effects that we often talk about. We all remember how the R number dropped back last summer and then came up quickly again in September/October. Some of the negative factors are that we cannot be positive about how much immunity people have and whether it will wane, particularly in the older population, and whether there will be more new variants. We have seen that, unfortunately, there will be more new variants. Of course, the other issue that he mentioned was the movement into Northern Ireland from areas with higher incidence levels. That concerns us, particularly in relation to the Republic of Ireland, and you are right to mention the fact that they have twice as many incidences according to our graphs that were shared today. We will, of course, continue to monitor what is going on in our modelling and with our nearest neighbour in the Republic of Ireland.

Mrs Cameron: Mr Speaker, thank you for the chance to ask a supplementary question. I thank the First Minister for that answer. I have to say that, a full year on, it is disappointing that the issue with passenger locator information has not been resolved. Given the threat that the new variants pose, it is unreasonable that that has not been brought to a head and dealt with.

Today, the Department of Health announced that close contacts of a positive case now need to be tested, whether or not they are symptomatic. I presume that that is a good way of helping to control what will be a continued outbreak of the virus. Does the First Minister think that our test, trace and protect system will be able to cope with the increased burden that will be placed on it from now on?

Mrs O'Neill: On your first question, the stronger and better our cooperation across this island, the better we will all be as a people. That needs to continue. I welcome the fact that the CMOs meet and converse every Friday morning. That is important because what happens in Cork will have implications for what happens in Tyrone and vice versa. It is really important that we have strong cooperation across the island.

I have always advocated a “Two islands” approach to COVID, and now, particularly where we are with the virus being suppressed, if we continue in that vein and, as the vaccine roll-out continues in the Twenty-six Counties, I hope that we will get to a point where we are aligned again. As we have seen throughout the pandemic, there have been times when we were the best with the response and times when we were the worst. That has happened across the island. We need to focus on working together and resolve things like the travel locator form, particularly given that travel will be a really sensitive issue.

Now, when we get to the point of being able to remove a lot of the harsh restrictions, the focus has to be on the other tools in the box to manage the virus. The test, trace and track system needs to be 100% perfect. It needs to actively find cases and deal with them head-on. As we come to the end of this wave — we are not there yet: we need to keep saying that, even though today is a good day — a lot of the shift in focus needs to be on what else we can now use to fight the virus and avoid, as best we can, going back into another cycle of lockdowns. We need to try to avoid that, and that is inevitably where we will end up again if we are not successful with an excellent test, trace and track system.

Dr Archibald: I thank the First Ministers for their statement. It is a significant announcement of relaxation measures and a welcome signal of the progress that we have made collectively as a society. It will certainly be welcome news for businesses. The dates for businesses, including those in the hospitality sector, some of whom I met today, will give people the ability to plan for reopening and that step back towards some sort of normality.

Will the Executive provide ongoing support for those businesses that continue to be impacted by the restrictions?

Mrs O'Neill: Thank you for the question. There is no doubt that hospitality and tourism are, by any stretch of the imagination, the sectors that have been worst impacted by the pandemic. They have come at the tail end of every easement period because of the nature of the spread. I am glad that we have been able to reach the situation where we can give that sector an indicative date for the indoor situation and a full-on date for the outdoor situation. We know that outdoors is safer than indoors.

The member makes a good point. The one thing that we have been able to do well as an Executive is, for example, that the support that is paid to the hospitality sector is double what is paid elsewhere. It is welcome that we have been able to support those businesses to mitigate the damage, not, of course, that we have been able to replace their income. As an Executive, we have decided today — even though some people will be able to open partially, until we have the full reopening, people will not be able to realise the full potential of their businesses — to continue the grant-aid funding for all businesses in the hospitality sector until we get to the end.

We also agreed to continue support for gyms. Gyms are allowed to open for one-to-one training, but, without classes or group sessions, they cannot reach their full potential in income, so we are going to continue to fund them until we have full reopening there.

Dr Archibald: I thank the joint First Minister for that response. It will be welcome news to many businesses. The date of the next formal review is 13 May. Do you intend to give businesses as much clarity as possible, as early as possible, around dates for reopening?

Mrs Foster: Absolutely. One of the reasons why the date for reopening hospitality is indicative is that we will look at the data between 23 April and 30 April and between 13 May and 20 May. We will continually track that data to see whether there are any changes that concern us. That means that we will have to continue our close contact with some of the sectors so that we can help them to understand where things are at the present moment and

whether we will be able to confirm that date. I very much hope that we will.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office made the comment that it was because of the work of the NHS and all its members, including volunteers, and of the population that has made so many sacrifices. It is correct to say that. We hope that people will continue to work with us and that they will adhere to what we have put out today. By doing that, we will be able to open hospitality on 24 May.

Mr Butler: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for coming here tonight.

In September of this year, I will have been married to Mrs Butler for 25 years. I am sure that it is a day that she will rue for the rest of her days. *[Laughter.]* The wedding industry is worth around £250 million per year to the Northern Ireland economy, and the industry has been hit hard. That is not even to speak of the couples who have tried to plan their weddings over the past year. Will you outline, especially for the wedding industry operators who fell through the gaps for grants and other moneys, any other funding opportunities between now and when weddings actually happen? It takes at least six to eight weeks to plan for those wedding receptions.

Mrs Foster: We hope that when people look at what we have announced today, they will recognise that weddings and families and all the things that we have talked about are one of the reasons why we are trying to give that indicative date of 24 May for the opening of the rest of the hospitality sector.

As the member will know, on 12 April, we moved to a risk-assessed system for weddings and funerals in places of worship and, indeed, in other places that host civil partnerships. That will be on a risk-based assessment. We have not yet reached the point where we can have wedding receptions indoors. That is why we thought it was important to give that date. It is one of the very important reasons why we felt that there was a need to give an indicative date for the rest of the tourist accommodation. The member is right. They do need time to plan. People need to know whether they are going to be able to have their wedding reception. I hope that that gives some certainty to people who are planning their weddings. Like Mr Butler, I was married 25 years ago, and I cannot imagine the horror that couples who are trying to plan their weddings are going through at the moment. We just took it for granted that everything was going to be there and in place. It has been an incredibly difficult time for couples who are planning their weddings. I have emails from people who have changed their wedding dates three or four times. That is really dreadful for them, and they will certainly not forget their wedding when they actually get there.

Mr Butler: Thank you for your answer, First Minister. A shorter question: do bridal boutiques come under close contact services?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, they do. They are able to work from 23 April. I also congratulate you and your wife on your anniversary, and I hope you have a meal booked for her on 24 May.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Ministers, for your statement today. I have not been so happy in months as I am to hear

that the gyms are reopening soon. My question is about driving instruction, theory tests and driving tests. Where and when is the extra capacity going to come from and will there be any prioritisation for those people who actually cannot get back to work because they do not have a test?

Mrs O'Neill: The date for instruction, theory tests and driving tests is 23 April, but the decisions on how that will be done and how to deal with the backlog will all come under the Department for Infrastructure. It will have to provide the detail. I am happy to pass your question to the Minister and ask for a response.

Ms Bradshaw: Last time, the issue was that they opened quite quickly, the appointments all got sucked up, and people who probably really needed a test, including care workers and stuff, were not able to access them, so it was really about using the system properly.

My supplementary question is about gyms and sport. We talk a lot about the mental health pandemic that will happen at the far side of this COVID pandemic. What consideration has been given to the impact on the physical health of the population, through this one-year-plus of quite a sedentary lifestyle?

Mrs Foster: We have concentrated quite a bit on the mental health and well-being of the population, for very obvious reasons. Throughout the pandemic, we have encouraged people to get out and to walk and take some exercise if they can, recognising that, of course, some people live in built-up areas and maybe cannot do that. Certainly, I imagine that the Minister for Communities, as well as the Minister of Health, will want to look at physical well-being.

The Minister of Education is very keen for young people to get back to sport as quickly as possible. Sport is now allowed within schools. However, inter-school sport still cannot happen, simply because it would involve too much inter-school mixing, but we hope that that will be able to happen in the near future.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their statement today. I know that, for many, it will give a little bit of hope that we are moving towards a more normalised society.

Although I welcome the funeral relaxations that were announced on Monday, can you provide some clarity around gatherings at gravesides?

Mrs Foster: I thank the member for that question. From 12 April, as I said, we agreed to increase the number permitted to attend marriages, civil partnerships and funerals, informed by a risk assessment for the venue. That extends to the number at the graveside as well. It is subject to a risk assessment of each particular burial ground, because they will vary, and we acknowledge that. Whoever is in charge of operating the burial ground, whether it is the council or a church, should liaise with the funeral directors and communicate with them if there are any issues with that particular venue. It is important that that happens.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the First Minister for her answer. I attended my uncle's funeral on Monday past, and it was a very strange event to go to, with the limited numbers in the church and at the graveside. Very much in our tradition, we have receptions after funerals: it is the time that is needed to celebrate someone's life and to talk to people. When

you looked at wedding receptions, did you consider funeral receptions as well?

Mrs O'Neill: I express my condolences to you and your family on the loss of your uncle.

Yes, we considered both things. Despite what was leaked this morning, which maybe got some people's hopes up that we were going to move to allow 30 people to attend weddings and the family gathering after a funeral, that is not what we have agreed. Having brought the date forward to 24 April, we thought that that would cover both occasions. It applies to all hospitality settings, so if people want to go back as a family to, for example, a community centre, a social club, a hotel or a restaurant, it will be provided for from 24 April. Hopefully, that will give some comfort at that time.

Mr O'Dowd: Paula's question was about the end of life. My question is about the start of life —maternity appointments — and a partner's ability to go with their pregnant partner to maternity appointments or even to the birth of their child. Is there any opportunity or indication from the announcement today that that will be the case, moving forward?

Mrs Foster: Your colleague the deputy First Minister raised that matter today at the Executive. The Health Minister was clear about visiting in hospitals: it is dependent on where the alert level is, nationally. At the moment, the UK alert level is level 4. The indication that he made to us today was that more hospital visiting will be allowed when the alert level drops to level 3. That is being looked at, we understand, this weekend. I am hopeful that we will see a change in that, because I think that we have all, like you, been contacted by people who want to visit people in hospital and, of course, to attend the birth of their children and be present at other very significant life events. It is very important for that to happen, so, hopefully, we will be able to give some news on that next week.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): I call John O'Dowd for a supplementary question.

Mr O'Dowd: No. Thank you, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): You pass? Thank you. I call Christopher Stalford.

Mr Stalford: Does a caravan constitute a self-contained tourism destination?

Mrs Foster: I love these questions. Yes. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Stalford: That was a surprisingly quick answer. I am grateful to the First Minister for providing it, because it will be welcome to many people around the country who have been paying thousands in fees for caravans that they have not been able to access.

During this time, our people have been very frustrated, and we are now at the point where they are sick to the back teeth of restrictions. That is definitely the case for young people who want access to their university education in a way that is not confined to online learning. When will we see some progress on that, particularly for a constituency such as mine where a university is a thriving part of the heart of the community?

Mrs Foster: As far as I understand it, at the moment, students on courses that require practical application, such as medicine, are attending the university, so they are

continuing with face-to-face learning. Those courses that can, on a practical level, be taught online are continuing to be online. It is a matter for the universities as to when they will change that.

I agree with the Member for South Belfast, however, about the university experience that our young people are currently not experiencing. They are at home, they are online, they are not with their friends and they are missing that critical university experience that both he and I went through. Of course, they are getting very close to exam time, and it will be difficult to move them into class for lessons because they will be moving immediately into exams. However, I recognise the concern that the member has raised because it is very close to home for me.

Mr Gildernew: On this day of undoubted optimism, it is fantastic that people are starting to see some light at the end of the tunnel. However, my thoughts today are with those people for whom day-care and respite services were ended overnight almost a year ago. Many of them are elderly and vulnerable themselves, and they were left in very difficult situations and remain in those situations. I look forward to engaging with the Health Minister in relation to those people. We have heard a lot of coverage about the vaccine programme and about the vaccines themselves. The roll-out of the vaccination programme has been a tremendous piece of work. Do the joint First Ministers agree that our health and social care staff have done excellent work in getting us to this point?

Mrs O'Neill: Thank you for your question. I absolutely concur with your first point. The families that need additional support have been starved of that support for over a year now. When it comes to day-care opportunities, families with a child or young adult with a disability in particular require that additional support. I very much look forward to hearing from the Department of Health, because it is in the remit of that Department. Given where we are in the pandemic, I hope that the Department of Health can instruct that that will now change so that families get back their full support.

The vaccination programme has been absolutely amazing. All credit goes to Patricia Donnelly and all the staff who have worked tirelessly to make it work. I am delighted that, in recent days, I got my first dose through my GP. It is just fantastic to get that call. You feel so liberated by it. I know that it is not everything — it is only the first dose — but you feel such a sense of hope. We felt that hope in our family when my mother got it.

We are able to make this announcement today because of the sacrifice of the public, the work of the healthcare staff and the work of the vaccination team with the roll-out of the vaccination programme. We are lucky to have those things.

Mr Gildernew: The joint First Minister has answered my supplementary question. I was going to ask whether she would take up the vaccine, but I think that she has indicated that fairly clearly.

Mr McNulty: This is a positive day. The sun is shining, there is summer heat in the air, and the First Ministers are sitting shoulder to shoulder.

Many young people, sports teams, learner drivers, business owners and families will breathe a huge sigh of relief, but, for others, there is less certainty, and there

is not such cause for relief for them. Day care for adults with learning and physical disabilities was mentioned, as well as the reopening of respite centres, people waiting for surgery and appointments or waiting for a return to normal GP services, appointments for those on mental health waiting lists or those awaiting treatments, such as CBT, and a full return to face-to-face child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) and children's family therapy sessions. Do you have any information on when those will recommence? Will appropriate funding be allocated to our health service to address the huge waiting list challenges?

Mrs Foster: I understand that the Health Minister was in the House this week to talk about rebuilding services. I concur with him that we need to get all the services that he mentioned back into a rhythm. GP services and child and adolescent mental health teams have to be back in place. Those are absolutely matters for the Health Minister. As I said, he came and told us about rebuilding services in the trusts. This is really a matter for him, but we will certainly pass on the member's concerns about those issues.

Mr McNulty: Lockdown has a lot to answer for, First Ministers, with my wife and me expecting our first child on the twentieth of this month. Will I be able to attend the birth of my son?

Mrs Foster: You have given the gender away.

Mrs O'Neill: You have given the gender away and everything. I hope that that was discussed and that you will not get a clip when you get home. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Foster: It is a gender-reveal party.

Mrs O'Neill: Congratulations to you. That is brilliant news. Fantastic. You are right to ask the question, because it is a question that probably every MLA has been asked throughout the pandemic. Partners have had to go in by themselves, without support. It is such a big time in your life, and you want that support. We raised that in the Executive today, because we want to get it up and running again to allow that support and to allow people to have their partner or someone with them at antenatal appointments and at the birth. Given where we are today and all the positive things that we have been able to achieve, I hope that that works for you and that everybody else gets the opportunity to be in that position as well.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): At least you cannot say that you were bored. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Stewart: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their statement and for their answers so far. There is light at the end of this long, dark tunnel, and these relaxations will no doubt go down very well with all our constituents. However, and I am sure it is the same for all MLAs, my phone is pinging away with questions to which we do not yet have answers, so I am going to put a couple to you.

What is the current assessment and state of play about travel to elsewhere in the United Kingdom? Will people still have to isolate when they get back, and, if so, when will that be amended?

Mrs Foster: Thank you very much. The member will be glad to know that that is a question that I asked of our Health Minister today because a lot of people have been asking about moving around the common travel area. At

the moment, guidance states that if you are staying for longer than 24 hours, you are supposed to isolate. That guidance should be looked at because there is a need for people to visit friends and family within the common travel area. There are also issues around, for example, examiners coming over to hold music exams and what have you. If they are doing them for two days, under the guidance — the guidance; it is not the law — they are meant to quarantine for 10 days. That is something that the Health Minister is looking at.

Mr Stewart: I thank the First Minister for that answer. No doubt, one of the sectors that will be overjoyed by this news will be the health and beauty sector, which has been champing at the bit to get back to start doing all the haircuts, nails and everything else. Many of them have been contacting me because they are keen to operate in a safe and legal manner. Are the guides and rules that were in place before Christmas still applicable, and will NI Direct be updated as quickly as possible to ensure that everyone has the information to hand?

Mrs O'Neill: I declare an interest as someone who is dying to get to a hairdresser. *[Laughter.]* Yes, the guidance remains the same, so all the mitigations that they invested in, and did so brilliantly, remain. If guidance is to be updated for any sector, it will be updated on the website. As far as I am aware, however, the guidance for close contact businesses remains the same.

Mr Newton: Like others, on probably the best weather day of the year, I welcome the statement. I am in no doubt that it will give encouragement to our folk across many areas. The statement is on behalf of the five parties in the Executive. Members of those parties who, in the not too distant future, might be willing to criticise the statement, will recognise that they are criticising their own colleagues in the Executive. That appears to have been the practice following previous statements.

First Minister, what steps are planned at this stage to assist the hospitality industry, which is so important to our economy?

Mrs Foster: Thank you very much for that question. The member is absolutely right. We do apologise for this being a late meeting but we absolutely felt that it was right to work through what we were looking at as five parties to get consensus. What you see before you may not be what we all would have liked to have seen but five-party consensus was arrived at.

The Economy Minister has been keeping in close contact with the hospitality industry. A number of schemes have been developed to help the industry to mitigate its obvious losses. That is all that we can do at this time, particularly in relation to the large hospitality venues scheme, which helps some of those who are the infrastructure of our tourism economy.

So, we will keep talking. That scheme will continue until they open, as will the localised restrictions support scheme (LRSS), and we will want to speak to them about the emerging trends in health as we go through late April and into May. It is so important that they continue to hear from us as to where we think we are going, but I very much hope that we are able to open on 24 May.

Mr Newton: I thank the First Minister for those encouraging words. The First Minister and deputy First

Minister will recognise the importance of tourism to Northern Ireland's economy overall, and much has been made of businesses requiring notice of reopening. I note the remarks that you made about transportation within the UK common travel area. Will you outline what the thinking might be in encouragement for the tourism industry in particular?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said earlier, the two sectors that have been hardest hit are hospitality and tourism. We know that there is a need to try to support all our industries that have been decimated as a result of the pandemic. We are working our way through all of that. Our priority now is to get them opened. We want to look towards future tourism potential. We need to work with the industry. We will have to sell what we have to offer. We will certainly be very supportive of the proposals that the Economy Minister will probably bring forward to rebuild the tourism sector.

We are looking at recovery as a whole, including societal recovery, economic recovery and well-being and personal recovery. We have all those things to focus on. That will all be factored in to our Programme for Government discussions and our plans. We do not underestimate the challenge in front of us to help some of those industries up off the floor, but we are determined to support them and to do the best that we can for them.

Mr Sheehan: I am sure that both Ministers will agree with me that this is a very good week, with the children being back to school and being able to enjoy their sport and physical exercise. When I was leaving my children to school this morning, I had a short conversation with the principal, who told me that he received guidance from the Education Minister last night that stated that breakfast and after-school clubs could open with immediate effect. That is good, but the principal said that that advice contradicts previous advice about keeping children in their bubbles. Will the joint Ministers tell us whether the Education Minister will provide clarification to school principals?

Mrs Foster: The letter that went out yesterday was designed to give clarity. There had been some questions around sport, music tuition, which, I think, was also included in the letter, and the wrap-around care piece. Some of the schools were very concerned that they were not able to provide that care for children at breakfast clubs and after-school clubs, so it was really important to get that clarification out. I hope that, whatever was said beforehand, people recognise that the latter one stands: it is the guidance now for wrap-around care in schools.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): Supplementary, Mr Sheehan?

Mr Sheehan: No. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): OK. I call Mr Chris Lyttle.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the people, particularly the children and young people, of Northern Ireland who have complied with profoundly challenging restrictions throughout the pandemic and for whom this will be positive news today.

I particularly welcome the return to sport. Will the return to squad training see any limit on numbers? Indoor group exercise is scheduled to return on 24 May. Has any consideration been given to earlier reopening of non-aerobic socially distanced group exercise, such as yoga, Pilates and children's gymnastics?

Mrs O'Neill: Thanks for the question. I think that the number for sport should not exceed 100. That includes everybody who is necessary; it is about including only the people who are necessary in order to have the game. Spectators are still not permitted at this stage.

The issue of allowing more indoor sport, including group exercise or even dance classes and things such as that, is something that a lot of us are probably lobbied about. It is the view of the health team — the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser — that those things are still too risky. That is why the date of 24 May has been allocated to that area. We constantly look at all those things and will continue to do so, but, at this stage, 24 May is where it sits.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the deputy First Minister for the response and the confirmation of the number not exceeding 100 for competitive games. The question was also about whether there will be any limit on the numbers for squad training. Hopefully, that will be in line with a suitable number required, given the limitations on the numbers at the moment.

Is it possible to be clearer about the number of guests whom people celebrating their wedding might be able to have at their reception after 24 May?

Mrs Foster: Again, that will depend on the size of the venue that they have their wedding reception at. Obviously, some venues are large, so you will be able to have larger weddings, but, if the venue is quite small, a risk assessment will have to be carried out to see how that can be achieved.

On the squad piece, I think it is fair to say that, as the deputy First Minister said, it should not exceed 100 but should be kept to a minimum of what is required for that sport. I think that it is fair to say that each of the codes will have advice and guidance out in relation to that for each of their clubs around Northern Ireland.

Mr Givan: I welcome today's statement. It is progress, and I commend my Rt Hon friend the First Minister and her DUP ministerial colleagues, without whom, I believe, we would not have made the same progress today. I am sure that we could have made further progress, left to ourselves.

In respect of some of the restrictions, the aspect around travel that is being raised with me is that currently you need an essential reason to go to Great Britain. Is that being removed so that non-essential travel into Great Britain will be allowed as well as the removal of the requirement to then quarantine?

Mrs Foster: This is the important issue that we have been talking about to do with the common travel area. There is a need to look at that guidance; he is absolutely right. At the moment, it is for work purposes that you can travel to Great Britain and not have to quarantine, so it is important that that is looked at. A lot of us have friends and family in Great Britain and will want to travel there to see them, and, at the moment, we cannot do that under the current guidance. I think that it is fair to say that we will look at this in the near future. As you know, we have moved from "Stay at home" to "Stay local", so, in Northern Ireland, that is what the guidance says. However, I hope that we can move to look at that whole common travel area piece in the next number of weeks.

Mr Givan: I thank the Rt Hon First Minister for that response.

At the Justice Committee today, one of the issues that were raised about the impact on courts — the hospitality sector has also raised it — is that, ultimately, the two-metre social distancing rule is the only way in which we will see the right kind of transformation to tackle that problem and a return to not having that requirement in place.

The deputy First Minister indicated — she can correct me, if I am wrong — that, without a perfect track-and-trace system, it was inevitable that we would go back into another lockdown scenario. Given that, as of today, 0.025% of patients in our hospitals are COVID patients, 60% of all adults are vaccinated and we have seen the atrocious consequences of lockdown, particularly for children, young people, women and low-paid workers, how on earth could we ever allow a situation where we could go back to tolerating any form of restrictions such as we have had to endure over the past 12 months? When will we see the removal of social distancing and the mandatory wearing of face masks and, ultimately, the repeal of what, everybody has said, is draconian legislation impinging on our civil liberties?

Mrs O'Neill: The first thing that I will say to the member is that two people have died in the past 24 hours as a result of COVID, so we are still living through the pandemic. The best thing that we can do for the public is to try to save lives every day and try to get a balance to support our industries to open up again and support all of our people to get back to some semblance of normality. You cannot close your eyes and ignore the fact that we are still in a pandemic. We are in a pandemic, and people are still dying as a direct result of that.

The point that I was making around lockdown scenarios is that we need to try to avoid any other lockdown scenarios. I pointed towards test, trace and isolate because that is one of the tools that can help us to avoid that. We need to invest in other mechanisms that avoid us having to go into a lockdown scenario. There is not one person in the Chamber who wants to see us in lockdown scenarios, but, unfortunately, because of a global pandemic, they were necessary at different times throughout the pandemic. When can we get to the point where we do not have to stay apart or follow the public health advice? We can do that when it is safe.

Finally, let me say this to you: do not believe your own hype. Every Minister in that Executive has been working night and day to do their best for the public throughout the pandemic, and every Minister in that Executive today was collective and unified in their approach to maximising our ability to lift restrictions at the same time as being able to mind the public in the public health crisis that we face. I do not question the bona fides of any Minister around the table when it comes to trying to mind the public and steer us through what has been a horrendous time for everybody.

Ms Brogan: I thank the joint First Ministers for their statements this evening. As has been said, the announcement is welcome and we are all pleased that restrictions are being eased, but we are also all very aware of the huge impact that the pandemic has had on people across the community, particularly on the most vulnerable and those in poverty or housing need, lonely people and

families and workers on low incomes. It has also been a difficult time for women, with an increase in unemployment and domestic violence. With that in mind, does the joint First Minister agree that the Executive's recovery strategy should focus on addressing social inequalities?

Mrs Foster: The member is right to point out that this is having a disproportionate impact on the lower-paid and women in particular. The Economy Minister was vocal today about trying to get a date for the tourism industry, because 50% of all those who are furloughed are either from the retail or the hospitality sector and most of them are young people and/or female and are low-paid. There is absolutely a need for us to get the economy opened up again so that people can have proper work to go to and can get the proper pay that they need to recover.

The recovery plan is part of what we are doing in the Executive. Obviously, the recovery plan has been brought. The Finance Minister has committed to funding the recovery plan from the Economy Minister, and it is critical that that happens now. We are dealing with stepping out of restrictions today, but we really have to focus now on our recovery and on rebuilding our society. Yes, of course, we need to build our economy, but we also need to rebuild our society, and I think that that is the point that the member makes.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): Supplementary, Ms Brogan?

Ms Brogan: Níl, go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): I call Matthew O'Toole.

Mr O'Toole: I welcome today's announcements from the First Ministers, even if, given some of what we have seen today with leaks, the Executive's approach to easing restrictions has been a little more colander than calendar. However, I welcome where we are today.

Can I specifically ask about a sector that is not mentioned in today's statement: our arts sector? There is no mention of outdoor theatre. Our arts sector has been very patient and has not been as vocal as some other sectors. It would be helpful if we could get some detail about, first, outdoor theatre and then, more broadly, opening up theatre and the arts sector in general.

Mrs Foster: We discussed large gatherings, whether outdoor or indoor, today, and it is felt that we need to do some more work on that. The member will be aware of the discussion at present around COVID certification and having some sort of evidence that you have been vaccinated or, at least, tested, and that discussion continues at UK Government level. At the moment, pilots are taking place in England on large events, and he will be aware of those. We will be able to see the data that comes from that. We will probably explore running pilot events in Northern Ireland as well so that we can see how that impacts on transmission of the virus. That is the plan. Obviously, we would love to come here and tell you when festivals are back on again and when large gatherings can come together again, but we will continue to work on those issues. As I say, COVID certification and pilots are part of that.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, First Minister, for that clarification. Several members have correctly said that hospitality and tourism are critical to our society and to our economy, and those sectors have been lobbying hard, as is their right.

Would either First Minister agree with me that, as we move into the summer and try to attract tourists, the last thing that Northern Ireland needs is images of civil disobedience and street protests? Whatever your view of any political issue, we really do not need that.

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, that goes without saying. Of course that is the case. We need to ensure that we do not see a return to the scenes that we witnessed in the last number of weeks on our streets. I hope that that is not the case, and I hope that everybody in the House uses their collective political will to make sure that it is not the case.

Mr Chambers: I acknowledge that huge responsibilities have rested on the shoulders of the Executive over the past year. Will the First Minister confirm that the TEO COVID task force, supported by the cross-departmental working group, holds lead responsibility for managing all possible changes to the regulations and for proposing possible dates for reopening? That being the case, does she agree that all Ministers, even those who were reported as speaking out in apparent surprise this morning, will have had formal departmental representation on the working group and therefore had equal opportunity to provide input and help shape the process?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, I can confirm that the cross-departmental working group meets every week. All Departments are represented on that through their officials. They all had input to the paper that we have today and collectively brought it forward. It was then up for discussion at the Executive, but unfortunately it was in the public domain before it got that far.

Mr Chambers: Do the First Minister and deputy First Minister agree that the Executive, by following the medical and scientific advice when shaping aspects of the lockdown, have undoubtedly saved many lives in Northern Ireland from this dreadful virus?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his comments on the responsibilities that lay on our shoulders. As I said, we had dreadful decisions to take about livelihoods and lives. That is essentially what we have been trying to do over the past year, and we have very much been taking the advice of our medical advisers. I pay tribute to our medical team for the way in which they work with us. It is a tough job. Sometimes, we would like to go faster, and they express the reasons why they think that we should not. We also have to take into account the point about livelihoods and the economy. When we come out of this dreadful time, we want to have an economy to go back to, we want to have a society that has good well-being — we have talked about mental health and physical health today — and there are so many issues that we have to balance.

As we said, we will look back at this time and delve into all the decisions that have been taken, which will be the right thing to do. This has been a tough year for all of us as public representatives, but it is important that we keep at the forefront of our minds the reasons why we do this: to protect our community and save lives but also to try to make sure that there is an economy to go back to.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Ministers for the statement. Given that the virus is still circulating in some areas and there are 100 cases —

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): The member is on mute.

Mr Carroll: Can you hear me, Mr Speaker?

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): We will move on to the next question and see if the member can get that technical problem resolved.

Ms Sugden: Thank you, First Minister and deputy First Minister.

I declare an interest. Earlier in the week, the Economy Minister suggested that there may be an announcement in relation to the reopening of FE colleges for all students. At the moment, some are open for courses that have a practical element. The First Minister talked about universities, but there is a difference with FE colleges, not least because there are sixth-form students who access them as part of their school curriculum. Is there any indication of when we might get a date for the full return of FE colleges?

Mrs Foster: That is an important question, and it is one that we have been trying to deal with today. Those who have practical applications will, because close contact is opening on 23 April, be able to have those training sessions again from that date. There was some confusion that that might happen this week, but, because the regulations need to change to allow close contact, that training will start again on the 23 April for those training to be beauticians, hairdressers or whatever. I will certainly get the Economy Minister to write to the member about the wider, full return of FE colleges, because it is important that we have clarity on that as well.

Ms Sugden: I appreciate that, First Minister.

I will go to another issue. Are touring caravans included in the reopening of caravan parks?

Mrs O'Neill: No. At this stage, it is just the static caravans. We will come back to the issue of touring caravans.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): I invite Gerry Carroll to try again to make his contribution.

Mr Carroll: Can you hear me, Mr Speaker?

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): Yes, certainly. Go ahead, please.

Mr Carroll: Thanks for the statement, Ministers. Given that the virus is still circulating and that, in some areas, we have 100 cases per 100,000 people and given the warnings from some medical practitioners about previous reckless decisions, how confident are the Ministers that this strategy will not lead to a further spike in cases?

Mrs O'Neill: Of course, as we have learned day after day for over a year now, there is no certainty in a pandemic, so as for what comes next with new variants and the spread, a lot of factors will mean that we do not know what the scenario could be in a number of months' time. However, I can say that we are confident that we have arrived at a balanced way forward and that we are living up to our promise that we would not keep restrictions in place for any longer than necessary. We are taking some preventative measures, and we have discussed today how adherence is a big thing for us if we are to be successful in what we have outlined today. We have asked the Communities Minister to come up with proposals around, for example, whether we could support local government to do more in terms of COVID marshals and whether we can support councils to work with local businesses across any sector from retail through to food and hospitality. We have asked her to see whether we can do more to support

councils and support adherence to what we have outlined today.

Mr Carroll: Thank you for that answer. I want to ask about the criteria for vaccination, because, as of next week, many thousands of workers, especially in retail, will return to work, many of whom have not had a vaccine. Will the Ministers commit to looking at that, or are there plans to adapt the vaccination programme to include people in retail, people in hospitality and especially people in schools? Special educational needs staff are still not vaccinated at the rate that they need to be.

Mrs Foster: As the member will know, the vaccination priority is set out by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), and it has set out the priority categories. I am happy to take your point back to the Health Minister, but I know that, in the past, when we have talked about different cohorts of workers, whether from the chilled meat industry, for example, or other industries, we have stuck to the JCVI vaccination route. I am happy to take his comments back to the Health Minister because I fully understand the point that he makes.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): Members, that concludes questions on the statement. I thank the Ministers for making sure that they came here this afternoon on behalf of the Executive to deliver their statement, giving due respect to the Assembly. Thank you all for your contributions.

Agenda item 3 is the time and date of our next meeting. Obviously, we do not have a date for our next meeting, and, as soon as I receive notification from the Executive about when a Minister next wishes to make a statement to the Committee, written notification of the time, date and place will be issued to members in the usual way.

That concludes this meeting of the Committee. Thank you.

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 16 April 2021

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many staff are employed in the Executive Office.
(AQW 3602/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): At 1 February 2021, there were 315 staff employed in the Executive Office, which translates into a full-time equivalent figure of 297.4.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the central role of the sector in getting people back to work, to outline (i) when childcare facilities will re-open; and (ii) why this was left out of the Coronavirus - Executive Approach to Decision-Making document.
(AQW 4455/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Under the Regulations currently in place, childcare can continue to be provided by a person registered in accordance with the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 or any childcare provided free of charge. Informal childcare arrangements are also permitted to continue.

The Executive's Coronavirus Decision Making document in May 2020 set out the overall approach that was adopted in the regular review of the Coronavirus Regulations and as such, it could not, at a practical level, cover every issue or all eventualities.

Mr Beattie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they will answer AQW 4646/17-22.
(AQW 5074/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: A response to AQW 4646/17-22 issued on 1 April 2021.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the recent Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey which shows more respondents disagreed more than they agreed with the statement we have an equal society.
(AQW 7453/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We are committed to building a more inclusive and equal society in which all of our citizens are valued and empowered to make a positive contribution. This will require a whole of government approach to successfully tackle disadvantage and improve wellbeing for all. Given the central importance of building a shared, fair and equal society, it is important that this is reflected in the new Programme for Government being brought forward by the Executive.

Mrs Cameron asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) a list of all external (a) consultants; and (b) contractors used by their Department since January 2020; (ii) the work they engaged in; and (iii) the entire costs incurred to date, broken down by (a) consultant; and (b) contractor.
(AQW 10697/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive Office has paid invoices totalling £43,914 (excluding VAT) to the following external consultants during the period 1st January to 31st October 2020:

Name of Consultant	Details of Work Engaged In
AECOM	Property and construction consultancy advice
Mr Jonathan E Baume	Legal consultancy advice
RSM UK Consulting LLP	TEO VSS - Formal Evaluation of the Victims and Survivors Strategy 2009-2019

The Executive Office has paid invoices totalling £2,945,050 (excluding VAT) to the following external contractors, during the period 1st January to 31st October 2020.

Name of Contractor	Details of work Engaged in
Graham Asset Management Ltd	Property Maintenance
Lowry Building & Civil Engineering Ltd	Collaborative Framework Agreement for Civil Eng Minor Works
Ernst & Young	TEO - (C3) Hub Covid-19 – Provision of Training Support and Analytics Services
Pricewaterhousecoopers	TEO (C3) Hub Covid-19 - Provision of Support for the Redesign and Implementation of the NI Hub
G4S	Security & Ancillary Services
Hays	Provision of Agency Workers
FP Mccann Ltd	Ebrington New Entrance & Boundary Treatment
Moore Macdonald & Partners	Provision of Agency Workers
ASG	Classified and Recruitment Advertising Placement Service for the Northern Ireland Public Sector
Noonan	Security Contract Fixed Costs & Adhoc Rates
Banner Group Limited	Provision of Office Desktop Stationery
Vodafone Ltd	Mobile Device Network - Vodafone Network
Aramark	Cleaning Service and Consumables
Doran HMK JV	Call Off Consultant Framework for Minor Works
McCadden	Design of various publications for Urban Villages
British Telecom PLC	NI Public Sector Shared Network (NIPSSN) Project
ASG	TEO EU Exit Advertising and Public Information Campaign
Aramark	Cleaning, Catering and Ancillary Services
Impress Promotional Products Ltd	Provision of Together: Building A United Community (TBUC) branded merchandise
Power NI	Supply of Metered Electricity Between October 2017 and March 2020 (Inclusive)
O2 (UK) Ltd	NICS Mobile Device Network - Telefonica Network
Moore Macdonald & Partners	Provision of Professional and Technical Services
KPMG	VAT Compliance Advice
XMA Ltd	Supply of IT Consumables to the NI Public Sector
Firmus Energy	Supply of Natural Gas
McCadden	TEO Communities in Transition (CIT) Branding
Michael Macbroom Films	Filming of capital projects across Urban Village areas
Maxol Direct	Provision of Fuel Cards
Minprint	Printing of 2 editions of the TEO Urban Villages Initiative FOCUS Magazine & other items
Noonan	Provision of Cleaning & Ancillary Services to the Northern Ireland Public Sector
Flint Studios Ltd	Design and host 'Your Ebrington' website
G & L Consultancy Ltd	Agreement for Asbestos Services for Properties Division 2012
Carecall (NI) Ltd	Provision of an Employee Assistance Programme Service for NI Public Sector
H & J Martin Ltd	Property Maintenance

Name of Contractor	Details of work Engaged in
Antalis Ltd	Provision of Copier Paper
Staffline Recruitment	Provision of Agency Workers
Electric Ireland	Provision of Metered Electricity 2020
It Guarded Ltd	Provision of CHECK Services
EE Limited	NICS Mobile Device Network - EE Network
Doran Consulting	Grade A Office Accommodation Ebrington Structural Engineering Advisor Services
Aramark	Hospitality
Oasis Group (McConnell Archive Storage)	Off Site Storage and Records Management
Willis Towers Watson	Provision of motor vehicle insurance for the NI public sector fleet
Whistl UK Ltd	PROVISION OF POSTAL SERVICES FOR THE NORTHERN IRELAND PUBLIC SECTOR
ESRI	Provision of mapping and spatial analytics software - maintenance and support
ASG	Appointment of Advertising Agency for Support in Delivering EU Exit
Kdm Hire Ltd	Vehicle, Plant and Equipment Hire Services
Senator International Ltd	Furniture Framework - Core items
Orchardville Works	Contract for Hospitality – Collaborative Catering Services
Specialised Electronic Services Ltd	The Fixing and Repair of Office furniture, Furnishing and Accessories for Northern Ireland Civil Service
Chubb (NI) Ltd	Provision of Fire Fighting Equipment and Associated Services
Global Connects	Provision of Interpretation, Translation, Transcription and Alternative

For the purpose of this AQW a contractor is defined as any individual or organisation that TEO has entered into contractual relations with.

Mr Muir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as per Recommendation one of the Public Accounts Committee report on Major Capital Projects, whether the recently appointed interim Head of the Civil Service will be given personal responsibility for the effective use of public resources in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 11357/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We are actively considering how this critical role will be most effective within the parameters of our own devolved arrangements in order to best drive reform and support collective decision making.

Mr McNulty asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, (i) whether they have any plans to bring forward a strategy which will encourage the creation of open public spaces and parks; and (ii) whether any indicative budget has been allocated for this work.

(AQW 13502/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive's Covid-19 Taskforce is leading and co-ordinating an integrated programme of work of response to, and recovery from, the COVID-19 pandemic. Consideration of the creation of open public spaces and parks will be taken forward in the longer term recovery plan and as such no budget has been currently allocated.

Mr Carroll asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether, at any point since its restoration in January 2020, the Executive has sought to agree a Programme for Government incorporating an agreed budget linked to policies and programmes.

(AQW 14549/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive is consulting on a new draft Programme for Government Outcomes Framework. 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 by around the end of April, and a more complete Programme incorporating an agreed budget linked to policies and programmes ready by the summer.

Ms Armstrong asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions there have been with the UK Government to take into account the disruption COVID-19 is having across Northern Ireland and the need to extend the deadline for the EU Settlement Scheme.

(AQW 14661/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The EU Settlement Scheme is a UK Government scheme. Our officials have however been working with their counterparts since the launch of the scheme and proactive engagement will continue as we enter the last few months

We very much want our valued EU citizens to apply to the scheme and be able to remain here. To encourage uptake, we have supplemented the Home Office's communication campaign. Since September 2020, digital advertising has been running to encourage EU citizens to apply to the scheme. To date, across all digital channels there have been over 6 million impressions (number of times the advert appears on screen) and 47,500 clicks to nidirect.com for more information. In the coming weeks there will be increased activity including TV, digital radio and out-of-home advertising.

Our officials have also raised the challenges around ensuring all those eligible apply by the deadline and requested consideration of an extension to the scheme, particularly given the impact of covid.

In the absence of an extension we have highlighted the need for flexibility post 30th June and are awaiting confirmation from the Home Office of its approach for those who have not applied by the closing date of the Scheme.

Mr Stalford asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the electoral system.

(AQW 14977/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We have made no joint assessment of the electoral system which is an excepted matter and therefore outside our official responsibilities.

Mr Nesbitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the average time it takes the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board to process an application from receiving it to a decision being made on whether it is successful or not; and (ii) what steps are being taken to improve communication between the Redress Board and survivors.

(AQW 15216/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Each application for compensation received by the HIA Redress Board is unique to the individual circumstances of the applicant. The time taken to process an application will vary for a number of reasons including the complexity of the application, the availability of records, and whether the applicant, or their solicitor, has provided all of the necessary statutory proofs and evidentiary documentation under the Rules together with the submitted application.

Once all the necessary statutory proofs and evidentiary documentation to be relied on by the applicant have been provided, the application will be confirmed as validated, and scheduled for consideration by a panel.

Table 1 below shows the current average time from receipt to full determination and Table 2 shows the current average time from validation to full determination.

Table 1 - Determined Applications Received Date to Final Determination

Overall	14 weeks
Priority Applications	10 weeks

Table 2 – Determined Applications Validated Date to Final Determination Date

Overall	8 weeks
Priority Applications	6 weeks

HIA Redress Board officials have met with victims' and survivors' groups with the most recent taking place on Tuesday 2 March 2021.

Prior to the appointment of a Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse (COSICA) the former President of the Redress Board and his officials met regularly with the Interim Advocate to discuss matters relevant to the operations of the Redress Board including communications.

The current President, the Honourable Mr Justice Huddleston, who was appointed by the Lord Chief Justice on 8 January 2021, is committed to ensuring the continued appropriate engagement between the HIA Redress Board, COSICA and victims' and survivors' groups and we understand that he is looking forward to meeting with the groups in the coming weeks.

In respect of individual applicants, the legislation governing the statutory procedures of the redress scheme encourages an applicant to instruct a solicitor to provide legal advice and assistance in the preparation and progression of an application for compensation. We can advise that 95% of applicants are represented by solicitors who have an obligation to communicate with and update their client on the status and the progress of their application. The Redress Board regularly updates the instructed solicitors on the progress of applications in the expectation that they will update applicants accordingly.

The Redress Board continues to communicate directly with unrepresented applicants on the status and progress of their application.

Mr Catney asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the reason for the six month delay between announcing the High Streets Task Force and its first meeting.

(AQW 15562/17-22)

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.

The challenges faced by our high streets need strategic change, not a quick fix. It was worth taking the time to engage properly with stakeholders, and to learn from experience elsewhere. Establishing the English High Streets Task Force took a number of attempts before finding success; and the Scottish Task Force took over a year to establish.

Time invested now in learning those lessons will be time saved further down the road to recovery.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the Nation Brands Index that Northern Ireland received its highest score and rank from China, for the first time since its inclusion in 2016.

(AQW 15643/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Nation Brands Index is a helpful tool used by a number of governments to determine the effectiveness of their international work across many countries including China. Consequently, NI has been included in the survey since 2016.

We are pleased to note the high score and ranking provided by China and would wish to see that replicated across all 50 nations. While we are currently analysing the information with officials it is likely that the higher ranking from China reflects the increased activity generated by the opening of the NI Bureau and Invest NI offices in China and the establishment of the Chinese Consulate in Belfast and by Councils, businesses and education institutions.

This has helped promote tourism, international education opportunities, cultural linkages and open up trade opportunities – the benefits of this activity are increasingly being realised.

We are currently considering the focus of a future international relations strategy and will be giving further consideration to the survey results.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the Nation Brands Index that Northern Ireland's largest change in score of (i) 6.48, from 2019 to 2020; and (ii) 10.58, from 2016 to 2020, came from China.

(AQW 15644/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Anholt Ipsos Nation Brands Index is an annual global survey which evaluates the international reputation and image of 50 nations across six dimensions: Exports; Governance; Culture; People; Tourism; and Immigration and Investment.

The Executive opened an office in China in 2014 and many of our partner organisations including Invest NI, councils and education institutions also increased activities in China shortly after that. The positive scores are an indication of that increase in our activities. It is positive to note that the NBI survey indicates that 64% of participants from China stated they were familiar with NI in 2020 compared to just 48% in 2016.

These are important findings to which we will be giving further consideration.

We will reflect further on the findings which will be of assistance in helping to inform the development of our work in China and a future international relations strategy.

Nation Brands Index

- | | |
|--|--|
| ■ University Accommodation Contracts | ■ Financial Support for Students |
| ■ Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland: Practical Problems | ■ Limited Company Director's Support Scheme |
| ■ £500 Covid Disruption Payment | ■ Small Business Grants |
| ■ UK Self Employed Income Support Scheme | ■ Economic Recovery Action Plan |
| ■ Non-completion Rates for Students at Regional Colleges | ■ Petroleum Licensing |
| ■ £500 Covid Disruption Payment | ■ Further Education Courses for Adult Learners |
| ■ £500 Covid Disruption Payments | ■ Retaining and Regaining Talent in Northern Ireland |
| ■ Redundancies of Young People | ■ Stranmillis University College |
| | ■ Governors of Stranmillis University College |
| | ■ Wind Turbines |

- Income Households
 - Postgraduate Education
 - COVID-19: Reopening the Economy
 - Energy Sources
 - Tourism: Impact of Brexit
 - Non-domestic RHI Scheme: Option 4
 - Postgraduate Students: Financial Support
 - Derry/Londonderry and Strabane City Region
 - COVID-19: Weekly Cost to the Economy
 - DFE: Financial Bids
 - 'Energy governance for the Northern Ireland energy transition'
- Students: COVID-19 Disruption Payment
- Wet Pubs Business Support Scheme
- Living Wage: NDNA Commitment
- COVID-19: Business Support Package
- HSE: Additional Resources
- COVID-19 Business Support Schemes: Uptake
- Furlough: CEV Staff
- Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland: Economic Opportunities
- Ulster University: Coleraine Campus
- COVID-19 Business Support Schemes

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 23 April 2021

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Ms McLaughlin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline (i) their assessment of the funding of Magee Medical School; and (ii) when an allocation will be made.
(AQW 4426/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The Executive has reaffirmed the commitment set out in New Decade, New Approach to establish a Graduate Entry Medical School on the Magee campus. This is a transformative project for the North West region, both in terms of economic recovery and wider social benefits. The university is progressing with recruitment, with the aim of a first intake of 70 students in September 2021.

The Inclusive Futures Fund will provide some £15m of RDEL funding for three years to provide the platform for the School's long term success. The Executive has also provided an assurance that it will provide funding for this project going forward.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail what makes up and constitutes Scientific Advice which underpins the decisions taken in relation to the relaxation of COVID-19 regulations.
(AQW 5266/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: A range of scientific advice is considered when considering the relaxation of restrictions, 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 published a significant body of evidential material. www.health-ni.gov.uk/covid-19-scientific-evidence

Ms Bunting asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) to detail all monies spent to date through Communities In Transition, as outlined in B4 of Fresh Start Agreement; (ii) to detail the projects on which it was spent and how much was allocated per project; (iii) to give an assessment of the effectiveness of the projects thus far; (iv) to outline any gaps; and (v) to detail why the youth element was not progressed and how this will be rectified.
(AQW 5701/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive Office has lead responsibility for delivery of the Communities in Transition Project.

(i) **Monies spent to date through Communities in Transition**

Spend up to 31 March 2021 totals £8.83 million. This can be broken down as follows:

- Extensive Phase 1 Fieldwork and community engagement - £214k
- Delivery of 8 short term, intermediary activities - £140k
- Participatory Design Phase - £113k
- Long Term Project Delivery - £7.4m
- Strategic Partner Management fee - £963k

(ii) **Projects on which it was spent and how much was allocated per project**

A further breakdown of allocations across the range of project activity to date is attached as annexes. Annex A includes a breakdown of intermediary activities and Annex B includes a breakdown of longer term delivery.

(iii) **Assessment of the effectiveness of the projects thus far**

34 projects are now operational and we are monitoring progress on a monthly basis in line with OBA guidance and reporting. A mid-term evaluation of the CIT Project has recently been completed and will be disseminated widely very soon. It notes that much good work is being undertaken by delivery partners, made even more admirable as they have continued to deliver during the COVID pandemic, and demonstrates impact, particularly in areas with a history of low capacity and an unwillingness to engage with Government departments and statutory agencies. The evaluation

concludes with a number of recommendations and our officials are considering these within the context of planning for Phase 2 of delivery.

(iv) **Outline any gaps**

Further work was required to develop proposals around personal transition and youth and we continued to work with communities in addressing these gaps. As a result, we have recently awarded an additional 4 contracts across these themes. As we look to developing the CIT project in the future, we recognise that further gaps may emerge across the eight areas of focus and we want to ensure scope for the development of appropriate interventions in response.

(v) **Why the youth element was not progressed and how this will be rectified**

More time was required to develop proposals related to youth activity to ensure that any projects which were delivered did not duplicate, and instead complemented, initiatives that are already being delivered for young people across the CIT areas. We have now awarded three contracts to deliver activity to raise the aspirations of school-age children and young people across 3 of the CIT areas. It should also be noted that young people are getting involved in CIT activity as part of the wider community in the delivery of projects right across the other themes.

Annex A: Intermediary Activity

Area	Project	Lead Delivery Partner	BCudget
Regional	Tender Training for Community & Voluntary Sector	Copius Consulting	£25k
Regional	Collaborative Problem Solving	Copius Consulting	£25k
Carrickfergus/Larne	Youth Engagement	Youth Work Alliance	£15k
Brandywell/Creggan	Youth Engagement	Youth Work Alliance	£15k
West Belfast	Youth Engagement	Youth Work Alliance	£15k
Brandywell/Creggan	Environment and Culture activity	Gasyard Wall Feile	£20k
New Lodge/Ardoyne	Environment and Culture activity	Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre	£15k
Kilcooley/Rathgill	Community Connect Events	Ards Development Bureau	£9k
Total			£139K

Annex B: Long Term Project Activity

Area	Project theme	Lead Delivery partner	Project Budget	Spend incurred to date*
Regional	Restorative Practices	Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI) & NI Alternatives	£1.4m	£1m
	Personal Transition in the Carrickfergus/Larne; East Belfast; Shankill; and North Down areas	Action for Community Transformation (ACT) Initiative	£110k	£21k
	Personal Transition in the Derry/Londonderry; West Belfast; North Belfast; and Lurgan areas	Tar Isteach Ltd	£110k	£22k
Carrickfergus & Larne	Capacity Building	Intercomm Ireland	£175k	£170k
	Health & Wellbeing	Extern	£208k	£206k
	Community Safety Awareness	Intercomm Ireland	£140k	£136k
	Arts & Culture	Intercomm Ireland	£167k	£165k
	Young People	Intercomm Ireland	£72k	£14k
Brandywell & Creggan	Employability & Training Support	Extern	£878k	£666k
	Arts & Culture	Gasyard Wall Feile	£236k	£235k

Area	Project theme	Lead Delivery partner	Project Budget	Spend incurred to date*
	Health & Wellbeing	Old Library Trust	£468k	£463k
	Community Vision Pilot	Gasyard Wall Feile	£20k	£20k
The Mount & Ballymacarrett	Capacity Building	EBCDA / NICVA	£182k	£180k
	Health & Wellbeing	EBCDA / ASCERT / ASSIST	£143k	£143k
	Arts & Culture	Ballymac Friendship Trust	£147k	£144k
	Young People	NI Alternatives	£107k	£21k
	Community Vision Pilot	Ballymac Friendship Trust	£20k	£20k
Drumgask & Kilwilkie	Facilitating Area Regeneration	Copius Consulting	£44k	£44k
	Capacity Building	Bryson / TIDES	£158k	£154k
	Community Safety Awareness	Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI)	£130k	£129k
	Health & Wellbeing	Copius Consulting	£131k	£131k
	Personal Transition	Copius Consulting	£34k	£34k
New Lodge & Ardoyne	Facilitating Area Regeneration	Ashton Community Trust	£43k	£41k
	Capacity Building	Ashton Community Trust	£271k	£261k
	Community Safety Awareness	Ashton Community Trust	£148k	£143k
	Health & Wellbeing	Ashton Community Trust	£207k	£204k
Kilcooley & Rathgill	Capacity Building	Bryson / TIDES Trainings	£161k	£156k
	Community Safety Awareness	NI Alternatives	£148k	£147k
	Health & Wellbeing	My UHub	£215k	£215k
	Young People	NI Alternatives	£74k	£74k
Shankill	Community Safety Awareness	NI Alternatives	£160k	£160k
	Health & Wellbeing	Extern	£193k	£190k
	Capacity Building	Greater Shankill Partnership Board	£314k	£311k
	Arts & Culture	Greater Shankill Partnership Board	£198k	£198k
West Belfast	Community Safety Awareness & Regeneration	Falls Community Council	£428k	£425k
	Health & Wellbeing	Blackie River Groups	£752k	£747k
Total			£8.4M	£7.4M

* This figure reflects spend incurred and project activity committed to under Phase 1 up to 31 March 2021, some of which is yet to be claimed by delivery partners.

Mr Muir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the impact on Northern Ireland of any attempt by the UK Government to unilaterally rewrite the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.
(AQW 6431/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The UK Internal Market Act became law on 17 December 2020 "notwithstanding clauses" on implementation were removed prior to the enactment of the legislation.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when AQW 5427/17-22 will be answered.
(AQW 7299/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: AQW 5427 was answered on 12 March 2021.

Dr Aiken asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why they were unable to appoint a new Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service.
(AQW 7691/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Head of the Civil Service (HOCS) recruitment competition is designed to protect the integrity of the NICS selection process and to ensure appointment on merit following fair and open competition.

In line with agreed policy and process, the final selection decision for the 2020 competition was an interview based on the NICS competency framework, with a requirement for ourselves as First Minister and deputy First Minister to reach an agreed ranking of all successful candidates (through agreed scores) allowing the top scoring candidate to be identified. Regrettably, we were unable to reach agreement which would enable a HOCS appointment to be made.

On 1 December 2020, we appointed Jenny Pyper as interim HOCS for a period of eight months. We have since reviewed the Head of the Civil Service role and engaged with officials on the recruitment and selection process. A new recruitment campaign was launched on 18 March aimed at having the selection process completed by early June and an appointment made by summer, aligning with the interim arrangements in place. This process is in accordance with relevant NICS policies and the requirements of the Civil Service Commissioners.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of appearances they have made since the restoration of devolution (i) before the Assembly; and (ii) before the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response.
(AQW 8002/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The information requested to October 2020 is detailed in the table below.

Date	Event	Title of Business	Minister
20 January 2020	Executive	The European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill	First Minister and deputy First Minister
3 February 2020	Question Time		First Minister and deputy First Minister
17 February 2020	Question Time		First Minister and deputy First Minister
2 March 2020	Statement	Legislative Programme	First Minister and deputy First Minister
2 March 2020	Question Time		First Minister and deputy First Minister
23 March 2020	Statement	Covid 19	First Minister and deputy First Minister
23 March 2020	Question Time		First Minister and deputy First Minister
7 April 2020	Ad Hoc Committee COVID-19	COVID-19 update on the work of the Executive	First Minister and deputy First Minister
21 April 2020	Executive	The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations NI 2020	Junior Ministers
5 May 2020	Executive	The draft Census Order (NI) 2020	Junior Ministers
12 May 2020	Statement	Coronavirus: Executive approach to Decision making	First Minister and deputy First Minister
19 May 2020	Executive	The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations NI 2020	Junior Ministers
26 May 2020	Question Time		First Minister and deputy First Minister

Date	Event	Title of Business	Minister
2 June 2020	Executive	The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations NI 2020	Junior Ministers
10 June 2020	Statement	The British Irish Summit 6 November 2020	First Minister and deputy First Minister
16 June 2020	Question Time		First Minister and Junior Minister
23 June 2020	Statement	The NSMC Institutional Meeting	Junior Ministers
30 June 2020	Executive	The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations NI 2020	Junior Ministers
6 July 2020	Urgent Oral	Funeral of Bobby Storey	First Minister and deputy First Minister
6 July 2020	Executive	The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations NI 2020 The Executive Committee (Functions) Bill Second Stage: The Executive Committee (Functions) Bill	Junior Ministers
7 July 2020	Question Time		First Minister and deputy First Minister
21 July 2020	Executive	The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations NI 2020	Junior Ministers
27 July 2020	Executive	Further Consideration Stage: The Executive Committee (Functions) Bill	Junior Ministers
28 July 2020	Executive	Final Stage: The Executive Committee (Functions) Bill	Junior Ministers
14 September 2020	Question Time		First Minister and deputy First Minister
14 September 2020	Private Members Business	Race Equality	Junior Ministers
21 September 2020	Statement	The NSMC: Plenary Meeting	First Minister and deputy First Minister
28 September 2020	Question Time		First Minister and deputy First Minister
29 September 2020	Statement	Restrictions on the Hospitality Industry	First Minister and deputy First Minister
6 October 2020	Statement	Appointment of COSICA	First Minister and deputy First Minister
6 October 2020	Executive	The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations NI 2020	Junior Ministers
12 October 2020	Question Time		First Minister and Junior Minister
14 October 2020	Statement	Executive's decisions relating to measures to be taken in response to the increased incidence of the transmission of Covid-19	First Minister and deputy First Minister

Miss Woods asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 5916/17-22, (i) whether they responded to the consultation on the UK Internal Market White Paper that closed in August 2020; and (ii) if so, whether they will place a copy of their consultation response in the Assembly Library.

(AQW 8169/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive considered the UK Internal Market White Paper in early August and an agreed response issued on 12 August 2020. We will place a copy in the Assembly library.

Ms Bailey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the decision to regulate against all live music in venues, whether they will be making publicly available the information, advice or evidence on the COVID-19 risk.

(AQW 8361/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The question refers to The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, which introduced a series of restrictions on 23 September 2020. These have since been replaced by The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) (Amendment No.6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021, which came into operation on 29 March 2021.

Under these Regulations, there is no regulation for live music.

The Department of Health publishes information and scientific advice on a regular basis, including weekly updates on the R number and other matters which help guide the Executive's decision making.

Further details can be found at - COVID-19 - Scientific Evidence | Department of Health (health-ni.gov.uk) (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/covid-19-scientific-evidence>)

Ms S Bradley asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why a further announcement of COVID-19 restrictions was announced without any corresponding information on when financial support would be payable to those businesses and individuals due to be affected.

(AQW 10680/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The two week 'circuit breaker' announced on 19 November 2020 was in operation from 26 November until 10 December 2020.

The Finance Minister, Conor Murphy provided Members with an update on the further allocations of COVID-19 support funding on 23 November 2020. This comprised a £300m support package, including over £200m for businesses and £98m to support the most vulnerable.

Details of Covid-19 funding allocations can be found on Department of Finance website –

<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dfp/Covid-19%20funding%20allocations%20table%2025.02.21%20-%20accessible.pdf>

Mr McNulty asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the announcement of the latest COVID-19 restrictions, whether (i) toy retailers are classed as essential retail and permitted to open; (ii) electrical retailers are classed as essential retail and permitted to open; (iii) non-essential retailers can operate on a click and collect basis; (iv) clothes retailers who provide school uniforms are permitted to open; (v) one-to-one tutoring for the purposes of educational or musical instrument tuition is permitted; (vi) registered venues, other than churches, are permitted to be used for a marriage ceremony; (vii) maintenance, repair and construction of closed retail outlets is permitted to take place, providing social distancing regulations are adhered to; (viii) estate agents, solicitors' practices, insurance, accountancy practices and mortgage advisors are permitted to open; and (ix) small-scale manufacturing and cottage industries are permitted to continue to work.

(AQW 10726/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The question refers to Amendment 17 of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, which introduced a series of restrictions from 27 November to 10 December. These have since been replaced by The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) (Amendment No.6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021, which came into operation on 29 March 2021.

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean for business sectors and individuals can be found on nidirect at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

Mr Beattie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when AQW 5121/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 10970/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: AQW 5121 was answered on 24 February 2021.

Ms Sugden asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) to detail the flexibility of the time window and dates given to people living in GB who wish to travel home to Northern Ireland for Christmas; (ii) whether those travelling home will be able to join their family bubble from the date of their return; (iii) whether accommodation will be available for those who are unable to instantly join their family bubble; and (iv) what plans they have put in place should scheduled flights to Northern Ireland become fully booked before everyone who wants to return has had a chance to book their flight.

(AQW 11202/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Updated guidance on travel over the Christmas period was published on the nidirect.gov.uk website on 22 December 2020.

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean can be found on nidirect at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

Mr McNulty asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (a) whether Irish dancing or dance studio classes, with restricted numbers, can continue during the current period of restrictions; (ii) the rationale for the decision to close standalone car washes; and (iii) why dog-grooming facilities were closed when they were permitted to remain open during the last lockdown.

(AQW 11296/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The question refers to Amendment 17 of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, which introduced a series of restrictions from 27 November to 10 December. These have since been replaced by The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) (Amendment No.6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021, which came into operation on 29 March 2021.

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean for business sectors and individuals can be found on nidirect at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

Ms Bailey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what measures are being taken around the enforcement of mandatory face coverings in the retail and hospitality sectors.

(AQW 11345/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The PSNI continues to work with retailers and others to support adherence with the restrictions that are in place by engaging, explaining and encouraging people to make the right choices. Enforcement is a last resort.

However, in circumstances where an individual or a business has been found to breach the Public Health Regulations, a range of enforcement sanctions are available to be used by organisations with the relevant powers, including the PSNI and local councils.

Details of the levels of enforcement activity carried out by the PSNI is published weekly and can be found at www.psnipolice.uk.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what consideration was given to the impact on MOT tests when the decision to close car washes was taken.

(AQW 12886/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Roadworthiness vehicle tests in NI are conducted in compliance with the Motor Vehicle Testing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003. The Regulations do not require the compulsory washing of the vehicle's exterior or underbody in preparation for the test. The accumulation of dirt during normal road use will not prevent the test from being conducted in full compliance with the relevant statutory requirements.

Outdoor retail, which includes car washes, has been permitted to reopen from 12 April 2021.

Mr McNulty asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) whether they are liaising with the Dublin Government in relation to the coordinated easing of restrictions; and (ii) whether they would consider, in partnership with An Taoiseach Michael Martin TD, calling a special meeting of the North South Ministerial Council to discuss the coordinated plan.

(AQW 15126/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: There is engagement with the Irish Government taking place in relation to Covid 19, both within the NSMC structures and elsewhere. The NSMC has agreed that "meetings of the Council in relevant sectors, will continue to consider how agreed collaborative approaches can contribute to the promotion of economic and social recovery in a Covid-19 context". Preparations for meetings are currently underway and it is anticipated that Covid 19 recovery will be discussed across all NSMC sectors.

Mr Carroll asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether their Department has raised the issue of the human rights of the Uighir community with the Chinese Government or its Consulate General.

(AQW 15603/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Foreign Policy is not a devolved matter. However, as an Executive, when we engage on the world stage with our international partners we have a responsibility to promote the values and rights which are important to our democratic systems.

In common with other governments, we join in support for human rights and equality in countries and regions where there are concerns. Following reports, therefore, about the treatment of the Uyghur population in China we have raised our deep concerns with the Chinese Ambassador and the Consul General.

We seek to demonstrate that an accountable political and democratic system can support business growth, strengthen the economy and generate many wider benefits for all in society.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 6848/17-22, (i) whether they intend to meet with the Chinese Consul General again; and (ii) whether a date has been set for this meeting.

(AQW 15642/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We regularly meet with representatives of foreign governments to promote the Executive's priorities and interests.

We met with the Chinese Consul General on 12 April 2021 and will continue to engage as we do with other governments and their representatives, on areas of interest to the Executive.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether Northern Ireland's score on the Nation Brands Index will continue to impact a draft Programme for Government.

(AQW 15646/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive is consulting on a new draft Programme for Government Outcomes Framework. 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.

Decisions about the most appropriate Indicators, including the future use of the Nation Brands Index, will be informed by an ongoing review being taken forward by a technical panel led by the NI Statistics and Research Agency.

Mr Muir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when AQO 1603/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 15858/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: AQO 1603 was answered on 23 March 2021.

Mr Carroll asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on Peace IV funding in relation the Empowering Young People programmes.

(AQW 15960/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: PEACE IV has a specific objective for children and young people and there are two actions that are being delivered under this objective: the Local Authority Children and Young People programme; and the Children and Young People aged 14-24 programme, also known as Peace4Youth.

While the Special European Programme Body (SEUPB) is the Managing Authority for the PEACE IV Programme, the Executive Office is the Accountable Department for the Local Authority Children and Young People programme and provides match funding for this action. A total of €17.1m has been allocated to this programme to enhance the capacity of young people to form positive and effective relationships with others of a different background and make positive contributions to building a cohesive society

Department for Economy is the Accountable Department for the Children and Young People aged 14-24 action. A total of €40m has been allocated to this programme to support 14-24 year olds who are disadvantaged, excluded or marginalised; have deep social and emotional needs; and are at risk of becoming involved in anti-social behaviour, violence or paramilitary activity.

Mr Carroll asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the papers guiding the Executive around school reopening will be made publicly available.

(AQW 16199/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Executive papers, and all aspects of the Executive decision making process are confidential. It is not intended that papers relating to school reopening will be made publicly available.

However, Executive decision-making on Covid is based on data at any given time which is publicly available on the Department of Health website – the links below may be of help.

<https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrJoiZGYxNmU0OTImZS00ODAxLWE1YTEtMjA0NjZhMzlmN2JmlwidCI6IjIjOWEzMRGRILWQ4ZDctNGFhNC05NjAwLTRiZTc2MjVmZmZjZjNSlmlMiOjh9>

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/coronavirus>

Ms Sugden asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail their plans for allowing increased numbers to attend civil and religious wedding ceremonies, including (i) timescale; and (ii) the expected numbers allowed.

(AQW 16658/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The number permitted to attend weddings and civil partnerships is to be informed by a risk assessment for the venue.

Face coverings must be worn by all unless exempt, other than those in the marriage party.

Receptions or post ceremony gatherings are not permitted.

Customers can also view the facilities of venues used for marriages and civil partnerships, such as hotels and other venues, restricted to a maximum of four customers per visit.

An indicative date of 24 May has been set for the resumption of post ceremony receptions or functions (numbers to be informed by a risk assessment for the venue). This will be subject to review.

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>

Miss Woods asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) what other economic models and performance indicators are being considering in the development of the new Programme for Government; and (ii) whether they have considered using a living standards framework as the Executive's key performance indicators for government.

(AQW 16826/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Work is progressing on the development a new Outcomes Framework which will provide the basis for the long-term Programme for Government being brought forward by the Executive. A public consultation on a draft Framework was concluded on 22 March 2021 and a separate Equality Impact Assessment consultation is ongoing and will close on 30 April 2021.

The findings from the consultations will help the Executive determine the final design and content of the Outcomes Framework.

Decisions about the most appropriate Indicators for monitoring progress in line with the Outcomes-based approach will be informed by an ongoing review being undertaken by a technical panel led by the NI Statistics and Research Agency.

Ms Hunter asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what travel considerations or exceptions are in place for the reunification of long distance couples throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 16902/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: It is important that everyone, including long distance couples, follow the requirements outlined in the Coronavirus Regulations, which state that only essential travel should take place.

If you are arriving here from within the Common Travel Area and you plan to remain for at least 24 hours, you should self-isolate upon arrival for 10 days. Information on travel within the Common Travel Area can be found here- Coronavirus (COVID-19): travel within the Common Travel Area | nidirect (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-travel-within-common-travel-area>)

If you are travelling from outside the Common Travel Area, the Executive agreed on 25 March the introduction of managed isolation in hotel accommodation on return from Red List countries for a period of 10 days. Further information can be found here- Coronavirus (COVID-19): international travel advice | nidirect (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-international-travel-advice>)

Once here, while households are not currently allowed to mix indoors in private homes, certain exceptions apply, including for the formation of a bubble with one other household. Guidance on household bubbles can be found at Coronavirus (COVID-19) regulations guidance: what the restrictions mean for you | nidirect (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>)

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to recent media reports (i) whether the suggested £10m for Communities in Transition is additional money or existing funding allocation; and (ii) if this is new money, whether it has received Executive approval.

(AQW 17116/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Funding for the Communities in Transition Project, which is part of the Executive's Tackling Paramilitary, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme was due to end in March 2021.

In July 2020 the Executive committed to extending the Programme for a further three years (up until March 2024) subject to budget availability and continued UK Government support for the Programme.

This match funding was confirmed in February and as a result the Communities in Transition Project was awarded £10m over three years (April 2021 – March 2024). The recent media coverage was a deeply flawed and unhelpful misrepresentation of the nature, targeting and development of this work.

Mr O'Toole asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) for a breakdown of current Communities in Transition projects being funded in South Belfast; and (ii) what impact evaluation has been agreed.

(AQW 17261/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: South Belfast is not one of the areas of focus for the Communities in Transition Project, therefore it is not currently funding project activity in this area.

The Communities in Transition Project is currently being delivered in the following eight areas:

- Carrickfergus/Larne
- Kilcooley and Rathgill in North Down
- Kilwilkie and Drumgask in Lurgan/Craigavon

- Brandywell/Creggan in Derry~Londonderry
- Shankill
- New Lodge and Ardoyne in North Belfast
- West Belfast
- The Mount and Ballymacarrett in East Belfast

For those areas in which the Communities in Transition Project operates, a mid-term evaluation has been completed. The mid-term evaluation considers the impact that the Project has had in these areas during its first year of delivery and the capacity of the Project to empower communities to resist the negative influence of paramilitary and criminal elements. The mid-term evaluation also provides a series of recommendations to inform the future development of the Communities in Transition Project, to ensure that it continues to have a positive impact in those areas which are most affected by ongoing paramilitary and associated criminal activity.

The Tackling Paramilitarism Programme, which is co-ordinated by the Department of Justice, supports delivery of a range of projects both within and more widely than these eight areas. Further information of the range of projects which are supported through the Programme (including those in South Belfast) can be sourced from the Department of Justice.

Ms Sheerin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the High Street Task Force.
(AQO 1883/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The first meeting of the Task Force took place on 23 February, chaired by Junior Minister Lyons and Junior Minister Kearney. The Task Force formally adopted its terms of reference, and the vision of:

“sustainable city, town and village centres which are thriving places for people to do business, socialise, shop, be creative and use public services as well as being great places to live.”

Since then, four subgroups have been established on:

- influencing policy and strategy;
- promoting the development of capacity;
- developing and promoting good practice; and
- influencing and shaping intervention and investment.

Meetings of the subgroups are being arranged to initiate the formal projects for each of the key functions, and a programme of comprehensive engagement and co-design with stakeholders.

Mr Blair asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether their Department will lead on the implementation of a gender-based strategy to end male violence against women and girls.
(AQO 1882/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Much work is already ongoing in the Department of Justice and the Department for Communities to address violence against women and girls and gender bias.

The Assembly and the Executive have however identified a clear need for us to act collectively to adopt a strategic approach to address this wicked problem. This will provide the opportunity to deliver cultural and societal change to ensure there are healthy behaviours and attitudes towards women and girls.

The Executive has agreed that TEO will co-ordinate the development of such a Strategy and have asked that the interim Head of the Civil Service be tasked to engage across all departments seeking resources to enable TEO to lead on the design, development and implementation of the strategy.

Once resources are in place, we are committed to this work being taken forward at pace.

Mr Storey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the High Street Task Force.
(AQO 1884/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The first meeting of the Task Force took place on 23 February, chaired by Junior Minister Lyons and Junior Minister Kearney. The Task Force formally adopted its terms of reference, and the vision of:

“sustainable city, town and village centres which are thriving places for people to do business, socialise, shop, be creative and use public services as well as being great places to live.”

Since then, four subgroups have been established on:

- influencing policy and strategy;
- promoting the development of capacity;
- developing and promoting good practice; and
- influencing and shaping intervention and investment.

Meetings of the subgroups are being arranged to initiate the formal projects for each of the key functions, and a programme of comprehensive engagement and co-design with stakeholders.

Ms Flynn asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the delivery of the Together: Building a United Community strategy.

(AQO 1885/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: There has been significant progress in delivering the Together: Building a United Community Strategy.

Over 24,000 young people have taken part in T:BUC Camps and five Urban Villages areas have been established.

Four Shared Education Campuses have been approved and are progressing. 10 shared neighbourhoods, providing 483 new homes, have been completed.

Over 6,000 young people have participated in the Peace4Youth programme. Over 26,000 young people have engaged with the Uniting Communities through Sport and Creativity Programme.

The number of interface barriers has been reduced by 14.

We provide some £19 million annually to support Strategy delivery.

Ms Dillon asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on payments made by the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board.

(AQO 1891/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: As at 31 March 2021, the first full year of operation of the HIA Redress Board, panels have made award determinations totalling £13.431m, this includes 76 Section 14 awards of £10,000.

Ten million, four hundred and sixty seven thousand pounds has been paid directly into the applicant or applicant's solicitor's account.

Ms P Bradley asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline how they have addressed concerns raised regarding the time delay in information about COVID-19 reaching those in the deaf community.

(AQO 1890/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We recognise the need to communicate the information about Covid-19 to as wide an audience as possible, and the deaf community are a key part of this.

Following representations, and in consultation with the deaf community, we have been using both BSL and ISL translators at our Covid-19 press conferences.

They provide a real-time, live translation – ensuring that those who rely on sign language get the information as it is being delivered. That began over a year ago and, to date, there have been over 100 press conferences where signers have been used.

Alongside this, we have translated the public information messages in BSL and ISL and they are available on the nidirect website (www.nidirect.gov.uk)

The feedback has been positive, this has become an important means of communication and engagement between government and the deaf community

While we will review the practice going forward, feedback from the deaf community has been overwhelmingly positive. Where appropriate, we will continue to use the services of signers in the future.

Mr Harvey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions their Department has had with the UK Government in light of the Shawcross report and the written statement on Tuesday 23 March 2021 from the Minister of State, James Cleverly MP.

(AQO 1888/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We have had no joint discussions on behalf of the Department with the UK Government in light of the Shawcross report and the written statement.

Mr Clarke asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their New Decade, New Approach commitments.

(AQO 1444/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We remain determined to deliver on the commitments contained in New Decade, New Approach.

There is no doubt that we haven't made as much progress as we would have liked on some key issues as a direct result of the pressures brought about by the pandemic. However, the Executive's priority since last March has been our response to

the Covid-19 pandemic and our focus, and that of our departments, has rightly been on saving lives and supporting people through this challenging time.

But we think we should also reflect on some of the important commitments in NDNA that have been delivered.

The health workers' pay dispute was immediately settled when the institutions returned.

We're on track to deliver the Graduate Entry Medical School at Magee with the first cohort of 70 students due to commence in September 2021.

A Mental Health Action Plan has been published.

A feasibility study is being taken forward for a potential high speed rail connecting Belfast, Dublin and Cork.

New Ministerial and Special Adviser codes have been published.

Legislation has been introduced to reclassify housing associations to protect social and affordable housing supply and the delivery of homes for those who need them.

The Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board has been established with payments being made to victims and survivors.

A statutory Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse has been appointed.

And a new strategic Programme for Government is being developed, with the aim being to have a new Outcomes Framework agreed by the Executive by around the end of April and a more complete Programme incorporating key actions and strategies ready by the summer.

So while the pandemic has of course had an impact on our ability to deliver quickly on some of the commitments in NDNA, we are sure the Member would agree that we have made significant progress in a number of important areas and will continue to do so in the time ahead.

Ms Dillon asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Interdepartmental Working Group on Mother and Baby Homes, Magdalene Laundries and Historical Clerical Child Abuse.

(AQO 1091/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Inter-Departmental Working Group was established by the Executive to take forward work on historic Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries and 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.

On 26 January, we announced that the Executive had agreed an independent investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries following the publication of the outcomes of research by the Working Group, chaired by Judith Gillespie, on the matter.

The group also intends to commission a research project on historical clerical child abuse.

Since her appointment, the Independent Chair has undertaken a programme of stakeholder engagement which has included meetings with victims and survivors, political representatives and other stakeholders.

She has established Reference Groups of victims and survivors in relation to Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries, as well as historical clerical child abuse.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the implementation of the Common Frameworks.

(AQO 1700/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: In our role as JMC (EN) Ministers, we are currently working through a list of 25 Common Frameworks that have been approved by the relevant Departmental Ministers. So far we have been in a position to endorse 5 of these which have also received provisional confirmation from the respective JMC (EN) Ministers for the Westminster, Scottish and Welsh Governments and we are continuing to work on finalising confirmation of the remaining frameworks.

Common Frameworks will be implemented by the Department with responsibility for the relevant policy area.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the potential merits of investing in peatlands restoration in terms of generating employment.

(AQW 16563/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): My Department recognises the importance of peatlands and the services they deliver and is developing a Peatland Strategy for Northern Ireland which will provide a framework for conserving our intact semi-natural peatlands and restoring degraded semi-natural peatlands.

Key actions within the draft Strategy will seek to build capacity in peatland restoration techniques, develop practical skills via training courses for landowners and organisations involved in peatland conservation and restoration and take forward a Knowledge Exchange Network.

The forthcoming Green Growth Strategy will map out the actions needed to meet sector-specific greenhouse gas emission targets, delivering a cleaner environment, more efficient use of our resources within a circular economy and green jobs.

In addition, my Department is currently supporting peatland restoration projects funded by Interreg Va, which provide employment opportunities and will seek to develop future peatland restoration projects.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what progress his Department has made on implementing a ban on setting peat bog fires.

(AQW 16564/17-22)

Mr Poots: There are currently no plans to implement a ban on setting peat bog fires.

My Department is developing a Peatland Strategy for Northern Ireland, reflecting the commitments in the UK Peatland Strategy and New Decade, New Approach document and 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 “Publish a Position Statement on Upland Management, with accompanying new legislation if required”. This Position Statement will clarify my Department’s advice with regard to the use of burning as a management tool for semi-natural peatlands in Northern Ireland.

In addition, my Department continues to develop a strategic way forward in partnership with other stakeholders, such as the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, for tackling the risk of wildfires in the countryside. This includes raising awareness of the risk of wildfires and aiding and responding to wildfire incidents.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the discussions his Department has had with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs regarding the replacement of Common Agricultural Policy payments to farmers after the current parliamentary term.

(AQW 16823/17-22)

Mr Poots: My officials continue to engage with Defra regarding the replacement of CAP payments. I have also written to the Defra SoS emphasising the importance of maintaining these payments to farmers, land managers and for the rural economy in Northern Ireland. I have also raised the need for continued funding in bilateral meetings with the Defra SoS. EU replacement funding issues are also discussed at the regular UK Inter-Ministerial Group for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs meetings which I attend.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what recent discussions he has had on the need to strengthen sentencing guidelines for waste offences.

(AQW 16996/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- I have not had any recent discussions regarding the need to strengthen sentencing guidelines for waste offences, as I consider there to be adequate provision within the current sentencing guidelines. Maximum penalties for waste offences heard within the magistrates’ court are 6 months imprisonment and/or a £50,000 fine, and for waste offences heard at the Crown Court, 5 years imprisonment and / or an unlimited fine.
- The Government, through legislation, lays down the maximum, and in some cases the minimum, sentence available for each offence, requiring a judge to carefully analyse the individual facts of each offence, taking into consideration the gravity of the crime, the consequences of the offence to the victim and to society, and the mitigating circumstances relating to the defendant. The Sentencing Council of the Lord Chief Justice’s Office has published Definitive Guidance on environmental offences, which references two relevant Northern Ireland convictions on indictment for waste offences from 2012 and 2016. <https://www.judiciaryni.uk/judiciary-decision-types/environmental-offences>.
- When appropriate, my officers within the Northern Ireland Environment Agency’s Enforcement Branch will continue to thoroughly investigate waste crime in order to present the best available evidence to the Public Prosecution Service and subsequently to the law courts. Beyond conviction, and after a pertinent evaluation of the facts, sentences imposed for waste offences are ultimately a matter for the judiciary.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what progress has there been on creating a new sanction in legislation to make the polluter pay to remediate or remove illegally deposited waste.

(AQW 16997/17-22)

Mr Poots: Significant sanctions already exist within the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 for depositing waste without a licence, disposing of waste without a licence or disposing of waste in a manner likely to cause pollution. In accordance with the 1997 Order anyone convicted of such an offence may be subject to a compensation order by the court for the cost of removing the waste and taking other steps to eliminate the consequences of the waste.

I have also recently written to you advising of ongoing work to further strengthen the powers which Councils have to deal with fly tipping and to enable them to issue fixed penalty notices for smaller offences in relation to illegal waste deposits.

However, I am also pleased to advise that in late March the Department issued a further consultation on Extended Producer Responsibility. Under the proposed reforms to the Producer Responsibility system across the UK, producers will be required in accordance with the polluter pays principle to pay the full net costs of managing the disposal or treatment of packaging waste when it reaches its end of life and this will include the costs for the clean-up of packaging that ends up as litter. The proposed Environment Bill will provide powers to regulators to monitor, audit, and use civil and criminal penalties to drive compliance and address non-compliance for the Extended Producer Responsibility scheme.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the cooperative efforts with HMRC to address the issue of landfill tax avoidance in relation to serious waste crime.

(AQW 17000/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- NIEA's Enforcement Branch has an ongoing, productive relationship with its HMRC counterparts, regularly sharing information and intelligence via an information sharing agreement that has been in place since 2019.
- NIEA refers suspected cases of environmental tax avoidance, including landfill tax, Aggregates Levy and VAT to HMRC. To date, NIEA has referred 167 cases to their HMRC counterparts.
- NIEA and HMRC participate in bi-monthly tasking and co-ordination meetings, discussing subjects of mutual interest and monitoring progress in cases of the aforementioned suspected environmental tax avoidance.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail his plans to deliver a deposit return scheme in Northern Ireland that could be described as all-in and will encompass containers of all sizes.

(AQW 17021/17-22)

Mr Poots: I committed back in February 2020 to Northern Ireland's continued participation in the development of UK-wide proposals to reform the Packaging Producer Responsibility system and the introduction of a Deposit Return Scheme. I am taking powers in the Westminster Environment Bill to allow a Deposit Return Scheme to be established in Northern Ireland, the purpose of which is to secure an increase in recycling and recyclability of materials, and to reduce the amount and costs of littering and fly-tipping.

The specific details of the scheme have been refined following earlier consultation in 2019, using evidence gathered and through ongoing engagement with stakeholders. I launched a second public consultation on 24 March 2021 along with the other UK nations. The options for scope (material and size of container), deposit level and model of a DRS are presented in the second consultation. The outcome of this consultation will inform final scheme design, include whether it will be 'all-in' or 'on-the-go'.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how his Department will be supporting the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan 2021-2025.

(AQW 17037/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department has been actively engaged with the development of actions to be included in the 2021-2025 All-Ireland Pollinator Plan, increasing from 81 to 186 actions. These now span across four themes; providing food, safety and shelter for pollinators and also improving our knowledge of populations through research.

Actions will be delivered through various means;

- Working closely with grant funded partners, such as Butterfly Conservation and Buglife, to raise awareness of the plan, and develop pollinator actions into project work plans.
- Engage with Local Biodiversity Officers to promote community based actions such as 'Don't Mow, Let it Grow' initiatives to improve habitat for pollinators.
- Increase the number of businesses, organisations and land owners, to sign up as official All-Ireland Pollinator Plan partners.
- Work with businesses taking DAERA 'Prosperity Agreements' to include actions for pollinators.
- Actively manage NIEA sites and country parks in a sustainable, pollinator-friendly manner.
- Work alongside plant health teams and AFBI to reduce threats from invasive species, and pesticide use.
- Deliver UK Pollinator Monitoring Scheme in Northern Ireland to identify population trends, impacts and threats.

Two representatives from the Department sit on the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan Steering Group, reporting back actions and progress. Following the first plan phase (2015-20) a publication was produced summarising the breadth of initial actions

completed 'Working together for Biodiversity' available to download from the All-Ireland Pollinator website. <https://pollinators.ie/resources/>

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what work has been done on a land-use strategy for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 17038/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department and the then Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Michelle McIlveen MLA, supported and attended the launch of the Sustainable Agricultural Land Management Strategy (SALMS) for Northern Ireland on 21 October 2016 titled 'Delivering our future, valuing our soils', which was published by an independent Expert Working Group (EWG).

Since that launch my Department has been working closely with the EWG and implementing actions associated with the recommendations made in the strategy report.

Significant investment has been made to assist farmers manage their land more sustainably, these include:

- Soil testing and analysis pilots schemes have been delivered across 1,613 farms and covering 49,711 hectares of land and an NI wide scheme is being developed;
- 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 improve protection of 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.
- The Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) will provide approximately £59m of financial aid 3,985 wider level agreements and 775 higher level agreements under the first three tranches of the EFS scheme.

My officials will continue to develop measures of support for farms to play their part in protecting the environment while producing food sustainably.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps he is taking to (i) increase recycling capacity; and (ii) improve recycling infrastructure in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 17134/17-22)

Mr Poots: Legislation transposing the Circular Economy Package (CEP) came into effect on 18 December 2020 with the Waste (Circular Economy) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) (2020). Among a number of key targets, the legislation includes an increased municipal recycling rate of 65% by 2035.

My Department are progressing a range of initiatives aimed at increasing the quality and quantity of recycling, including the Household Waste Collaborative Change Programme (HWRCCP) and the recent discussion document "Future Recycling and Separate Collection of Waste of a Household Nature in Northern Ireland".

The HWRCCP provides capital funding assistance for local councils to improve recycling infrastructure and services. This supports local councils to further increase recycling rates and improve the quality of recycling, and to date I have made £4.8m 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 recent consultation Future Recycling and Separate Collection of Waste of a Household Nature in Northern Ireland put forward proposals on how to improve consistency, quantity and quality of recycling in Northern Ireland. The responses to the consultation will help to develop future recycling policy and a Summary of Responses is currently being prepared by Departmental officials.

On March 24 of this year, my Department issued second public consultations alongside the rest of the UK on Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) for Packaging and on a Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) for drink containers alongside England and Wales.

EPR for packaging will incentivise better design and recyclability of packaging and improved labelling, while the introduction of a DRS in England, Wales and Northern Ireland aims to increase the recycling of in-scope drinks containers and improve the quality of recycled material.

The Strategic Investment Board (SIB) waste infrastructure report 'Analysis of NI Residual Waste arisings to 2035' focuses on identifying waste infrastructure needs for municipal waste arisings as defined by the EU Circular Economy Package (CEP).

Owing to the significant impact of the pandemic on the local and global economy, SIB has been asked to model additional scenarios, which factor in the potential economic impact of COVID-19 on future waste arisings.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what assessment he has made of the risk to the health of domestic bee colonies from the importation of honey bees.

(AQW 17136/17-22)

Mr Poots: DAERA officials are aware of the concerns that have been expressed surrounding the potential to introduce exotic bee diseases through the medium of imports.

European Union (EU) legislation, with which Northern Ireland (NI) must continue to comply under the Withdrawal Agreement and Northern Ireland Protocol, requires that only certain control measures may be applied when moving bees between countries within the EU and into Northern Ireland.

Such moves may therefore take place if the bees are accompanied by an Animal Health Certificate which has been signed by an official authorised by the competent authority of the country of origin. However certain conditions apply, with the certificate requiring specific attestations for American Foul Brood, Small hive beetle (*Aethina tumida*) and *Tropilaelaps* mite (*Tropilaelaps* spp.). Intra-community bee movements must be pre-notified using the EU's TRACES system and in writing to DAERA using a form available on our website. DAERA officials intend to inspect such consignments when they arrive in Northern Ireland.

Beekeepers here are particularly concerned about the potential for the introduction of Small hive beetle which is known to exist in one region of Italy (Calabria). EU legislation imposes strict controls on the export of bees from the affected region effectively mitigating against this risk. DAERA does not therefore consider that there is a significant risk of the introduction of Small Hive Beetle and it would not be appropriate to impose additional constraints on the movement of bees from Italy.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) to outline the current arrangements for Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute laboratory accreditation in respect of the testing of product to EU member states and under the NI Protocol; (ii) whether the United Kingdom Accreditation Service is the sole service relied upon and used; and (iii) what other accreditation service is relied upon and used.

(AQW 17220/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AfBI) is currently accredited by the United Kingdom Accreditation Service for laboratory testing services.

Under the NI Protocol and the Official Controls Regulation (EU 625/2017), AfBI, as a DAERA designated Official Laboratory carrying out tests for the EU market, is also required to have accreditation by an EU accreditation body.

My officials are currently progressing dual accreditation arrangements in liaison with AfBI and UK Government.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail how the condition of the sale by Northern Ireland Water of Portavoe Reservoir is being enforced concerning the terms of agreement that Portavoe continues as part of his Department's Public Angling Estate.

(AQW 17250/17-22)

Mr Poots: Portavoe Reservoir was sold by NI Water into private ownership in June 2020.

The new owner of Portavoe Reservoir has confirmed that he wishes the site to remain private and not open or accessible to the public.

My Department retains the fishing rights to this water until 2024. My officials are currently seeking legal advice regarding access rights for permit holders to fish at the site. Until this has been clarified permit holders have been advised, via the NI Direct website, that the site will remain closed to the public for the foreseeable future.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the number of pollution incidents investigated by his Department, broken down by constituency, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 17298/17-22)

Mr Poots: The number of water pollution incidents investigated by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, broken down by constituency, in each of the last three years are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Water Pollution Incidents by Constituency 2018 to 2020

Constituency	2018	2019	2020
North Down	62	37	51
Upper Bann	115	94	100
East Antrim	56	50	66
North Antrim	143	131	158

Constituency	2018	2019	2020
South Down	122	113	123
Mid Ulster	97	121	151
Newry and Armagh	148	163	160
West Tyrone	210	215	176
Belfast East	27	31	32
Belfast South	17	20	29
Strangford	74	61	90
Belfast West	19	14	23
Lagan Valley	75	81	90
South Antrim	132	128	150
Belfast North	21	14	19
East Londonderry	139	146	222
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	241	229	216
Foyle	62	61	66

The total number of water pollution incidents investigated in 2018, 2019 and 2020 were 1793, 1754 and 1960 respectively. A small number of water pollution incidents, approximately 2%, each year are confirmed but with their locations below the high water mark along the Northern Ireland coastline outside of the Parliamentary Boundary these are not consequently presented in the table above. In 2018, there were 33 such incidents, in 2019 there were 45 and in 2020 there were 38.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what his Department is doing to help clean up the major red diesel pollution incident at the old Millisle Borstal site.

(AQW 17531/17-22)

Mr Poots: On Saturday 17 April 2021 at approximately 09:15, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) received a report via the Incident Hotline of diesel pollution on the beach at Millisle County Down.

A Water Quality Inspector was deployed to the area to investigate. He identified an outfall from a culverted stream which was polluted by diesel flowing onto the beach. Absorbent booms were installed to contain the oil. Following a request from NIEA, the PSNI were able to contact a local key holder who was asked to return to their premises. The source of the leak was located and stopped. It has not yet been established how much fuel escaped from the premises.

NIEA along with Marine & Fisheries Division (MFD) officers monitored the situation on the ground over the course of the weekend and are continuing to assess the impact of the incident at Millisle and along the coast.

On Sunday 18 April 2021, a specialist oil spill contractor was appointed and a clean-up of the area commenced to prevent any more oil being released and to ensure any remaining trapped oil along the coastline is dealt with.

Members of the public have been urged by way of press releases and social media issued by NIEA and the Ards and North Down Borough Council, not to handle or attempt any clean-up. They are being advised to report any remaining pollution along the coastline to the NIEA Incident Hotline on 0800 807060 or email emergency-pollution@daera-ni.gov.uk

Since the incident was first reported, NIEA and MFD staff have worked alongside HM Coastguard, the PSNI, Ards and North Down Borough Council and Northern Ireland Water Ltd., to help mitigate the environmental impact of the incident. The cause of the pollution is under active investigation.

Department for Communities

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities what actions her Department is taking to ensure that people eligible for the EU Settlement Scheme have the opportunity to apply.

(AQW 14662/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): My officials are working with DWP and others with a view to issuing letters to existing benefit claimants who are eligible for the Scheme but have not yet applied. This will remind people of the requirement to submit an application to the Scheme before the 30th June 2021 deadline and help ensure they can continue to receive benefits to which they are currently entitled. The letter will direct people to further information about how to apply for the Scheme.

In addition, Advice NI, the Department's delivery partner and eleven member organisations are delivering support to EU, EEA and Swiss nationals and their family members to assist them in applying to the EU Settlement Scheme.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for Communities whether there will be an underspend in funding for the Arts Council in this financial year.

(AQW 16178/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I do not anticipate any underspend in funding for the Arts Council in this financial year.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the establishment of a central Translation Hub as detailed in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 16528/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department for Communities launched the Central Translation Hub for Irish and Ulster-Scots on Monday 19th April 2021. The translation hub will provide translation services to 180 public sector bodies including; Executive departments, arms lengths bodies and local government.

This establishment of this service is a key commitment under the New Decade, New Approach Agreement. The hub will be managed by Languages Branch, which sits within Culture Division in the Department for Communities.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for Communities what consideration her Department has given to measures to increase the uptake of Pension Credit.

(AQW 17056/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department's Make the Call service aims to ensure that all individuals and their families are receiving the benefits, support and services they are entitled to claim. Make the Call provides needs assessments through a free and confidential telephony and outreach service. The most recently published data for 2019/2020 shows that an additional £5.4million of Pension Credit payments were generated as a result of people contacting Make the Call.

In autumn 2020, a campaign supported by Age NI was launched to raise awareness of Pension Credit and help dispel some of the misconceptions that people might have about Pension Credit eligibility. In line with the original plan this activity will be repeated shortly.

An online claim service for Pension Credit to supplement the existing telephone and postal claim services has also been launched. The new online service enables pensioners to apply for Pension Credit at a time that suits them. Around a third of new claims to Pension Credit are currently being made using the service.

Earlier this year, letters were issued to just over 300,000 pensioners informing them about the increase in their State Pension from April 2021, this letter included an accompanying leaflet which provided important information on various benefits, including how to claim Pension Credit.

My Department continues to work with key stakeholders to develop further Pension Credit promotional material because we know that often the best ways to reach eligible pensioners is through trusted stakeholders working in the community.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the establishment of a child funeral fund as per New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 17105/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Officials within my Department continue to work on the development of a Child Funeral Fund and this will include an in-year bid for the necessary funding.

As an interim measure, local councils had agreed to voluntarily waive certain fees in the case of a burial or cremation of a child under 18, to ease the financial burden on parents and this continues to be the case.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the funding received by each neighbourhood renewal partnership in each of the last 10 years.

(AQW 17107/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department does not fund the Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships nor does it provide remuneration to individuals in relation to their membership of a Partnership.

For a breakdown of Neighbourhood Renewal funding awarded to each Neighbourhood Renewal Area in each of the five financial years to 2019/20 I refer you to the answer I recently provided to AQW 16450/17-22.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for Communities how many cases, which have been referred to the Financial Investigations Unit by Child Maintenance, are outstanding 52 weeks or more.

(AQW 17149/17-22)

Ms Hargey: There are currently 61 investigations that have been ongoing for 52 weeks or more.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities whether she will request an urgent procedure from the Minister of Health for the immediate reopening of amateur sports and other community clubs for those under 18 years old.

(AQW 17295/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Executive announcement on 15 April has extended the existing easements for sport meaning that from 23 April all amateur outdoor sport training and competitions can resume as long as it is structured through clubs affiliated to recognised sports Governing Bodies or other representative organisations for sport and physical activity.

However numbers for competitive fixtures, including officials, participants, management and support personnel, should be restricted to the minimum number required for the delivery of the event and should not exceed 100.

In addition, the Executive has agreed that from the 30 April, individual indoor activities in gyms, swimming pools and other large venues will be permitted.

These announcements permit structured amateur outdoor sports to re-open for everyone, including young people under 18 years of age.

The return to sport protocols put in place by sports Governing Bodies and representative organisations, should be strictly adhered to including hygiene measures, social distancing, track and trace provision and other mitigations.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Communities, given that so many of her departmental staff are working from home, often in rural locations with substandard connections, whether her Department will consider covering the costs incurred by his staff to install superfast broadband, or available alternatives, in their homes.

(AQW 17333/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Boiler Replacement Scheme: Delay

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Communities why the Boiler Replacement Scheme for Housing Executive tenants has been delayed until 2022.

(AQO 1854/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Boiler Replacement Scheme referred to by the Member is a scheme for homeowners and is not available to Housing Executive tenants.

The Scheme was introduced in September 2012 and assists privately owned households with an annual income of less than forty thousand pounds (£40,000) to replace old and inefficient boilers that are more than 15 years old.

The Scheme has been successful in encouraging more than thirty-eight thousand (38,000) households to replace older inefficient boilers with new boilers.

The Scheme has not been delayed. Now the Executive has considered the Budget paper I will make funding available to continue the Boiler Replacement Scheme for homeowners into 2021/22 as it continues to support improvements to energy efficiency particularly for vulnerable households.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities what discussions she has had with the Housing Executive on proposed delays to the action plan on any significant work to correct cavity wall insulation.

(AQO 1861/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I have spoken many times about the significant backlog the Housing Executive faces in stock investment and the £7.8 billion deficit in its funding.

The Housing Executive published its draft Cavity Wall Insulation Action Plan for consultation in December. That consultation has just closed and the responses received will be carefully considered before the final plan is published later this year.

Once it has the funding to do so the Housing Executive intends to implement a cavity wall insulation remediation/replacement programme which will be an integral part of its Energy Efficiency Strategy. Not only will this strategy help address fuel poverty and improve tenants' comfort, it will play a major part in the Housing Executive's effort to contribute to decarbonisation

Department of Education

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to detail the policies and procedures for the appointment of transferor governors.
(AQW 9786/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Schedule 4 to the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 makes provision for the membership of the Boards of Governors (BoGs) of controlled schools. In accordance with Schedule 4, a number of members of the BoGs of controlled primary and secondary schools are nominated by the transferors and superseded managers of the school. For controlled integrated schools, nomination is by the transferors and superseded managers of controlled schools (other than controlled integrated schools) in the locality served by the school. The proportion of transferor governors on a school's BoG will vary according to the total number of members on the board.

The Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) nominates transferor representatives to the BoGs of controlled schools for formal appointment by the Education Authority. The TRC is an unincorporated body comprising the three Protestant churches (Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist) that owned schools prior to their transfer to state ownership.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education (i) how and (ii) by whom Transferor Governors are appointed; and to whom they are accountable.

(AQW 16667/17-22)

Mr Weir: Schedule 4 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 (the 1986 Order) gives the "transferors and superseded managers" nominating rights in respect of the Boards of Governors of controlled primary schools. The "transferors" are the three main Protestant Churches and the "superseded managers" are the persons who were formerly trustees or managers of any schools which have been superseded by controlled schools.

The majority of transferor governors are nominated by the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC). The remainder comprises governors in schools that are not transferred or do not supersede any other school. Some church representatives may also be nominated by the Department of Education (DE), the Education Authority (EA) or the Board of Governors itself.

A school's Board of Governors is normally made up of members who represent the interests of:

- those who originally founded the school i.e. foundation governors, which would include transferor governors;
- those who fund the education system. These governors are appointed by the EA and/or DE to represent the public or tax payer's interest i.e. EA and DE governors;
- parents of registered pupils at the school i.e. parent governors; and
- teachers on the staff of the school i.e. teacher governors.

All governors, once appointed, are a member of the body corporate; decisions are made collectively either by the board or by a committee thereof in accordance with the school's scheme of management. As a corporate body, the Board of Governors is legally liable for all decisions and actions taken in its name by a governor (and the Principal) or committees to which it has delegated functions.

Governors are expected to work together to fulfil the Board of Governors statutory functions in relation to the school. The Board of Governors is accountable for ensuring that its decisions support the best interests of the school and its pupils. It must also ensure that its decisions are consistent with the principles of corporate and collective responsibility as per para 2.33 and 2.34 in the Governors Guide¹.

1 <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/guide-governor-roles-and-responsibilities>

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education (i) whether he has received official advice regarding musical instrument and singing tuition in schools; (ii) who provided this advice; and (iii) to outline what criteria will need to be met for musical instrument and singing tuition to resume in schools.

(AQW 17070/17-22)

Mr Weir: In line with the Executive's, "Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions", a full return of all post-primary pupils was allowed from 12 April. In light of the advice from the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency, and in order to allow the focus to be on ensuring that all pupils were able to return to school and maintain the core curriculum, additional mitigations were put in place.

As stated in my letter of 1 April, singing and the playing of woodwind and brass instruments indoors was temporarily paused. It was, however, permissible to continue in an outdoor setting and no further restrictions were placed on any other practical lessons in schools. Parallel to this, the Education Authority decided that it would temporarily pause its wider Music Service while it examines its guidance and how it can resume safely.

My Department has continued to engage with the Department of Health on this issue and I have written to schools on 14 April to advise that, with immediate effect, pupils taking a practical music assessment for GCSE, AS-level and A-level qualifications that require singing or the playing of a woodwind or brass instrument will be permitted to take these lessons as normal in suitable venues i.e. where mitigations, such as social distancing and in well-ventilated rooms, can take place.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education (i) whether his Department has or will make any assessment of the physical fitness levels of school children and young people on the return to school after such a prolonged period of lockdown; and (ii) what additional resources have been made available to schools to recover fitness levels and to increase participation in sport or physical activity during (i) the remainder of this academic year; (ii) the next academic year and (iii) for life.

(AQW 17085/17-22)

Mr Weir: As with all areas of the curriculum, the assessment and measurement of the impact on young people of the lack of Physical Education (PE) during the periods of lockdown will initially be for teachers to consider. Teachers are best placed to both assess and address the needs of their pupils.

Schools may be able to ascertain the short-term impact through planned conversations during, for example, circle time, Personal Development and Mutual Understanding, PE lessons, focus group discussions; and, as appropriate, the use of physical activity, health and lifestyle self-report questionnaires. This may be beneficial to support the planning of PE and

inform schools on appropriate targeted interventions to help young people to recover from the varying degrees of inactivity during the periods of lockdown.

Pupils will need PE, now more than ever, to help them settle back into school; giving them support and a sense of belonging whilst engaging in enjoyable physical activity with their peers. My officials are developing proposals for a School Summer Scheme this year which will include activities that are interactive and fun, with plenty of scope for outside play.

All grant aided schools are funded under the Common Funding Scheme (CFS) in accordance with the Local Management of Schools arrangements. One of the key principles of the Scheme is that the formula should support schools in delivering the curriculum. Schools are therefore responsible for meeting the cost of delivering the curriculum from within their delegated budgets.

That said, I recognise the financial pressures which schools face as a result of COVID-19. Consequently, my Department has secured further COVID-19 funding in 2021-22, which includes funding to help schools to address many of the new pressures arising as a result of the pandemic, for the remainder of this academic year. In conjunction with the Education Authority, I will continue to monitor our schools' funding requirements as the pandemic progresses, for this financial year and beyond, in order to seek adequate funding to protect our children and young people.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Education (i) what scientific or health advice informed the decision to stop a return to music lessons in school; and (ii) how will students who are studying music as part of GCSE, AS or A Level complete the relevant assessments under his Department's current guidance.

(AQW 17091/17-22)

Mr Weir: In line with the Executive's, "Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions", a full return of all post-primary pupils was allowed from 12 April. In light of the advice from the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency, and in order to allow the focus to be on ensuring that all pupils were able to return to school and maintain the core curriculum, additional mitigations were put in place.

As stated in my letter of 1 April, singing and the playing of woodwind and brass instruments indoors was temporarily paused. It was, however, permissible to continue in an outdoor setting and no further restrictions were placed on any other practical lessons in schools. Parallel to this, the Education Authority decided that it would temporarily pause its wider Music Service while it examines its guidance and how it can resume safely.

My Department has continued to engage with the Department of Health on this issue and I have written to schools on 14 April to advise that, with immediate effect, pupils taking a practical music assessment for GCSE, AS-level and A-level qualifications that require singing or the playing of a woodwind or brass instrument will be permitted to take these lessons as normal in suitable venues i.e. where mitigations, such as social distancing and in well-ventilated rooms, can take place.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Education when singing and musical instrument lessons will restart in schools.

(AQW 17150/17-22)

Mr Weir: In line with the Executive's, "Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions", a full return of all post-primary pupils was allowed from 12 April. In light of the advice from the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency, and in order to allow the focus to be on ensuring that all pupils were able to return to school and maintain the core curriculum, additional mitigations were put in place.

As stated in my letter of 1 April, singing and the playing of woodwind and brass instruments indoors was temporarily paused. It was, however, permissible to continue in an outdoor setting and no further restrictions were placed on any other practical lessons in schools. Parallel to this, the Education Authority decided that it would temporarily pause its wider Music Service while it examines its guidance and how it can resume safely.

My Department has continued to engage with the Department of Health on this issue and I wrote to schools on 14 April to advise that, with immediate effect, pupils taking a practical music assessment for GCSE, AS-level and A-level qualifications that require singing or the playing of a woodwind or brass instrument will be permitted to take these lessons as normal in suitable venues i.e. where mitigations, such as social distancing and in well-ventilated rooms, can take place.

The EA met with the PHA to review its guidance for its Music Service and have issued a letter to Principals dated 16 April 2021. In it, they agreed that woodwind and brass tuition can recommence, along with strings, percussion and keyboard.

Music Service tutors who teach woodwind, brass, strings, percussion and keyboard instruments will therefore resume face-to-face tuition in schools from Monday 19 April 2021.

Music Service tutors who teach singing will resume face-to-face tuition in schools to support ONLY those pupils who are taking a practical music assessment for GCSE, AS-level and A-level qualifications. The policy to pause all other indoor singing remains in place. All Music Service tuition will continue to be delivered with appropriate mitigations in place, as detailed in the "Music Unlocked" guidance and risk assessments. The Department will keep this under review with PHA input.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education to outline when there will be a resumption of one to one music lessons.

(AQW 17166/17-22)

Mr Weir: Following the Executive's decision and in line with its document, "Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions", a full return of all pupils into schools was allowed from 12 April.

As part of the Executive's cautious and measured approach, and on the advice of the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency, in order to allow the focus to be on ensuring that all pupils were able to return to school, singing and the playing of woodwind and brass instruments, were identified as potentially being more likely to facilitate the transmission of the COVID-19 virus.

As stated in my letter of 1 April, singing and the playing of woodwind and brass instruments indoors was temporarily paused. It was, however, permitted to continue in an outdoor setting and no further restrictions were placed on any other practical lessons in schools.

Parallel to this, the Education Authority decided that it would temporarily pause its wider Music Service while it examined how it can resume safely.

My Department has continued to engage with the Department of Health on this issue and I wrote to schools on 14 April to advise that, with immediate effect, pupils taking a practical music assessment for GCSE, AS-level and A-level qualifications that require singing or the playing of a woodwind or brass instrument will be permitted to take these lessons as normal in suitable venues i.e. where mitigations such as social distancing and well-ventilated rooms, can take place.

The EA met with the PHA to review its guidance for its Music Service and have issued a letter to Principals dated 16 April 2021. In it, they have agreed that woodwind and brass tuition can recommence, along with strings, percussion and keyboard.

Music Service tutors who teach woodwind, brass, strings, percussion and keyboard instruments will therefore resume face-to-face tuition in schools from Monday 19 April 2021.

Music Service tutors who teach singing will resume face-to-face tuition in schools to support ONLY those pupils who are taking a practical music assessment for GCSE, AS-level and A-level qualifications. The policy to pause all other indoor singing remains in place. All Music Service tuition will continue to be delivered with appropriate mitigations in place, as detailed in the "Music Unlocked" guidance and risk assessments. The Department will keep this under review with PHA input.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to provide (i) a detailed rationale for not permitting the return of music lessons in schools, (ii) when he expects music lessons in schools to recommence; and (iii) when he expects the Music Service in the Education Authority to return.

(AQW 17178/17-22)

Mr Weir: In line with the Executive's, "Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions", a full return of all post-primary pupils was allowed from 12 April. In light of the advice from the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency, and in order to allow the focus to be on ensuring that all pupils were able to return to school and maintain the core curriculum, additional mitigations were put in place.

As stated in my letter of 1 April, singing and the playing of woodwind and brass instruments indoors was temporarily paused. Singing and the playing of woodwind and brass instruments generates an increase in aerosol and droplet projection. Due to the increased prevalence of the Kent variant (B.1.1.7.) of the COVID-19 virus, on the advice of the CMO and PHA, these activities were temporarily suspended. This variant was identified as potentially being 50% to 70% more transmissible than known variants during the school term leading up to Christmas. Increased projection due to these activities presented a potential enhanced increase of transmission of the new variant. It was, however, permissible to continue in an outdoor setting and no further restrictions were placed on any other practical lessons in schools.

My Department has continued to engage with the Department of Health on this issue and I have written to schools on 14 April to advise that, with immediate effect, pupils taking a practical music assessment for GCSE, AS-level and A-level qualifications that require singing or the playing of a woodwind or brass instrument will be permitted to take these lessons as normal in suitable venues i.e. where mitigations, such as social distancing and in well-ventilated rooms, can take place.

The EA met with the PHA to review its guidance for its Music Service and have issued a letter to Principals dated 16 April 2021. In it, they have agreed that woodwind and brass tuition can recommence, along with strings, percussion and keyboard.

Music Service tutors who teach woodwind, brass, strings, percussion and keyboard instruments will therefore resume face-to-face tuition in schools from Monday 19 April 2021.

Music Service tutors who teach singing will resume face-to-face tuition in schools to support ONLY those pupils who are taking a practical music assessment for GCSE, AS-level and A-level qualifications. The policy to pause all other indoor singing remains in place. All Music Service tuition will continue to be delivered with appropriate mitigations in place, as detailed in the "Music Unlocked" guidance and risk assessments. The Department will keep this under review with PHA input.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) how Shared Education outcomes are measured; and (ii) what evidence is there that the concept has delivered its aims of community cohesion.

(AQW 17184/17-22)

Mr Weir: Under the Shared Education Act (NI) 2016, the Department of Education is required to lay a report before the Assembly every two years on the operation of the Act and section 2(3) of the Education Act (NI) 2014.

Two reports have been laid to date, both of which can be accessed via <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/what-shared-education>.

As required by the Act, the reports include statements on the extent to which the purpose of Shared Education has been achieved. Information on the impact of Shared Education is obtained from a range of sources including regularly scheduled surveys and reports, supplemented by evaluations, and research papers linked to Shared Education funded programmes.

Section 5 of the latest report, Advancing Shared Education 2nd report to the Northern Ireland Assembly published in June 2020, summarises information obtained from the 2018 Young Life and Times and Kids Life and Times surveys outlining the impact of Shared Education on promoting good relations, respect for identity, diversity and community cohesion.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education when practical music lessons will be permitted in schools.
(AQW 17189/17-22)

Mr Weir: In line with the Executive's, "Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions", a full return of all post-primary pupils was allowed from 12 April. In light of the advice from the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency and in order to allow the focus to be on ensuring that all pupils were able to return to school and maintain the core curriculum, additional mitigations were put in place.

As stated in my letter of 1 April, singing and the playing of woodwind and brass instruments indoors was temporarily paused. It was, however, permissible to continue in an outdoor setting and no further restrictions were placed on any other practical lessons in schools. Parallel to this, the Education Authority decided that it would temporarily pause its wider Music Service while it examines its guidance and how it can resume safely.

My Department has continued to engage with the Department of Health on this issue and I have written to schools on 14 April to advise that, with immediate effect, pupils taking a practical music assessment for GCSE, AS-level and A-level qualifications that require singing or the playing of a woodwind or brass instrument will be permitted to take these lessons as normal in suitable venues i.e. where mitigations, such as social distancing and in well-ventilated rooms, can take place.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to provide an updated timeframe and budget to complete the Strule Shared Education Campus in Omagh.
(AQW 17201/17-22)

Mr Weir: While the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted on all aspects of business in the past year which has caused delays in the programme, campus construction is planned to complete in 2025.

As notified to the Executive in September 2020, it is estimated that an investment of £181m over the period 2020/21 to 2024/25 is required to complete the campus. This includes the costs of construction, including a contingency for construction price inflation, risk and optimism bias; staffing the Programme; and other running costs, including support being provided to the schools for shared curricular development and implementation.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Education what consideration is being given to allow for an exemption, subject to distancing and ventilation as well as lateral flow testing, to enable performance exams for music at A Level, AS Level and GCSE to proceed.
(AQW 17215/17-22)

Mr Weir: In line with the Executive's, "Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions", a full return of all post-primary pupils was allowed from 12 April. In light of the advice from the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency, and in order to allow the focus to be on ensuring that all pupils were able to return to school and maintain the core curriculum, additional mitigations were put in place.

As stated in my letter of 1 April, singing and the playing of woodwind and brass instruments indoors was temporarily paused. It was, however, permissible to continue in an outdoor setting and no further restrictions were placed on any other practical lessons in schools.

My Department has continued to engage with the Department of Health on this issue and I have written to schools on 14 April to advise that, with immediate effect, pupils taking a practical music assessment for GCSE, AS-level and A-level qualifications that require singing or the playing of a woodwind or brass instrument will be permitted to take these lessons as normal in suitable venues i.e. where mitigations, such as social distancing and using well-ventilated rooms, can take place.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to his announcement on 8 April 2021 on the further re-opening of some youth services, what is meant by an area of heightened community tension.
(AQW 17244/17-22)

Mr Weir: In this context, an area of heightened community tension refers to a location where young people are engaged in social disorder on the streets and where young people are either perpetrators or at risk of harm and/or where their actions may lead to a criminal conviction.

The Education Authority's (EA) Youth Service coordinates this work and determines which locations meet the definition, in close partnership with a multi-agency group that includes the Northern Ireland Office, The Executive Office, Department of Justice and the PSNI. This is done using on-the-ground intelligence.

EA's role and details of those areas currently designated as meeting the heightened community tension criteria have been communicated to relevant registered youth work providers (ie those in receipt of local area or local project funding). Any concerns regarding young people at risk from heightened community tensions in an area should be communicated in the first instance to the local Senior Youth Officer.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education whether updated and specific guidance will be made available on NI Direct for the community and voluntary sector dealing with youth service provision.

(AQW 17245/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) continues as the operational lead for youth restart.

Comprehensive Youth Service Restart guidance is available on the Education Authority website via the following link www.youthonline.org.uk/restart and all registered youth service providers have been informed of this.

Ms Brogan asked the Minister of Education to outline the engagement he has had or plans to have with the Minister for the Economy with specific reference to the provision of childcare to facilitate parents return to work and aid economic recovery.

(AQW 17269/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have had engagement with all Executive colleagues, including the Economy Minister, on the importance of childcare as an enabler of economic recovery and employability. They have demonstrated their acceptance of this by permitting childcare provision to remain open since June 2020 and making significant emergency funding available to support the sector.

From April 2020 to date, approximately £30M has been paid to assist the childcare sector withstand the challenges of the pandemic and help ensure its availability for parents as the economy recovers.

Work to develop a longer-term Executive Childcare Strategy is due to resume in the coming months. Engagement with the Department of the Economy will be an essential part of this process.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education what measures his Department is taking to ensure there is a diverse representation of children in school books to reflect changing demographics.

(AQW 17280/17-22)

Mr Weir: Diversity is an integral part of the Northern Ireland curriculum and is covered under Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) in primary schools and under Learning for Life and Work (LLW) in post primary schools. Diversity can also be approached by teachers through Religious Education at any key stage, for example through the general learning objective of Morality and through the more specific learning objective of World Religions from Key Stage 3.

The design of the curriculum provides teachers and schools the flexibility to deliver tailored lessons to meet the needs of the pupils in the classroom. The curriculum also acknowledges the significance of demographic and social changes locally and globally, including gender, ethnicity and race.

As with all curricular areas it is a matter for individual schools, using their delegated budget, to choose the textbooks they use to support their teaching and delivery of the curriculum.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education for an update on the work of his Department to develop policy in accordance with the aims of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.

(AQW 17307/17-22)

Mr Weir: All actions within the Department of Education Business Plan for 2020/21, and those of its Arm's Length Bodies, are linked to the eight wellbeing outcomes within the Children and Young People's Strategy (CYPS) and, by extension, to the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 (CSCA).

The Department has also issued guidance to other departments explaining the content of the CSCA, the duties it places on Children's Authorities and the approach they are expected to adopt when developing policy.

Two examples of recent policy initiatives which have been developed in accordance with the aims of the CSCA include:

Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework – My department has been working collaboratively with the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency, the Health and Social Care Board, the Education Authority and other Government Departments to develop a Framework for Children & Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education. The main emphasis of the Framework is to support schools to promote emotional health and wellbeing at a universal level. In implementing the Framework, I can confirm that £5m recurrent funding has been made available by DE to support mental health and wellbeing within the education sector, and the Health Minister has agreed to provide an additional £1.5m on a recurrent basis from 2021/22 onwards.

Special Education - My Department worked closely with colleagues from the Education Authority (EA), Department of Health (DoH) and the Public Health Agency (PHA), to address legislative issues in relation to the Statutory Operations around the statementing process for children and young people who have or who may special educational needs (SEN). A continuing process of review was in place for consideration of each of the Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties with close collaboration between all of the parties involved in the Statutory Operations Process ensuring that during this period of significant pressure the system could function in meeting their duties to children and young people.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Education given the easing of other restrictions, whether he has any plans to reintroduce singing and music tuition in schools.

(AQW 17341/17-22)

Mr Weir: My officials have continued to engage with the Department of Health (DoH) and Public Health Agency (PHA) on this issue and I wrote to schools on 14 April to confirm that pupils taking practical music assessment for GCSE, AS-level and A2-Level qualifications that requires singing or the playing of a woodwind or brass instrument will now be permitted to do so indoors, so there would be no detriment to their ability to undertake their qualifications.

The EA has met with the PHA to review its guidance for its Music Service and have issued a letter to Principals dated 16 April 2021. In it, they have agreed that woodwind and brass tuition can also recommence, along with strings, percussion and keyboard.

Music Service tutors who teach woodwind, brass, strings, percussion and keyboard instruments will therefore resume face-to-face tuition in schools from Monday 19th April 2021.

Music Service tutors who teach singing will resume face-to-face tuition in schools to support ONLY those pupils who are taking a practical music assessment for GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications. The policy to pause all other indoor singing remains in place. All Music Service tuition will continue to be delivered with appropriate mitigations in place, as detailed in the "Music Unlocked" (<https://musicservice.eani.org.uk/schools-teachers/music-unlocked-guidance-schools>) guidance and risk assessments. The Department will keep this under review with PHA input.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education for an update on his plans to introduce a flexible school starting age for children in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 17342/17-22)

Mr Weir: My officials have begun work on a comprehensive policy analysis considering the immediate and longer term effect, including the legislative and educational impacts of introducing flexibility in regard to school starting age.

The immediate focus is on research and engagement to identify and assess 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.

Policy development and public consultation will take time but they are critical to ensure we have a sound policy and evidence basis on which to move forward

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Education whether any of his Department's publications or advertising campaigns use images that have been photoshopped to alter the body of the participants.

(AQW 17364/17-22)

Mr Weir: When designing Departmental publications, Departmental officials use stock images from a variety of sources including official photographs taken or arranged by my Press Office. Press Office do not photo shop or alter images to change body shapes. I am not aware if other external sources alter their images in this manner.

My Department does not directly manage advertising campaigns they are managed by the Government Advertising Unit (GAU) which is part of the Department of Finance (DoF) Enterprise Shared Services (ESS). The advertising agency used for Department of Education (DE) advertising has confirmed they have not altered body images/shapes in DE advertisements.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education what assurances can he offer that, in order to satisfy the demands of CCEA for evidence, young people will not be required to produce (i) more evidence or (ii) more evidence under exam type conditions than by other exam boards.

(AQW 17394/17-22)

Mr Weir: Schools are required to determine grades for GCSE, AS and A level qualifications this year by providing a holistic and professional assessment of the evidenced standard at which a pupil is performing in the context of the specification for which they have been entered.

The arrangements, which are similar across all awarding bodies, have been designed to facilitate flexibility and to take account of the different levels of disruption experienced by different schools and individual pupils. It is a matter for each school to make decisions about the amount and type of evidence to support their determinations.

As all awarding bodies, including CCEA, have not specified a required amount or type of evidence to support grade determinations, schools should not have to produce evidence for CCEA over and above that which is required by other awarding bodies.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, now that schools have fully re-opened and an increasing number of parents are returning to their places of work, (i) why schools are not permitted to operate breakfast clubs and after school clubs; (ii) whether he is aware that the net result of these facilities not operating in schools is to cause parents to seek other day care type accommodation for their children thus creating additional safety risks as bubbles are mixed unnecessarily causing the very problems outside the school gate that he warns against; and (iii) whether he will make public the specific data that enables him to assure the general public that keeping school clubs closed is the safer of the two options.

(AQW 17396/17-22)

Mr Weir: In line with the Executive's, "Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions", a full return of all post-primary pupils was allowed from 12 April. In light of the advice from the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency, and in order to allow the focus to be on ensuring that all pupils were able to return to school and maintain the core curriculum, additional mitigations were put in place.

Following further engagement with the Department of Health and the Executive Office, I announced on 14 April 2021 that schools can now provide wraparound care for pupils with immediate effect. This includes the provision of care both before and after school, for example, the provision of breakfast clubs and after school care such as homework clubs.

The position remains unchanged in respect of all other extra-curricular activities. However, the Department continues to engage with the Department of Health in relation to the most appropriate means to permit a resumption of all such activities when it is safe to do so.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education what engagement has he had with Unison in relation to their campaign for free school meals.

(AQW 17463/17-22)

Mr Weir: Whilst I have had no direct contact with Unison, I am aware of their campaign for Free School Meals for all children in school.

Free school meals are currently provided to ensure pupils of "non working" and low income families have access to a nutritionally balanced meal suitable as the main meal of the day when at school. The eligibility criteria are largely based on receipt of qualifying welfare benefits.

I have recently agreed to commence a comprehensive review of the free school meal and uniform grant eligibility criteria. The purpose of the review is to ensure that free school meals and uniform grants are available to support the most vulnerable children in our society. The option to provide universal free school meals to all or certain year groups of pupils will be considered as part of the review. In developing proposals the review team will consult widely with stakeholders including trade unions.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education how many children in special schools have been identified as clinically extremely vulnerable.

(AQW 17466/17-22)

Mr Weir:

219 children in special schools have been identified by the Department of Health as clinically extremely vulnerable.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Education (i) what health and scientific advice informed his decision to direct the full resumption of breakfast clubs in schools; and (ii) for his assessment of the impact this decision will have on the integrity of the bubble system which schools have been operating to keep pupils and staff safe.

(AQW 17478/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department's guidance continues to be informed by advice provided by the Chief Medical Officer, the Assistant Chief Scientific Advisor and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) and is based on the scientific and public health advice available at the time of writing. Further engagement with the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency formed the decision to allow the resumption of breakfast schools.

The purpose of using bubbles in educational settings is to segment pupils into a consistent group or groups, as far as is practicable, in order to reduce the number of close contacts that each pupil will have, and is only one of a range of mitigating measures in schools to ensure the safety of pupils and staff. Schools offering a breakfast club service should consider all mitigating measures to minimise the risk of virus transmission, including, operating a bubble approach within their breakfast club to ensure a small and consistent number of additional close contacts for each pupil from outside their class bubble, encouraging social distancing wherever possible, ensuring that pupils observe good hand and respiratory hygiene measures and that rooms are well ventilated. In post-primary settings, pupils are also expected to wear a face covering when they are not eating or drinking.

The benefits of pupils attending a breakfast club, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds who may not be able to access a nutritious breakfast, have to be considered alongside the range of mitigations that schools implement in operating a breakfast club and the current relatively low levels of community transmission of the virus. I believe that breakfast clubs are an important service to pupils and that schools will continue to ensure the risks of virus transmission are minimised.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Education to detail his plans for examinations for pupils returning to classroom learning, given the stress and anxiety this has caused to pupils and their families.
(AQW 17501/17-22)

Mr Weir: External, public examinations have been cancelled this year as it is not possible to run standardised examinations in circumstances where young people have experienced differing levels of disruption to their education.

The CCEA alternative awarding arrangements for Summer 2021 require schools to determine grades for GCSE, AS and A level qualifications by providing a holistic and professional assessment of the evidenced standard at which a pupil is performing, in the context of the specification for which they have been entered.

The arrangements have been designed to provide schools with the flexibility to take account of the different levels of disruption experienced by different schools and individual pupils. It is a matter for each school to make decisions about the evidence to support their determinations and this may include the optional assessment resources provided by CCEA. However, unlike standardised examinations, these resources can be adapted to only assess content that has been taught, they will be marked by the teacher and form only one part of a portfolio of evidence to support a holistic judgement.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether AS grades awarded in the 2020/21 academic year will be counted towards next year's A2 grades.
(AQW 17522/17-22)

Mr Weir: CCEA has provided advice to the Department of Education on this issue and my officials have been engaging with key education stakeholders, including young people, to ensure their views are taken into account. I hope to be in a position to make an announcement on the arrangements for 2022 awarding very soon.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education to detail what engagement his Department has had with the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People regarding face coverings in schools.
(AQW 17603/17-22)

Mr Weir: I, along with departmental officials, met with Koulla Yiasouma, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), on 25 February 2021. Face coverings were discussed and NICCY raised concerns about post-primary school pupils wearing face masks for the full school day, and if the wearing of masks was mandatory.

Advice from CMO and PHA is that wearing face coverings in environments with reduced capacity for social distancing is an effective risk mitigation, both for the wearer and the surrounding pupils. SAGE evidence further suggests that there is a 7% - 45% reduction in transmission of the COVID-19 virus when wearing face masks.

All pupils will be strongly encouraged to adopt this position, but no pupil will be refused entry to school, or treated differently in school if they are unable to wear a face covering.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education to outline how often reviews will take place on the policy around face masks in post-primary schools.
(AQW 17604/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department's guidance continues to be informed by advice from the Chief Medical Officer, the Assistant Chief Scientific Advisor and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) which is based on scientific and public health advice. Guidance will continue to be monitored and will be amended to reflect any updates to public health guidance and will be used to form any future decisions on policies for the wearing of face coverings in post-primary schools.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education whether he will consider making the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland a core, mandatory part of the curriculum.
(AQW 17662/17-22)

Mr Weir: The curriculum is not designed to prescribe detailed lists of compulsory subject content; rather it allows schools appropriate autonomy to meet the needs of their pupils. This flexibility encourages more innovative and customised approaches to ensuring our young people are both safe and well-informed about all of the issues they face in modern society.

In my response to AQW 16313/17-22 I outlined the opportunities to address the topics of lawfulness and the justice system in our schools.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Education for an update on the introduction of legislation on flexible school starting age.
(AQO 1905/17-22)

Mr Weir: My have officials have begun work on a comprehensive policy analysis considering the immediate and longer term effect, including the legislative and educational impacts, of introducing flexibility in regard to school starting age.

The immediate focus is on research and engagement to identify and assess 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.

Policy development and public consultation will take time but they are critical to ensure we have a sound policy and evidence basis on which to move forward.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Education for an update on the implementation of resilience training as part the curriculum. **(AQO 1904/17-22)**

Mr Weir: The Curriculum addresses resilience through the objectives for pupils to have opportunities to learn to develop as:

- 1 an individual: to achieve personal fulfilment and individual wellbeing through living a successful life; and a contributor to society:
- 2 to be concerned for the wellbeing of others as well as themselves, in their own society and beyond.

Resilience is a key factor of good emotional wellbeing and can be addressed explicitly through Personal Development and Mutual Understanding and Learning for Life and Work.

At primary school, pupils are encouraged to develop their knowledge and understanding of how to manage their self-esteem, self-confidence and deal with a range of emotions. These issues are explored further and developed at post-primary level. Pupils are encouraged to explore the consequences of low self-esteem, and how real life situations can have an impact on their physical and emotional mental health.

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) provides comprehensive teaching resources for both primary and post-primary. These include "Living. Learning. Together" and "INSYNC", which contain specific themes and lesson materials to support teachers to develop the social and emotional skills that promote resilience in their pupils.

CCEA also offers a range of qualifications which allow older pupils to develop their knowledge and understanding and critical thinking in the areas of mental health including the development of resilience.

The recently launched Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework highlights the importance of developing resilience as one of the key factors for good emotional health. Services to be introduced through the Framework's Implementation Plan will complement and support delivery of the curriculum through further and enhanced support for children and young people.

This includes a new online Wellbeing Hub (<https://ccea.org.uk/learning-resources/wellbeing-hub>) developed by CCEA which provides detailed information and signposting to relevant resources on emotional health and wellbeing, including resilience.

Additionally, the new EA Youth Service "REACH" programme (Resilience Education Assisting Change to Happen) provides universal/whole school support for pupils aged 6-19 with a focus on preventing/reducing mental health issues, building on the expertise developed through their existing and successful Facilitating Life And Resilience Education (FLARE) programme. This will include capacity training for education staff to develop Resilient Schools, provided in conjunction with Ulster University.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the impact of his approach to this year's exams on the mental health and wellbeing of pupils.

(AQO 1903/17-22)

Mr Weir: The emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people, at all stages of their education, continues to be a high priority for my Department.

Examinations are a source of anxiety for all young people and I recognise that, this year, there has been heightened anxiety surrounding the disruption to learning and the requirement for alternative awarding arrangements.

The arrangements I have put in place recognise and take account of this disruption. As such, in relation to Centre Determined Grades, teachers have been entrusted to make holistic judgements, based upon a broad portfolio of evidence, to take account of disrupted learning.

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland's capacity to carry out its role as the regulator for the teaching profession.

(AQO 1902/17-22)

Mr Weir: The General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) currently lacks capacity to fully discharge its intended role as regulator for the teaching profession.

The fundamental difficulty is that although current legislation permits GTCNI to regulate, the legislation is incomplete, with gaps in GTCNI's powers preventing it from operating a legally robust process, compliant with recent case law. Legal advice

has also been that the courts would look unfavourably upon any regulation decisions taken using powers which we know to be flawed; with those decisions unlikely to survive judicial challenge.

Wider legal concerns regarding the compatibility of current legislation on this issue with the European Convention on Human Rights have also been raised.

Beyond these considerations, however, it has become apparent that the current Council is underperforming and is struggling with deep, and seemingly still growing, levels of distrust among its members. These difficulties call into question its ability to provide the expected strategic direction for the Council's work. For this reason I have commissioned an urgent, independent Effectiveness Review of the Council and its Committees.

This Review will examine whether the Council, in its current form, is fit for purpose and able to discharge all of its duties and responsibilities, including teacher regulation.

It is already certain that legislative change will be needed to enable effective teacher regulation. If structural changes to GTCNI are recommended by the Review, these will also require changes to primary legislation.

The preparation and introduction of a new GTCNI Bill will therefore be a priority for the Department.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Education to detail any plans his Department has to introduce programmes aimed at preventing and responding to violence against women and girls.

(AQO 1901/17-22)

Mr Weir: 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. My officials are working closely with both Departments to progress actions in relation to education and awareness for all pupils, including in the areas of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) and preventative education.

All publicly funded schools in Northern Ireland are required to deliver the statutory curriculum which includes RSE through Personal Development and Mutual Understanding at primary level and Learning for Life and Work at post-primary level and pupils, both male and female, are taught about the topic of violence within these areas. The school setting provides young people with opportunities to explore the characteristics of violent and abusive relationships in a safe and respectful environment together with information on who to go to if they feel uncomfortable or at risk.

My Department also 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.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education for an update on the ongoing issues with in-year planned growth funding for Grant Maintained Integrated schools.

(AQO 1900/17-22)

Mr Weir: Finance officials in my Department and the Education Authority have established a Project to review the Education Authority's application of the Common Funding Scheme in relation to dual sites and contingency funding, which includes in-year growth. The issues raised by stakeholders are being fully considered as part of this Project.

Any change to the current funding approach adopted by the Education Authority will require a robust assessment of the financial impact on the education budget. This work is ongoing and is being progressed at pace. It is anticipated that the outcome of the review will be known early in the 2021-22 financial year.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Education what measures his Department is taking to promote effective education within schools to address the issue of gender-based violence.

(AQO 1899/17-22)

Mr Weir: 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. My officials are working closely with both Departments to progress actions in relation to education and awareness for all pupils, including in the areas of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) and preventative education.

All publicly funded schools in Northern Ireland are required to deliver the statutory curriculum which includes RSE through Personal Development and Mutual Understanding at primary level and Learning for Life and Work at post-primary level and pupils, both male and female, are taught about the topic of violence within these areas. The school setting provides young people with opportunities to explore the characteristics of violent and abusive relationships in a safe and respectful environment together with information on who to go to if they feel uncomfortable or at risk.

My Department also 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.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to introduce standardised, comprehensive Relationship and Sexuality Education in our schools.

(AQO 1898/17-22)

Mr Weir: RSE is already covered in the curriculum from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 4 through Personal Development and Mutual Understanding and Learning for Life and Work. This provides a standardised statutory minimum entitlement, which all children must legally receive.

Beyond the statutory minimum content, schools and teachers have the flexibility to decide the topics and approaches that best suit their pupils. Providing detailed lists of compulsory subject content within a curriculum does not guarantee that a subject will be well or appropriately taught or that it will reflect the needs of pupils. Further, in a subject area such as RSE, detailed prescribed content may rapidly become out of date as new issues emerge. I do not, therefore, consider that introducing greater prescription and standardisation in the RSE curriculum is the best approach.

You will be aware that I have provided funding to support the production of RSE resources and guidance materials now housed on CCEA's online RSE Hub. 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.

Work on the Hub is ongoing. CCEA is also developing a section for Teacher Professional Learning on the Hub as well as a Curricular Progression Framework which will set out clearly the issues to be considered at each Key Stage.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Education for an update on his Department's work to implement the recommendations of the Gillen Review: Report into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland, in schools.

(AQO 1897/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department is working closely with the Department of Justice (DoJ) to take forward the recommendations in Sir John Gillen's report. One of the actions from the Implementation Plan is raising education and awareness in relation to consent. An Education and Awareness working group has been established on which DE is represented, alongside other departments and key delivery partners to drive this work forward.

I met with the Minister of Justice recently to discuss progress and the interconnection between our respective Departments. Our discussion focused on issues including the Council for Curriculum Examination and Assessment's Relationships and Sexuality Education Hub and the additional work completed by CCEA on this in 2020/21, preventative education programmes and the broader safeguarding programme, including the Safer Schools App.

I can confirm that during this meeting we agreed to establish a sub-group to consider the minimum content order for the curriculum and whether schools use this as the maximum level of curricular content for all their pupils, including those with special educational needs. It is our intention to identify any gaps in order to establish a more uniform and consistent approach to teaching topics such as dispelling rape myths and consent.

In addition to this, my Departmental officials are also reviewing current work programmes in relation to preventative education to ensure that any future programmes will address these sensitive topics.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister of Education for an update of the area planning proposal to merge Coleraine College, Dunluce High and North Coast Integrated College.

(AQO 1896/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) is currently working in partnership with representatives of three schools, Coleraine College, Dunluce School and North Coast Integrated College on a joint proposal for non-selective post primary provision in the Causeway area.

A steering group the 'Causeway Project Board' has been established which includes representation from the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, the Controlled Schools' Support Council and the Ulster University.

The EA has advised that the Causeway Project Board will meet on 15 April 2021 to finalise arrangements for a pre-publication consultation launch and engagement events.

My Department only becomes formally engaged in the process when the Development Proposals have been published.

Department of Finance

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Finance for a breakdown of all public procurement contracts awarded for the delivery of Personal Protection Equipment since February 2020, indicating (i) how long each company was registered with Companies House at the time of signing the contract; and (ii) the registration status of each company with the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency.

(AQW 17058/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Details of the contracts awarded for Personal Protection Equipment by Construction and Procurement Delivery within the Department of Finance were provided in response to AQW 17022/17-22.

Information regarding how long each company was registered with Companies House, or the registration status of each company with the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, is not held by the Department for the purpose of procurement for the following reasons;

- (i) **Companies House** – Registration with Companies House is not a prerequisite for supplying products here.
- (ii) **Medicines and Healthcare status** – Personal Protective Equipment is not considered to constitute a Medical Device and therefore is not subject to approval by this agency.

For further information regarding the checks carried out on PPE sourced to support frontline workers in dealing with the pandemic, please refer to the previous response to AQW 14508/17-22

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Finance (i) for an update on progress in bringing forward required regulations for his Department to pay out recently announced one-off grants for businesses totalling £178m, to assist with Covid-19 challenges; and (ii) when these payments are expected to be made.

(AQW 17081/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

- (i) Three Regulations to provide the legal authority for the £178 million in new business support grants which I announced on 15 March 2021, were made on 30 March and came into operation on 31 March 2021.
- (ii) The schemes and payment timeframes Land and Property Services (LPS) is working towards are:
 - The application portal for the £50,000 grant scheme for businesses in large NAV properties, as provided for in The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus) (Large Business) Regulations (NI) 2021, will open on 21 April and will remain open for 2 weeks;
 - Payments for the £25,000 grant scheme to mid-sized manufacturing businesses that did not receive funding in the first lockdown, as provided for in The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus) (Industrial Business) Regulations (NI) 2021 provide, will commence to be paid automatically from the end of April; and
 - Top-up payments to businesses that received the £10,000 and £25,000 grants in the first lockdown but have not received support in the second lockdown, as provided for in The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus) (Business Support) Regulations (NI) 2021, will commence to be paid automatically from the mid May.

I anticipate that the majority of payments from all three grant schemes will be processed by the end of May.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the progress towards the recognition of Irish language versions of legal documents such as wills and birth certificates.

(AQW 17117/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Officials in the General Register Office are currently working on options to enable official documents such as birth, death and marriage certificates to be available in the Irish language.

The Department of Justice has responsibility for wills and were asked for part input but no response has been received.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Finance to detail (i) the mental health related support is available for employees of the Northern Ireland Civil Service; and (ii) the criteria for accessing this support.

(AQW 17141/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

- I. The Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) has a number of mental health related support services available to its employees:

Welfare Support Service (WSS)

WSS is a part of NICS HR and provides all NICS staff with free emotional and practical advice and support on both work and domestic issues including mental health matters.

Staff can self-refer to WSS. Referrals are also accepted from line managers and the Employee Relations team within NICS HR (normally when member of staff is on sickness absence).

Welfare officers provide emotional and practical support and will signpost to the relevant support organisations. Welfare officers are trained in suicide prevention and are Mental Health First Aiders.

Covid-19 Health and Wellbeing information hub

An online health and wellbeing hub was developed in April 2020 as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The hub provides information and resources for a range of health and wellbeing issues, including mental health. It is updated regularly ensuring that the most up to date information is readily available to all NICS staff.

Employee Assistance Programme

The NICS Employee Assistance Programme (provided by Inspire Workplaces) is a free service to all Civil Service employees and provides access to a range of wellbeing support services including:

- Counselling services.
- 24/7 free telephone support line.
- The Inspire Support Hub.
- Specialist wellbeing information.

WELL

The WELL programme, provided by the Northern Ireland Civil Service Sports Association (NICSSA), is designed to develop a culture of health, wellbeing and engagement within the NICS. The programme seeks to improve all areas of health, with a particular focus on mental health issues. It is delivered through the provision of targeted events and initiatives available to staff at various locations. These free services are available to all Civil Service and include:

- Resilience building webinars.
- Health screening events.
- Health awareness and personal development courses.
- Nutrition seminars.
- Online fitness classes and other fitness campaigns.

The WELL team is supported by over 130 volunteer champions who work with and encourage staff within their local areas.

The Charity for Civil Servants

The Charity for Civil Servants offers support to civil servants, past and present, along with their financial dependents. Services include mental health support through the provision of a range of free online tools for health and wellbeing. These include:

- Mindfulness programmes.
- A sleep improvement programme.
- Access to relationship counselling via Relate.
- The Charity for Civil Servants Wellbeing App.
- Carer's passport and carer's statement digital tool.
- Online financial capability tools.
- Budget calculator.

The charity works in partnership with Anxiety UK, who have supplied a guide to support individuals who have pre-existing mental health issues such as anxiety disorders. The charity offers regular free webinars to civil servants on a range of topics, often mental health related.

NICSHR Learning & Development (L&D)

NICSHR L&D has developed a variety of free digital training products designed to help NICS staff look after their own mental health and wellbeing, and to assist line managers in supporting staff who may be experiencing mental health or wellbeing issues. A dedicated Well-being Learning Pathway is available via LInKS allowing staff to easily access the courses and resources available relating to mental health issues.

II. The Criteria for accessing this support.

As detailed in the responses above, these support services are free for all current NICS staff to access, with some limitations in use, for example the number of counselling sessions through Inspire.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance whether he will report to the Assembly on the administration of the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme, including (i) the reasons for overpayments; (ii) the number of businesses affected; and (iii) the reason for the variance between his Department and the Department of Health on whether close contact businesses in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area were permitted to trade between 5 October 2020 and 15 October 2020.

(AQW 17145/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

- (i) Land & Property Services was tasked with administering the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) at pace. Payments under LRSS are linked to the restrictions imposed by the Health Protection Regulations. These Regulations have changed many times making the Scheme complex to administer. The changes have resulted in 30 different payment amounts being payable to businesses for the period up to 14 April 2021. In the circumstances that the scheme was established and administered, it was accepted that there was a risk that payments may be made in error.

The review of payments has identified the following reasons for overpayment:

- Business Type not eligible
 - Business Type eligible for a limited period during restrictions only, but paid for a longer period
 - Business not occupying a commercial premises
 - Business not open and trading when restrictions began
 - Business ceased trading during period of restrictions
 - Accommodation business not Tourism NI approved
- (ii) LPS wrote to 480 businesses during the week commencing the 29 March 2021 regarding an overpayment or incorrect payment in respect of their LRSS application. The amount involved in these cases is £4.26 million, which is less than 1.6% of all payments made under the scheme to date. Businesses have the opportunity to appeal the Department's decision and provide further evidence to support their eligibility for the LRSS payments. This is expected to result in payments continuing to some of these businesses thereby reducing the overall amount of overpayments. Similarly if a business is eligible for one of the new Covid-19 support grants I announced on 15 March 2021, this can be offset against any overpayments. LPS will enter into a payment arrangement with any business which needs additional time to make any repayments.
- (iii) As I previously advised in my answer to AQW 16174/17-22, 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 close contact services to close during the period to 15 October 2020. As the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme was introduced to provide financial assistance for businesses directly restricted by the Health Protection Regulations I am, therefore, unable to extend support to any close contact service for that period.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether agency staff working in the Civil Service can attend medical appointments during working hours without loss of pay.

(AQW 17167/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Under contracts with CPL, Staffline and Premiere People (awarded in January 2021), recruitment agency staff are entitled to paid time off for medical appointments from day one of their assignment.

NICSHR is currently working to transition those agency staff engaged under the previous contract (known as the 2016 Framework - where agency staff were not entitled to paid time off for medical appointments), to the new contracts.

An existing separate agency contract with Hays (awarded in 2020) for qualified accountants does not include an entitlement for these agency staff to have paid time off for medical appointments.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance how many agency staff in the Civil Service took time off work for a medical appointment in each of the last five years.

(AQW 17168/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The management of recruitment agency staff, including their time and attendance, is the responsibility of the relevant line manager in the departmental team to which they are assigned.

This information is not recorded by line managers in the Civil Service as recruitment agency staff are not civil servants, but rather employees of the relevant recruitment agency.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance what steps he is taking to ensure that businesses that were not eligible for the £10,000 Land and Property Services grant in 2020 and who did not receive any payments under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme will be eligible for the announced £5000 support grant.

(AQW 17176/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Businesses which were not eligible for the initial £10,000 grant, either because the property they occupy was not on the Valuation List or the business was not in occupation of the property until after the 15 March 2020, will be eligible for the top up grant providing they meet qualifying criteria that were in place for the £10,000 Small Business Support Grant and all other qualifying criteria for the Top Up grant, including:

- On the 8th Valuation List with a Net Annual Value (NAV) not more than £15,000.
- In occupation and trading on the 1 March 2021.
- In receipt of Small Business Rate Relief or rated as Industrial.
- Have not availed of support through any other Executive Covid-19 Support Scheme including Localised Restrictions Support Scheme and Coronavirus Restrictions Business Support Scheme.

Land & Property Services will issue Top Up Grants automatically to qualifying businesses which did receive the initial £10,000.

Payment of the grant to businesses that have not previously received the £10,000 Small Business Support Grants will not be automatic in such cases and it may be necessary for the business to make an application. More information on the payments is available on the nibusinessinfo website.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance what additional monies he has secured from the Treasury to meet commitments made in the New Decade, New Approach agreement in relation to (i) health; and (ii) infrastructure.

(AQW 17177/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The financial package that accompanied the New Decade New Approach document provided the Executive with the following funding:

£million	Resource	Capital
NDNA - Agenda for Change pay	200.0	
NDNA - Transformation	240.0	
NDNA - Medical School in Derry	15.0	45.0
NDNA - Low Carbon Emission Public Transport		50.0
NDNA - General Pressures	350.0	
NDNA - Unique Circumstances	140.0	
<i>Total</i>	<i>945.0</i>	<i>95.0</i>

The financial package does not provide sufficient funding to address the priorities listed in the NDNA document.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether small businesses, recently independently rated by Land and Property Services with a Net Annual Value under £15,000 and previously excluded from £10,000 Small Business Support Grants, could be deemed eligible for upcoming £5,000 top-up payment grants.

(AQW 17246/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Businesses which have taken up occupation of an eligible property after the qualifying date for the initial £10,000 Small Business Support Grant will be eligible for Top Up Grant, providing they meet qualifying criteria that was in place for the £10,000 Small Business Support Grant and all other qualifying criteria for the Top Up grant are met including:

- On the 8th Valuation List with a Net Annual Value (NAV) not more than £15,000.
- In occupation and trading on the 1 March 2021.
- In receipt of Small Business Rate Relief or rated as Industrial.
- Have not availed of support through any other Executive Covid-19 Support Scheme including Localised Restrictions Support Scheme and Coronavirus Restrictions Business Support Scheme.

Land & Property Services will issue Top Up Grants automatically to qualifying businesses which did receive the initial £10,000 Small Business Support Grants.

Payment of the grant to businesses that have not previously received the £10,000 Small Business Support Grants will not be automatic in such cases and it may be necessary for the business to make an application. The nibusinessinfo website will be updated when details on how to apply are finalised.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance how (i) 480 businesses were required to repay grants received under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme; and (ii) some of those businesses were then advised that they did not have to repay their grants.

(AQW 17247/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

- (i) Land & Property Services was tasked with administering the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) at pace. Payments under LRSS are linked to the restrictions imposed by the Health Protection Regulations. These Regulations have changed many times making the Scheme complex to administer. The changes have resulted in 30 different payment amounts being payable to businesses for the period up to 14 April 2021. In the circumstances that the scheme was established and administered, it was accepted that there was a risk that payments may be made in error.

Therefore, Land & Property Services has been regularly reviewing all approved applications to ensure the scheme is being administered in line with the associated regulations and to identify instances where incorrect payments may have been made, including payments made outside of the scope of the regulations. This kind of 'post event assurance checking' is encouraged by the Northern Ireland Audit Office in Covid funding schemes and it was always intended that we would do this.

The review of payments has identified the following reasons for overpayment:

- Business Type not eligible
- Business Type eligible for a limited period during restrictions only, but paid for a longer period
- Business not occupying a commercial premises
- Business not open and trading when restrictions began

- Business ceased trading during period of restrictions
- Accommodation business not Tourism NI approved

For context, the amount involved in these cases is £4.26 million, which is less than 1.6% of all payments made under the scheme to date.

- (ii) The review was conducted using information held by Land & Property Services or freely available online. Businesses have the opportunity to appeal the decision regarding their eligibility and provide further evidence to support their appeal. If further information is supplied, the case will be reconsidered. On appeal, it may be determined that no overpayment has been made and the applicant will be advised of this.

I have written to the Finance Committee and the Permanent Secretary has written to the Public Accounts Committee and the Comptroller and Auditor General to advise them of this process.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance when the top-up grants for businesses that previously received the £25,000 and £10,000 support grants will be paid.

(AQW 17348/17-22)

Mr Murphy: These further business support top-up grant payments will be automatically issued to businesses that received the £10,000 Small Business Support Grant in 2020 or the £25,000 Retail, Tourism, Hospitality and Leisure Grant and have not been paid under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme or Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme: Part B, subject to scheme eligibility in line with the associated Regulations.

It is anticipated that these automatic payments will begin to issue by the end of May 2021. Ratepayers entitled to receive this grant will be informed by letter or email that a payment will be issued.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 14294/17-22, for an update on the Civil Service pay award.

(AQW 17349/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I recently made a two-year pay offer for civil servants to recognised Trades Unions which are consulting with their members. The offer, which was agreed by the Executive, represents a 4.8% increase over two years on the civil service pay bill at a cost of £44 million and is in contrast to the position in England where the majority of civil servants are facing a pay freeze in 2021. The offer acknowledges the hard work of civil servants while taking account of the current financial pressures being faced.

Staff due to receive an increase under the terms of any pay award for 2020 will receive any arrears backdated to 1 August 2020.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Finance to outline his plans to resume a graduate fast-track programme for the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

(AQW 17355/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Work is underway to develop proposals for a new Civil Service Management Trainee Scheme (similar to the British Government's Fast Stream model and the Scottish Government Graduate Development Programme), aimed at recruiting graduate talent into the Civil Service and expanding the leadership talent pool.

This work is alongside other activities, such as high volume open recruitment exercises (never done before), expanding the apprenticeship offering and increased student placement opportunities, both paid sandwich placements (for up to 51 weeks) as well as work experience opportunities.

Individual Civil Service Departments can already apply to avail of a six month placement of British Government Civil Service Fast Stream staff (who are on a three to four year development programme, gaining experience via a rotation of placements in Civil Service departments and other public sector organisations). This year, the Department for the Economy has obtained one Fast Stream General Service placement which started on 1 April 2021.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the Civil Service pay award.

(AQW 17367/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I refer the member to the answer for AQW 17349/17-22.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Finance to detail the 2020-21 underspends in (i) Resource Departmental Expenditure Limit; (ii) Capital Departmental Expenditure Limit; and (iii) Financial Transactions Capital spending allocations.

(AQW 17441/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The provisional outturn position will not be available until 14th May 2021. I will provide a statement to the Assembly on the position in due course.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Finance whether any of his Department's publications or advertising campaigns since January 2020 use images that have been photoshopped to alter the body of the participants.

(AQW 17446/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Any photographs of body images taken by or used by the Department of Finance Media and External Communications office for the purpose of Departmental publications are not photo shopped or altered for body image. I am not aware if other external sources alter their images in this manner.

The two current advertising agencies which the Department of Finance use have confirmed they do not use photo shopped body images in any advertisements.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance how much his Department has spent on producing material in Irish, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 17497/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department does not record separately the costs of producing materials, that is the cost of design, printing and issue etc., in different languages.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance how many staff within the Civil Service are employed on a reduced basis per week after taking their pension; and what benefits this brings to the Civil Service.

(AQW 17563/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There are 1460 staff (which accounts for approximately 6.64% of the total Civil Service headcount) employed on a reduced basis per week after taking their pension. This is referred to as partial retirement and is facilitated under Section 3.12 Job Reshaping (Partial Retirement) of the Civil Service Staff Handbook. Partial retirement enables an individual to transition to full retirement which in turn gives benefits to the Civil Service through the retention of the skills, experience and knowledge during the period of transition, and allowing time for succession planning and transfer of knowledge.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance whether Localised Restrictions Support Scheme grants will be available after the 30th April 2021 for businesses where, due to no outdoor or reduced capacity, it is not viable to open.

(AQW 17635/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The legal authority that was given to my Department to provide financial assistance relates only to those businesses that are restricted by the Health Regulations. Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) funding will continue for businesses until they are allowed to re-open or resume their normal services. When business sectors come out of restrictions my Department can no longer provide payment to businesses in that sector, regardless of whether an individual business actually opens or not.

Following the decisions taken by the Executive on 15 April, the LRSS will continue to support close contact services and outdoor visitor attractions until 22 April, and non-essential retail and self-contained tourist accommodation until 29 April.

Hospitality will be allowed to serve outside from 30 April. I think this is a positive first step for those businesses, but I recognise that not every café, restaurant or pub will be able to make that work. It isn't a full re-opening and businesses will still be subject to severe restrictions and will see a reduced trade. I have, therefore, agreed to continue paying businesses support payments on the basis that only being allowed to serve outside still represents a severe curtailing of the service which these businesses can offer. Businesses such as hospitality and gyms will therefore be paid until at least 23 May due to the restrictions that will continue to apply. I will keep this matter under review.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance what plans he has for the new Fiscal Council to report regularly to the Assembly as well as to the Executive.

(AQO 1911/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As I announced in a written statement to the Assembly on 12 March, both the Fiscal Council and the Fiscal Commission have now been established and their initial Terms of Reference and membership have been published on my department's website. Subsequently, the British Government have also indicated that they are content with my approach and the progress that has been made in establishing the Council.

I met with the Chairs and members of both bodies last month, who have now begun their important work.

That work includes the development of a communications plan by the Chair and members of the Council to clearly articulate the remit of the Council and engage with relevant stakeholders. The details of the plan will be published by the Council and I expect that this will involve early engagement with a wide range of stakeholders including with the Executive and MLAs.

However, as a fully independent body, it will not report nor is it answerable to either the Assembly or Executive. Rather as set out in the Terms of Reference, the Council will publish the assessments it makes of the Executive's finances each year and these will be available for all members and the public to see.

Finally, the immediate focus of the Council will be to deliver on the commitments within the New Decade New Approach. Beyond that, it will be for the Council to develop its future work programme where a wider remit could potentially evolve to include economic modelling.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Finance to outline the independent economic forecasting role of the new Fiscal Council.
(AQO 1912/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As I announced in a written statement to the Assembly on 12 March, both the Fiscal Council and the Fiscal Commission have now been established and their initial Terms of Reference and membership have been published on my department's website. Subsequently, the British Government have also indicated that they are content with my approach and the progress that has been made in establishing the Council.

I met with the Chairs and members of both bodies last month, who have now begun their important work.

That work includes the development of a communications plan by the Chair and members of the Council to clearly articulate the remit of the Council and engage with relevant stakeholders. The details of the plan will be published by the Council and I expect that this will involve early engagement with a wide range of stakeholders including with the Executive and MLAs.

However, as a fully independent body, it will not report nor is it answerable to either the Assembly or Executive. Rather as set out in the Terms of Reference, the Council will publish the assessments it makes of the Executive's finances each year and these will be available for all members and the public to see.

Finally, the immediate focus of the Council will be to deliver on the commitments within the New Decade New Approach. Beyond that, it will be for the Council to develop its future work programme where a wider remit could potentially evolve to include economic modelling.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Finance to outline the level of financial support his budget will provide for the Economic Recovery Action Plan.
(AQO 1913/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Final Budget provides £275.8m Resource DEL and £11m Capital to the Department for the Economy to support the Economic Recovery Plan in 2021-22. This allocation fully funds the Economic Recovery Action Plan which DfE bid for in the 2021-22 financial year.

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the completion of the Census 2021 online.
(AQO 1914/17-22)

Mr Murphy: To date over 90 per cent of households have completed their return. Of these around eight out of ten householders have completed their return online.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the work of the Fiscal Council and the Fiscal Commission.
(AQO 1917/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As I announced in a written statement to the Assembly on 12 March, both the Fiscal Council and the Fiscal Commission have now been established and their initial Terms of Reference and membership have been published on my department's website. Subsequently, the British Government have also indicated that they are content with my approach and the progress that has been made in establishing the Council.

I met with the Chairs and members of both bodies last month, who have now begun their important work.

That work includes the development of a communications plan by the Chair and members of the Council to clearly articulate the remit of the Council and engage with relevant stakeholders. The details of the plan will be published by the Council and I expect that this will involve early engagement with a wide range of stakeholders including with the Executive and MLAs.

However, as a fully independent body, it will not report nor is it answerable to either the Assembly or Executive. Rather as set out in the Terms of Reference, the Council will publish the assessments it makes of the Executive's finances each year and these will be available for all members and the public to see.

Finally, the immediate focus of the Council will be to deliver on the commitments within the New Decade New Approach. Beyond that, it will be for the Council to develop its future work programme where a wider remit could potentially evolve to include economic modelling.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of progress on the New Decade, New Approach commitment to end short-term budgeting.
(AQO 1918/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I am committed to the introduction of multi-year budgets.

However, the Executive's funding envelope is set by the British Government's Spending Review. Therefore the Executive's ability to set a multi-year budget is constrained by the period covered by the Spending Review.

Unfortunately the Spending Review 2020 provided an outcome for one year only.

It is hoped that the Treasury will announce a multi-year Spending Review in 2021 allowing the Executive to agree a multi-year Budget.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the new social value policy being developed by the Procurement Board.

(AQO 1915/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Procurement Board is currently considering an enhanced social value policy which is linked to PfG outcomes.

This policy will address a number of specific social, economic and environmental areas such as:

- Employment, training and skills;
- Building ethical and resilient supply chains;
- Equal opportunity and employment practices;
- Climate change; and
- Wellbeing;

and will allocate a minimum weighting of the award criteria to social value when assessing bids.

An innovation lab is planned for 5 May to discuss and finalise the new policy. I will update the Assembly as soon as this is agreed by the Executive.

Department of Health

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health (i) how many people have been asked to self-isolate as a result of the track and trace procedures in place; and (ii) how many of those asked to self-isolate have tested positive for COVID-19.

(AQW 8638/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): The Public Health Agency has advised that:

- (i) in the period from 25th May 2020 to 28 March 2021 there were 187,457 close contacts of positive cases successfully contacted and advised of the need to self-isolate.
- (ii) information on the number of close contacts who have been asked to self-isolate and who have subsequently tested positive for COVID-19 is not currently available.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health what mechanisms are in place to identify false positive COVID-19 tests, to capture incidences of false positives and to publish the associated trends.

(AQW 8756/17-22)

Mr Swann: Every diagnostic test for SARS-CoV2 or any other pathogen has its own performance profile.

Given the different testing PCR platforms and kits that are in use for SARS-CoV2 testing, it is extremely challenging to categorically define an overall false positivity rate.

However, to prevent the reporting of false positives, assessment of all positives is undertaken by the laboratory using key criteria that may indicate a false positive may be occurring. This criteria includes:

- If only 1 gene target out of 2 or 3 gene targets are positive; and
- Weak Ct values (viral load) close to the limit of detection.

When these indicators occur, repeat testing or testing the sample on a different platform with a different specificity profile is undertaken. This confirmatory testing clarifies the result in most cases.

Associated trends are not currently published.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the services his Department commissions from Public Health England in relation to COVID-19 (i) testing; (ii) contact tracing; and (iii) travel restrictions.

(AQW 9406/17-22)

Mr Swann: While the Department does not commission services in relation to COVID-19 directly from Public Health England (which from 1 April 2021 has been subsumed into the newly established UK Health Security Agency, together with the NHS Test & Trace and the Joint Bio-Security Centre) the Department and its Agencies continue to be involved in work undertaken on a UK-wide basis across a number of programmes including the National Testing Programme and work progressed by the Joint Bio-Security Centre (JBC).

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to detail the basis of the advice to the public only to seek a test for COVID-19 upon the development of symptoms, even if they have been in close contact with someone who has tested positive.

(AQW 9501/17-22)

Mr Swann: At the time of the question, general policy was that all people displaying symptoms of the SARS-Cov-2 virus were advised to come forward for testing.

Following investigation and advice from the Contact Tracing Service, close contacts who were not displaying symptoms may also have been advised to take a test in certain circumstances for example if there was an outbreak in an area or at a workplace. For other close contacts not advised to go for a test, the public health advice remained that they should isolate for 10 days irrespective of whether they developed symptoms and were subsequently tested. A subsequent negative test result does not alter the requirement to complete the full 10 day isolation period.

Testing policy in Northern Ireland continues to be reviewed regularly and updated in line with emerging scientific and medical evidence as we learn more about the SARS-Cov-2 virus, and as testing capacity has enhanced.

In April 2021, the offer of testing to all close contacts of positive cases in Northern Ireland has commenced.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what assessment has been made of the value for money provided by Serco in the COVID-19 test and trace system.

(AQW 9838/17-22)

Mr Swann: The National Testing Programme (Pillar 2) is managed by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), London, working in partnership locally to implement the programme with the Public Health Authority and the Department of Health in Northern Ireland. Serco are centrally contracted by the DHSC to support delivery of Pillar 2 testing as part of the National Testing Programme in Northern Ireland.

The Contact Tracing Service in Northern Ireland is operated by the Public Health Agency (PHA). SERCO have no involvement in operating this service.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health what the average length of time from the issuing of a notification of a positive test result for COVID-19 from the Central Test Registry to contacting all the case's close contacts, broken down for each week since April 2020.

(AQW 11154/17-22)

Mr Swann: Test results are issued directly from the National Testing Programme data systems to the individual and sent to the Central Test Registry. There are five uploads from the Registry to the Contact Tracing Service every day.

The information in the table below, provided by the Public Health Agency (PHA), shows the mean time in hours taken to complete contact tracing from the time the case was created (i.e. received in the Contact Tracing Centre). Data is available from 25 May 2020.

Week Ending	Average time taken to complete contact tracing (rounded to the nearest full hour)	Week Ending	Average time taken to complete contact tracing (rounded to the nearest full hour)
31/05/2020	11	08/11/2020	15
07/06/2020	9	15/11/2020	30
14/06/2020	7	22/11/2020	10
21/06/2020	7	29/11/2020	8
28/06/2020	6	06/12/2020	14
05/07/2020	3	13/12/2020	6
12/07/2020	6	20/12/2020	6
19/07/2020	13	27/12/2020	9
26/07/2020	4	03/01/2021	15
02/08/2020	9	10/01/2021	9
09/08/2020	13	17/01/2021	6
16/08/2020	17	24/01/2021	6
23/08/2020	15	31/01/2021	5
30/08/2020	38	07/02/2021	7
06/09/2020	48	14/02/2021	7
13/09/2020	89	21/02/2021	7
20/09/2020	56	28/02/2021	7
27/09/2020	73	07/03/2021	8
04/10/2020	68	14/03/2021	7

Week Ending	Average time taken to complete contact tracing (rounded to the nearest full hour)	Week Ending	Average time taken to complete contact tracing (rounded to the nearest full hour)
11/10/2020	39	21/03/2021	9
18/10/2020	32	28/03/2021	8
25/10/2020	30	04/04/2021	8
01/11/2020	25	11/04/2021	8

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health how many people have not turned up to COVID-19 test appointments; and how these are logged for statistical purposes.

(AQW 11989/17-22)

Mr Swann: Management Information for weeks commencing 1 February 2021 – 24 March 2021, record a daily average of 90 missed appointments for COVID-19 testing.

The Public Health Agency continue to monitor the occurrences of missed appointments. The information has been extracted from the management information system hosted by the Department of Health and Social Care London, who manage the National Testing Programme booking system.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health (i) why the decision was taken to close the Urgent Care Centre at the Downe Hospital to be replaced with a nurse-led Minor Injuries service on Christmas Day 2020; (ii) when this decision was taken; (iii) what the corporate strategy was to communicate this to the public; and (iv) for his assessment of the adequacy of 10 days' notice to inform the people of Down and Mourne of this decision.

(AQW 12088/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) Despite the best efforts of the South Eastern Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust to ensure appropriate staff cover across the Trust during the entire Christmas holiday period, the insufficient availability of doctors on Christmas Day meant that a nurse-led minor injuries service was available on a 'phone first' basis from 9am-5pm. The Consultant-led Urgent Care Centre re-opened as normal on Monday 28 December 2020, and was also open on New Year's Day, 1 January 2021.
- (ii) This decision was taken on Monday 14 December 2020.
- (ii) The Trust communicated the Christmas Day change of service to local elected representatives, local media and the public on the morning 15 December 2020. The Health and Social Care Board also communicated Christmas opening hours messages at that time through relevant website and social media channels.
- (iv) The pressures facing HSC services over the winter months were more challenging than at any period during the entire COVID-19 pandemic. I am grateful to the staff who ensured that unscheduled care services could be provided across Northern Ireland during the Christmas period, and to the public for the understanding that has consistently been demonstrated about the unprecedented nature of these challenges. Unfortunately it is not always possible to provide greater notice about the range of contingency measures that have been necessary to sustain services.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health, in relation to the changes at the Downe Hospital Emergency Department during autumn 2020, (i) when the decision was taken to implement these changes; (ii) when the decision was implemented; and (iii) when the Equality Impact Assessment documents were approved.

(AQW 12718/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust informed my Department on 2 October 2020 that the Downe ED was not likely to reopen as planned on 19 October 2020, and that a Consultant-led Urgent Care Centre would be in place from that date. This was confirmed by the Trust on Monday 5 October 2020.
- (ii) The Urgent Care Centre opened at the Downe Hospital on 19 October 2020.
- (iii) These plans formed part of the Trust's Phase 3 Rebuilding plans and the Trust's Resilience and COVID-19 Surge Plan. Equality screening for these plans commenced in October 2020, were presented to the Trust's Executive Management Team for review and approval on 13 October 2020, and were formally approved on 16 October 2020.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether Tocilizumab and Sarilumab are being used in the treatment of stroke in the Health Service.

(AQW 12740/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer to my answer to AQW 12925/17-22 for the licensed indications for these medicines. Neither tocilizumab nor sarilumab are licensed to treat stroke. Use of these medicines to treat stroke would be considered off-label. Decisions to prescribe a particular medicine are made by clinicians working in partnership with patients and their families, taking into account the evidence, the potential risks and benefits of treatment, and individual circumstances.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister of Health to detail the timetable for the vaccination of those in the clinically vulnerable category who are currently in sheltered housing.
(AQW 13044/17-22)

Mr Swann: As sheltered housing facilities were a high priority in the Covid-19 vaccination programme, Trust vaccination teams actively targeted those facilities akin to care homes from an early stage in the programme.

As a consequence of this early engagement Trusts have almost completed vaccination visits to those who are currently in sheltered housing.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to detail any North South co-operation or work on child post-mortem services.
(AQW 13181/17-22)

Mr Swann: The full range of paediatric pathology and post mortem services is available to parents from across Northern Ireland, however, it has been necessary to deliver these services from Alder Hey Children's Hospital in Liverpool since January 2019.

My Department remains committed to restoring the local provision of these services, including through an all-island approach if feasible, however it is acknowledged that this would take several years to develop and implement. Despite numerous national and international recruitment drives by the Belfast Trust since 2015, it remains extremely challenging across these islands to recruit and train staff in this highly specialised area of medicine. It has also not been possible to progress exploratory work with the Department of Health in Ireland due to other priorities including the COVID-19 pandemic, however this will be progressed as soon as it is feasible to do so.

In the meantime my Department's priority is to ensure that bereaved parents continue to have access to the highest quality services which provide not only the clinical answers and the rapid reporting that families expect, but also the care and support that they require and deserve. I am assured from the initial feedback my Department has received that the interim arrangement with Alder Hey provides this. A formal evaluation of the service will proceed when COVID-19 pressures permit.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the services his Department commissions from Public Health England in relation to COVID-19 (i) testing; (ii) contact tracing; and (iii) travel restrictions.
(AQW 13238/17-22)

Mr Swann: While the Department does not commission services in relation to COVID-19 directly from Public Health England (which from 1 April 2021 has been subsumed into the newly established UK Health Security Agency, together with the NHS Test & Trace and the Joint Bio-Security Centre) the Department and its Agencies continue to be involved in work undertaken on a UK-wide basis across a number of programmes including the National Testing Programme and work progressed by the Joint Bio-Security Centre (JBC).

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health for an update on the reintroduction of child post mortem facilities.
(AQW 13270/17-22)

Mr Swann: The full range of paediatric pathology and post mortem services is available to parents from across Northern Ireland, however, it has been necessary to deliver these services from Alder Hey Children's Hospital in Liverpool since January 2019.

My Department remains committed to restoring the local provision of these services, including through an all-island approach if feasible, however it is acknowledged that this would take several years to develop and implement. Despite numerous national and international recruitment drives by the Belfast Trust since 2015, it remains extremely challenging across these islands to recruit and train staff in this highly specialised area of medicine. It has also not been possible to progress exploratory work with the Department of Health in Ireland due to other priorities including the COVID-19 pandemic, however this will be progressed as soon as it is feasible to do so.

In the meantime my Department's priority is to ensure that bereaved parents continue to have access to the highest quality services which provide not only the clinical answers and the rapid reporting that families expect, but also the care and support that they require and deserve. I am assured from the initial feedback my Department has received that the interim arrangement with Alder Hey provides this. A formal evaluation of the service will proceed when COVID-19 pressures permit.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health whether he has bid for money to support a carers payment.
(AQW 13400/17-22)

Mr Swann: On 28 January I announced my intention to provide our carers with a one off award as a small recognition for the exceptional contribution that they make to our society. The Department previously secured funds for Covid-19 pressures in 20/21, including for a potential one off payment to carers.

Intense work has been undertaken to explore how such an award might be delivered. However a payment to carers will be significantly more complex to administer than recent one-off payments made to other groups. I have therefore written to my Executive colleagues requesting their support with this initiative as cross-departmental collaboration will be required. Work will continue to explore how we can make such an award a reality.

I am however pleased to have been able to allocate £4.4m to establish a new Support for Carers' Fund. This will provide very valuable support for charities working with and for carers.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 12189/17-22, how his Department will manage the COVID-19 vaccination programme to ensure vulnerable people are invited to attend for vaccination, taking into account when his Department is unaware how many people, or who, is not registered with a general practitioner.

(AQW 13566/17-22)

Mr Swann: The model for vaccine deployment has been designed to be pragmatic, agile and flexible for all, but in particular those vulnerable people who may be at high risk of exposure to infection and are at higher clinical risk of severe disease and mortality.

Trusts have put special arrangements in place for the homeless, asylum seekers and GB residents currently staying in Northern Ireland, e.g. some 1,200 homeless people have been identified and their vaccinations have begun.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for his assessment on the progress of vaccinating over 70 year olds against COVID-19.

(AQW 13706/17-22)

Mr Swann: As of 18th April 2021, 100% of the total estimated number of people aged 75 to 79 have received a first dose of vaccine. Some 26% have received their second dose. 91% of people aged 70 to 74 have received their first dose of vaccine and 9% their second dose. In total, 135,483 persons aged 70-79 have received at least one dose of vaccine.

The population in this age cohort has therefore largely received their first dose of vaccine and has already begun to receive their second dose.

This is to be commended and is a testament to the work of GP practices and Trusts across Northern Ireland.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of COVID-19 clusters that were reported to the Health and Safety Executive by the Public Health Agency, in each month since February 2020, broken down by the size of the cluster.

(AQW 14090/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Public Health Agency (PHA) has advised from 1st November 2020 to 24th February 2021 there were 201 COVID-19 clusters/outbreaks reported to the Health and Safety Executive (HSENI) by the PHA. Prior to November 2020, PHA did not collate the data in the format requested.

A COVID-19 cluster/outbreak may require more than one referral to HSENI, as clusters/outbreaks can grow over time and need to be reassessed. Therefore, whilst there were 201 clusters/outbreaks in total during the period above, this generated a total of 229 reported to HSENI.

A breakdown of the 229 COVID-19 clusters/outbreaks reported to HSENI is given in Table 1 below.

Table 1: COVID-19 Clusters/Outbreaks referred to HSENI

Cluster Size	No. of Referrals			
	Nov 20	Dec 20	Jan 21	Feb 21
1 to 5	18	16	32	4
6 to 20	21	34	25	41
21 to 50	3	2	6	15
51+	0	1	5	6
Total	42	53	68	66

Information on the number of outbreaks and clusters by setting is now available on the Public Health Agency website and can be accessed using the following link:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/covid-19-clusteroutbreak-summary>

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health when fertility clinics will reopen and treatments resume.
(AQW 15911/17-22)

Mr Swann: Covid-19 has had a significant impact on what services can be delivered in the Belfast Trust and indeed throughout the region. Due to the pandemic, the Trust had to focus resources on those life critical and time critical services, which meant downturning a lot of other services including providing fertility treatment at the Regional Fertility Centre (RFC).

However, virtual outpatient appointments continued during the recent pause in treatment and the RFC completed risk assessments to ascertain if it could safely increase the number of patients attending the RFC and provide additional appointments. As a result, a limited number of diagnostic semen analysis appointments resumed on 18 March. Face to face appointments resumed for a number of RFC outpatient clinics from 7 April. These will operate in parallel with the existing schedule of virtual appointments.

The RFC has also resumed frozen embryo transfer services. IVF/ICSI patients who had treatment paused in January have been contacted directly by the RFC to reschedule their treatment; once these patients have been rescheduled, the next patients on the waiting list will be contacted.

The RFC has also advised that it will provide a regular update to patients on its website at <https://belfasttrust.hscni.net/services/rfc/>

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of whether metastatic spinal cord compression services meet NICE guidelines CG75.
(AQW 16304/17-22)

Mr Swann: I can advise that my Department has endorsed the relevant NICE guidance and Health and Social Care Trusts are currently working towards their implementation in metastatic spinal cord compression (MSCC) services.

Where implementation is likely to require sizeable service change the guidance recognises that full implementation may take some time as it may be reliant on significant investment or strategic change to the existing MSCC services.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health when he will bring forward a COVID-19 recovery plan to address waiting lists.
(AQW 16384/17-22)

Mr Swann: 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. HSC Trusts have prepared rebuilding plans for the next three months and I will shortly publish an elective care recovery framework that will set out the 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. It will require major sustained investment over the next ten years 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.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health for an update on a new action plan for waiting times in line with New Decade, New Approach.
(AQW 16584/17-22)

Mr Swann: 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. HSC Trusts have prepared rebuilding plans for the next three months and I will shortly publish an elective care recovery framework that will set out the 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. It will require major sustained investment over the next ten years 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 Buckley asked the Minister of Health how many care homes have fully implemented the Care Partner role without any time restrictions or limits to the number of individual care partner visits, as per the latest government regional guidance.
(AQW 16602/17-22)

Mr Swann: Up to and including 12 April 2021, 302 homes reported that they have implemented the care partner scheme with at least one care partner. Information relating to time restrictions or limits to the number of individual care partner visits is not available.

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 Sugden asked the Minister of Health to detail the correspondence he has had with care providers in order to facilitate face-to-face visits for residents and their families; and for his assessment of the difficulties currently faced by relatives trying to visit loved ones in care homes.

(AQW 16608/17-22)

Mr Swann: Guidance for nursing and residential care homes in Northern Ireland was first issued on 17 March 2020 and an updated version issued on 26 April 2020, which detailed information for the care home sector regarding visiting restrictions and included advice about visiting at end of life. This guidance continues to be updated in line with scientific advice.

Guidance on the principles for visiting in care settings including care partner arrangements, was published on 23rd September. Supplementary information was provided on 13th November with a letter issued to providers and Trusts the same day.

There continues to be a significant number of families who still feel they have not been able to visit their relatives with any kind of regularity or be in a position to set up care partner arrangements, in line with regional guidance. It is my stated position that care home visiting and the utilisation of care partners' support can be safely facilitated through compliance with the regional principles for visiting in care settings that are clearly set out in the existing guidance.

I understand that some providers remain cautious about permitting visiting based on their experiences to date of managing the transmission and the impact of COVID-19 but with the support of Trusts, PHA, HSCB and the RQIA, we are keen to allay those fears.

Guidance provided by my Department sets out the approach as to how safely managed visiting can be achieved as well as a clear expectation that where possible the care partner role will be facilitated should families wish to avail of it. Where homes are seeking to implement visiting and care partner guidance, funding is available to them. In addition, local Trusts will continue to engage with care homes to assist in the implementation of visiting guidance.

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 most recent letter issued to the sector in April 2021 by the Chief Nursing Officer and Chief Social Work Officer underlines these points and provides additional clarity.

I can also confirm that under the auspices of the PHA, a 'Moving Towards Normalised Care Home Visiting in Northern Ireland Task and Finish Group' has been established. The purpose of the Group is to develop an approach, for my endorsement, which will support a safe and proportionate return to normalised care home visiting as restrictions in Northern Ireland are eased from April 2021.

The Grouping is made up of representatives from the:-

- HSCB, PHA, RQIA, Trusts, COPNI and PCC;
- Departmental policy Directorates;
- Representatives from various relatives Groupings; and
- the Independent Healthcare Providers

As the Group's work is progressed support for the sector in facilitating visiting and establishing and maintaining Care Partners arrangements will continue.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health for an update on the Cancer Strategy.

(AQW 16643/17-22)

Mr Swann: Delivery of the Strategy has been delayed due to the need for redeployment of staff to respond to the impact of the global pandemic. However, it is still my intention that this important piece of work will be available for external consultation through the summer of 2021.

Under the Cancer Strategy remit my Department, with support from the HSC Board has prepared a draft COVID-19 recovery plan. The plan is aligned with the cancer strategy and identifies cancer services badly impacted by the pandemic. The plan identifies and seeks to implement a range of actions to support and recover these services over a 3 year timeframe. There are significant costs associated with the plan and delivery will be subject to receiving the required level of investment.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health how many staff from the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust will staff the SSE Arena Vaccination process.

(AQW 16679/17-22)

Mr Swann: As at 19th April 2021, a total of 364 staff from the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust have staffed the SSE Arena Vaccination Centre.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health when the booking system for vaccinations at the SSE Arena will be open.

(AQW 16683/17-22)

Mr Swann: In advance of the SSE Arena going live on the 29th March the booking platform opened at 12 noon on Tuesday 23rd March 2021.

The SSE Arena vaccination slots are available to those currently eligible for the vaccination programme who have not as yet been vaccinated elsewhere. Those wishing to book an appointment are not required to reside in Belfast.

In just the first two weeks, staff at the Vaccination Centre at the SSE Arena have administered over 32,000 doses.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 9525/17-22, whether there have been any changes to the support offered to Health and Social Care staff for (i) accommodation; (ii) access to food and fluids; (iii) psychological support; and (iv) additional break time areas.

(AQW 16693/17-22)

Mr Swann: The range of supports outlined in my response to AQW 9525/17-22 continue to be offered to staff.

On the 19th April I announced that I have allocated £15m to Health Trusts to boost the support available for healthcare workers across Northern Ireland. This is in addition to the establishment of new grant schemes for cancer and mental health charities and a Carers Support Fund.

This funding for Health Trusts is intended to provide both general support and specific support to nursing staff. The money will be split evenly across the five local Trusts.

I have asked that a significant focus be given to supporting the practical day to day needs of staff such as improving comfort in the workplace and making sure funding is available for staff that want to undertake additional education or training.

Healthcare Staff have given so much over the last 13 months and it is important for this to be recognised and for them to be supported.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Health to outline the reasons for the differential in terms of percentage of COVID-19 Vaccine first doses administered in England as compared to Northern Ireland.

(AQW 16703/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member will be aware that temporary variation in vaccination numbers is to be expected although overall the uptake by the public remains very good.

To date 860,313 first doses vaccines have been administered to an eligible population of approximately 1.4 million.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 15130/17-22, (i) whether his Department collects any data on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder PTSD; (ii) the reasons for this; (iii) for his assessment of PTSD in Northern Ireland; and (iv) what plans he has to address this issue.

(AQW 16736/17-22)

Mr Swann: I recognise that the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can have a significant impact on a person's day-to-day life. Services for individuals with a potential diagnosis of PTSD are offered on both a regional and trust level.

My Department does not routinely collect data on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) but instead uses latest academic research to help inform service planning and delivery, as required. Going forward, the proposed Regional Trauma Network will further complement existing support services by providing a quality trauma service to further address and treat this cohort of individuals as well as assist with data collection on PTSD.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he has considered a prerequisite percentage of the population being vaccinated before hospitality restrictions can be eased.

(AQW 16777/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member will be aware that hospitality restrictions will be eased once it is considered safe to do so. This decision will be based on medical and scientific evidence and advice.

Vaccine coverage is not the determining factor in the re-opening of this sector.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the adequacy of support services for children and adults with autism in Castleberg.

(AQW 16793/17-22)

Mr Swann: The provision of supports and interventions for children and adults in relation to autism are operational matters for individual Trusts and, as such, are assessed on a case by case basis and tailored dependent on the needs of the individual and their family and carers.

Individuals within the Castleberg area can avail of access to the broad range of services available within the Western Health and Social Care Trust which include post diagnostic interventions, clinical helplines and autism intervention sessions for parents. Throughout the pandemic these have also been available via digital platforms, where appropriate.

Diagnosed autistic adults who require access to support services within the Trust can avail of services delivered through Primary Care services, Intellectually Disability services and Adult Autism Services.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health what steps his Department is taking, in addition to the care partner scheme, to enable residents in care homes to have visits from family members.

(AQW 16829/17-22)

Mr Swann: Guidance provided by my Department sets out how safely managed visiting can be achieved as well as a clear expectation that where possible the care partner role will be facilitated should families wish to avail of it. Where homes are seeking to implement visiting and care partner arrangements funding has been available to assist them.

All 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. We will be writing to Trusts to advise of the mechanisms that already exist within the Regional Contract where there are concerns the approaches being taken by Care Homes are not human rights compliant or raise safeguarding concerns.

My Department has recently commissioned the Public Health Agency (PHA), to establish a Task and Finish Group to develop a new approach which supports the safe and proportionate return to normalised visiting in care homes, as restrictions in Northern Ireland are eased from April 2021. The Group's recommendations will be submitted for endorsement by the end of April.

The Group includes representatives from the:-

- HSCB, PHA, RQIA, Trusts, COPNI and PCC;
- Departmental policy Directorates;
- Representatives from various relatives groupings; and
- Independent Healthcare Providers

While these new arrangements are being formulated we will continue to support the sector in facilitating visiting and establishing and maintaining Care Partners arrangements. The Department continues to support Care Partners arrangements by making regular testing available to nominated care partners. To provide additional assurance to assist and support visiting in care homes, work is also continuing to expand testing for visitors to care homes using lateral flow devices (LFDs). This will be in addition to existing mitigation measures including personal protective equipment (PPE), social distancing, good hand hygiene, and other robust infection, prevention and control (IPC) measures.

While some Providers remain cautious about expanding visiting based on their experiences of the impact of COVID-19, with the support of Trusts, PHA, HSCB and the RQIA colleagues, we remain very keen to allay those fears and provide assistance where appropriate.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health for an update on the future use of Northfield House in Donaghadee.

(AQW 16833/17-22)

Mr Swann: Northfield House, Donaghadee is currently being used as an intermediate care residential facility which has supported individual discharge from hospital for a period of rehabilitation care and support. At this time there are no plans to change this purpose.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether long Covid clinics will be available to people who have not had a positive COVID test.

(AQW 16913/17-22)

Mr Swann: Since the publication by the National Institute for Care and Health Excellence (NICE) of a rapid guideline on the condition in December 2020, the Health and Social Care Board have been tasked with developing proposals for the assessment and treatment of people who continue to experience long-term health effects as a result of Covid-19 infection.

In developing the proposals, HSCB is engaging with the primary and secondary care sectors as well as other stakeholder groups. In addition, it is reviewing the different approaches being taken in England, Scotland and Wales to ensure that we have the right service to meet the needs of people in Northern Ireland. Once a service model has been identified, work will be undertaken to rapidly develop the appropriate services. Funding requirements for post-Covid services will be developed once the model is identified.

It is anticipated that services will be available to people who have had a positive Covid-19 test, and those who have not.

Data on the incidence of post-Covid syndrome is being recorded however there will be insufficient data to conduct analysis for a number of months. In the interim, the available evidence and research on prevalence at the UK level continues to be monitored.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how the Health Service is recording details of people with long Covid.

(AQW 16914/17-22)

Mr Swann: Since the publication by the National Institute for Care and Health Excellence (NICE) of a rapid guideline on the condition in December 2020, the Health and Social Care Board have been tasked with developing proposals for the assessment and treatment of people who continue to experience long-term health effects as a result of Covid-19 infection.

In developing the proposals, HSCB is engaging with the primary and secondary care sectors as well as other stakeholder groups. In addition, it is reviewing the different approaches being taken in England, Scotland and Wales to ensure that we have the right service to meet the needs of people in Northern Ireland. Once a service model has been identified, work will be undertaken to rapidly develop the appropriate services. Funding requirements for post-Covid services will be developed once the model is identified.

It is anticipated that services will be available to people who have had a positive Covid-19 test, and those who have not.

Data on the incidence of post-Covid syndrome is being recorded however there will be insufficient data to conduct analysis for a number of months. In the interim, the available evidence and research on prevalence at the UK level continues to be monitored.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to detail the resources being allocated to research treatment plans for long Covid. (AQW 16915/17-22)

Mr Swann: Since the publication by the National Institute for Care and Health Excellence (NICE) of a rapid guideline on the condition in December 2020, the Health and Social Care Board have been tasked with developing proposals for the assessment and treatment of people who continue to experience long-term health effects as a result of Covid-19 infection.

In developing the proposals, HSCB is engaging with the primary and secondary care sectors as well as other stakeholder groups. In addition, it is reviewing the different approaches being taken in England, Scotland and Wales to ensure that we have the right service to meet the needs of people in Northern Ireland. Once a service model has been identified, work will be undertaken to rapidly develop the appropriate services. Funding requirements for post-Covid services will be developed once the model is identified.

It is anticipated that services will be available to people who have had a positive Covid-19 test, and those who have not.

Data on the incidence of post-Covid syndrome is being recorded however there will be insufficient data to conduct analysis for a number of months. In the interim, the available evidence and research on prevalence at the UK level continues to be monitored.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to outline the measures taken to vaccinate pregnant women in line with guidance by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. (AQW 16987/17-22)

Mr Swann: Vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which advises the 4 UK Health Ministers.

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) provides advice on the measures taken to vaccinate pregnant women:-

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/961287/Greenbook_chapter_14a_v7_12Feb2021.pdf

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) has amended its previous highly precautionary advice on COVID-19 vaccines and pregnancy or breastfeeding. Vaccination with either vaccine in pregnancy should be considered where the risk of exposure SARS-CoV2 infection is high and cannot be avoided, or where the woman has underlying conditions that place her at very high risk of serious complications of COVID-19, and the risks and benefits of vaccination should be discussed.

Those who are trying to become pregnant do not need to avoid pregnancy after vaccination, and breastfeeding women may be offered vaccination with either vaccine following consideration of the woman's clinical need for immunisation against COVID-19. The UK Chief Medical Officers agree with this advice:-

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-hss-md-93-2020.pdf>

The Department does not hold operational information how many pregnant women have received a COVID-19 vaccine nor the risk assessments that have been carried out in relation to pregnant women not receiving a vaccination for COVID-19. The member may wish to make inquiries with the HSCB and individual HSC Trusts.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how many pregnant women have received a COVID-19 vaccine. (AQW 16989/17-22)

Mr Swann: Vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which advises the 4 UK Health Ministers.

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) provides advice on the measures taken to vaccinate pregnant women:-

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/961287/Greenbook_chapter_14a_v7_12Feb2021.pdf

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) has amended its previous highly precautionary advice on COVID-19 vaccines and pregnancy or breastfeeding. Vaccination with either vaccine in pregnancy should be considered where the risk of exposure SARS-CoV2 infection is high and cannot be avoided, or where the woman has underlying conditions that place her at very high risk of serious complications of COVID-19, and the risks and benefits of vaccination should be discussed.

Those who are trying to become pregnant do not need to avoid pregnancy after vaccination, and breastfeeding women may be offered vaccination with either vaccine following consideration of the woman's clinical need for immunisation against COVID-19. The UK Chief Medical Officers agree with this advice:-

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-hss-md-93-2020.pdf>

The Department does not hold operational information how many pregnant women have received a COVID-19 vaccine nor the risk assessments that have been carried out in relation to pregnant women not receiving a vaccination for COVID-19. The member may wish to make inquiries with the HSCB and individual HSC Trusts.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what risk assessments have been carried out in relation to pregnant women not receiving a vaccination for COVID-19.

(AQW 16991/17-22)

Mr Swann: Vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which advises the 4 UK Health Ministers.

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) provides advice on the measures taken to vaccinate pregnant women:-

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/961287/Greenbook_chapter_14a_v7_12Feb2021.pdf

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) has amended its previous highly precautionary advice on COVID-19 vaccines and pregnancy or breastfeeding. Vaccination with either vaccine in pregnancy should be considered where the risk of exposure SARS-CoV2 infection is high and cannot be avoided, or where the woman has underlying conditions that place her at very high risk of serious complications of COVID-19, and the risks and benefits of vaccination should be discussed.

Those who are trying to become pregnant do not need to avoid pregnancy after vaccination, and breastfeeding women may be offered vaccination with either vaccine following consideration of the woman's clinical need for immunisation against COVID-19. The UK Chief Medical Officers agree with this advice:-

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-hss-md-93-2020.pdf>

The Department does not hold operational information how many pregnant women have received a COVID-19 vaccine nor the risk assessments that have been carried out in relation to pregnant women not receiving a vaccination for COVID-19. The member may wish to make inquiries with the HSCB and individual HSC Trusts.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the funding allocated to each cross border service in each of the last five years; and whether he will make a statement on the matter.

(AQW 17013/17-22)

Mr Swann: The cost of services purchased from the Republic of Ireland from the HSC budget over the last 5 years are as follows:

2015/16 £000's	2016/17 £000's	2017/18 £000's	2018/19 £000's	2019/20 £000's
4,982	9,082	11,606	16,040	18,870

The cost of services provided to the Republic of Ireland (which provide a source of funding for the HSC) over the last 5 years are as follows:

2015/16 £000's	2016/17 £000's	2017/18 £000's	2018/19 £000's	2019/20 £000's
1,036	1,971	3,851	3,845	4,172

The following funding has been provided to HSC from EU Interreg VA monies to support a range of cross border project work, with costs attributed to both HSC and HSE organisations. Note as this is EU funding the figures are provided in Euros and calendar years:

2017 - Year 1 €000's	2018 - Year 2 €000's	2019 - Year 3 €000's	2020 - Year 4 €000's
188	2,643	4,948	6,476

I do not intend to make a statement at this time.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the services his Department currently has responsibility for commissioning.

(AQW 17043/17-22)

Mr Swann: In broad terms, services commissioned can be categorised as falling into the following high level programme areas; acute services, maternal and child health, family and child care, older people's services, mental health services, learning disability, physical and sensory services, health improvement and primary care, including General Practitioners, Community Pharmacists, Dentists and Optometrists.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the number and quantities of antidepressants prescribed in each constituency, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 17059/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number and quantity of antidepressants prescribed in each constituency is not known, but the number and quantity of antidepressant prescription items dispensed by a community pharmacist or dispensing doctor in each constituency, in each of the last three years, are shown in the tables overleaf.

Table 1a: The number and quantity of antidepressant prescription items dispensed by community pharmacists or dispensing doctors in each constituency, in 2018 ^{1,2}

Constituency ³	2018		
	Number of prescription items	Quantity of tablets/ capsules	Volume of oral solution/ liquid (mls)
Belfast East	189,151	7,800,454	121,414
Belfast North	296,277	11,185,049	165,809
Belfast South	181,701	7,470,106	86,951
Belfast West	234,751	8,940,029	144,998
East Antrim	124,668	5,195,907	77,207
East Londonderry	164,598	6,260,087	94,229
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	176,515	5,882,253	54,119
Foyle	241,806	8,158,589	89,595
Lagan Valley	138,575	6,655,029	107,909
Mid Ulster	135,428	5,216,900	73,986
Newry and Armagh	200,759	7,859,280	104,014
North Antrim	172,172	7,298,977	76,026
North Down	134,313	5,763,851	116,676
South Antrim	130,673	5,333,795	90,584
South Down	181,090	7,161,786	140,347
Strangford	122,866	5,502,404	83,661
Upper Bann	229,868	10,520,270	85,120
West Tyrone	171,933	7,081,053	88,999
Total	3,227,144	129,285,819	1,801,644

Source: Family Practitioner Services, HSC Business Services Organisation.

- 1 All information is for prescriptions prescribed in Primary care and dispensed by a community pharmacist or dispensing doctor and based on the year of payment. Data on secondary care prescribing and private prescriptions are not included. Data includes prescriptions from out-of-hours surgeries and non-medical prescribers who are employed and based within a GP surgery. Hospice items and items prescribed in other parts of the UK but dispensed in NI are excluded.
- 2 Anti-depressant items are defined as those categorised under British National Formulary (BNF) chapter 4, section 3.
- 3 Data is allocated to a constituency on the basis of the prescribing practice as assigned by the NISRA Central Postcode Directory. The constituency may therefore be different from a patient's home address.

Table 1b: The number and quantity of antidepressant prescription items dispensed by community pharmacists or dispensing doctors in each constituency, in 2019^{1,2}

Constituency ³	2019		
	Number of prescription items	Quantity of tablets/ capsules	Volume of oral solution/ liquid (mls)
Belfast East	198,756	8,119,185	108,778
Belfast North	308,585	11,558,774	194,571
Belfast South	188,267	7,707,054	82,901
Belfast West	248,573	9,436,044	154,601
East Antrim	132,683	5,493,819	65,625
East Londonderry	172,733	6,566,062	95,710
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	183,001	6,062,661	56,816
Foyle	257,430	8,649,265	95,265
Lagan Valley	149,214	7,031,935	86,882
Mid Ulster	141,257	5,392,056	83,497
Newry and Armagh	207,518	8,141,087	103,569
North Antrim	184,787	7,724,942	78,631
North Down	142,447	6,126,443	110,181
South Antrim	138,456	5,653,247	94,845
South Down	191,355	7,522,670	153,952
Strangford	128,259	5,797,669	86,280
Upper Bann	241,648	10,979,831	86,733
West Tyrone	184,201	7,499,175	96,150
Total	3,399,170	135,461,919	1,834,987

Source: Family Practitioner Services, HSC Business Services Organisation.

- 1 All information is for prescriptions prescribed in Primary care and dispensed by a community pharmacist or dispensing doctor and based on the year of payment. Data on secondary care prescribing and private prescriptions are not included. Data includes prescriptions from out-of-hours surgeries and non-medical prescribers who are employed and based within a GP surgery. Hospice items and items prescribed in other parts of the UK but dispensed in NI are excluded.
- 2 Anti-depressant items are defined as those categorised under British National Formulary (BNF) chapter 4, section 3.
- 3 Data is allocated to a constituency on the basis of the prescribing practice as assigned by the NISRA Central Postcode Directory. The constituency may therefore be different from a patient's home address.

Table 1c: The number and quantity of antidepressant prescription items dispensed by community pharmacists or dispensing doctors in each constituency, in 2020^{1,2}

Constituency ³	2020		
	Number of prescription items	Quantity of tablets/ capsules	Volume of oral solution/ liquid (mls)
Belfast East	204,335	8,357,995	135,389
Belfast North	324,225	12,897,898	213,228
Belfast South	191,041	7,959,958	90,629
Belfast West	259,724	9,895,776	149,234
East Antrim	139,072	5,822,134	66,203
East Londonderry	178,595	7,464,517	90,695
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	190,727	7,139,085	68,250
Foyle	270,950	9,935,936	116,268
Lagan Valley	157,902	6,548,286	91,394
Mid Ulster	145,935	5,598,064	77,562
Newry and Armagh	216,450	8,521,069	91,845
North Antrim	191,253	7,999,552	70,237
North Down	146,427	6,353,712	126,356
South Antrim	144,201	5,918,612	89,853
South Down	199,031	7,825,063	134,931
Strangford	135,296	6,180,108	92,669
Upper Bann	250,566	9,996,907	77,763
West Tyrone	191,839	7,137,377	91,218
Total	3,537,569	141,552,049	1,873,724

Source: Family Practitioner Services, HSC Business Services Organisation.

- 1 All information is for prescriptions prescribed in Primary care and dispensed by a community pharmacist or dispensing doctor and based on the year of payment. Data on secondary care prescribing and private prescriptions are not included. Data includes prescriptions from out-of-hours surgeries and non-medical prescribers who are employed and based within a GP surgery. Hospice items and items prescribed in other parts of the UK but dispensed in NI are excluded.
- 2 Anti-depressant items are defined as those categorised under British National Formulary (BNF) chapter 4, section 3.
- 3 Data is allocated to a constituency on the basis of the prescribing practice as assigned by the NISRA Central Postcode Directory. The constituency may therefore be different from a patient's home address.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of prescriptions for antidepressants prescribed in each constituency in each of the last three years.

(AQW 17060/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of prescriptions for antidepressants prescribed in each constituency is not known, but the number of prescription forms for antidepressants dispensed by a community pharmacist or dispensing doctor in each constituency, in each of the last three years, are shown in the table overleaf.

Table 1: The number of prescription forms for antidepressants dispensed in each constituency, in each of the last three years^{1,2}

Constituency ³	2018	2019	2020
	Number of prescription forms	Number of prescription forms	Number of prescription forms
Belfast East	189,053	198,667	204,254

Constituency ³	2018	2019	2020
	Number of prescription forms	Number of prescription forms	Number of prescription forms
Belfast North	296,162	308,471	324,074
Belfast South	181,609	188,180	190,946
Belfast West	234,636	248,481	259,626
East Antrim	124,634	132,647	139,039
East Londonderry	164,528	172,665	178,520
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	176,450	182,970	190,655
Foyle	241,683	257,331	270,829
Lagan Valley	138,521	149,163	157,847
Mid Ulster	135,388	141,216	145,884
Newry and Armagh	200,682	207,444	216,360
North Antrim	172,102	184,735	191,196
North Down	134,268	142,392	146,371
South Antrim	130,636	138,427	144,162
South Down	181,010	191,286	198,984
Strangford	122,805	128,225	135,244
Upper Bann	229,783	241,588	250,504
West Tyrone	171,863	184,118	191,741
Total	3,225,813	3,398,006	3,536,236

Source: Family Practitioner Services, HSC Business Services Organisation.

- 1 All information is for prescriptions prescribed in Primary care and dispensed by a community pharmacist or dispensing doctor and based on the year of payment. Data on secondary care prescribing and private prescriptions are not included. Data includes prescriptions from out-of-hours surgeries and non-medical prescribers who are employed and based within a GP surgery. Hospice items and items prescribed in other parts of the UK but dispensed in NI are excluded.
- 2 Anti-depressant items are defined as those categorised under British National Formulary (BNF) chapter 4, section 3.
- 3 Data is allocated to a constituency on the basis of the prescribing practice as assigned by the NISRA Central Postcode Directory. The constituency may therefore be different from a patient's home address.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the necessity of a duty of candour for health care workers.
(AQW 17072/17-22)

Mr Swann: In January 2018, the Inquiry into Hyponatraemia-Related Deaths recommended that a statutory Duty of Candour should be enacted in Northern Ireland for every healthcare organisation and everyone working for them.

My Department accepts all the recommendations from the Inquiry and on 12th April 2021 launched a public consultation on a range of policy options to implement a statutory Duty of Candour.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health why (i) Solas; and (ii) Kids together didn't receive any funding via his Department's funding streams for community and voluntary sector organisations.
(AQW 17074/17-22)

Mr Swann: Sólás and Kids Together are not currently funded through my Department's Core Grant Funding Scheme. However, it is intended that both organisations will have an opportunity to apply to a new core grant funding scheme, which is intended to start in April 2022. Invitations to apply to the new scheme, which will replace the existing scheme, will be sought later this year.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health whether earwax removal services are being offered at GP surgeries during the pandemic; and what alternative provision is in place for people who require earwax removal.
(AQW 17089/17-22)

Mr Swann: Under the terms of their contract all GPs are required to provide essential primary medical services to their registered patients and the current COVID-19 pandemic does not in any way negate this requirement. GPs will however use their clinical judgement to decide how best to prioritise patients to provide this core service whilst maintaining patient safety.

GP practices are open and are providing face to face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them. All practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to allow them to do so safely.

In 2018 the National Institute for Clinical Health Excellence (NICE) issued guideline 98 which recommended that the manual syringing method for ear wax removal should no longer be used.

It recommended that GPs should offer ear wax removal using an electronic irrigator, micro-suction or another method of earwax removal (such as manual removal using a probe) for adults in primary or community ear care services, if the practitioner, such as a community nurse or audiologist:

- has training and expertise in using the method to remove earwax;
- is aware of any contraindications to the method, and
- the correct equipment is available.

GPs are free to decide whether they wish to contract with the HSCB to provide this particular service, having firstly met the relevant NICE recommendations. Where a GP does not provide the service, they would make the necessary referrals to ENT/Audiology in a Health and Social Care Trust, for which there will be no charge. However, rather than wait, patients may prefer to seek, and pay for, private treatment.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the demand for addiction services at the Asha Centre for Addictions, Omagh.

(AQW 17102/17-22)

Mr Swann: As one of three regional Complex Detoxification and Stabilisation Units operating at Tier 4A in Northern Ireland, the ASHA inpatient addiction treatment unit in Omagh is an 8-bedded unit providing a 6-week inpatient programme. The ASHA Unit currently has 7 beds in operation, with the 8th bed being utilised as an isolation room if required due to COVID-19.

Together with Shimna (Downpatrick) and Carrick 1 (Antrim), these 3 units provide 30 inpatient beds for complex detoxification and stabilisation across NI. Residents from any of the five Health & Social Care Trust areas can avail of treatment in any of the units of their choice, with admission organised through local Tier 3 Community Addiction Services.

All three units closed during the first phase of the pandemic as part of the Trusts' COVID-19 surge planning, with the ASHA Unit closing on 06 April 2020 and reopening again on 03 August 2020. Since re-opening, the ASHA Unit has accommodated 52 admissions, and currently has a waiting list of 25 individuals for inpatient treatment.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health how many social work posts were vacant on (i) 6 April 2017; (ii) 6 April 2019; and (iii) 6 April 2021.

(AQW 17119/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on social work vacancies actively being recruited to in Health and Social Care (HSC) is collected and published on a quarterly basis. The table below details the position as at 31 March each year since 2017. Information at 31 March 2021 is due to be published on Wednesday 26th May 2021 at the following link: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/staff-vacancies>

	31 March 2017	31 March 2018	31 March 2019	31 March 2020
HSC Social Worker vacancies actively being recruited to	151	247	508	413

Source: HSC Organisations

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for an update on the North West Medical School at Magee.

(AQW 17129/17-22)

Mr Swann: The first cohort of 70 students for Ulster University's Graduate Entry Medical School is due to commence in September 2021. Ulster University is reporting to the Department that it has received a high level of interest in this course.

In advance of the September 2021 start date, Departmental officials and HSC Trust clinical educational leads are working closely with Ulster University on their curricular requirements for clinical placements for students. The Department is also supporting Ulster University as they arrange GP clinical placements, although this requirement is limited in the first year.

The Department for the Economy have agreed to chair a cross-departmental working group, on which DoH will be represented, to take forward key issues relating to GEMS.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health when he intends to agree and implement a uniform approach to the assessment and payment of Continuing Healthcare in Northern Ireland, as recommended by the Public Services Ombudsman in February 2021.

(AQW 17142/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department launched a public consultation on Continuing Healthcare in Northern Ireland: Introducing a Transparent and Fair System in 2017. The outcome of the consultation was published on the Department's website on 11 February 2021 and can be accessed at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/consultations/continuing-healthcare-northern-ireland-introducing-transparent-and-fair-system>

The preferred option which emerged from the consultation was to introduce a single eligibility criteria question for continuing healthcare: 'can your care needs be properly met in any other setting other than a hospital?'. If the answer is "yes", then the individual will be discharged to the appropriate care setting and depending on the type of care package, be subject to the relevant charging policy.

The new policy of a single eligibility criteria question is effective from 11 February 2021. Any applications for continuing healthcare already in the system prior to this will be assessed in line with previous guidance. New applicants from that date will be subject to the new policy.

Whilst the outcome of the consultation represents a significant change to the policy, it will provide a clear and easily understood test and will ensure a consistent and standardised approach in continuing healthcare outcomes across Northern Ireland.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health how many playgroups are registered in each (i) Health and Social Care Trust; and (ii) council district.

(AQW 17144/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of registered playgroups in each Health and Social Care Trust and in each Local Government District are set out in Table 1 and Table 2 respectively.

Table 1: Number of registered playgroups at 14th April 2021 by Health and Social Care Trust

Health and Social Care Trust	Number of registered playgroups
Belfast	49
Northern	109
South Eastern	79
Southern	100
Western	78
Northern Ireland	415

Table 2: Number of registered playgroups at 14th April 2021 by Local Government District

Local Government District	Number of registered playgroups
Antrim and Newtownabbey	25
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	53
Belfast	47
Causeway Coast and Glens	36
Derry City and Strabane	28
Fermanagh and Omagh	40
Lisburn and Castlereagh	24
Mid and East Antrim	28
Mid Ulster	48
Newry, Mourne and Down	51
Ards and North Down	35
Northern Ireland	415

A list of all registered playgroups can be found online on <https://www.familysupportni.gov.uk/>.

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQO 937/17-22, whether there has been an improvement in the waiting time for cataract surgery.

(AQW 17158/17-22)

Mr Swann: The pandemic has inevitably had a negative impact across many aspects of elective surgery, including access to cataract surgery. Addressing the backlog of patients waiting will be challenging given the reduced operational capacity across the HSC. Going forward, the focus of the HSC will be on resetting all elective services in an environment that is safe for both staff and patients.

The three cataract DPCs, located at Downe, Mid-Ulster, and South Tyrone Hospitals are increasing activity, with each centre moving back towards full commissioned capacity. The Downe Hospital in particular is offering ten HSC theatre sessions per week, supplemented by additional Independent Sector activity at weekends.

Furthermore, I am pleased to report that a recently-commissioned service offering post-operative cataract reviews in community optometry will commence in May 2021. These reviews, traditionally undertaken in the acute hospital setting, will free capacity in secondary care, allowing more pre-assessments to be carried out to improve patient flows and reduce waiting times.

In summary, although the pandemic has had a negative impact in waiting times for cataract surgery, I am confident that the plans which are in place to rebuild and transform services will help reduce waiting times going forward.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health what discussions take place with a patient or their family regarding Do Not Resuscitate orders.

(AQW 17160/17-22)

Mr Swann: Decisions about cardiopulmonary resuscitation are best made as part of a holistic approach to advance care planning 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.

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' 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 notes that clinical decisions should continue to be guided by the codes of professional practice as well as available evidence and 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>

Ideally a person will have set out their discussions about cardiopulmonary resuscitation as part of their advance care planning. However decisions about cardiopulmonary resuscitation may have to be taken at a time when a person is more critically ill, or has lost mental capacity. 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 should 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.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health for a update on the progress of the £500 payment for carers.
(AQW 17185/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer the Member to AQW 16881/17-22.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on a new mental health hospital in Omagh.
(AQW 17200/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Western Health and Social Care Trust submitted a proposal for a new Mental Health Unit in Omagh as part of a capital planning review exercise in 2018. A bid for the funding to commence the new unit was resubmitted to the Department of Finance in September 2020 as part of a four year capital budget information gathering exercise however, as you are aware, only a one year settlement has been confirmed for the 2021/22 financial year.

The key issue of the capital investment programme is the affordability of schemes in future years. Without additional resources and a multi-year budget settlement my Department is unable to commence any significant new investments that will continue beyond this financial year.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health when health and social care workers will receive the £500 recognition payment. (AQW 17203/17-22)

Mr Swann: An FAQ on the special recognition payment, which includes 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>

My Department is currently finalising the scheme and will make payment as soon as possible.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health what plans he has for the relaxation of restrictions for (i) maternity and (ii) care home visiting. (AQW 17204/17-22)

Mr Swann: The COVID-19: Regional Principles for Visiting in Care Settings in Northern Ireland, which details the visiting restrictions applicable in all settings, including Maternity services and Care Homes, was originally published in June 2020. The guidance has since been subject to amendments and updates as the science dictates, however it remains fully predicated on restrictions applying in line with the Regional Alert Level.

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.

I welcome the good news that, thanks in no small part to the efforts of the public and our Health and Social Care Workforce, we are now seeing infection numbers consistently declining, and the threat of health services being overwhelmed has receded. However, transmission rates, hospital pressures and deaths remain higher than we would wish to see and so some level of visiting restrictions must remain.

These restrictions are not in place simply to protect patients and their visitors, but are necessary due to the need to maintain safety for all others, including other families, all Health and Social Care staff and therefore the wider population. My officials continue to keep the guidance for all healthcare settings under review, in line with the best available scientific and medical evidence, and in line with the Northern Ireland Executive's "Nine Pathways" road map back to normality.

With specific reference to the Care Home sector, my Department has commissioned the Public Health Agency (PHA) to develop a new approach which supports the safe and proportionate return to normalised visiting in care homes, as restrictions in Northern Ireland are eased from April 2021. PHA has drawn together a working group including representatives from:

- HSCB, PHA, RQIA, Trusts, COPNI and PCC;
- Departmental policy Directorates;
- Representatives from various relatives Groupings; and
- Independent Healthcare Providers

The Group expects to submit its recommendations by the end of April.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health whether the Duty of Candour, on which his Department is currently consulting, will require legislation; and whether this legislation will be implemented in the current mandate. (AQW 17223/17-22)

Mr Swann: As part of the Hyponatraemia Report Implementation Programme, the Duty of Candour Workstream and its Being Open Sub-group have developed a range of policy options to implement a statutory Duty of Candour, which were published for a 16 week public consultation on 12th April 2021.

Post-consultation, the Workstream and Sub-group will review the responses received and finalise the policy for my consideration. Primary, and possibly secondary, legislation will then need to be drafted and enacted in order to implement the preferred approach. While it is unlikely that the legislation will be introduced before the end of the current mandate, given the time remaining, this important piece of work remains a priority for me and my Department.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health how many Health and Social Care staff have received the COVID-19 recognition payment. (AQW 17229/17-22)

Mr Swann: An FAQ on the special recognition payment, which includes 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>

No payments have as yet been authorised to staff.

My Department is currently finalising the scheme and will make payment as soon as possible.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what is the estimated cost, including working hours, that is required to award the Health and Social Care COVID-19 recognition payment on a pro-rata basis.

(AQW 17230/17-22)

Mr Swann: The information requested is not available, as the recognition payment will cross many different employers. However, by way of illustration, the Regional Business Services Organisation have confirmed their estimate of the work conducted so far in calculating the awards for almost 80,000 directly employed HSC staff of 165 hours in total, at a cost of £4,107.

The element of this cost, for completing the calculation for a pro rata basis, accounts for approximately £900.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of people newly diagnosed with dementia in each Health and Social Care Trust in each of the last five years.

(AQW 17263/17-22)

Mr Swann: Dementia 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. Further information on the QOF can be found at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/topics/doh-statistics-and-research/quality-outcomes-framework-qof> and all available QOF data can be accessed on the Department of Health's website at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/qof-achievement-data>.

The number of people newly diagnosed with dementia in each Health and Social Care Trust in each of the last five years is not known. QOF disease prevalence data is collected and published annually and the dementia register contains the total number of people diagnosed with dementia. Also, QOF data is not broken down by Health and Social Care Trust, but can be broken down by Local Commissioning Group (LCG). The number of people on the dementia register at 31st March in each LCG, in each of the last five years is shown in Table 1. The most recent data available is for 31st March 2020; the 2021 data is not yet available but will be published on 6th May 2021. Further information is available at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/prevalence-statistics>.

Table 1 Number of people on the dementia register, by LCG, at 31st March 2016 to 2020.

LCG	Number of people on the QOF Dementia Register				
	31st March 2016	31st March 2017	31st March 2018	31st March 2019	31st March 2020
Belfast	3,125	3,140	3,190	3,278	3,289
South Eastern	2,712	2,741	2,786	2,856	2,772
Northern	3,131	3,131	3,207	3,297	3,302
Southern	2,367	2,386	2,389	2,424	2,530
Western	2,282	2,409	2,565	2,791	2,835
Northern Ireland	13,617	13,807	14,137	14,646	14,728

Source: Quality and Outcomes Framework (QOF)

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health to detail the waiting time for a dementia diagnosis appointment in each Health and Social Care Trust in (i) 2020; and (ii) 2021.

(AQW 17264/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of active waits for a dementia diagnosis appointment, as at end of February 2020 and also at end of February 2021 is set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of active waits for a dementia diagnosis appointment, as at 29th February 2020 and also at 28th February 2021

HSC Trust	Month Ending February 2020				Month Ending February 2021			
	0-3 weeks	3-6 weeks	6-9 weeks	>9 weeks	0-3 weeks	3-6 weeks	6-9 weeks	>9 weeks
Belfast	102	86	19	23	81	59	36	51
Northern	143	90	21	0	118	60	45	301

HSC Trust	Month Ending February 2020				Month Ending February 2021			
	0-3 weeks	3-6 weeks	6-9 weeks	>9 weeks	0-3 weeks	3-6 weeks	6-9 weeks	>9 weeks
South Eastern	92	39	77	338	74	70	56	725
Southern	81	78	54	16	66	52	23	389
Western	47	78	47	169	32	48	54	340

Source: PMSID (HSCB)

Note: The month ending February 2021 is the most up-to-date position currently available therefore a comparison with month ending February 2020 has been provided.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how much has been paid to independent and private health providers over each of the last five years.

(AQW 17279/17-22)

Mr Swann: Expenditure on the independent and private health care sector in each of the last five years is set out in the table below.

£'000

2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
29,380	32,815	16,792	24,203	24,221

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health his assessment of the decision to suspend AstraZeneca for under 60s in the Republic of Ireland; and what impact it could have on the local vaccination programme.

(AQW 17281/17-22)

Mr Swann: At this stage we are not aware of any impact on the NI Vaccination Programme from the decision to suspend AstraZeneca for under 60s in the Republic of Ireland.

The local Covid-19 vaccination programme will continue at pace, informed by the expert independent advice and recommendations of the MHRA and JCVI. This expert, independent advice is clear – the benefits of the AstraZeneca vaccine far outweigh any potential risk for the vast majority of adults.

JCVI has advised:-

that it is preferable for adults aged under 30 with no underlying conditions to be offered an alternative to the AstraZeneca vaccine where available. This weighs up the risks of being seriously ill or dying from COVID-19 against the extremely small risk of a serious adverse event.

Department officials will continue to have regular contact with their ROI counterparts on an ongoing basis to discuss areas of mutual interest, and this may include talks on the impact of government decisions.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) his plans for using community pharmacists to continue to alleviate pressure on the Health Service; and (ii) the support and assistance pharmacists will need to fulfill this role.

(AQW 17291/17-22)

Mr Swann: Community pharmacies have been playing a pivotal role in delivering health services to communities in Northern Ireland during the pandemic and it is clear that there is a very high level of public confidence in the professionalism and dedication shown by community pharmacies during what has been an extremely challenging year. I am therefore very pleased that agreement has now been reached on a community pharmacy commissioning plan for 2021-22.

The commissioning plan for 2021-22 builds on the agreement reached on last years' commissioning arrangements and provides a coherent structure for the provision of community pharmacy services over the next 12 months. The plan continues to focus on the need to develop and support community pharmacy in their delivery of services and provides a commitment to scope, test and pilot services to inform future commissioning arrangements.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health to detail the funding provided by his Department to voluntary and charitable groups in South Down, in each of the last three years, for each of the publicly available funding streams.

(AQW 17304/17-22)

Mr Swann: Funding by this Department to voluntary and charitable groups in South Down is not recorded on a constituency basis and can only be provided by on a Health and Social Care Trust basis.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health for an update on the work of the Safeguarding Board of Northern Ireland to implement and facilitate the adoption of trauma informed practice.

(AQW 17309/17-22)

Mr Swann: Since March 2018 the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) has led a change delivery programme for professionals and voluntary sector staff to embed a better understanding of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and trauma-informed thinking across health, education, social care, justice, housing, local government and the voluntary sector. By March 2021, the project had achieved all of its original objectives, including the roll out of ACE awareness and trauma sensitive approaches to Practice Training, the establishment of a Train-the-Trainer Programme of Professional Development and enabling organisations to share good practice through engaging with the 'Be the Change' Leadership Programme.

Work is currently ongoing to develop policies and procedures with the aim of fully embedding trauma informed practice into work settings at all levels.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health an update on his Department's work to address levels of self harm and suicide.

(AQW 17310/17-22)

Mr Swann: A broad range of actions are being progressed since the launch of Protect Life 2 in September 2019, including: Lifeline 24/7 helpline, self-harm support, training, counselling support, resilience building, awareness raising campaigns and bereavement support. Over 90% of commissioned suicide prevention services have continued during the pandemic.

An update on the implementation of the Strategy is available on the Department of Health website and a further update will shortly be provided:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/actionplanataglance-aug2020.pdf>

The Public Health Agency (PHA) has responsibility for procurement of services under Protect Life 2. Procurement will commence following a process of extensive involvement/engagement. PHA seek to meaningfully involve service users and carers, stakeholders and the general public in this process to build consensus and support for how future services are shaped and commissioned with the levels of investment available.

To ensure appropriate input a process of involvement commenced in December 2020 through Stakeholder Engagement to gain an understanding of the evidence of current services provided.

This will be carried forward through a 3 stage approach which will reflect on feedback from previous involvement processes and consider future models of delivery of Protect Life 2 actions which the PHA have responsibility for.

An 8 week pre-consultation process commenced in February 2021. Following the pre-consultation period, a discussion paper will be developed outlining the feedback from the pre-consultation involvement events and the considerations being made ahead of the next consultation period. This will be a public document available online with the opportunity to feedback comments.

Subsequently, a 12 week consultation process will take place from November 2021 following which a procurement stage will commence.

Services currently funded through Protect Life 2 will continue to be delivered while this process is being carried out.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether there are any plans to further ease the visiting restrictions for (i) care homes; (ii) maternity services; (iii) community visiting services such as health visitors; and (iv) hospital wards.

(AQW 17330/17-22)

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.

I welcome the good news that, thanks in no small part to the efforts of public and our Health and Social Care Workforce, we are now seeing infection numbers consistently declining, and the threat of health services being overwhelmed has receded. However, transmission rates, hospital pressures and deaths remain higher than we would wish to see and so some level of visiting restrictions must remain. I wish to stress that these restrictions are not in place simply to protect residents and their visitors, but are necessary due to the need to maintain safety for all others, including other families, all Health and Social Care staff and therefore the wider population.

My officials keep the visiting guidelines under constant review, and will issue further updates as the position develops.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how much has been paid to Beeches Associates for work relating to the hyponatraemia inquiry.

(AQW 17377/17-22)

Mr Swann: In response to the Inquiry into Hyponatraemia Related Deaths (IHRD), the Department of Health established the IHRD Implementation Programme in 2018, made up of 9 Workstreams and 7 Sub-groups, to co-produce implementation plans for the recommendations.

In the last three full financial years (2018/19, 2019/20 and 2020/21), a total of £405,400 has been paid to HSC Leadership Centre (previously known as the Beeches Management Centre) Associates to act as independent Workstream chairs, facilitators, researchers and expert support to the Programme.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on phase 2 of the Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex. (AQW 17393/17-22)

Mr Swann: Phase 2 of the Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex and the new Mental Health hospital in Omagh are one in the same project. Therefore I refer you to my response to your recent Assembly Question AQW 17200/17-22.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health what steps his Department has taken to (i) ensure that residents in care homes can visit their family members; and (ii) to remove the required two week self-isolation period following a visit. (AQW 17400/17-22)

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.

My Department has commissioned the Public Health Agency (PHA) to develop a new approach which supports the safe and proportionate return to normalised visiting in care homes, including reviewing arrangements for the management of residents visiting out and the resulting need for self-isolation on return, as restrictions in Northern Ireland are eased from April 2021.

PHA has drawn together a working group including representatives from:

- HSCB, PHA, RQIA, Trusts, COPNI and PCC;
- Departmental policy Directorates;
- Representatives from various relatives Groupings; and
- Independent Healthcare Providers

The Group expects to submit its recommendations by the end of April.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the timetable for the full resumption of fertility services at the Regional Fertility Clinic, Belfast. (AQW 17418/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Belfast Trust, in which the Regional Fertility Centre (RFC) is situated, has advised that:

- Frozen embryo transfer (FET) services have resumed - the RFC has contacted patients who had treatment paused in January 2021 and has started to plan their treatment.
- IVF/ICSI - the RFC started to contact patients from 29 March who had treatment paused in January 2021 and has started to plan their treatment.
- Intrauterine insemination (IUI) and ovulation induction (OI) - the RFC started to contact patients from 12 April who had treatment paused in January 2021 to begin planning their treatment.

Once patients who had their IVF/ICSI/IUI/OI treatment paused in January 2021 have been rescheduled, the RFC will start to schedule other patients on the waiting list. Patients will be contacted directly when their name reaches the top of the waiting list.

Once patients who had their treatment paused have been treated and the RFC can safely project its available capacity levels, information on waiting times will be provided on the RFC's website at: Regional Fertility Centre | Belfast Health & Social Care Trust ([hscni.net](https://belfasttrust.hscni.net/services/rfc/)) (<https://belfasttrust.hscni.net/services/rfc/>).

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health why some staff within Altnagelvin's Emergency Department have not yet received payment for overtime after undertaking Covid enhancement shifts. (AQW 17493/17-22)

Mr Swann: My officials have been in contact with the Western Trust. The Trust has advised that all such payments have been processed. One data set relating to Covid timesheets was received after the processing deadline for April's pay run, this will be paid in May.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health how much his Department has spent on producing material in Irish, in each of the last three years. (AQW 17496/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department did not produce any material in Irish in each of the last three years.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health when the outcomes report on the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust's neurology patient recall will be published.

(AQW 17502/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Health published the Neurology Recall Cohort 2: Activity and Outcomes Report on Tuesday 20th April 2021.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health whether people called for COVID-19 vaccination can request a particular vaccine, or is the vaccine type fixed depending on the vaccination site.

(AQW 17606/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member will be aware that everyone will be offered a vaccine which has been approved by the independent Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) as safe and effective and recommended by the JCVI for persons of his/her age or risk group.

Vaccine administrators are working with pharmacy deployment teams in order to ensure adequate supplies are available for first and second doses and the appropriate vaccine is available to meet the individual's circumstances and comply with MHRA and JCVI advice.

The member may be aware that the Pfizer vaccine is only available at Trust Vaccination sites while GP practices and Community Pharmacies administer the Astra Zenica Vaccine only.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Harvey asked the Minister for Infrastructure what steps she is taking to increase capacity for theory driving tests in light of further cancellations made by her Department.

(AQW 17017/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Following the Executive's review of COVID-19 restrictions on 15 April 2021, delivery of theory tests will resume from 23 April.

The Driver & Vehicle Agency is working closely with the theory test provider to ensure that additional theory test appointments are made available, through a combination of extended opening hours at the six existing theory test centres here and the opening of an additional temporary centre in Ballymena. Customers will be able to book appointments through the online theory test booking system, with priority initially being given to customers whose tests have been affected by the suspension of theory test services due to COVID-19 restrictions and whose appointment has been rescheduled into the virtual theory test centre

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure for the addresses of all current peat extraction sites.

(AQW 17039/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Following the transfer of the majority of planning functions on 1st April 2015, peat extraction sites which constitute development, are the responsibility of planning within the local councils.

My Department does not hold information on the location of peat extraction sites.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure when her Department plans to update the Railway Investment Prioritisation Strategy.

(AQW 17044/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have stated previously that I am ambitious for our rail network, and am keen to do all that I can to explore how we can progress rail improvements within the limited budgetary envelope that we have available to us. I want to ensure that any proposals for changes to the rail network include operational and financial viability and have a very clear focus on the part that rail can play in growing our all-island economy, while improving the ability of people to connect with and access opportunities and addressing longstanding regional imbalances.

The Railway Investment Prioritisation Strategy was published in 2014 by the then Minister for Regional Development, Danny Kennedy MLA. It sought to identify ways to develop our rail network where there was the greatest potential for further passenger growth in preparation for a time when funding might become available. The Strategy set out a new vision for expanded rail access across the North and it is one I am keen to build on, even if a lack of funding still remains a major stumbling block in achieving our shared objectives.

My Department is currently bringing forward our Transport Plan for the Regional Strategic Transport Network (RSTNTP) and this will build on the principles set out in the Railway Investment Prioritisation Strategy. I am keen to examine how best to optimise the existing rail 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.

The Strategic Rail Review which I launched earlier this month, will consider how the rail network on the island of Ireland can improve sustainable connectivity between major cities, enhance regional accessibility including to the North West and support balanced regional development. In addition, the Review will consider the feasibility of high-higher speeds on the network and whether there is a potential to increase use of the network for freight. The Strategy will set out a new vision for expanded rail access across the North and it is one I am keen to build on.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline how recycled aggregates are included in construction works undertaken by her Department.

(AQW 17045/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The general approach within the construction industry is to recycle material when possible, rather than sending it to land fill. For example, 40 thousand cubic metres of existing bituminous surfaces were recycled, along with 2 million cubic metres of excavated material, was reused as fill on the A6 Dungiven to Drumahoe Dualling scheme. The use of recycled aggregates is permitted on highway projects provided that they meet the physical and chemical properties set out in Specification for Highway Works in the Manual of Contract Documents for Highway Works. These requirements are included to ensure that the materials selected for use:

- a Can effectively perform their intended function, within the structure of the road;
- b Will not pose an environmental hazard; and
- c Will not present a significant health and safety risk.

Reuse and recycling of material is also promoted within our internal DfI Roads Environmental Manual.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) to detail the main accident blackspots in East Antrim; and (ii) what action her Department is taking to reduce accidents in these areas.

(AQW 17080/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department routinely carries out a review of collision cluster sites when developing the Collision Remedial programme that sits within the wider Local Transport and Safety Measures (LTSM) programme. This review seeks to identify sites where 4 or more collisions have occurred within a three year period to determine if the application of appropriate road safety engineering measures would help to reduce the number and severity of collisions.

A number of sites within the East Antrim constituency met the threshold of 4 or more collisions however, when the nature and severity of the collisions and causation factors were considered, further remedial measures were not deemed appropriate. Therefore there are no sites currently being taken forward in East Antrim under the Collision Remedial programme however a further review of collisions is scheduled to take place within the coming months when the latest collision statistics collated by the PSNI are made available.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the A21 Comber Road from Ballygowan to Comber has been assessed for inclusion in the resurfacing programme.

(AQW 17092/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The resurfacing programmes for 2021-22 will be finalised once I have taken decisions on my Department's opening budget allocation. Once finalised, details of schemes in the Ards and North Down District Council area will be presented in the DfI Roads Spring report to Council prior to its general release.

I have asked that the A21 Comber Road from Ballygowan to Comber be assessed and considered for inclusion in the 2021-22 resurfacing programme but at this time am unable to give any commitments in relation to this programme.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure what risk assessments have been carried out on the planned toucan crossing at Durham Street, Belfast.

(AQW 17120/17-22)

Ms Mallon: All the proposed road and pedestrian crossings that are planned to be installed as part of the Belfast Transport Hub project on Durham Street have been subject to an independent Road Safety Audit which was carried out on the scheme in May 2017.

As the scheme progresses, the detailed design for the crossings will be carried out in accordance with current design standards and engagement/consultation between Translink and DfI Roads.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure when drafting the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017, whether it was the intention of her Department that Regulation 32 only applies to unauthorised EIA development.

(AQW 17139/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Regulation 32 of the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017 falls under Part 9 of those Regulations which deals with "Unauthorised EIA Development". This highlights the importance of

considering the use of enforcement powers for unauthorised EIA Development but does not constrain the exercise of those powers in other circumstances.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will launch a public awareness campaign highlighting the dangers of quads and scramblers.

(AQW 17159/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister with responsibility for road safety, I take very seriously my responsibility to all road users, particularly those that are more vulnerable, such as the users of these type of vehicles. A substantial section can be found on niDirect covering the use of quads and scramblers on public and private land and it sets out what is legally required to use them on public roads. The link is:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/riding-quad-and-scrambler-bikes>

I can also confirm that the PSNI has produced an information leaflet about the use of powered transporters on public roads and private land which includes quads and scramblers (copy attached). PSNI periodically remind those who sell these types of vehicles of the legal requirements particularly regarding their use on public roads who are advised to pass this information on to anyone considering purchasing one of these vehicles

In 2018 following the tragic death of a young mother in Colin Glen Park, DOJ and DFC jointly set up the Motorcycle Awareness Project (MAP) designed to help young people gain an understanding of the dangers associated with the illegal use of off-road motorcycles. This project is ongoing (albeit Covid-19 has impacted in its roll out across the North) with some students qualifying as coaches to deliver future programmes.

My department will continue to work with all partners to improve safety.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 16718/17-22, on what data evidence she bases her statement 'the rail network has been innovative and renowned for its high level of punctuality and service provision', with particular regard to punctuality.

(AQW 17163/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The NI Railways network consistently achieves punctuality figures of over 95% of all trains arriving at their destination 'on-time' and during 2020/21 this figure rose to 99.06%. In comparison to other operators the GB average for 2020/21, according to the Rail Delivery Group, was recorded as 93.4%.

In terms of being innovative, NIR has introduced a number of new customer focused initiatives that have all contributed to an improved level of service provision:

- On-time customer notifications where the train movement is measured from the advertised departure time;
- New low rail adhesion best practices;
- Clock face timetable planning; and
- Best in class mechanical engineering and infrastructure maintenance.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the cycle routes delivered under road improvement / resurfacing schemes by DfI Roads Northern Division in each of the last five years; and (ii) a summary of the number of schemes and length, broken down by facility type as defined in departmental guidance measures to regulate traffic RSPPG E063, namely (a) totally separate facility; (b) cycle lane on the carriageway; and (c) shared walking/cycling facility.

(AQW 17190/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Details of the cycling facilities that have been constructed by my Department within Northern Division in the previous 5 years, by facility type, are provided in the following table:

Year	Scheme Name	Type of cycling facility provided	Length (KM)
2016/17	A2 Shore Road, Carrickfergus	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.8
2017/18	A57 Ballyclare Road, Templepatrick	Shared walking/cycling provision	1.36
	A6 Foreglen Road, Dungiven	Shared walking/cycling provision	1.02
2018/19	C708 Somerset Road, Coleraine	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.97
2019/20	B95 Mallusk Road, Newtownabbey	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.6
	A29 Coleraine Ring Road	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.4
	A6 Foreglen Road, Dungiven	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.94
	B95 Loughanmore Road, Antrim	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.4
2020/21	B513 O'Neill Road, Newtownabbey	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.78

Year	Scheme Name	Type of cycling facility provided	Length (KM)
	A26 Larne Road Link, Ballymena	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.69
	A6 Foreglen Rd, Dungiven	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.47
	Fry's Road/Doury Road/Grove Road, Ballymena	Shared walking/cycling provision	2.9
	Ballee Road East, Ballymena.	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.46

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the cycle routes delivered under road improvement / resurfacing schemes by DfI Roads Western Division in each of the last five years; and (ii) a summary of the number of schemes and length, broken down by facility type as defined in departmental guidance measures to regulate traffic RSPPG E063, namely (a) totally separate facility; (b) cycle lane on the carriageway; and (c) shared walking/cycling facility.

(AQW 17191/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Details of the cycling facilities that have been constructed by my Department within Western Division in the previous 5 years, by facility type, are provided in the following table:

Year	Scheme Name	Type of cycling facility provided	Length (KM)
2016/17	Irishtown Road, Omagh	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.13
	Old Mountfield Road, Omagh	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.23
	Fountain Road, Cookstown	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.40
2017/18	Enniskillen Road, Ballinamlard	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.85
	Sligo Rd, Enniskillen	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.30
	Killyman Road, Dungannon	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.20
2018/19	Sligo Rd, Enniskillen	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.10
	Lough Yoan Road, Enniskillen	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.20
	Nutfield Road, Lisnaskea	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.10
	Oaks Road, Dungannon	New toucan crossing	0
	Mullaghmore Road, Dungannon	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.30
2019/20	Nutfield Road, Lisnaskea	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.22
	Main Street, Lisnaskea	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.22
	Lisnagole Road, Lisnaskea	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.04
	Mayogall Road, Clady	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.70
	Magherafelt Road, Castledawson	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.50
	Broadbridge, Eglinton	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.10
2020/21	Dublin Road, Omagh	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.20
	Old Mountfield Road, Omagh	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.48
	Beltany Road, Omagh	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.10
	Quarry Lane, Dungannon	New Toucan crossing	0
	Mullaghmore Road, Dungannon	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.05
	Queen's Quay, Foyle Riverside	Temporary Separate walking / cycling	0.30
	Strathfoyle – Maydown	Shared walking/cycling provision	Ongoing
	North West Greenway, joint scheme with Council and others	Shared walking/cycling provision	Ongoing
		Total length (KM)	5.72

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the need to expand rail services to Omagh town.
(AQW 17198/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have ambitions for our rail network, and am keen to do all that I can to explore how we can progress rail improvements within the limited budgetary envelope that I have available. I want to ensure that any proposals for changes to the rail network include operational and financial viability and have a very clear focus on the part that rail can play in growing our all-island economy, while improving the ability of people to connect with and access opportunities, and addressing longstanding regional imbalances.

My Department is currently bringing forward the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) and, amongst other measures, this will consider improvements and extensions 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 the All Island Strategic Rail Review which I launched with my counterpart Eamon Ryan earlier this month, will consider how the rail network on the island of Ireland can improve sustainable connectivity between major cities, enhance regional accessibility including to the West and support balanced regional development.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on plans for the Lagan Towpath, with particular reference to improving the bridges and access to Edenderry, Belvoir and Finaghy on foot or by public transport.
(AQW 17213/17-22)

Ms Mallon: .

On behalf of my Department, Sustrans carried out a feasibility study to consider better utilisation of the Lagan Navigation, in promoting outdoor recreation, active and sustainable travel, tourism, social cohesion and health and wellbeing. A Blueways Development Group is to consider the proposals contained in the feasibility study.

In addition, work is currently being undertaken on the Gilchrist Bridge close to Edenderry on the wooden structure which is in need of urgent repairs. It is anticipated that the repairs will continue into May. The existing bridge into Belvoir Park Forest is not on land within the ownership of the Department although it is anticipated that the new bridge at the Stranmillis Weir could, in due course, permit better access to Belvoir Park Forest.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given the recent unrest across Northern Ireland, what steps she will take to ensure the safety of (i) bus and rail conductors and drivers, (ii) station staff and; (iii) passengers is prioritised.
(AQW 17238/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The safety of all Translink staff and passengers on public transport services is a priority for me. The Translink staff deserve to be safe as they do their job and they deserve our respect and gratitude. Throughout this period of unrest I have continued to work with Translink to provide support.

Translink continues to work closely with the PSNI at both a strategic command and local level to ensure the safety of all its staff and passengers. Where potential for civil unrest is identified Translink will pause services, assess the risk to the safe operation of services and if necessary divert, suspend or withdraw services depending in the identified risk levels. These decisions are taken based on the available evidence from PSNI, local community groups, elected representatives and Translink supervisory/management staff on the ground.

In the last year Translink and the PSNI have jointly developed and launched the Safe Transport Team pilot, which has seen dedicated teams of Police Officers working across the Translink bus and rail network focusing on passenger and staff safety, anti-social behaviour, Covid controls and other activities supporting a safe Public Transport network. Throughout the recent unrest these teams have been active on the network, on services and in stations.

Translink has also continued to work with the Trade Unions throughout this difficult period to ensure that all staff concerns are addressed as quickly as possible.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will revise the criteria for rivers management which currently states that a designated river only requires maintenance if it risks damage to a person or property, to instead require maintenance when there is a risk to livestock or a person's land.
(AQW 17239/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Designation of a watercourse permits it to be maintained at public expense from a drainage perspective. In considering whether a watercourse should be designated one of the overriding factors my Department considers is that the cost of the works must satisfy appropriate appraisal criteria, either in quantifiable cost/benefit terms, or qualitative terms such as a reduction in risk to life or damage to property from flooding. This approach is pragmatic as it ensures that my Department's limited resources and public finances are focussed on those areas where there is a clear public benefit.

The vast majority of watercourses in the North are undesignated and the responsibility for their maintenance rests with the riparian landowner. Frequently the riparian is the person best placed to determine the level of maintenance required on watercourses that flow through their land and also ensuring that their fields are stock proof.

Officials from my Department would be happy to meet with any landowner and provide some specific drainage advice if you thought that they would find this beneficial.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) any trial of Traffic Attendants working in the Helen's Bay area, undertaken by her Department; and (ii) how the success of this trial will be measured.

(AQW 17242/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is not conducting a trial of Traffic Attendants (TAs) in the Helen's Bay, however, in response to a recent increase in non-compliance of parking restrictions in this area, the level of enforcement was increased from 15 March 2021.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the path at Twisel Bridge, Holywood will be resurfaced.

(AQW 17243/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As I am sure you will appreciate the demand for resurfacing of carriageways, footways and footpaths far outweighs the available resource and therefore schemes have to be prioritised after due consideration of the many other potential schemes 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 unable at this stage to confirm details for the footpath at Twisel Bridge, Holywood.

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the East Link Road project in Armagh city.

(AQW 17271/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Capital Expenditure of Cycling in 2020-2021

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) how the capital expenditure of cycling in 2020-2021 was allocated per local council; and (ii) the resource spend for cycling, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 17272/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not identify spend on walking and cycling separately but includes both in funding for active travel. The attribution of spend to active travel is not a precise exercise as some projects have benefits for active travel even if not carried out specifically for that purpose.

In addition, capital expenditure is not allocated by Council area as the available budget is prioritised based on need and where opportunities for active travel interventions arise. Spend can be reported by Council area. However, the level of capital expenditure on new or enhanced cycling measures by Council area in 2020/21 will not be available until the Department's accounts are laid before the Assembly.

In relation to resource spend, much of this expenditure is on active travel rather than walking or cycling specifically. Programmes such as the Active School Travel programme (which is jointly funded by my Department and the Public Health Agency) benefit both walking and cycling.

Resource spend on active travel over the previous five years is as follows:

2016/2017	£707,000
2017/2018	£756,000
2018/2019	£1,691,000
2019/2020	£682,000
2020/2021	£775,000

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the level of active travel funding for Newry and Armagh in 2020/2021.
(AQW 17273/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department continues to encourage local councils to identify active travel opportunities and proposals that will help deliver sustainable positive change. During 2020/21, some £385K was invested in active travel schemes in my Department's Roads Southern Division. This includes the council areas of: Ards and North Down Borough Council, Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council areas.

It is my intention to continue to make progress on active travel and blue / green initiatives in 2021/22. Given the importance of active travel and the multiple health and environmental benefits it brings, I am fully supportive of investment in such schemes across the North.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much funding has been allocated for rural roads, compared to the trunk road network, since 2018.

(AQW 17275/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There has been historical under-investment in our road network over a significant number of years and it is acknowledged that many rural roads are in need of repairs. In recognition of this, I allocated £10m of my 2020-21 Capital budget specifically towards rural roads.

My reply to your previous AQW 15012/17-22 provided details of my Department's investment on the Roads Recovery Fund since 2018. However the rural road network, both Trunk and Non-Trunk, also attracts other resource and capital budget funding which is not categorised separately and as such the precise investment in rural roads compared to the trunk road network cannot be identified.

I am currently considering the capital budget for 2021-22 and am committed to the continuation of a rural roads fund.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the Smithborough to Middletown greenway is on target for delivery for 2021.

(AQW 17276/17-22)

Ms Mallon: This project is funded through the INTERREG VA Territorial Co-operation Programme, and I am pleased my Department was able to support the issuing of a Letter of Offer by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) to the project.

The SEUPB has advised the Smithborough to Middletown greenway will not meet the target for delivery of 2021. The Ulster Canal Greenway faces considerable challenges in terms of delivery within the timeframe and is working with SEUPB.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on measures to address traffic congestion in Omagh town. **(AQW 17299/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: As I previously advised my Department is fully aware of traffic congestion in Omagh town and particularly on the Omagh Bypass during peak periods. In this regard I recognise that the planned A5 Western Transport Corridor (A5WTC) dual carriageway would benefit strategic traffic and greatly improve traffic progression in Omagh. As you are aware I remain fully committed to the delivery of this important project.

Traffic surveys have been undertaken at various junctions within Omagh Town to determine if further improvements can be introduced to reduce traffic congestion. However due to the current Covid 19 restrictions and the resultant reduction in traffic volumes on the road network, it has not been possible to validate the findings of these surveys.

My officials are keen to seek to identify appropriate measures to improve traffic progression on the road network in Omagh in a bid to enhance capacity. When restrictions are eased and traffic volumes have returned to more normal levels, this work can resume.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the funding provided by her Department to voluntary and charitable groups in South Down, in each of the last three years, for each of the publicly available funding streams.

(AQW 17303/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department provides funding to Rural Community Transport Partnerships (RCTPs), via the Rural Transport Fund (RTF), to provide Dial-a-Lift services in rural areas. There are two grant funded operators in the South Down area. However, it should be noted that the operational areas of the RCTPs do not directly align with the South Down constituency area. Funding streams include:

- Dial-a-Lift resource funding which is paid annually as a contribution towards operational costs;
- Assisted Rural Travel Scheme (ARTS) funding which enables users of Dial-a-Lift to avail of a concessionary fare. The Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs provides funding for ARTS, although the scheme is managed by DfI.
- Capital funding has been made available on an ad hoc basis, supported by the completion of business cases. In 2020/21, capital funding from the Blue/Green Infrastructure Fund was made available as part of a pilot project to enable the RCTPs to buy an electric vehicle and in-year capital funding was awarded to assist operators in paying six month lease costs in response to the financial challenges faced as a result of COVID.

The two RCTPs that deliver services in the South Down area and the amount of funding received is detailed in the table below.

RCTP	Financial Year	RTF – resource funding	ARTS	In Year Capital	Electric Vehicles
Down District Accessible Transport	2018/19	£312,758	£66,678	n/a	n/a
	2019/20	£297,120	£73,782	n/a	n/a
	2020/21	£297,120	£73,782	£14,552	£93,083

RCTP	Financial Year	RTF – resource funding	ARTS	In Year Capital	Electric Vehicles
Southern Area Partnership	2018/19	£300,275	£82,151	n/a	n/a
	2019/20	£285,262	£84,323	n/a	n/a
	2020/21	£285,262	£84,323	n/a	£173,524

My Department also provides annual resource funding to Shopmobility Newry via the Transport Programme for People with Disabilities Fund. Capital funding has been made available on an ad hoc basis, supported by the completion of a business case. In 2020/21 capital funding was paid to enable the purchase of new mobility equipment. Amounts paid over the last three years are detailed below.

Financial Year	Resource funding paid via TPPD	Capital Funding
2018/19	£30,000	n/a
2019/20	£28,500	n/a
2020/21	£28,500	£2,500

In 2020/21, my Department has also provided funding through the Road Safety (Safe Travel) Grant Scheme as follows:

- Ballinacraig Community Association (£3,858.00)
- Road Safe (NI) - Newry & Mourne Committee (£4,000.00)
- New Driver Safety Ambassadors Ltd (£9,925.00)

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure how her Department is ensuring that taxi driving licence renewals are processed without delay.

(AQW 17319/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Licensed taxi drivers are issued with both an electronic and a manual reminder 16 weeks in advance of their Taxi Driver Licence expiry date. This provides them with sufficient time to complete and submit their application well in advance of the expiry date of their existing licence.

Initial assessments of applications are completed within five working days of receipt and licences are issued within ten working days of a complete application being provided.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether taxi drivers awaiting a renewal of their taxi driving licence can still operate without prosecution should any processing delay results in their renewed licence not arriving by the expiry date of their existing licence.

(AQW 17320/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A taxi driver is not permitted to drive a taxi unless they have a current taxi driver licence.

The Driver and Vehicle Agency issue both an electronic and a manual reminder to each licensed taxi driver 16 weeks in advance of the expiry of their existing licence to allow sufficient time for their application to be completed and processed.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a breakdown of how many incidents of violence have taken place against Translink staff over the past 12 months.

(AQW 17322/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In the past 12 months, Translink has confirmed that there has been 160 incidents of either verbal assault, physical assault or objects thrown at staff. Ten of these incidents have resulted in personal injury to Translink staff.

It is totally unacceptable that workers providing us with a vital public service, that many of us couldn't do without, are facing abuse by customers whilst trying to carry out their job. Everyone deserves to be safe in their workplace.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the Drumahoe to Claudy section of the A6 upgrade is due to be completed.

(AQW 17323/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Construction work is progressing well on the 25.5km A6 Dungiven to Drumahoe dualling scheme, including the section between Drumahoe to Claudy. When complete, this Flagship scheme will enhance the connectivity of the North West, improve journey time reliability, reduce journey times and improve road safety.

COVID-19 initially caused some disruption with many activities stopping due to difficulties in the supply chain, social distancing requirements and staff absences. Although the situation is now much improved, COVID-19 continues to have an impact, however the scheme is expected to be complete in 2022, largely as planned.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that so many of her departmental staff are working from home, often in rural locations with substandard connections, whether her Department will consider covering the costs incurred by his staff to install superfast broadband, or available alternatives, in their homes.

(AQW 17332/17-22)

Ms Mallon: COVID-19 guidance for all NICS staff, which includes information on claiming for home working expenses, including broadband costs, is available on the NICS COVID Hub and a link to this guidance is available on my Department's Intranet site.

The Department may reimburse staff for the additional cost of increased broadband data charges incurred solely from working from home. The Department may also reimburse the additional cost of installing broadband at home and monthly tariffs on the basis that the charges incurred are solely related to working from home. In these instances, prior to agreeing to the installation of home broadband, staff and their line management should consider IT alternatives available and the comparative costs, such as providing a Data Sim for laptops.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 5146/17-22, (i) to detail the date she instructed her Department to draft an options paper on the Review of Old Minerals Permissions; (ii) for an update on the progress made; and (iii) the date when this paper is to be completed.

(AQW 17345/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Officials began drafting an options paper on the Review of Old Minerals Permissions (ROMPs) in February 2020. However, due to competing priorities, including responding to COVID-19 and preparations for Brexit, this was delayed. Work in this area remains subject to prioritisation against other demands and in the context of available resources. It is anticipated that the options paper will be completed by the summer.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 5404/17-22, (i) whether the ongoing removal of priority habitat at Craigall Quarry under a 1964 planning permission has now removed the last known site in Northern Ireland for the priority species *Calamagrostis epigejos* (wood small-reed); and (ii) whether she will ensure that the options paper being prepared by her departmental officials includes an assessment of the environmental harm caused by historic permissions operating outside of modern-day environmental standards due to the repeated decisions not to commence the Review of Old Minerals Permissions.

(AQW 17346/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) DAERA is the regional statutory nature conservation body with responsibility for the assessment, and where appropriate, designation of priority habitats and associated priority species. This site has not been designated by DAERA under any of its legislation. I understand the local council has been in touch with DAERA regarding activities on this site.
- (ii) The options paper will identify options to inform any decision on the way forward and will include consideration of historic permissions.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 14438/17-22, what is the envisaged timescale for completion of the detailed analysis of the information submitted.

(AQW 17347/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am advised that the detailed analysis of the information submitted on the operation of the Roads (Miscellaneous Provision) Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 is complete, and the Department's response is currently being finalised for my consideration.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether an offer to buy Portavoe Reservoir was submitted by Ards and North Down Borough Council to NI Water.

(AQW 17369/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has advised that to their knowledge, no offer to buy Portavoe Reservoir was submitted by Ards and North Down Borough Council.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what funding opportunities are available for joint resurfacing projects of public car parks between local councils and her Department, such as Drumaway car park outside Millisle.

(AQW 17370/17-22)

Ms Mallon: It is not within the remit of my Department to provide funding for resurfacing of areas outside its ownership. The car park at Drumaway is owned by Ards and North Down Borough Council and as such they are responsible for its maintenance.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the additional measures in place to help clear the backlog of theory and practical driving tests.

(AQW 17372/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Following the Executive's decision on 15 April to relax some Covid-19 restrictions, the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) will resume practical driving tests and theory tests on 23 April, with appropriate mitigations in place.

Driver theory testing will resume at the six established test centres, with additional slots at each location and extended opening hours to help address the increased demand. An additional temporary test centre, which will be located in Ballymena, will also be opened that can provide around 1,000 test slots per week. Customers can book appointments through the online theory test booking system, with priority initially being given to customers whose tests have been affected by the suspension of theory test services due to COVID-19 restrictions.

In terms of practical driving tests the booking service will open in three phases based on the expiry dates of theory test pass certificates, to give priority to those who have been waiting for the longest time. The booking system for Phase 1 customers, whose theory test pass certificates will expire by 31 October 2021, will open on 26 April 2021. The booking system for Phase 2 customers, whose theory test pass certificates will expire between 1 November 2021 and 31 March 2022, will open on 4 May 2021.

The DVA has contacted Phase 1 and Phase 2 customers directly to advise them when they can access the booking system.

The DVA plans to open the booking service for all other customers in mid-May and they will issue further communications through nidirect and social media channels, and write to all Approved Driving Instructors to confirm the process and the exact date.

The DVA has, and continues, to work hard to increase its capacity to help meet the expected high demand for driving tests. The DVA has taken a range of measures to maximise the availability of test slots, including the recruitment of additional examiners and the provision of new temporary test centres. They will continue to offer driving tests on a Saturday and at certain centres on Sundays where it is suitable to do so without compromising the integrity of the test. Overtime will also be used to rota off-shift dual role driving examiners to provide further capacity. Additional slots are therefore being made available for May, June and July to accommodate more learners.

I remain committed to minimising disruption and ensuring the DVA's plan for the restoration of services is in hand, and most importantly to protecting the lives of staff and customers during this pandemic.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure why additional funding from SEUPB is needed for the Ulster Canal.

(AQW 17373/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Ulster Canal Greenway project application was submitted and approved in 2016, at which point the preferred route had not been finalised. Since then and with confirmation of the preferred route, there have been both inflationary increases and increases in construction costs which have resulted in an additional funding request for the project.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the link roads in each constituency which have been estimated to carry more than 2500 vehicles per day and which would normally meet gritting criteria, but which her Department has decided not to grit.

(AQW 17382/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In general my Department salts main through routes carrying more than 1,500 vehicles per day and, in exceptional circumstances, roads with difficult topography carrying between 1,000 and 1,500 vehicles per day. The application of this policy ensures that 28% of the total road network, which carries around 80% of traffic is salted.

There are two roads estimated to carry more than 2500 vehicles per day which are not salted: Ballymoney Road, Holywood (North Down), and Killyglen Link Road, Larne (East Antrim). Whilst both of these roads exceed the traffic volume threshold, my officials have advised that neither warrant inclusion on the gritted network as there are nearby parallel routes that are already part of the gritted network. I have asked officials to reassess both these routes in advance of the next winter service season.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many homes directly access onto the Killyglen link road, Larne; and what is her Department's estimated number of journeys from those homes each day.

(AQW 17383/17-22)

Ms Mallon: No homes directly access onto the Killyglen Link Road. All dwellings in the area are served by a network of side roads and then gain access to the Killyglen Link Road by main road junctions.

The Department does not maintain records of the number of homes which access the Killyglen Link Road via the main road junctions or estimated figures of journey numbers from these homes. When analysing a planning application for a dwelling, the Department would estimate the number of journeys generated by a single home to be ten trips per house per day.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for Infrastructure what consideration is being given to extending the expiry dates of theory test certificates for learner drivers who have had their practical tests cancelled or postponed.

(AQW 17392/17-22)

Ms Mallon: To help mitigate the impact on customers due to the cessation of practical driving tests as a result of Covid restrictions I brought forward legislation to extend the validity period of theory test pass certificates. Theory test certificates that were due to expire between 1 March 2020 and 31 October 2020 have been extended by 12 months. In addition, theory test pass certificates which expire between 1 November 2020 and 30 June 2021, and which have not already benefited from an extension, have been extended by 8 months.

Customers whose certificates expire between the relevant dates do not need to do anything as their certificates are being automatically extended to allow them to book their practical driving test, now that the legislation is in place

Rather than apply further extensions, I have agreed that the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) will operate a prioritised booking system for customers which will focus on those that have been waiting longest. Phase 1 customers, whose theory test pass certificates will expire by 31 October 2021 will open on 26 April 2021. The booking system for Phase 2 customers, whose theory test pass certificates will expire between 1 November 2021 and 31 March 2022, will then open on 4 May 2021. The DVA has contacted Phase 1 and Phase 2 customers directly to advise them when they can access the booking system.

The DVA is set to reopen the booking service for all other customers in mid-May and they will issue further communications through nirect and social media channels, and write to all Approved Driving Instructors to confirm the process and the exact date.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the upgrading of Botanic Train Station, including the relocation of frontage onto Cromwell Road.

(AQW 17402/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have stated previously that I am ambitious for our rail network and I am keen to do all that I can to explore how we can progress rail improvements within the budgetary envelope that we have available to us.

In respect of the upgrade to the Botanic Train Station, I can confirm that Translink is currently undertaking a feasibility study for the development of the site. Whilst my Department awaits the outcomes of this feasibility study and the subsequent economic appraisal for the potential upgrade, I would note that there are no plans to relocate the frontage of the station to the Cromwell Road given its distance from the train line.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure what account has been taken of new houses planned for the Carryduff area in assessing the Glider route in South Belfast.

(AQW 17403/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As part of the Outline Business Case for Belfast Rapid Transit Phase 2 an assessment of potential routes has covered a range of criteria including potential demand, attractions, trip generators, buildability, environmental impacts and road safety. Discussions have also been held with Lisburn and Castlereagh Council officials to consider future developments in the Carryduff area to inform this assessment.

This assessment will establish emerging route options for consultation.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much her Department has spent on producing material in Irish, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 17405/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department supports the commitments in the New Decade New Approach to promote the Irish Language, culture, and identity.

Officials promote the Irish Language by helping customers conduct their business in Irish, and also offer an Irish translation of Departmental documents on request. My Department's Irish Language Policy provides officials with guidance on how to translate documents and handle verbal and written communications in Irish. My Department also continues to adhere to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) commitments which protect and promote regional and minority languages including Irish.

The following table represents expenditure on producing materials in Irish in the years 2018, 2019 and 2020.

2018	2019	2020
£497.73	£3225.45	No costs incurred

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the cycle routes delivered under road improvement and resurfacing schemes by Roads Eastern Division in each of the last five years; and (ii) a summary of the number of schemes and length

broken down by facility type as defined in departmental guidance “Measures to regulate traffic RSPPG E063” (a) totally separate facility; (b) cycle lane on the carriageway; and (c) share walking/cycling facility.

(AQW 17432/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Details of the cycling facilities that have been constructed by my Department within Roads Eastern Division in the previous 5 years, by facility type, are provided in the following table:

Year	Scheme Name	Type of cycling facility provided	Length (KM)
2020-21	Blaris Greenway Phase 3	Greenway	1.4km
	Dublin Road	Pop Up	0.63km
	Grosvenor Road	Pop Up	0.55km
	Crumlin Road	Pop Up	1.0km
	Donegall Road	Pop Up	0.80km
	A55 Knock Road / Glen Rd	Crossing	-
2019-20	Broadway	Shared	0.12km
	Blaris Greenway Phase 1 / 2	Greenway	1.4km
2018-19	Middlepath Street	Two-way	0.37km
	Middlepath Street	Shared	0.15km
	Middlepath Street	Two-way	0.29km
	Comber Greenway (Comber Rd / Old Dundonald Greenway included)	Greenway	2.4km
	Laurelhill Road	Shared	1.2km
2017-18	Castledillon	Shared	0.05km
	Comber Greenway	Greenway	4.8km
2016-17	College Sq North	Two-way	0.19km
	College Sq North	Shared	0.06km
	Durham St	Two-way & Shared	0.15km
	Durham St	Shared	0.07km
	College Ave to Castle Street	Contraflow	0.13km
		Total length (KM)	15.76km

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the cycle routes delivered under road improvement and resurfacing schemes by Roads Southern Division in each of the last five years; and (ii) a summary of the number of schemes and length broken down by facility type as defined in departmental guidance “Measures to regulate traffic RSPPG E063” (a) totally separate facility; (b) cycle lane on the carriageway; and (c) share walking/cycling facility.

(AQW 17433/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Details of the cycling facilities that have been constructed by my Department within Southern Division in the previous 5 years, by facility type, are provided in the following table:

Year	Scheme Name	Type of cycling facility provided	Length (KM)
2016/17	N/A	N/A	
2017/18	Monaghan Road, Armagh	New toucan crossing	-
2018/19	Moy Road, Scotch Street, Portadown	New toucan crossing	-
	Carbane Way	New toucan crossing	-
	Shepherds Way	New toucan crossing	-
	Carnbane Way / Shepherds Way	Shared walking/cycling provision	1.69
2019/20	A2 Belfast Road, Bangor (At Ballygilbert)	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.50

Year	Scheme Name	Type of cycling facility provided	Length (KM)
2020/21	Newtownards Traffic Study	Shared walking/cycling provision	Ongoing
	Nursery Road, Armagh	Shared walking/cycling provision	0.340
		Total length (KM)	2.53

Details of these schemes are readily available in the reports presented to Council each year which are available at: <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/type/corporatereports>

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure what role her Department would have in the roll-out of an e-bike scheme in a council area, similar to the scheme recently launched in Dublin.

(AQW 17434/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Under the Active Travel Demonstration Projects competition in 2013, my Department provided capital funding to Belfast City Council for the Belfast Bikes bikeshare scheme. The Council undertook responsibility for the development, implementation, operation and maintenance of the scheme. My Department also provided capital funding for the recent upgrade of the Belfast Bikes. I would expect that my Department could continue to have a capital funding role.

If a Council wishes to develop an e-bike scheme for their area, my Department would be willing to consider funding subject to affordability, a satisfactory business case and DoF approval to pay a capital grant.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the meetings she has held in the last 12 months with (i) chargepoint operators; and (ii) other providers of Electric Vehicle charging infrastructure.

(AQW 17435/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The electric vehicle public charge point network is owned by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and is operated on a commercial basis. I have recently met with ESB representatives to discuss EV charging infrastructure in Northern Ireland. 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. I have not been approached for meetings by any other charge point operator or other providers of EV charging infrastructure in the last 12 months.

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 Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the work undertaken to arrange a concessionary agreement with infrastructure providers for Electric Vehicle Chargepoints.

(AQW 17436/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The British Government has made £20 million in grant funding available to local authorities in GB-NI for 2021/22 to provide charge points for residents without off-street parking. My Department has been engaging with the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV) and with the Energy Saving Trust (EST), who administer the On-street Residential Charge Point Scheme (ORCS) to ensure the scheme can be accessed by councils in the North. Concession agreements may form part of the arrangements between local councils and charge point operators. The EST held a workshop last year with local councils here to provide information about the ORCS scheme and has indicated its intention to hold further events to support councils in Northern Ireland interested in applying to the scheme. My Department will also work with councils who wish to apply.

In addition, my Department has been supporting the development of a separate potential EV charging infrastructure pilot project. The role of my Department in any future arrangements is currently being considered.

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 Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure following her January 2021 statement that the project was on track for delivery in 2022, for an update on Phase 2 of the A6 road upgrade from Drumahoe to the A2 Caw roundabout.

(AQW 17442/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Phase 2 of the A6 Derry to Dungiven road project extends from Drumahoe to the A2 Caw roundabout. It is estimated this 7km section would cost around £200m and forms part of the A6 Flagship Project.

Part of the works will encroach on the Mobuoy waste site and the final design will need to take this into account.

Delivery of this phase of the project, which is not part of the current Dungiven to Drumahoe construction contract, will depend on a range of factors including future budget settlements.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether any of her Department's publications or advertising campaigns use images that have been photoshopped to alter the body of the participants, since January 2020.

(AQW 17443/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Department routinely use images in Departmental publications and in advertising campaigns. During this process Departmental officials use stock images from a variety of sources including official photographs taken or arranged by the Department's Communications Team. The Department does not photo shop or alter any images to change body shapes.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the requirements for motorcycles to complete an MOT.
(AQW 17448/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) conducts annual roadworthiness tests on motorcycles, from 4 years old, in compliance with the Motor Vehicle Testing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003. Details of the test requirements are contained in the DVA's published Motor Bicycle Inspection Manual. This manual may be viewed via the following link –

www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/motor-bicycle-inspection-manual-dva

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the areas categorized as being at risk from coastal flooding across North Down.

(AQW 17451/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Access to the government's latest flood hazard map information for all areas, including North Down, is publicly available through Flood Maps NI. This information can be found on my Department's website at: <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/topics/rivers-and-flooding/flood-maps-ni>.

North Down generally has a high degree of natural protection against coastal flooding due to its coastal topography being predominantly higher than both present day extreme tide levels and current predicted climate change extreme tide levels.

Coastal flood risk in North Down is therefore considered to be relatively low overall, although during extreme tidal conditions coastal flooding may occur at the following locations:-

- a) Parts of Kinnegar area in Holywood, the nearby section of the by-pass and some properties close to it;
- b) In Bangor, a small number of properties close to the outfall of the Ballyholme Stream into Ballyholme Bay near The Esplanade;
- c) A small number of coastal properties between Groomsport and Orlock, and at the seaward side of Warren Road between Orlock and Donaghadee;
- d) In Donaghadee, some coastal properties in the vicinity of The Parade, Railway Street, and the ends of Manor Street and Saltworks Street nearest the harbour; and
- e) A small number of coastal properties south of Millisle at Ballywalter Road. Narrow Water Bridge Project

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she anticipates the construction for the Narrow Water Bridge commencing before May 2022.

(AQW 17456/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to progressing the long awaited, transformative Narrow Water Bridge project, as outlined in the New Decade, New Approach agreement.

My officials continue to work in collaboration with colleagues in the South to progress this important project. As such, it is not presently possible to provide a date when construction will commence, although I would want it to be started as soon as possible.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Infrastructure to provide the data that has informed her decision in March 2021 to restrict driving theory tests to 15 critical workers.

(AQW 17460/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Driving instruction ceased from 26 December 2020 when the Executive introduced Regulations to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Driver theory tests and practical driving tests were also suspended from that date. Following the Executive's review on 15 April 2021, driving instruction, theory tests and practical tests can resume from 23 April 2021.

While testing services were suspended, my officials in the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) liaised 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 and who are required to drive for the purposes of their work. The number of theory tests delivered to these critical workers during March 2021 reflected the requests received from the relevant employers.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, when it comes to re-booking, whether priority will be given to those who had their practical driving tests and theory tests cancelled due to the pandemic.

(AQW 17480/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Following the Executive's decision on 15 April to relax some Covid-19 restrictions, the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) will resume practical driving tests and theory tests on 23 April, with appropriate mitigations in place.

Customers who had their practical driving tests cancelled due to the pandemic continue to have access to the booking system and have been contacted by DVA to provide them with the opportunity to reschedule their appointments before the booking service opens for customers who have not yet booked a test.

The booking service will then open in three phases based on the expiry dates of theory test pass certificates, to give priority to those who have been waiting for the longest time. The booking system for Phase 1 customers, whose theory test pass certificates will expire by 31 October 2021, will open on 26 April 2021. The booking system for Phase 2 customers, whose theory test pass certificates will expire between 1 November 2021 and 31 March 2022, will open on 4 May 2021. The DVA has contacted Phase 1 and Phase 2 customers directly to advise them when they can access the booking system.

The DVA plans to open the booking service for all other customers in mid-May and they will issue further communications through direct and social media channels, and write to all Approved Driving Instructors to confirm the process and the exact date.

The DVA has, and continues, to work hard to increase its capacity to help meet the expected high demand for driving tests. The DVA has taken a range of measures to maximise the availability of test slots, including the recruitment of additional examiners and the provision of new temporary test centres. They will continue to offer driving tests on a Saturday and at certain centres on Sundays where it is suitable to do so without compromising the integrity of the test. Overtime will also be used to rota off-shift dual role driving examiners to provide further capacity. Additional slots are therefore being made available for May, June and July to accommodate more learners.

Driver theory testing will resume at the six established test centres, with additional slots at each location and extended opening hours to help address the increased demand. An additional temporary test centre, which will be located in Ballymena, will also be opened that can provide around 1,000 test slots per week. Customers can book appointments through the online theory test booking system, with priority initially being given to customers whose tests have been affected by the suspension of theory test services due to COVID-19 restrictions.

I remain committed to minimising disruption and ensuring the DVA's plan for the restoration of services is in hand, and most importantly to protecting the lives of staff and customers during this pandemic.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there are plans in place to reopen the Knockmore railway line. (AQW 17489/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to improving transport connectivity for the benefit of our economy and communities across the North. Our rail network, whilst relatively small, does present a unique opportunity to improve the sustainability of the Department's transport operations.

My Department is currently preparing the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) which will set out the priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks up to 2035. The RSTNTP will primarily consider capital investment for road and rail networks, but will also consider resource costs for improved bus and rail services. It is anticipated this plan will be published for public consultation later this year and I would welcome all representations throughout this process including those in respect of reopening Lisburn to Antrim railway line via Knockmore through this process.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail her Department's plans for the purchase of new trains for the railway network. (AQW 17490/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are many benefits to investing in our rail network. Transport underpins our quality of life and chances of economic success. Our rail network plays a key role in making the North a more attractive place to visit, live, work and do business. For too long, though, we have not been ambitious or courageous enough. We have to think bigger, especially as we work to tackle the climate crisis, grow our island economy and improve connectivity, not just across the North, but right across this island.

Pre COVID-19, our railway network was experiencing unprecedented levels of demand on peak services with more than one third of all services exceeding the passenger seated capacity. My Department has therefore invested £66m in twenty one new train carriages with the first three having already been delivered in March this year. These new carriages will provide an additional 1600 seats on the network and, subject to successful testing, are due to go into service between autumn 2021 and autumn 2022. The introduction of these carriages will provide a further step change in the provision of public transport and will encourage modal shift which is a key part of building back greener post COVID-19.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail how much has been spent on the York Street Interchange Project, in each of the last five years. (AQW 17515/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The following table provides a breakdown of the annual spend to date on the York Street Interchange project in each of the last five years.

Financial Year	£k
2016-17	1,073
2017-18	4,936
2018-19	2,380
2019-20	1,639
2020-21	2,344
Total	12,372

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for an update on the work being done to ensure anyone requiring an MOT can get one before their certificate expires; (ii) what are the repercussions in terms of insurance, tax and the car owner's ability to drive their vehicle if they cannot secure a test prior to the expiry of their MOT certificate; and (iii) what is the advice for someone who cannot secure an MOT test before their certificate expires.

(AQW 17550/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) is delivering vehicle testing services at all 15 of its test centres for those vehicles that require an MOT test. While there is sufficient capacity for customers to book a vehicle test appointment, it may not always be possible to book a test at the preferred test centre, and customers may have to travel to an alternative centre to secure a test before their current test pass certificate expires.

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 continually identifying and cancelling vehicle tests which have been booked by customers even though their vehicle has a current Temporary Exemption Certificate (TEC). Additional vehicle test slots are available daily at most centres and further slots also become available due to cancellations.

Customers are able to change existing appointments to a different test centre and time if a preferred slot becomes available.

In addition, the DVA also offers vehicle test appointments on Sundays and bank holidays, at most test centres. Following conversion of an adjoining building at the Newbuildings test centre, additional testing capacity is now available to meet demand in the north-west.

The DVA has recently extended the period in which MOT reminder letters are issued to six weeks prior to the test due date, with plans to increase this to seven weeks in mid-June to provide customers with earlier notice to book their test.

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. This will help free up test slots for customers that cannot avail of a TEC.

If someone is unable to secure a vehicle test date until after their vehicle test certificate or TEC expires, the legislation permits them to drive the vehicle to a test centre and, if it fails, back to the registered address for the vehicle or a place of repair.

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. The DVA will continue to be guided by the latest public health and scientific advice as they work towards the resumption of normal services.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 17047/17-22, what was the date of the Land and Property Services valuation used for the sale of Portavoe Reservoir.

(AQW 17586/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has advised that the date of the Land and Property Services valuation was 21 March 2019.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 16787/17-22, whether she will meet with the residents of Ravensbrae, Garrison.

(AQW 17621/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I sympathise with the residents at Ravens Brae in Garrison. However, the issues at Ravens Brae have been caused by the developer failing to maintain the wastewater systems, for which he is responsible.

This is a stand-alone private wastewater treatment works which was never intended to be adopted by NI Water. At the outset of this development, NI Water had advised the developer that there was no capacity at the Garrison wastewater treatment works and there are currently no plans or funding to upgrade the works which might enable Ravens Brae to connect to the public infrastructure.

In spite of this, NI Water has offered assistance on this issue, and attended the site on 4 March 2021 to inspect the wastewater treatment works and to detail the work that would need to be carried out before the sewerage infrastructure could be considered for adoption. Unfortunately, NI Water was unable to gain access to the private wastewater treatment works to complete the inspection. NI Water inspected a number of manholes and found them to be full of raw sewage, which indicated that the wastewater treatment works is no longer functioning. NI Water provided some advice around the implications of this, however this remains privately-owned infrastructure which NI Water has no legal power to maintain.

An inspection of the private wastewater treatment works would be helpful. NI Water is happy to attend the site again if access can be provided.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to extend the expiry date on theory tests due to Covid restrictions being in place and people not having been able to avail of driving lessons.

(AQW 17644/17-22)

Ms Mallon: To help mitigate the impact on customers due to the cessation of practical driving tests as a result of Covid restrictions I brought forward legislation to extend the validity period of theory test pass certificates. Theory test certificates that were due to expire between 1 March 2020 and 31 October 2020 have been extended by 12 months. In addition, theory test pass certificates which expire between 1 November 2020 and 30 June 2021, and which have not already benefited from an extension, have been extended by 8 months.

Customers whose certificates expire between the relevant dates do not need to do anything as their certificates are being automatically extended to allow them to book their practical driving test, now that the legislation is in place

Rather than apply further extensions, I have agreed that the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) will operate a prioritised booking system for customers which will focus on those that have been waiting longest. Phase 1 customers, whose theory test pass certificates will expire by 31 October 2021 will open on 26 April 2021. The booking system for Phase 2 customers, whose theory test pass certificates will expire between 1 November 2021 and 31 March 2022, will then open on 4 May 2021. The DVA has contacted Phase 1 and Phase 2 customers directly to advise them when they can access the booking system.

The DVA is set to reopen the booking service for all other customers in mid-May and they will issue further communications through nidirect and social media channels, and write to all Approved Driving Instructors to confirm the process and the exact date.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the installation of a railway halt in central Craigavon will form part of her considerations in conjunction with the All Island Strategic Rail Review recently announced by her Department.

(AQW 17697/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The All Island Strategic Rail Review will allow us to consider our network across this island to view how we can improve it for everyone. Whilst it reflects the commitment under the New Decade, New Approach agreement of the Irish and British Governments to examine the feasibility of a high/higher speed rail link between Derry, Belfast, Dublin and Cork, Minister Ryan and I have a shared ambition for rail and commitment to tackling the climate emergency, and we are keen that we use this opportunity to consider how we can improve our rail network across the island of Ireland.

To achieve this, the All Island Rail review will examine the potential for rail connections across the island including how our existing connections could be improved and where new rail links would be best placed. It will also review how we can connect our rail network to our international gateways through our ports and airports. In line with this, the review will consider the use of transporting freight across our island using the rail network whilst considering how we can move to a low or zero emission rail network as we seek to tackle the climate emergency.

This process is at an early stage with a procurement exercise being undertaken to appoint a service provider to deliver the review. The purpose of this will be to allow data to drive how to improve and expand our rail connections. To that end, neither Minister Ryan nor I have made no assumptions on the outputs of the review and cannot pre-empt what the recommendations may be.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure, following the finding of the Court of Appeal, arising from a major contract, that 'The Department engaged in a secret, bilateral and unrecorded process with one of multiple bidders..... accorded special treatment in a clandestine and purely bilateral process and, in consequence, the level playing field was distorted for other bidders.', whether assurance exists that the awarding of road contracts is now fair and transparent.

(AQW 17712/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Court of Appeal finding relates to a procurement competition run in 2015. The Court found that there was a flaw in the Department's approach to the award of multiple, term type maintenance contracts across Northern Ireland. I am advised that the procurement process for these contracts has been amended significantly since 2015. In 2018 the Roads Centre of Procurement Expertise (CoPE) was reaccredited through a rigorous external assessment examination.

All complex award decisions and procurement legal challenges taken forward by the Roads CoPE are undertaken with full involvement of its legal advisers. My Department has noted the judgment of the Court of Appeal and is considering its implications with its legal advisors.

My Department has a close working relationship with Industry Groups such as the Mineral Products Association Northern Ireland (MPANI), to ensure that its procurement strategies and tender processes for road maintenance contracts are developed in partnership. In the past 5 years my Department's Roads CoPE has successfully awarded more than 300 contracts.

Department of Justice

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the recruitment of PSNI officers.
(AQW 17065/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Decisions relating to the recruitment of police officers are an operational matter for the Chief Constable of the PSNI, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB). I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the role of the NIPB. You may, therefore, wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

However, the Member may also wish to note that the Finance Minister has set out the Executive's 2021-22 final budget allocation, which was agreed by the Executive on 1 April 2021, subject to NI Assembly debate and vote. In addition to the final 2021-22 budget, PSNI will be given an in-year allocation of £12.3m and this will enable PSNI to increase the police officer numbers during the year.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the recruitment of prison officers.
(AQW 17066/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Prison Service continues to recruit staff across all operational grades. In 2020 114 new officers were recruited into the Service with a further 15 officers joining since January.

Preparations are also underway for a further recruitment campaign. It is anticipated that will be launched later this year.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme, including the likely date of commencement.
(AQW 17096/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department advanced the work necessary to enable the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme to open for applications in line with the target date of March 2021. That included: 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, 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.

Development of the medical assessment guidance is ongoing. It will be a matter for the President and the Victims' Payments Board to confirm when the scheme will open for applications. However, the President has ensured that the main groups representing victims and survivors have been kept updated on progress.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 14322/17-22, (i) whether any further Ministerial responses to her correspondence on the matter of the minimum age of criminal responsibility have been received; and (ii) to outline how she intends to progress this matter.
(AQW 17174/17-22)

Mrs Long: Further to AQW 14322/17-22, in which I stated that I had received three responses from Executive colleagues on the issue of the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility (MACR) within Northern Ireland, I can confirm that no additional responses have subsequently been received.

As you know, I am fully supportive of taking steps to increase our MACR, in line with international standards and recommendations from a range of youth justice reports. I will therefore continue to press for Executive colleagues to engage on this important issue.

I am currently considering the introduction of a legislative proposal to increase MACR as part of the Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. However, any such proposal will require Executive approval and I intend to seek this in the coming months.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister of Justice to provide details of all drug seizures at ports across Northern Ireland over the last 12 months.

(AQW 17175/17-22)

Mrs Long: Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of children who have been retained, post sentence, at Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre since March 2020.

(AQW 17183/17-22)

Mrs Long: Woodlands, Juvenile Justice Centre is Northern Ireland's only custodial facility for young people under the age of 18 in Northern Ireland.

Young people may be retained in Woodlands, Juvenile Justice Centre, post sentence on such occasions whereby the Court has issued a Warrant of Commitment to Remand.

The Commitment to Remand warrant is issued when secondary charges are pending and not related to the offence that resulted in the prior sentence.

From March 2020 to date Woodlands records show that one young person was retained, on a remand warrant, following sentence.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the work of her Department to reduce the rates of reoffending.

(AQW 17308/17-22)

Mrs Long: Evidence shows that it is only by working with, and providing support to, those who offend that we can make communities safer and reduce future harm to victims. The criminal justice system on its own cannot provide the knowledge, expertise or access to the services needed to truly reduce reoffending. There are a range of socio-economic factors which have been shown to have an impact on reoffending, including poverty and social deprivation, mental health issues, substance misuse, homelessness, and a lack of educational attainment and employment opportunities. These factors contribute toward the reasons why people become involved in crime in the first place, and they are often exacerbated through contact with the criminal justice system, leading to a cycle of offending which causes significant harm to victims and communities.

Addressing reoffending means tackling each of these wide-ranging issues, and our approach is therefore multi-faceted. The Department's key strategic and operational work areas are detailed in a previous answer to AQW 11899/17-22, so I shall not repeat that detail here. We continue to work with our agencies, NDPBs and other partners, particularly those in the voluntary and community sector, to provide a range of services and support, which include early intervention; trauma-informed and problem solving approaches; and a Reducing Offending Partnership (ROP) model aimed at managing offenders who are at high risk of reoffending.

Specific needs such as accommodation, education and employment, and welfare and benefits are also being addressed, and we are working to improve health outcomes for people in the criminal justice system. At a strategic level, my Department has developed a Strengthening Family Relations Strategy, and consulted on both an Adult Restorative Justice Strategy and a new justice-wide gender-informed strategy to support women and girls in contact with the criminal justice system.

This work is ever-evolving as we are faced with new opportunities and informed by research, evidence and best practice. I am aware that at first glance, the headline rate of reoffending year-on-year seems to be largely unaffected by this work. However, a closer look at the statistics shows that significant progress has actually been made in reducing both the numbers entering the justice system in the first place, and the number of individuals who go on to reoffend.

Table 1 below shows the number of people who received a non-custodial disposal at court, a diversionary disposal or who were released from custody within Northern Ireland during the given financial year has decreased from 33,815 in 2010/11 to 20,407 in 2017/18, a reduction of approximately 39.7%. Furthermore, the number of people who reoffended within each cohort has decreased from 5,646 in 2010/11 to 3,884 in 2017/18, a reduction of approximately 31.2%.

Table 1: One-Year Proven Reoffending within Northern Ireland from 2010/11 to 2017/18

	Number of People in Cohort	Number who Reoffended within One Year	Reoffending Rate (%)
2010/11	33,815	5,646	16.70%
2011/12	31,343	5,869	18.73%
2012/13	29,427	5,452	18.53%
2013/14	27,069	4,890	18.06%
2014/15	23,627	4,221	17.87%
2015/16	21,982	4,059	18.47%
2016/17	21,493	3,862	17.97%

	Number of People in Cohort	Number who Reoffended within One Year	Reoffending Rate (%)
2017/18	20,407	3,884	19.03%

I am therefore happy to provide this update on the work of the Department, and the progress that has been – and continues to be – made in supporting people to reduce offending behaviour and deliver safer communities for all.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Justice whether any of her Department's publications or advertising campaigns use images that have been photoshopped to alter the body of the participants.
(AQW 17365/17-22)

Mrs Long: I am not aware of any occasion where such altered images have been used in this way.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice to detail the impact the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill 2021 will have on local policing.
(AQW 17430/17-22)

Mrs Long: The provisions in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill 2021 relate mostly to policing in England and Wales. It is proposed that a small number of provisions should be extended to Northern Ireland, subject to the agreement of the Assembly. These are:

- amendments to the Crime (Overseas Production Orders) Act 2019, which would streamline the gathering of stored electronic data to be used for criminal investigations and prosecution and ensure NI is line with other parts of the UK;
- measures placing the National Driver Offender Retraining Scheme (courses as an alternative to prosecution) on a statutory footing, which would provide a clear legislative basis for this scheme and for any excess income to be used in NI for initiatives to promote road safety;
- provision for the execution of warrants sought in England and Wales for information relating to the discovery of human remains, which would prevent NI becoming a possible 'safe haven' for such information;
- powers relating to the enforcement and variation of sexual offences orders, which would provide for more effective management of sex offenders and avoid anyone subject to an order in Scotland being able to come to NI to evade any prohibitions placed on them; and
- the placing on a statutory footing of powers to extract information from digital devices of witnesses, victims and others, which would address a recommendation made by the Information Commissioner and clarify the lawful grounds for extraction of data.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Justice whether she will work with the Minister of Health on the implementation of safe-zones around health care clinics to ensure no-one is intimidated or deterred from accessing vital health services due to street protests, like have been seen at John Mitchel Place and Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry in recent weeks.
(AQW 17759/17-22)

Mrs Long: While everyone has the right to express their views, no-one should be deterred from accessing healthcare, or subjected to protests and images that they find distressing or offensive.

Those who protest outside Health Trust premises, which are delivering abortion related advice and services, are impacting not only on the well-being of women at a very vulnerable time of their lives, but on all those who are attending these health facilities for many other reasons, including children and young people, the elderly and Health Trust staff.

Providing for safe-zones at Health Trust and other health care premises can only be achieved through legislation, which would require Executive agreement. I am proposing to open the conversation with the Executive in the near future with a view to seeking its approval to develop legislative solutions in this area.

I am acutely conscious of the effect of such protests and have asked my officials to liaise with their Department of Health counterparts on the impact relating to those accessing services, and to keep me fully informed.

Department for the Economy

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for the Economy whether testing will be made available on university campuses in Northern Ireland for students of other universities or colleges in the UK and Ireland in order to provide further assurance around travel across jurisdictions over the Christmas period.
(AQW 11140/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): A programme of asymptomatic testing using Lateral Flow Devices for students studying at Northern Ireland Universities was established before Christmas. Similar arrangements were available in Universities across the UK and students were encouraged to get tested prior to leaving their term time addresses and travelling home.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy to detail her legislative programme for this mandate.

(AQW 13276/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I intend to introduce a Parental Bereavement and Leave bill. This bill will introduce a statutory right to Parental Bereavement Leave and Pay in Northern Ireland akin to that introduced in GB on 6 April 2020. In addition my officials continue to process subordinate legislation across a wide range of Business areas including Health and Safety, Insolvency, Company Law, Energy and Further and Higher Education.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will set up a dedicated unit within Invest NI to help ensure Northern Ireland maximises opportunities and investment in the local green economy.

(AQW 15206/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI recognises the increasing significance of the green economy as an emerging driver of future growth and prosperity. In line with DfE's Economic Recovery Action Plan and as a key strand of my Department's Energy Strategy Options Consultation, growing the green economy is one of Invest NI's eight key recovery drivers through which it aims to accelerate progress by industry towards Net Zero by stimulating investment in a green sustainable recovery. To this end, and recognising that there is still much to do to understand the depth & breadth of the opportunities in the green economy it is Invest NI's aim to review resource allocation in this area.

Currently, Invest NI works with and supports companies active in Clean Technology sectors. They generate c.£1.77bn in annual sales, of which £1.12bn is exported and £500m is sold to GB. In order to stimulate further growth, it has funded 18 company networks through its Collaborative Network Programme to focus on building capability which can be deployed through the green economy and in addition, has a broad portfolio of support schemes that can and will support businesses to capitalise from opportunities in the green economy as they become clearer.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will seek to introduce Restart Grants to support businesses to resume trading following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions.

(AQW 15711/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Any decision on such a scheme would require collective agreement by the Executive. With the Chancellor's budget announcements now revealed, I have met with Executive colleagues to consider how this impacts on our own situation in Northern Ireland, as we work towards a pathway of sustained recovery. As detailed in the Economic Recovery Action Plan, my Department will launch the High Street Stimulus Scheme, which will provide individuals throughout Northern Ireland with a personalised prepaid card to be spent at 'bricks and mortar' businesses including retail, hospitality and close contact services. When it is safe to do so, the launch of this scheme will help to kick-start our economic recovery, and provide a welcome boost to those businesses impacted by the necessary restrictions. As we look forward, my Department's focus is on a speedy and un-interrupted re-opening of the NI economy as soon as possible, in line with the Executive's published roadmap 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions' and the associated health regulations. It will be for the Executive collectively to determine how any Covid-related funding is allocated as we progress through the roadmap and the lifting of restrictions.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail her plans to incentivise businesses to invest in the green economy.

(AQW 16356/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: 'Building a Greener Economy' is a central pillar of my Economic Recovery Action Plan. I have identified actions to be taken forward that will support the clean energy transition and economic recovery. Securing £20million for investment in energy efficiency, green innovation and the development of the hydrogen and circular economy demonstrates my commitment to ensuring our recovery is sustainable, environmentally responsible and tackles climate change.

I have launched a policy options consultation for a new NI Energy Strategy. It will consider how future energy policies can help to support the growth of a green economy.

I would encourage local businesses to consider the investment potential within the clean energy sector. Supporting businesses that are willing and able to develop and adopt innovative, low carbon technologies and grow our green workforce as a result, is a priority for me. Responding to the consultation will help to inform how policy can support businesses to take advantage of these new opportunities.

My Department is developing a bold and ambitious new vision, for a decade of innovation, for the Northern Ireland economy. The ambition will reflect the scale of the challenges ahead, and the opportunity we have, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit and the climate crisis, to make a generational change. To meet our ambition we will focus on areas in which we can maximise our advantage including opportunities within the green economy.

Furthermore, my officials are currently developing a strategic framework which will provide a first step in setting out a clear vision for Circular Economy in Northern Ireland. The framework will encourage innovation and resource efficiency, help increase productivity, drive economic growth and it will help local businesses become resilient and competitive in the global market.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy what categories of nature based solutions her Department is considering for future investment.

(AQW 16419/17-22)

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. My Department is progressing work which will contribute to a greener economy.

Building a Greener Economy is one of the four 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.

I have launched a policy options consultation for a new NI Energy Strategy. It considers how future energy policies can help to support the growth of a green economy. The clean energy sector has a number of characteristics which provide unique opportunities in growing the green economy. It will lead to sustainable economic development that is compatible with and directly contributes to net zero carbon emissions.

My Department is also developing a bold and ambitious new vision, for a decade of innovation, for the Northern Ireland economy. The ambition will reflect the scale of the challenges ahead but also the opportunity we have to make a generational change in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit and the climate crisis. To meet our ambition we will focus on areas in which we can maximise our advantage including opportunities within the green economy.

Furthermore, my officials are currently developing a strategic framework which will provide a first step in setting out a clear vision for Circular Economy in Northern Ireland. We can reduce the material footprint, waste and carbon emissions of Northern Ireland by focusing attention on opportunities to increase circularity. The framework will encourage innovation and resource efficiency, help increase productivity, drive economic growth and it will help local businesses become resilient and competitive in the global market.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for the Economy how she plans to create employment in the area of nature-based solutions.

(AQW 16432/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I would refer the Member to the reply I gave to AQW 16419/17-22.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) her priorities in improving regional economic balance; and (ii) whether the high unemployment and economic inactivity in the most deprived urban areas constitutes the highest priority in addressing regional economic imbalance.

(AQW 16490/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I would refer the Member to the reply I gave to AQW 16489/17-22.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy to outline (i) why further education lecturers in Northern Ireland are paid less than in other UK regions; and (ii) what actions she intends to take to address this issue, including the awarding of enhanced pay and conditions.

(AQW 16573/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As you will be aware, salary levels in most professions, including further education (FE), vary across regions of the UK to take account of a range of factors, including local circumstances.

Lecturers' pay and conditions within the six FE Colleges in Northern Ireland are a matter for the FE colleges themselves as the employers and are the subject of negotiations which have been taking place between Trade Union Side and the College Employers' Forum. My Department has not been involved in the negotiations. However, if and when an agreement is reached between both

parties through these negotiations, any resulting Business Case will be submitted to the Department for appraisal before coming to myself for approval.

However, I do recognise that the industrial action initiated by the University and College Union will have raised concerns for learners, parents and indeed for staff themselves. I value the important contribution which lecturers in our FE colleges make to building our economy and improving the skills and life outcomes for learners, including many of the most vulnerable in our society and I would encourage both employers and unions to continue to engage to seek a resolution to limit any impact on learners.

In the meantime, it is important that the negotiations are afforded the space needed to reach agreement and it would be inappropriate for me to make any further comment at this time.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy what action her Department is taking to implement the Green New Deal, as committed to in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 16575/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Responding to the challenge of climate change is a complex policy area and development of a Green New Deal within that context will require input from across a number of Departments. My Executive colleagues and I will need to work collectively to determine the next steps required to take this work forward.

My own Department is currently progressing work that will contribute towards this area including the development of a new Energy Strategy. I launched a Policy Options Consultation on 31 March which help to shape how future energy policies within the clean energy sector can support the growth of a green economy.

My Department is developing a bold and ambitious new vision for the Northern Ireland economy. The ambition set out in this vision is to drive economic growth through a focus on innovation, to achieve a fairer distribution of opportunities for all our people and to contribute to environmental wellbeing.

Clean Energy is one of the emerging priority sectors identified within the vision through stakeholder engagement. Further work will be conducted to ascertain how we can best maximise our advantage within this area.

Furthermore, my officials are currently developing a strategic framework which will provide a first step in setting out a clear vision for Circular Economy in Northern Ireland. The framework will encourage innovation and resource efficiency, help increase productivity, drive economic growth and it will help local businesses become resilient and competitive in the global market.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of times she, or her officials, met with the University and College Union from January 2020 to March 2021.

(AQW 16775/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I have not had any meetings with representatives from the University and College Union (UCU) during the period in question.

However, officials within Further Education Division of my Department have had a total of four meetings involving UCU during that period.

Following a meeting with Trade Union Side (TUS) on 8th June 2020 to discuss the Department's approach to safe resumption of on-site educational provision and related provision in further education colleges and Non-Statutory Contractors, a representative from UCU was invited to become a member of the Advisory and Oversight Group (AOG), which was established to plan for the safe resumption. UCU was also invited to form part of the membership of a parallel group of meetings between the Department and TUS on the same issue. In addition to the initial meeting on 8th June, the UCU representative attended two meetings of the AOG, on 9th and 16th June, and one meeting with TUS on 19th June, at which several of my officials were present, but subsequently withdrew from attending further meetings of both groups.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy whether she intends to implement any of the findings from the Northern Ireland College of the Future Final Report.

(AQW 16849/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I very much welcome the recent publication of the Northern Ireland College of the Future Final Report which recognises the excellent progress which has been made in the Further Education (FE) sector here in recent years and makes a number of recommendations for how we can continue that work. I note in particular the recommendation that some of the initiatives which have been rolled out such as the Curriculum Hubs, should be replicated across the other jurisdictions.

As we emerge from the current restrictions, FE colleges will play a central role in ensuring we develop the skills which will help to rebuild the economy and drive recovery. We need to ensure that colleges are properly structured and resourced to meet not just today's challenges but also those of the next 10-20 years, in building a high skills economy which can compete in a global environment. This report is a very welcome addition to the consideration of how FE can play a full role in that journey and it is important that I take time to consider with my Department how the findings in the report can inform and contribute to those deliberations.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) any discussions she has had with Project Gigabit in relation to expanding the provision of superfast broadband to rural areas excluded from Project Stratum; and (ii) the number of rural properties in Northern Ireland, and East Londonderry that will remain without superfast broadband after the completion of Project Stratum.

(AQW 16855/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) Project Gigabit is a £5 billion project managed by Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), aimed at bringing next generation gigabit broadband to more than one million hard to reach homes and businesses. As part of Project Gigabit, the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme is being relaunched, with up to £210 million to give people in eligible rural areas immediate financial help to get gigabit speeds. My Department will continue to engage with DCMS to discuss how these schemes will benefit Northern Ireland.

- (ii) Project Stratum was developed to improve access to broadband services for those premises unable to access speeds of 30 Mbps (Superfast broadband, as defined by Ofcom) 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 2,517 eligible premises are currently out of scope of the project. Of those, 185 are within the East Londonderry Constituency.

My Department is seeking to address these premises. Discussions have already been advanced with DCMS and, now with Fibrus Networks appointed as the contractor, we are working to identify the solutions and costs to maximise coverage across the target intervention area. 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.

Mr Butler asked the Minister for the Economy whether she intends to introduce legislation to mirror Jack's Law to support parents and carers to take paid time off due to parental bereavement.

(AQW 16865/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Yes.

I felt particularly moved and gratified when I was able to announce in January my intention to introduce the Northern Ireland Parental Bereavement Leave and Pay Bill. This important piece of legislation, which I intend to introduce in the Assembly prior to summer recess, will mirror "Jack's Law" which was introduced in Great Britain in 2018. The Bill will provide support for bereaved working parents and those carers who had parental responsibility for a child in the period immediately prior to death.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the think-tank report, Retaining and Regaining Talent in Northern Ireland, including the absence of policies to address outward educational migration.

(AQW 16897/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is a combined response to the above two AQWs.

I welcome Pivotal's report on 'Retaining and Regaining Talent in Northern Ireland' and note its findings.

While the Pivotal report argues that educational migration has a negative impact on Northern Ireland's 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.

The issue, therefore, is not the lack of graduates, but rather getting the right balance of skills to meet the needs of the economy.

The Skills Barometer predicts an undersupply in STEM subjects. Northern Ireland's universities are aware of this undersupply, and have taken measures 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.

The Department is engaged in a number of initiatives to encourage this alignment, including: the provision of relevant information to prospective students; the development of degree level apprenticeships; and funding short-term courses in priority economic sectors.

The Pivotal report also argues that educational migration is partly driven by the MaSN cap.

However, figures from UCAS show that the numbers of 'Determined leavers' is far higher than the number of 'Reluctant leavers' each year. For example, in 2019/20 there were 1,590 'Determined leavers', while there were only 305 'Reluctant leavers'. (Determined leavers are those who applied only to, and were accepted at, institutions in the UK, while 'Reluctant leavers' are those who had a firm NI choice, but who ultimately accepted an offer in the UK.)

These figures would imply that there are more important factors motivating educational migration out of Northern Ireland than the MaSN cap. The Pivotal report acknowledges that Determined leavers are, for example, more likely to attend highly-selective universities and wish to seek out new experiences for personal development and experience the wider cultural offerings of university attendance in a large city.

However, the Department's new draft Skills Strategy outlines several proposed policy commitments for consideration including a full independent review of funding for education in Northern Ireland, as set out in New Decade, New Approach, which is to be initiated by 31 August 2021. It is intended that the review of HE Funding will include a review of the funding model, including MaSN.

Officials have recently been looking at the available information regarding 'educational migration', with the intention of reviewing policy in this area. The Pivotal report, and results of their future research, will be helpful in developing a strong factual basis for policy development moving forward.

I believe that intermediate higher education can and should also contribute to addressing outward educational migration. The benefits to the economy from higher level skills at levels 4 and 5 should not be under-estimated, in terms of contribution to productivity and human capital and there are very positive employability prospects for individuals undertaking this pathway.

There is capacity within our local Further Education Colleges to meet greater higher education demand and scope to retain some of the 'reluctant leavers' through this alternative pathway. My officials are currently progressing a review of Level 4 and 5 Provision and HE in FE in recognition of the supply gap and capacity in this space.

A consultation on the new Skills Strategy will be published shortly and I would very much welcome Pivotal's views on the proposed commitments outlined therein. I am also arranging to meet Ann Watt, Pivotal's Chair, to discuss the report.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the report on Retaining and Regaining Talent in Northern Ireland's assertion that retaining and regaining students and graduates is crucial for economic growth and should be central to her Department's skills strategies in order to help address weak productivity and human capital.

(AQW 16898/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is a combined response to the above two AQWs.

I welcome Pivotal's report on 'Retaining and Regaining Talent in Northern Ireland' and note its findings.

While the Pivotal report argues that educational migration has a negative impact on Northern Ireland's 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.

The issue, therefore, is not the lack of graduates, but rather getting the right balance of skills to meet the needs of the economy.

The Skills Barometer predicts an undersupply in STEM subjects. Northern Ireland's universities are aware of this undersupply, and have taken measures 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.

The Department is engaged in a number of initiatives to encourage this alignment, including: the provision of relevant information to prospective students; the development of degree level apprenticeships; and funding short-term courses in priority economic sectors.

The Pivotal report also argues that educational migration is partly driven by the MaSN cap.

However, figures from UCAS show that the numbers of 'Determined leavers' is far higher than the number of 'Reluctant leavers' each year. For example, in 2019/20 there were 1,590 'Determined leavers', while there were only 305 'Reluctant leavers'. (Determined leavers are those who applied only to, and were accepted at, institutions in the UK, while 'Reluctant leavers' are those who had a firm NI choice, but who ultimately accepted an offer in the UK.)

These figures would imply that there are more important factors motivating educational migration out of Northern Ireland than the MaSN cap. The Pivotal report acknowledges that Determined leavers are, for example, more likely to attend highly-selective universities and wish to seek out new experiences for personal development and experience the wider cultural offerings of university attendance in a large city.

However, the Department's new draft Skills Strategy outlines several proposed policy commitments for consideration including a full independent review of funding for education in Northern Ireland, as set out in New Decade, New Approach, which is to be initiated by 31 August 2021. It is intended that the review of HE Funding will include a review of the funding model, including MaSN.

Officials have recently been looking at the available information regarding 'educational migration', with the intention of reviewing policy in this area. The Pivotal report, and results of their future research, will be helpful in developing a strong factual basis for policy development moving forward.

I believe that intermediate higher education can and should also contribute to addressing outward educational migration. The benefits to the economy from higher level skills at levels 4 and 5 should not be under-estimated, in terms of contribution to productivity and human capital and there are very positive employability prospects for individuals undertaking this pathway.

There is capacity within our local Further Education Colleges to meet greater higher education demand and scope to retain some of the 'reluctant leavers' through this alternative pathway. My officials are currently progressing a review of Level 4 and 5 Provision and HE in FE in recognition of the supply gap and capacity in this space.

A consultation on the new Skills Strategy will be published shortly and I would very much welcome Pivotal's views on the proposed commitments outlined therein. I am also arranging to meet Ann Watt, Pivotal's Chair, to discuss the report.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 16579/17-22, whether, as reported in local media, her officials met with academics from the University of Exeter regarding its publicly funded report on energy governance, which led to changes in the report.

(AQW 16900/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As openly stated in the published report, officials did engage with the researchers from the University of Exeter throughout the study.

The Department's role in any external research is to ensure it is factually accurate and supported by evidence. Officials provided information to the researchers to seek to ensure the factual accuracy of the report's contents. This is viewed as 'normal practice' by the authors.

It is for the authors to use any information provided to them and draw their own conclusions which, naturally, may change as additional evidence is gathered.

As the report highlights, it has been researched by and written by the authors and the words contained within it are the responsibility and views of the authors only.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for her assessment of the comment that Northern Ireland has an extremely complex structure of energy governance as stated in a recent University of Exeter Report on Energy governance for the Northern Ireland energy transition; and (ii) whether the upcoming Energy Strategy will address this issue.

(AQW 16923/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The complexity of energy means that there is no single best approach to energy governance, and the division of roles and responsibilities across the UK and the Republic of Ireland vary widely. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' answer.

Regardless of the structures in place, a joined-up approach across government will always be required. The governance structures established for the Energy Strategy have already led to the collaborative approach needed across central and local government.

These structures include a Government Stakeholders Group that brings together all government departments with a role in energy policy. Central and local government have also worked together across the five working groups (consumers, energy efficiency, heat, power and transport) to inform the energy policy options included in the recent Energy Strategy Options Consultation.

The leadership that my Department is showing across the Executive on energy policy matters is demonstrated through the Options Consultation published at the end of March which covers the full breadth of energy policy issues across government.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 15611/17-22 and due to the proximity to the end of the financial year, whether delays in payment risk funding for the scheme.

(AQW 16925/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I can confirm there is no risk to the funding allocated to the Limited Company Director Support Scheme. Invest NI remain committed to assessing and verifying all outstanding applications, and processing payments, to eligible applicants as quickly as possible.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy (i) to outline current employment law in Northern Ireland in relation to bereavement leave for partners who suffer miscarriages and still births; and (ii) whether bereavement leave should be available to these partners rather than having to take sick leave.

(AQW 16934/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) There is no specific provision for bereavement leave for partners who suffer miscarriages and still births in our current employment law framework. However, many good employers treat employees who suffer such a loss with compassion and empathy and I would encourage all employers to do the same.
- (ii) It is my intention to introduce a Parental Bereavement Leave and Pay Bill in the Assembly in the coming months. My planned Bill includes provision for parents who suffer a still birth in addition to parents who suffer the loss of a child. It will not include a specific provision for parents who suffer a miscarriage.

I am aware of the recent changes in this area in New Zealand and whilst, I have no plans currently to introduce similar legislation in Northern Ireland I will continue to monitor any changes made in Great Britain and further afield to ensure that the employment law framework in Northern Ireland is comparable and fair.

My priority for this mandate remains to introduce Parental Bereavement Leave and Pay in NI akin to that which was introduced in GB in April 2020 and to focus on our continued economic recovery in response to COVID-19.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for the Economy what plans or proposals in the short to medium term (i) has her Department agreed with Invest NI in relation to the site at Mandeville Road, Craigavon; (ii) has Invest NI ever discussed or agreed for any

part of the site at Mandeville Road, Craigavon being used by other Department's outside of the remit of the Department for Economy; and to whom and at what stage are those discussions.

(AQW 16935/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) My Department has not had any discussions with Invest NI regarding its land at Mandeville.
- (ii) The Department of Education has approached Invest NI to explore the potential for land at Mandeville to be utilised for non-industrial purposes - these discussions have been exploratory in nature and remain ongoing.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy (i) how wages with lecturers in further education colleges in Northern Ireland compare with their counterparts in other parts of the UK; and (ii) for her assessment of whether the difference in pay is justified.

(AQW 16950/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department does not currently hold information on how lecturers' salaries in further education (FE) colleges in Northern Ireland compare to those of their counterparts in other jurisdictions and I therefore cannot comment on any difference.

However, I expect the FE colleges, as the employers of the lecturers, will include such an assessment as part of any Business Case submitted to the Department for appraisal as a result of the current negotiations with trade unions on pay and conditions.

When this information is provided to the Department, I will ensure the member is provided with a copy of any comparison made.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the environmental impact of coal power stations.

(AQW 16964/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Fuel Mix Disclosure and CO2 Emissions reports, supplied by the Utility Regulator, shows that there has been significant inroads in the reduction of coal as a source of power generation. Coal in the all-island fuel mix has reduced from 16% in 2010 to 2.6% in the most recent report in 2019.

Kilroot is the only EU ETS electricity generator in NI that continues to use coal as a fuel. The 2019 annual emission report, produced by DAERA, states that Kilroot emitted 1,010,033.348 tCO₂ of which 968,049.345 tCO₂ were from coal. Kilroot will be converted to a gas-powered station in 2023 which will mean that coal will be reduced to zero in the subsequent Fuel Mix Disclosure and CO2 Emissions reports.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for the Economy whether a complete and unedited version of the Northern Ireland Energy Strategy 2050, published by the University of Exeter, will be made available to Assembly Members.

(AQW 16965/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The University of Exeter did not write a report on the Northern Ireland Energy Strategy 2050. They completed an academic think-piece on 'Energy governance for the Northern Ireland energy transition'.

On 31 March 2021, I published a policy options consultation for a new Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland. This will be used to inform the final Strategy, which I plan to bring to the Executive for approval by the end of this year.

The report to which the member refers has been published and is available from the University of Exeter's website.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy, further to AQW 15864/17-22, (i) whether her Department has identified sites for the storage of captured carbon; (ii) whether potential sites are being investigated; and (iii) to list those identified and potential sites.

(AQW 16975/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As outlined in the Energy Strategy Options Consultation, we do not intend to develop a policy regime to store carbon dioxide (CO₂) at sites onshore in Northern Ireland. This is consistent with the advice from the Climate Change Committee, which highlighted that Northern Ireland was not best placed across the UK for the storage of carbon. We are therefore engaging with emerging CO₂ storage sites elsewhere in the UK, including the HyNet project.

Our focus is on identifying future opportunities in Northern Ireland for capturing, utilising and transporting carbon. The Options Consultations seeks input on what these opportunities may be.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy how many investor visits were facilitated by InvestNI in the 2020 calendar year, broken down by council district.

(AQW 16976/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In total there were 42 visits by potential inward investors in the 2020 calendar year. 22 were physical visits (18 of which were pre-COVID-19), the breakdown of these visits by District Council Area is detailed below.

Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, from April 2020 onwards Invest NI pivoted to a 'virtual visit' delivery model for potential inward investors. The agency hosted 20 virtual visits between April 2020 and December 2020, for which a breakdown by District Council Area is not applicable.

There have been a further 4 physical visits since COVID-19. It should be noted that these visits only took place when government restrictions permitted and all necessary precautions were implemented.

As has been explained in previous questions of this nature, investor visit numbers to Belfast includes investors that may be considering a location elsewhere in Northern Ireland, but due to time constraints do not have time to travel to visit this area. In these cases they are hosted at Invest NI headquarters and therefore logged as Belfast.

Breakdown of the 22 physical visits by District Council Area during the calendar year 2020:

Belfast	Derry & Strabane	Newry, Mourne & Down
19	2	2

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of research by the International Council on Clean Transportation in its report Hydrogen for Heating, which concluded that heat pumps are a lower carbon and much more cost effective option than using hydrogen for heating.

(AQW 16978/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Heat pumps are a mature low carbon technology, and can be cost effective when installed in properties with a suitable building fabric. I believe the increased use of heat pumps will be one of the key elements in decarbonising heat in Northern Ireland in order to achieve net zero emissions by 2050. The introduction of hydrogen into the heat matrix may also be required to help meet this target.

These issues, and the findings of this report, are being considered as part of the development of my Department's new Energy Strategy. The draft Energy Strategy policy options consultation was issued on 31 March, and a final Energy Strategy is due to be published by November 2021.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy what plans she has to upgrade the BT8 area to Fibre To The Premises broadband.

(AQW 17018/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As you will be aware, my Department has developed Project Stratum, a major telecoms project which will utilise £165 million of public funding, together with Fibrus Networks' investment, to deliver gigabit-capable broadband infrastructure to more than 76,000, primarily rural, premises, with full deployment expected to be completed by March 2024. Of those 76,000 premises, 226 premises are within the postcode district of BT8.

Current deployment plans show that the first premises in the postcode district of BT8 are scheduled for improvement in Winter 2021. These premises are located in the Lagan Valley and Strangford Constituencies. For premises within the Belfast South Constituency area of BT8, deployment is scheduled to commence in Summer 2023.

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 whether he will bring forward proposals for Covid financial support for international language schools that have been badly affected by travel restrictions.

(AQW 17052/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has accepted transfer of this question, directed to the Minister of Education.

The Executive and UK Government have introduced an unprecedented range and volume of financial support packages since March 2020. These have been designed to mitigate against the most damaging impacts of the pandemic for individuals and families, to prevent businesses from closing and to protect people's main jobs and livelihoods.

To date, the Department for the Economy (DfE) has provided approximately £440 million of much needed funds to support to local businesses from all sectors and occupations throughout Northern Ireland.

Despite the significant number of schemes that were introduced by my Department in recent months, primarily to address gaps that had been identified from previous packages of support, it has not been possible to legislate for every scenario or to meet the growing demands arising from many sectors and industries throughout Northern Ireland.

Looking forward, my focus will be on re-opening the economy, as I believe that the best way to support all of our local businesses, employers and employees, 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'.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether universities and colleges are being paid to administer the £500 Covid disruption payments; (ii) how much they are being paid; and (iii) how that figure was negotiated.

(AQW 17053/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) An administration cost has been allocated to each university and college to cover any transaction fees incurred per student in administering the Covid Disruption Payment, and any staff costs or other resources which were necessary, including staff time taken on student validation, dealing with student queries etc.
- (ii) My Department has advanced a notional administration cost to each university and college of 10% of their total grant payment allocation.
- (iii) No fee has been negotiated but HEIs and Colleges are being reimbursed for the costs of administering the scheme. The Department retains the right to claim back administration costs once an assessment of these costs for each institution has been carried out.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy for a breakdown of the number of Northern Ireland-domiciled students studying at Higher Education Institutions located in (i) the Republic of Ireland; (ii) Great Britain; and (iii) Northern Ireland, for each of the last 10 academic years.

(AQW 17055/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I refer to AQW 14667/17-22 and AQW 15028/17-22 in which I have recently provided advice in relation to similar requests.

The latest information available regarding student enrolments is for 2018/19. Information on students from Northern Ireland enrolled at universities in Great Britain is available on the Department for the Economy website at the link below:

<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/enrolments-uk-higher-education-institutions-northern-ireland-analysis-201819>

My Department does not hold information regarding enrolments at institutions in the Republic of Ireland. However, you can find the requested information on the Irish Higher Education Authority's website at the following link:

<https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/enrolments/enrolments-detailed-5yeartrend-dashboard/>

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on her plans to restart the Northern Ireland Economy.

(AQW 17067/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As part of 'The Executive's Pathway out of Restrictions' process, I have drawn up detailed proposals for the relaxing / reopening in key employment sectors including; retail, close contact services, hospitality and tourism.

On 15th April, the Executive announced that businesses in these key areas have all been given confirmed or indicative dates to re-open, between 23rd April and 24th May 2021.

Also, on 25th February 2021, 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 actions set out in my plan will enable us to build a more competitive and inclusive economy as we recover from the impacts of this pandemic, through investment in skills; stimulating research, development and innovation; promoting investment, trade and exports; and building a greener economy.

The Executive has agreed to allocate an additional £286.8 million to fully fund the delivery of my Economic Recovery Action Plan. This includes £145 million for the High Street Stimulus Scheme which has been designed to encourage much needed expenditure in local towns and city centres throughout Northern Ireland.

The Economic Recovery Action Plan has received strong support from leaders in the business, tourism and skills sectors. It is intended that this will start a more detailed conversation regarding the economic recovery journey. The outputs of this stakeholder engagement will enable my Department to provide a comprehensive input into the wider Executive framework for recovery.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for the Economy to outline (i) what discussion she is having with energy suppliers; and (ii) what action her Department is taking to ensure NI households are protected from the 14% gas unit price increase.

(AQW 17090/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Utility Regulator is responsible for regulating gas tariffs charged by the dominant suppliers in the Greater Belfast and Ten Towns license areas – SSE Airtricity and firmus energy respectively. The Utility Regulator (UR) scrutinises the energy supplier submissions in relation to price changes, and ensures that customers pay no more than the efficient costs of purchasing and supplying natural gas plus an agreed profit margin set by the UR. The Department has an oversight role in this process.

Although the firmus energy gas tariff in Greater Belfast is unregulated, a competitive market and the price assurance provided by the regulated tariffs gives protection to domestic gas consumers.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of whether the Utility Regulator's remit is outdated, and needs reviewed, as suggested by some stakeholders, in the University of Exeter's Report on Energy governance for the Northern Ireland energy transition.

(AQW 17171/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Regulation was identified as a delivery priority in the consultation on Policy Options for a new Energy Strategy which I launched last month.

The consultation outlines my Department's intention to work with the Utility Regulator to review the adequacy of its legislative remit in the context of the Energy Strategy.

Furthermore, in its 2021/22 Forward Work Programme, the Utility Regulator has also committed to reviewing the adequacy of its legislative remit in the context of emerging industry requirement and change.

I would encourage you and your constituents to respond to the consultation to help inform our policies to deliver net zero carbon and affordable energy.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has undertaken any work in regards to the feasibility of district heating networks.

(AQW 17172/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The feasibility of district heat networks is being considered as part of my Department's new Energy Strategy, with the draft Energy Strategy policy options consultation issued on 31 March, and a final Energy Strategy due to be published by the end of the year.

District heat networks operate by distributing heat for space heating and hot water, through insulated pipes from a central source to a number of buildings in a local area. Where the heat source uses renewable energy or waste heat, then such an approach may be one of a number of potential options to decarbonise heat in Northern Ireland.

My Department is currently engaging with The Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) on a National Comprehensive Assessment (NCA) of the potential for efficient heating and cooling in the UK, with a focus on the use of district heating networks, which is due to be published next month.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has liaised with the Department of Health to provide any up to date guidance to Queens University and Ulster University regarding the return to face to face lectures for all students.

(AQW 17180/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As our Universities are autonomous institutions the return of face to face learning is primarily a matter for them to consider based on the public health advice from the Executive.

I recently announced an £4.1million for the provision of a safe working, learning and research environment in our Higher Education Institutes and all our Higher Education students have access to asymptomatic testing. With these measures I believe that we should be facilitating the potential return for all students as soon as it is possible, I am asking Executive colleagues to consider the current advice and to help our University students regain the learning experience they deserve.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on whether she has had any engagement with the Irish Government, regarding continuing participation in the Erasmus Scheme, for students at Northern Ireland universities.

(AQW 17283/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department has engaged with the Irish Government on the proposed arrangements. The Department has however not developed the arrangements with the Irish Government.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 16851/17-22, (i) what is a Tier 4 licence; and (ii) how many students with a Tier 4 licence are currently studying in further education colleges.

(AQW 17286/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) A Tier 4 licence is a Point Based System and is the primary immigration route for non-EEA students who wish to study full-time in the UK. These students must be sponsored by an education provider that holds a Tier 4 licence.

An education provider can apply for a licence which lasts for four years. There are two categories of visa, Tier 4 (Child) student and Tier 4 (General) student which would apply to the Further Education (FE) colleges and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

In September 2020, the National Government laid Immigration Rules in Parliament to announce a replacement to the Tier 4 (General) and Tier 4 (Child) student routes with a new and improved Student and Child Student routes. These routes are part of the UK's new points-based immigration system and applications opened on 5 October 2020.

From 5 October 2020, all prospective international students, including those from Europe coming to study in the UK after the end of the transition period, need to apply through the Student route before coming to UK.

(ii) There are four Tier 4 learners currently attending the FE colleges.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of formal meetings she has had with the NUS-USI since January 2020 to discuss issues of concern to students.

(AQW 17287/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I have had one formal meeting with NUS-USI during this period, along with separate meetings with other student representatives.

Rest assured, I am acutely aware of the issues faced by further and higher education students. My officials have been in regular contact with NUS-USI to discuss a broad range of further- and higher-education related matters, which is in addition to the significant volume of correspondence which I regularly receive on their behalf.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for the Economy, given that so many of her departmental staff are working from home, often in rural locations with substandard connections, whether her Department will consider covering the costs incurred by his staff to install superfast broadband, or available alternatives, in their homes.

(AQW 17334/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I recognise that good broadband connectivity is vital to ensure citizens are able to work remotely and that the Covid-19 crisis has emphasised the greater challenges faced by those with poor broadband coverage. My Department's Project Stratum will utilise £165 million of public funding, together with Fibrus Networks Ltd's investment, to deliver gigabit-capable broadband infrastructure to more than 76,000 primarily rural premises across Northern Ireland.

Deployment work is already underway and information on roll-out has been published by Fibrus Networks on its Project Stratum dedicated website at www.hyperfastni.com. My Department recognises that Project Stratum will not deliver an immediate solution for many citizens currently working from home.

From the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) has made every effort to support employees who have been required to work from home to comply with Government and NI Executive guidelines.

Extensive Covid-19 information, provided by the Department of Finance, on topics such as health and wellbeing and remote working, as well as Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and Guidance were developed to help civil servants in a number of ways. This information is available on the internet so that everyone can access it at:

- <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/landing-pages/covid-19-guidance-nics-employees>
- <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/articles/faqs-home-working-expenses-and-furniture-provision>

The 'Home working expenses and furniture provision' section of the Covid-19 FAQs and Guidance specifically addresses the issue around broadband provision. These FAQs advise colleagues that their Department may reimburse them for the following and that any claims need to be accompanied with supporting information, such as receipts:

- the additional cost of increased broadband data charges incurred solely from working from home; and
- the installation costs and monthly tariff for home broadband when they did not previously have home broadband and it has had to be installed due to working from home requirements. Any charges incurred must be solely related to working from home. Such reimbursement is non-taxable when the broadband is provided for business purposes and private use must be limited.

This provision is only available after staff and their line managers have considered IT alternatives available and the comparative costs, such as providing a Data Sim for laptops or Wifi device for desktop computers.

The 'Covid-19 Working from home guidance' also directs civil servants to the above mentioned FAQs and Guidance.

The provision of high speed broadband may be considered on a case by case basis on consideration of all the facts, in consultation with Civil Service IT experts and with due consideration to the requirements of Managing Public Money NI to ensure any costs are justified, reasonable and reimbursements are compliant with HMRC requirements.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy how many RHI scheme participants subject to regulatory sanction have sought statutory review of their cases; and of that number, how many have been concluded within 28 days.

(AQW 17499/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has had a total of 77 cases submitted for statutory review. Of these, 6 were recalled/retracted and 14 are still open. Of the 57 completed cases, 5 cases have concluded within 28 days.

There is no statutory timeframe for completion of a statutory review. There is a statutory requirement for the Department to notify the participant (and any other individual affected) within 21 days of the Department's decision on review. The Department has continued to meet this requirement.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) how much the System Operator for Northern Ireland has spent on advertising; and (ii) who received the payments, broken down over the past 10 years.

(AQW 17564/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This question raises a matter that is not within my ministerial responsibility.

As the question is for SONI, you may wish to contact them directly at:

SONI Ltd
12 Manse Road
Belfast BT6 9RT
Tel: 028 9079 4336
Email: info@soni.ltd.uk

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether she or her officials have met with their counterparts in the Irish government to discuss the future participation of Northern Ireland students in Erasmus; and, if not, why not.

(AQW 17593/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Yes.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for the Economy what consideration her Department has given to funding higher education qualifications specialising in conservation as a means of addressing the biodiversity crisis.

(AQW 17655/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department provides teaching grant to the Northern Ireland (NI) Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to support the continuation of all activities delivered by the HEIs associated with their core activities of teaching. My Department therefore does not consider funding for specific higher education qualifications. The universities are autonomous bodies and as such are responsible for their own course provision however I can advise that there are higher education courses available at the NI HEIs that specialise in conservation and the biodiversity crisis. If you would like more details on these courses, the universities' websites provide full detail on the courses they deliver, or the universities may be contacted directly for any further specific information you may require.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 30 April 2021

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Nesbitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide a breakdown of the total costs per member of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition.
(AQW 940/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): A breakdown of the total costs per member of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition is attached at Annex A.

Annex A

Expenditure on Remuneration and other Expenses for Members (20 June 2016 – 31 March 2021)

June 2016 - March 2017					
Commissioner	Remuneration (£)	Travel and Subsistence (£)	Flights and Hotels (£)	Employers HMRC Liability	Total Costs (£)
Mr Neville Armstrong (Joint Chair)	8,756.25	5,187.50	225.00	1,417.89	15,586.64
Dr Dominic Bryan (Joint Chair)	8,943.75	94.45	225.00	671.00	9,934.20
Mr Doug Beattie MC MLA*	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Mr Ian Crozier	1,950.00	0.00	0.00	175.81	2,125.81
Mr Richard Good	4,425.00	782.90	148.00	233.40	5,589.30
Mr Tom Hartley	4,687.50	0.00	148.00	123.93	4,959.43
Prof. Thomas Hennessey	4,380.00	1,227.59	7,542.35	3,583.95	16,733.89
Dr David Hume MBE	3,956.25	862.65	148.00	231.47	5,198.37
Mr Donncha MacNiallais	2,850.00	175.40	148.00	105.84	3,279.24
Mr Nelson McCausland	0.00	0.00	71.00	0.00	71.00
Mr Ian McCrea	2,700.00	731.93	148.00	270.85	3,850.78
Dr Katy Radford MBE	5,249.00	370.70	148.00	320.34	6,088.04
Mr David Robinson	6,375.00	942.35	148.00	328.73	7,794.08
Mr Mukesh Sharma MBE DL	4,687.50	917.34	225.00	306.47	6,136.31
Mr Carl Whyte	2,362.50	117.95	148.00	20.65	2,649.10
	61,322.75	11,410.76	9,472.35	7,790.33	89,996.19

*not eligible to claim remuneration as is an MLA.

April 2017 - March 2018					
Commissioner	Remuneration (£)	Travel and Subsistence (£)	Flights and Hotels (£)	Employers HMRC Liability	Total Costs (£)
Mr Neville Armstrong (Joint Chair)	16,768.12	5,566.50	253.99	3,078.50	25,667.11
Dr Dominic Bryan (Joint Chair)	19,406.25	35.40	108.00	1,677.55	21,227.20

April 2017 - March 2018					
Commissioner	Remuneration (£)	Travel and Subsistence (£)	Flights and Hotels (£)	Employers HMRC Liability	Total Costs (£)
Mr Doug Beattie MC MLA*	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Mr Ian Crozier	6,993.75	0.00	0.00	683.62	7,677.37
Mr Richard Good	15,074.50	643.10	108.00	1,376.11	17,201.71
Mr Tom Hartley	14,118.75	20.90	108.00	830.81	15,078.46
Prof. Thomas Hennessey	17,249.50	5,578.55	18,269.62	21,363.32	62,460.99
Dr David Hume MBE	10,200.00	1,098.00	108.00	984.12	12,390.12
Mr Donncha MacNiallais	8,756.25	712.50	108.00	558.09	10,134.84
Mr Nelson McCausland	11,700.00	452.70	108.00	1,592.33	13,853.03
Mr Ian McCrea	9,318.75	2,112.88	108.00	1,332.55	12,872.18
Dr Katy Radford MBE	10,593.75	237.60	0.00	662.70	11,494.05
Mr David Robinson	18,431.25	879.90	108.00	2,025.90	21,445.05
Mr Mukesh Sharma MBE DL	14,137.50	918.90	108.00	1,382.08	16,546.48
Mr Carl Whyte	8,343.75	188.10	108.00	427.28	9,067.13
	181,092.12	18,445.03	19,603.61	37,974.96	257,115.72

April 2018 - March 2019					
Commissioner	Remuneration (£)	Travel and Subsistence (£)	Flights and Hotels (£)	Employers HMRC Liability	Total Costs (£)
Mr Neville Armstrong (Joint Chair)	5,521.87	1,944.45	0.00	984.04	8,450.36
Dr Dominic Bryan (Joint Chair)	7,425.50	0.00	0.00	184.71	7,610.21
Mr Doug Beattie MC MLA*	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Mr Ian Crozier	6,506.50	0.00	0.00	607.26	7,113.76
Mr Richard Good	5,906.25	160.20	0.00	355.00	6,421.45
Mr Tom Hartley	6,131.25	0.00	0.00	179.99	6,311.24
Prof. Thomas Hennessey	5,813.00	2,181.52	4,866.02	6,753.23	19,613.77
Dr David Hume MBE	2,418.75	234.90	0.00	99.25	2,752.90
Mr Donncha MacNiallais	5,446.75	464.80	0.00	332.38	6,243.93
Mr Nelson McCausland	0.00	264.60	0.00	0.00	264.60
Mr Ian McCrea	4,556.25	585.00	0.00	422.29	5,563.54
Dr Katy Radford MBE	3,187.50	0.00	0.00	184.02	3,371.52
Mr David Robinson	6,900.00	264.15	0.00	414.82	7,578.97
Mr Mukesh Sharma MBE DL	7,275.00	387.75	0.00	869.92	8,532.67
Mr Carl Whyte	3,562.50	0.00	0.00	209.90	3,772.40
	70,651.12	6,487.37	4,866.02	11,596.81	93,601.32

April 2019 - Mar 2020					
Commissioner	Remuneration (£)	Travel & Subsistence (£)	Flights and Hotels (£)	Employers HMRC Liability	Total Costs (£)
Mr Neville Armstrong (Joint Chair)	543.75	503.10	0.00	125.59	1,172.44

April 2019 - Mar 2020					
Commissioner	Remuneration (£)	Travel & Subsistence (£)	Flights and Hotels (£)	Employers HMRC Liability	Total Costs (£)
Dr Dominic Bryan (Joint Chair)	881.25	0.00	0.00	0.00	881.25
Mr Doug Beattie MC MLA*	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Mr Ian Crozier	187.50	0.00	0.00	0.00	187.50
Mr Richard Good	393.75	24.30	0.00	0.00	418.05
Mr Tom Hartley	393.75	0.00	0.00	0.00	393.75
Prof. Thomas Hennessey	487.50	263.30	1,169.25	175.60	2,095.65
Dr David Hume MBE	393.75	78.30	0.00	19.61	491.66
Mr Donncha MacNiallais	281.25	18.60	0.00	4.60	304.45
Mr Nelson McCausland	5,456.25	37.80	0.00	613.97	6,108.02
Mr Ian McCrea	431.25	135.00	0.00	0.00	566.25
Dr Katy Radford MBE	431.25	0.00	0.00	0.00	431.25
Mr David Robinson	693.75	29.70	0.00	7.20	730.65
Mr Mukesh Sharma MBE DL	300.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	300.00
Mr Carl Whyte**	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	10,875.00	1,090.10	1,169.25	946.57	14,080.92

**not eligible to claim remuneration since being elected to Belfast City Council in May 2019.

April 2020 - Mar 2021					
Commissioner	Remuneration	Travel & Subsistence	Flights and Hotels	Employers HMRC Liability	Total Costs
Mr Neville Armstrong (Joint Chair)	1,012.50	0.00	0.00	38.71	1,051.21
Dr Dominic Bryan (Joint Chair)	3,637.50	0.00	0.00	214.66	3,852.16
Mr Ian Crozier	562.50	0.00	0.00	0.00	562.50
Mr Richard Good	450.00	8.10	0.00	8.10	466.20
Mr Tom Hartley	656.25	0.00	0.00	0.00	656.25
Prof. Thomas Hennessey	2,215.40	61.85	0.00	167.94	2,445.19
Dr David Hume MBE	525.00	26.10	0.00	32.70	583.80
Mr Donncha MacNiallais	693.75	24.00	0.00	30.00	747.75
Mr Nelson McCausland	562.50	0.00	0.00	0.00	562.50
Mr Ian McCrea	375.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	375.00
Dr Katy Radford MBE	2,437.50	0.00	0.00	134.34	2,571.84
Mr David Robinson	2,043.75	19.80	0.00	117.86	2,181.41
Mr Mukesh Sharma MBE DL	1,143.75	£0.00	0.00	56.82	1,200.57
Mr Carl Whyte**	0.00	£0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Mr Stephen Barr***	3,168.75	0.00	0.00	0.00	3,168.75
	19,484.15	139.85	0.00	801.13	20,425.13

***Mr Stephen Barr replaced Mr Doug Beattie as UUP representative on the Commission in March 2020

Mr Beattie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) what correspondence they have had with the US Secretary of State to seek an expedited procedure for visa applications from ex-prisoners affiliated with groups on ceasefire; (ii) the reply from the US Secretary of State; and (iii) whether they will make this correspondence available to Members.

(AQW 5075/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive Office has lead responsibility for implementing Action B3 of the Executive's Action Plan on Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime. Action B3 states: The Executive should make representations to the US Secretary of State to seek an expedited procedure for visa applications from ex-prisoners affiliated with groups on ceasefire. This matter remains under consideration.

Ms McLaughlin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when AQW 4426/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 5193/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: A response to AQW 4426/17-22 issued on 20 April 2021.

Ms Armstrong asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the Assembly committee to monitor the Programme for Government will be involved in the development of a Programme for Government for (i) the rest of this mandate; and (ii) for the next mandate.

(AQW 11192/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The creation of an Assembly Committee to monitor the Programme for Government (PfG) is a matter for the Assembly.

Good progress has been achieved towards the development of a new PfG. A draft Outcomes Framework was consulted on recently and responses are currently being analysed to inform design and content of the final version. This will give strategic direction to a more complete PfG incorporating an agreed budget and linked to policies and programmes which will be brought forward for Assembly consideration in due course.

Mr Beggs asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail when and how they vigorously engaged with the European Commission over the past year seeking to reduce the damage which will be caused to businesses and the increased cost to consumers as a result of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.

(AQW 11383/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: In the past year we have engaged at the highest levels in the European Commission through our participation in the Joint Committee on the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement which oversees the implementation and application of the Protocol.

The Joint Committee has now met on 7 occasions, most recently on 24 February.

We wrote to the European Commission's Co-chair of the Committee, Vice –President Maroš Šefčovič, on 5 November setting out our view of the key issues affecting our region and our people at this very important juncture. We also met with Vice –President Šefčovič on 3 February.

We are continuing to work to address the impacts of the end of the transition period as they arise, and to engage the Government and Lord Frost in the Joint Committee also.

Ms McLaughlin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the High Street Task Force, for an update on (i) progress; (ii) the terms of reference; (iii) its composition; and (iii) the timetable for its work.

(AQW 12753/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The first meeting of the Task Force took place on 23 February, chaired by the Junior Ministers. The Task Force formally adopted its terms of reference, and the vision of:

“sustainable city, town and village centres which are thriving places for people to do business, socialise, shop, be creative and use public services as well as being great places to live.”

Since then, four subgroups have been established on:

- influencing policy and strategy;
- promoting the development of capacity;
- developing and promoting good practice; and
- influencing and shaping intervention and investment.

Meetings of the subgroups are being arranged to initiate the formal projects for each of the key functions, and a programme of comprehensive engagement and co-design with stakeholders.

The Task Force Board comprises key stakeholders from:

- | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| ■ Retail NI | ■ The Executive Office; |
| ■ Hospitality Ulster; | ■ Department for Communities; |
| ■ NILGA; | ■ Department of Finance; |

- Department for the Economy;
- Department for Infrastructure;
- Department for Agriculture, the Environment and Rural Affairs;
- Business Alliance;
- NI Retail Consortium;
- Social Enterprise NI;
- NI Council for Voluntary Action;
- NI Council Irish Congress of Trade Unions;
- USDAW;
- Federation of Small Businesses;
- SOLACE;
- Ulster University;
- Queen's University Belfast; and
- Mr Chris Sutor (business owner).

Given its strategic role, we have established the Task Force for an initial period of 5 years; with an expectation of a review of its performance early in the next Assembly mandate.

Mr McNulty asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether children's pram and baby car seat retailers are permitted to trade under current restrictions, as long as they abide by social distancing and sanitising regulations for new and expecting parents.

(AQW 14232/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Since 8 March 2021, a controlled click and collect service has been permitted for baby equipment shops, clothing shops, footwear shops and electrical goods shops. These arrangements were extended to all non-essential retail from 12 April. More information can be found on nibusinessinfo at: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-guide-providing-contactless-click-and-collect>

From 30 April, all retail can reopen. Retailers should ensure appropriate mitigations and measures are in place to prevent the transmission of COVID-19.

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean can be found on nidirect at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

Ms McLaughlin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) why AQW 12753/17-22 has not been answered within the expiry of the timeframe stipulated by Standing Orders; and (ii) when it will be answered.

(AQW 14443/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: AQW 12753/17-22 was answered on 30 April.

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 highlight the unique nature of our responsibilities, which requires 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 disruption as a result of Covid-19 which has impacted upon the timelines of responses to questions because of the need to divert and dedicate staffing resources in response to this emergency.

Mr Hilditch asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given regulations on meeting outdoors are scheduled to ease on 8 March, and scottish golf courses are currently open, to detail the rationale for keeping golf courses closed.

(AQW 15192/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The current restrictions allow up to 10 people (including children of all ages) from a maximum of two households to take part in outdoor exercise or sports activities. This means that golf courses here are permitted to open. Club houses and indoor sports facilities (changing rooms, showers, kitchens, meeting rooms), apart from essential toilet facilities, must stay closed.

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean for business sectors and individuals can be found on nidirect at:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) what cost/harm benefit analysis studies, both monetised and unmonetised, have been carried out in relation to the Coronavirus regulations and restrictions; and (ii) with what outcomes.

(AQW 15250/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Each department is responsible for assessing the impact of coronavirus regulations and restrictions in their own remits.

The Department for the Economy has published a range of research and analysis on the impacts of the Covid-19 outbreak on the local economy. It provides analysis on the impact on the labour market, sectoral analysis and the potential path to recovery.

This is available at <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/covid-19-analysis>

The Pathway out of Restrictions document also provides an assessment of the impact COVID-19 has had on health, society and the economy. It can be viewed at <http://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/publications/executives-pathway-out-restrictions>

Miss Woods asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when AQW 8169/17-22 will be answered.
(AQW 15359/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: A response to AQW 8169 issued on 20 April 2021.

Mr Catney asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of meetings they have had with the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation in the last 12 months.
(AQW 15564/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The First Minister and Junior Minister Kearney met with the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation on one occasion during the last 12 months, on 10 February 2021.

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the Board's Strategy, Business Plans and Governance.

Officials from our department meet formally with the MLKDC senior management team on a quarterly basis.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on legislation to establish a Commissioner for the development of the Ulster Scots language in Northern Ireland as set out in New Decade, New Approach.
(AQW 16529/17-22)

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 legislative provisions which provide for the establishment of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression, the appointment of a Commissioner to enhance and develop the language, arts and literature associated with the Ulster Scots and Ulster British tradition; to make provision for a duty on the Department of Education in relation to Ulster Scots; and for the appointment and functions of an Irish Language Commissioner, and provision for best practice standards relating to the use of the Irish Language in connection with the provision by public authorities of services to the public here.

We will progress the legislation during this mandate and the appointment of Commissioners 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 on how many occasions have officials from the Northern Ireland Executive attended meetings of the Specialised Committee on the implementation of the EU Protocol; and with what results.
(AQW 16749/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Officials from the Executive Office have attended all seven meetings of the Specialised Committee on the Implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland (Specialised Committee) as part of the UK delegation.

The Specialised Committee also met on 23 February 2021 to discuss 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. It met again on 26 March and took stock on outstanding issues and the implementation of the Protocol. Both the UK and the EU committed to continuing their engagement with Northern Ireland business and civil society stakeholders.

Mr McNulty asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether, when opening up retail for click and collect, they will allow flexibility for children's footwear retailers to measure children for the appropriate footwear.
(AQW 16844/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: From 30 April, all retail can reopen. Retailers should ensure appropriate mitigations and measures are in place to prevent the transmission of COVID-19.

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean can be found on nidirect at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

Mr Chambers asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to whom is the Director of Public Prosecutions accountable.
(AQW 16986/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Attorney General appoints the Director for Public Prosecutions.

Under Article 42(1) of the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 the functions of the DPP will be exercised by the Director, independent of any other person.

The Public Prosecution Service is a non-ministerial government department with funding provided by the Assembly.

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline (i) how they are incorporating delivery of the UN Sustainable Development Goals into the Programme for Government; and (ii) how they are working to increase public awareness and understanding of the goals.

(AQW 17104/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Work is progressing on the development of a new Outcomes Framework to provide strategic direction for the Programme for Government being brought forward by the Executive. A public consultation on a draft Outcomes Framework was concluded on 22 March 2021 and a separate Equality Impact Assessment consultation is ongoing and will close on 30 April 2021.

It is intended that the Framework should provide a firm basis for the development of cross-cutting and impactful action plans to deliver against a vision of societal wellbeing which is aligned to and supports the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Performance against the Outcomes contained in the PfG Framework will be reported on in a timely manner through PfG monitoring webpages that will also demonstrate linkages to and progress towards the achievement of the SDGs. A PfG communications plan will be established which will provide further opportunities to promote awareness and understanding of the SDGs.

Miss Woods asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail her plans to introduce a violence against women and girls strategy.

(AQW 17140/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Much work is already ongoing in the Department of Justice and the Department for Communities to address violence against women and girls and gender bias.

The Assembly and the Executive have however identified a clear need for us to act collectively to adopt a strategic approach to address this wicked problem. This will provide the opportunity to deliver cultural and societal change to ensure there are healthy behaviours and attitudes towards women and girls.

The Executive has agreed that TEO will co-ordinate the development of such a Strategy and have asked that the interim Head of the Civil Service be tasked to engage across all departments seeking resources to enable TEO to lead on the design, development and implementation of the strategy. This engagement has commenced not just in respect of resources but to inform our understanding of the relevant work currently being undertaken.

Once resources are in place, we are committed to this work being taken forward at pace.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the funding provided by their Department to voluntary and charitable groups in South Down, in each of the last three years, for each of the publicly available funding streams.

(AQW 17209/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Several of the projects funded by Good Relations were across multiple council areas. The information provided is in relation to the Newry Mourne and Down Council Area. This comprises the two Assembly areas of South Down and Newry and Mourne. A breakdown of how much of the funding was provided to South Down is unavailable.

	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
Central Good Relations Funding	£391,614	£427,817	£276,268
District Council Good Relations Funding	£26,800	£11,447	£6,750

In addition to the above funding, TEO funded the Community Relations Council and The Education Authority to deliver funding to South Down groups. These organisations made the decisions on what groups received funding. The below amounts are fully attributable to the South Down area.

	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19
T:BUC Camps Programme and the Planned Interventions Programme	£23,965	£27,540	£23,965
Community Relations Council	£5,750	£18,690	£21,884

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress has been made on addressing travel issues as a result of the pandemic faced by couples when one lives overseas.

(AQW 17216/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: It is important that everyone, including long distance couples, follow the requirements outlined in the Coronavirus Regulations, which state that only essential travel should take place.

Anyone arriving here from within the Common Travel Area and who plans to remain for at least 24 hours, should self-isolate upon arrival for 10 days. Information on travel within the Common Travel Area can be found here- <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-travel-within-common-travel-area>

For anyone travelling from outside the Common Travel Area, the Executive agreed on 25 March to the introduction of pre-booked managed isolation in hotel accommodation on return from red list countries for a period of 10 days.

Travellers arriving from non-red list countries outside the Common Travel Area must self-isolate for 10 days at home. Test kits must be booked for days two and eight of isolation. The day of arrival will be treated as day zero.

Further information can be found here-

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-international-travel-advice>

Once here, while households are not currently allowed to mix indoors in private homes, certain exceptions apply, including for the formation of a bubble with one other household. Guidance on household bubbles can be found at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

Those travelling need to be aware at all times of the restrictions where they are travelling from and to.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when campsites and caravan parks will be permitted to reopen. (AQW 17218/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: From 30 April, overnight stays are permitted in self-contained tourism accommodation. This means accommodation with no shared facilities that can be exclusively used by a single household or bubble. For example self-catering houses, caravans and motor homes.

An indicative date of 24 May has been set for the reopening of indoor hospitality venues and all tourism accommodation. This will be subject to review.

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean can be found on nidirect at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

Mr McCrossan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether drive-in cinemas are permitted to open during the current COVID-19 restrictions (AQW 17300/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: From 23 April, outdoor visitor attractions and activity centres may reopen. This includes drive-in cinemas.

Members of the public should be reminded that when going to these events, they must not share their vehicle with anyone outside of their household or bubble.

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean can be found on nidirect at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

Mr Lunn asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister given the self contained nature of such caravans, to outline the rationale for excluding touring caravans from the relaxation in respect of static caravans, . (AQW 17494/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: A review of the current restrictions took place on 15 April and a package of relaxations were announced.

From 30 April, overnight stays are permitted in self-contained tourism accommodation (such as self-catering houses, caravans and motor homes). This relates to accommodation with no shared facilities and which can be exclusively used by a single household/ bubble.

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean can be found on nidirect at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

Ms Bailey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether self-contained touring caravans and campervans are permitted to be used from 30 April 2021 under COVID-19 regulations. (AQW 17572/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: A review of the current restrictions took place on 15 April and a package of relaxations were announced.

From 30 April, overnight stays are permitted in self-contained tourism accommodation (such as self-catering houses, caravans and motor homes). This relates to accommodation with no shared facilities and which can be exclusively used by a single household/ bubble.

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean can be found on nidirect at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

Mr Stalford asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when outdoor drive-in cinemas can re-open.
(AQW 17734/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: From 23 April, outdoor visitor attractions and activity centres may reopen. This includes drive-in cinemas.

Members of the public should be reminded that when going to these events, they must not share their vehicle with anyone outside of their household or bubble.

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean can be found on nidirect at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

Mr Muir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the establishment of a Citizens' Assembly.
(AQW 17756/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We remain committed to the convening of at least one Citizen's Assembly each year on an issue to be recommended by the Compact Civic Advisory Panel. Preparatory work has begun on the re-establishment of the Panel through public appointment but Covid-19 has unavoidably impacted both on this work due to the necessary diversion of staffing resources and also taking into account the panel's potential ability to function most effectively due to the current social constraints in which we have been operating.

Mr Chambers asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of recent comments made by the Secretary of State that money allocated under New Decade, New Approach could be used to fund the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme.
(AQO 1889/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We would like to reiterate that we remain entirely committed to delivering the Scheme. Victims and survivors have waited too long and we are focused on getting the Scheme up and running, applications in and payments made as quickly as possible.

In relation to the recent legal challenge on the funding issue, we have provided an undertaking to the Court that payments will be made to successful applicants under the Scheme. This undertaking provides reassurance and confidence that payments will be made when they fall due under the terms of the Scheme, regardless of where the funding comes from.

The offer of financial support from the Secretary of State falls considerably short of what Ministers expected and we have expressed this view in correspondence to the Secretary of State and at our recent meeting with him.

Ministers, including the Minister of Finance and Minister of Justice, also expressed concern that the support offered by the Secretary of State will have an impact on legacy funding and will leave the Executive with a financial pressure in relation to that aspect of the New Decade, New Approach agreement.

We will continue to progress financial discussions with the Secretary of State and the NIO in the context of their funding responsibilities for the Scheme.

Miss Woods asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the funding of the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme.
(AQO 1786/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We would like to reiterate that we remain entirely committed to delivering the Scheme. Victims and survivors have waited too long and we are focused on getting the Scheme up and running, applications in and payments made as quickly as possible.

In relation to the recent legal challenge on the funding issue, we have provided an undertaking to the Court that payments will be made to successful applicants under the Scheme. This undertaking provides reassurance and confidence that payments will be made when they fall due under the terms of the Scheme, regardless of where the funding comes from.

The offer of financial support from the Secretary of State falls considerably short of what Ministers expected and we have expressed this view in correspondence to the Secretary of State and at our recent meeting with him.

Ministers, including the Minister of Finance and Minister of Justice also expressed concern that the support offered by the Secretary of State will have an impact on legacy funding and will leave the Executive with a financial pressure in relation to that aspect of the New Decade, New Approach agreement.

We will continue to progress financial discussions with the Secretary of State and the NIO in the context of their funding responsibilities for the Scheme.

Ms Mullan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their discussions with the Secretary of State on funding to deliver the Troubles-related incident Victims Payment Scheme.
(AQO 1788/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We would like to reiterate that we remain entirely committed to delivering the Scheme. Victims and survivors have waited too long and we are focused on getting the Scheme up and running, applications in and payments made as quickly as possible.

In relation to the recent legal challenge on the funding issue, we have provided an undertaking to the Court that payments will be made to successful applicants under the Scheme. This undertaking provides reassurance and confidence that payments will be made when they fall due under the terms of the Scheme, regardless of where the funding comes from.

The offer of financial support from the Secretary of State falls considerably short of what Ministers expected and we have expressed this view in correspondence to the Secretary of State and at our recent meeting with him.

Ministers, including the Minister of Finance and Minister of Justice also expressed concern that the support offered by the Secretary of State will have an impact on legacy funding and will leave the Executive with a financial pressure in relation to that aspect of the New Decade, New Approach agreement.

We will continue to progress financial discussions with the Secretary of State and the NIO in the context of their funding responsibilities for the Scheme.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what engagement he has had with the British Government to address the Brexit-related issue where blackface sheep breeders in the north, particularly in North Antrim, are having difficulties in relation to the movement of sheep between Scotland and the north.

(AQW 14563/17-22)

Mr Poots: (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):

From 1 January 2021 livestock can only be moved from Great Britain (GB) to Northern Ireland (NI) if they satisfy the same requirements as those moving from a so-called "third country", into the European Union.

I am acutely aware of the issues this, a result of the Northern Ireland Protocol and Withdrawal Agreement, presents regarding the movement of livestock from GB to NI and fully appreciate the difficulties regarding the requirements that must now be met complying with the conditions contained within the Export Health Certificates (EHCs) for the movement of breeding sheep from GB to NI.

Under the current EHC, the movements of breeding sheep are restricted to those from scrapie-monitored flocks and/or those proven to have the scrapie resistant genotype. Under the Scrapie Monitored Flock Scheme (SMFS) rules, it takes at least three years for a flock to become scrapie monitored.

I have written to the European Commission to highlight the issues with what I regard as unnecessary additional requirements within the EHCs for GB to NI livestock movements. I will also continue to engage on these issues with my Ministerial Colleagues across the United Kingdom, to find what I hope are pragmatic and sensible solutions. In addition, my officials continue to discuss, on a regular basis, with their counterparts from both GB and the European Commission, possible mitigations to what I consider to be unnecessary barriers to intra-UK trade.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what progress reports have been undertaken by his Department on the recommendations of the Mills Report; and when they will be published.

(AQW 16998/17-22)

Mr Poots: I can confirm that a Management Action Plan containing 25 actions was developed in order to implement the 14 recommendations presented in the Mills Report (2013).

An Internal Audit review, completed in March 2015, concluded that from 25 actions on the Management Action Plan, 9 were fully implemented and 16 were partially implemented. Internal Audit did a further review in 2017/18 and reported its findings in an Internal Audit Report on the 8th March 2018. The reported stated that all the recommendations in the Mills Report within DAERA's control have been implemented. The only outstanding recommendation from the Mills Report is Recommendation 9 which relates to retrospective planning permissions that was transferred to DfI in 2015 along with the planning function. Both Audit reports are published and are available to view at: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/copy-2015-internal-audit-report-implementation-recommendations-2013-mills-report>

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the membership of the (i) Strategic Waste Partnership Group; and (ii) Government Waste Working Group.

(AQW 16999/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Northern Ireland Strategic Waste Partnership (SWP) membership comprises of Directors from Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) Environment, Marine & Fisheries Group (EMFG), local Council Chief Executives, and senior representatives from Strategic Investment Board (SIB).

The Government Waste Working Group membership comprises representatives from Northern Ireland Waste Management Groups, local Councils, NI Local Government Association (NILGA), SIB, DAERA Environmental Policy Division (EPD) and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA).

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the various statutory responsibilities of (i) his Department; (ii) the Food Standards Agency; and (iii) local councils in respect of the checks required under the Northern Ireland Protocol at our ports, identifying policy, administrative and financial responsibilities.

(AQW 17030/17-22)

Mr Poots: Under the terms of the EU Withdrawal Agreement, the Northern Ireland Protocol and domestic law, Northern Ireland must continue to adhere to the EU Official Controls Regulation. Under this regulation, the relevant competent authorities (CAs) are legally obliged to undertake official controls on imports into Northern Ireland from non-EU countries (third countries), including Great Britain (GB), to ensure compliance with EU law.

Mandated official controls taking place at Northern Ireland's Points of Entry (NI POEs) in accordance with the aforementioned legislation include Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS), Marketing Standards, Organics, and IUU Fishery product Catch Certificates checks.

Statutory responsibilities of DAERA, the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland (FSA NI) and local authorities in respect of official controls and related official activities at NI POEs, including details on the respective policy and administrative roles, are detailed in Section Two of DAERA's Compliance Protocol. This is available at: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/compliance-protocol-sanitary-phytosanitary-controls-and-point-entry-marketing-standards-checks-gb-ni>.

In terms of the respective financial responsibilities, the EU Official Controls Regulation provides that the Competent Authorities responsible for delivering these controls must ensure that adequate financial resources are available to fund the official activities, such as checks at POEs, for their areas of competence. This includes the collection of fees and charges required to deliver the official control activities.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department will recognise the Northern Ireland Federation of Sea Anglers as an official body representing Northern Ireland sea anglers.

(AQW 17068/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department has no role in the recognition of any sport governing body.

This is matter for Sport NI which is an Arm's Length Body of the Department for Communities.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline (i) how he is helping to enable farmers to reduce carbon emissions resulting from their industry; and (ii) his future plans to assist the sector in reducing emissions.

(AQW 17094/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have prioritised the development of a cross-cutting Green Growth Strategy which my Department is leading on, on behalf of the Executive. This will be a multi-decade strategy to tackle climate change and will map out the actions we must take to meet sector-specific greenhouse gas emission targets, including across the agri-food industry, which will deliver a cleaner environment, more efficient use of our resources within a circular economy and green jobs. The Green Growth Strategy will be developed in phases and a consultation on the draft Strategy to be launched will take place in advance of COP26 in Glasgow later this year, with the final Strategy being launched by March 2022.

My department continues to support farmers to adopt low-carbon farming practices through knowledge transfer, farm support schemes and scientific research.

CAFRE deliver knowledge and technology transfer advice through initiatives including Business Development Groups, Farm Family Key Skills and the new Environmental Business Development Group Programme where currently 20 groups have been set up across NI focusing on sustainable farm systems and helping farmers identify carbon reduction measures and how to help protect the environment.

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.

Forest Service is leading on 'Forests for our Future' aiming to create 9,000 hectares of new woodland by 2030. Grant funding for creating new woodlands is provided via the Forest Expansion Scheme and a new stand-alone Small Woodland Grant Scheme to help farmers integrate woodland on their farms. Also, the Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) supports carbon friendly practices through a range of measures, including peatland restoration, establishing native woodland, agro-forestry and creation of new hedgerows. There are currently over 5,000 EFS agreements in place after four tranches, and a further two tranches are planned, subject to the necessary approvals.

DAERA supports ongoing scientific research aimed at reducing agricultural emissions and enhancing carbon storage in the landscape. This includes research 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.

My department also supports the Agri-Forestry Greenhouse Gas Implementation Partnership's (GHGIP) Efficient Farming Cuts Greenhouse Gases Implementation Plan aimed at tackling greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from agriculture. There is a strong emphasis on improved nutrient and livestock management within the plan.

My officials will continue to develop measures of support to help farmers play their part in reducing emissions and protect the environment. Work is ongoing to develop a future agri-environment scheme which will contribute to these aims. We 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 McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the number of fines issued by each local council for fly tipping and littering in each of the last three years.

(AQW 17099/17-22)

Mr Poots:

My Department does not hold that information. Whilst a District Council may issue fixed penalty notices under The Litter (NI) Order 1994 and The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (NI) 2011 or seek a fine of up to £2,500 following summary conviction at a Magistrates Court, there is no requirement to report information on levels of penalties issued to my Department.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the adequacy of action taken against fly tipping and littering in rural areas.

(AQW 17100/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- While District Councils (DCs) are solely responsible for enforcement against littering, DCs and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) share the responsibility for enforcement against flytipping.
- I firmly believe that we all have our part to play, and my Department is committed to promoting and funding environmental education and action and building civic pride to help tackle these ongoing problems. We could always do better, of course, but I am encouraged by what is being done to encourage civic responsibility and pride in our local communities.
- For its part, DAERA is using a combined approach of legislation, education and awareness, and enforcement to tackle flytipping and litter. New options for tackling litter will also be considered in the Environment Strategy for Northern Ireland which is due to be consulted upon in late spring.
- The recently finalised Flytipping Protocol aims to provide clarity on the roles and responsibilities of both DCs and NIEA, in preparation for commencement of Sections 4 & 5 of the Waste & Contaminated Land (Amendment) Act 2011, which will provide DCs and NIEA with analogous powers under the Waste and Contaminated Land (NI) Order 1997.
- Under the Protocol, NIEA is responsible for the investigation of large-scale waste criminality and the removal of hazardous wastes (e.g. asbestos) and other fly-tipped waste over 20m³ in volume; DCs take responsibility for other deposits under 20m³ – what might be more commonly understood as 'flytipping', i.e. the casual dumping of household waste by individuals.
- DAERA is working with 'TourismNI' to promote the message "Be Outdoor Smart – Leave No Trace – Love The Place" which reinforces our objective of encouraging everyone to look after our environment – particularly during the current pandemic.
- The Clean Neighbourhoods & Environment Act (NI) 2011 enables Council fines of up to £80 or court fines of up to £2,500 for littering. DAERA is currently reviewing the fixed penalty notices available to Councils to penalise offenders.
- In 2013 DAERA introduced the 5p carrier bag levy. This has reduced the number of carrier bags dispensed by over 1 billion since its introduction, and generated millions of pounds for environmental work (including anti-litter projects).
- DAERA works closely with DCs and environmental NGOs to develop and support educational & promotional campaigns aimed at achieving behavioural change. The Environment Fund directly supports 'Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful' (KNIB) which runs a number of programmes, including: 'Eco-Schools'; 'Live Here, Love Here'; 'Clean Coast'; & 'Adopt-A-Spot' projects.
- Over £3m has been awarded to KNIB since 2007/8 with additional current funding of over £1m to further support its campaigns. These make environmental awareness and action an intrinsic part of the life and ethos of our schools and communities, and focus on practical, positive environmental behavioural change.
- DAERA supports the 'Big Spring Clean' - NI's largest community clean-up campaign - which involves 100,000+ volunteers every year.
- KNIB receives DAERA funding to produce the annual Marine Litter Report which contains counts of litter items, litter types and geographical breakdown of the litter items.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on a bovine tuberculosis eradication strategy for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 17132/17-22)

Mr Poots: The eradication of bTB remains a top priority for both me and my Department. I am fully aware of the devastating emotional and financial impact a bTB breakdown can have on farming families.

The proposed bTB Eradication Strategy for Northern Ireland will aim to reduce, and eventually eradicate, bTB levels by comprehensively addressing all the recognised key factors in the spread of the disease.

I can advise that my officials have completed the business case to support the implementation of the Strategy and this will now be followed by the provision of final advice. This will assist me to take decisions on next steps that will address all the key factors in the control and eradication of the disease.

It should be noted that new legislation and further consultation will be required and stakeholders and the public will have the opportunity to express their views.

I can assure you that I am fully committed to a new bTB eradication Strategy and it is my firm intention to see its launch in the coming weeks.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what recent progress has been made on bringing forward legislative proposals to ban new licences for badger culling in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 17133/17-22)

Mr Poots: Badgers are a protected species in Northern Ireland under the terms of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency issues licences under Article 18 of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 for specific purposes such as scientific research, road development or building construction. The majority of licences issued are for development purposes and normally relate to badger sett disturbance or removal. Licence applications require relevant and sufficient supporting detail.

There are currently no plans to introduce legislation pertaining to the banning of use of badger removal licences

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what assessment he has made of the potential merits of introducing legal limits of carbon emissions for incinerators in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 17135/17-22)

Mr Poots: The latest Greenhouse Gas Inventory indicates that 0.8 MtCO₂e Tonnes of emissions are derived from waste management each year. This equates to approximately 4% of Northern Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions and is nearly a 58% decrease in emissions from the base year 1990. The Committee on Climate Change report on Reducing Emissions in Northern Ireland published in February 2019 highlighted that the emissions from waste are almost entirely (95%) methane, the main source of which was anaerobic decomposition of biodegradable waste in landfill sites (75%). Further analysis of the NI Greenhouse Gas Inventory indicates that waste incineration generates 0.017% of Northern Ireland's annual carbon emissions.

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.

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.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the number of recipients of Farm Payments in East Antrim, broken down by scheme type.

(AQW 17169/17-22)

Mr Poots: My department made payments to farm businesses for the following schemes in East Antrim for the 2020 scheme year.

Number of recipients of Farm Payments and amount paid by scheme type in East Antrim in 2020 scheme year:

Scheme	Number of recipients	Amount Net Total
COVID 19 Financial Support	290	£331,125.67
Basic Payment Scheme	775	£8,805,865.56
Greening Payment	775	£3,772,823.74
Young Farmers' Payment	33	£105,042.49

Scheme	Number of recipients	Amount Net Total
Environmental Farming Scheme	57	£374,245.58
Farm Woodland Annual Premia	13	£7,536.00
Total Payments	787*	£13,396,639.04

*Number of unique farm businesses paid as most receive more than one payment

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on planned works for Gortin Glens Forest Park.

(AQW 17199/17-22)

Mr Poots: Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (FODC) advise that the majority of the current Phase Two works at Gortin Glens Forest Park, co-funded by DAERA, are completed. Phase Two works include: upgrading of the café/restaurant and educational facilities; providing Picnic Shelters; the provision of additional Mountain Bike Trails (approx. 200m) and walking trails (250m); enhancing the Campsite area; a new access corridor suitable for equestrian parking and access to bridle trails; developing an entrance feature; and, additional equipment at the play area for children with disabilities.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the funding provided by his Department to voluntary and charitable groups in South Down, in each of the last three years, for each of the publicly available funding streams.

(AQW 17211/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs had identified payments of £1,185k made to voluntary and charitable groups in South Down over the past three years. This funding and the programme it was provided under is detailed in the table below.

Programme	2018-19 £'000	2019-20 £'000	2020-21 £'000
Environment Fund	227	299	280
Environment Fund: Environmental Challenge Competition		63	79
European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (SEAFLAG)		16	2
Coastal Communities Fund		96	
Angling Event Fund	1	1	1
TRPSI Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme	49	67	4
	277	542	366

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the launch of a public consultation on the Joint Fisheries Statement which will set out how his Department intends to achieve the objectives outlined in the Fisheries Bill.

(AQW 17234/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Fisheries Act 2020 sets out the United Kingdom's fisheries objectives and requires the UK fisheries administrations acting jointly to prepare and publish a Joint Fisheries Statement (JFS) for consultation. The draft JFS will set out the joint fisheries policies and how they will meet the fisheries objectives. My officials are currently working with their counterparts in the fisheries administrations in England, Scotland and Wales on drafting the text of the JFS and the preparatory work on statutory assessments and consultation exercises.

Drafting of the JFS and associated assessments will continue until Autumn 2021.

Devolved Ministers will be asked to agree the draft before consultation. Thereafter, my Department must specify a period of scrutiny of the draft JFS by the Assembly, and lay a copy of the consultation draft before the Assembly. The draft JFS will be brought to the attention of the AERA Committee during this period.

The public consultation on the JFS is planned from late December 2021 to early March 2022, for a 13 week period. The JFS must be published by 23 November 2022.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department intends to carry out a policy review of the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966, following the passing of the Fisheries Act 2020.

(AQW 17235/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department intends to complete a policy review of the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966 by 31 December 2021. This will allow for the development of fisheries policies in Northern Ireland that are aligned with the fisheries objectives in the UK-wide Fisheries Act 2020.

A Northern Ireland Fisheries Bill will be introduced in the next Assembly mandate, subject to the Executive's agreement.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the Green Growth Strategy and Delivery Framework.

(AQW 17236/17-22)

Mr Poots: Thank you for your interest in Green Growth. I am conscious that you will have had sight of the draft Green Growth Strategy framework, as it was recently shared with the AERA Committee members for their consideration. I am now considering the Strategy Framework in light of feedback received from the Committee.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) whether the Forest Service has considered land management responsibilities falling to the respective parties resulting from the change in land ownership at Portavoe Reservoir; and (ii) if so, what has been agreed.

(AQW 17241/17-22)

Mr Poots: The land surrounding Portavoe reservoir, now in private ownership, was formerly owned and managed by NI Water. DAERA Forest Service managed the trees on the land by management agreement with NI Water (formerly DOE) since 1978. Following the sale, the land management responsibilities transferred to the new landowners.

The agreement under which Forest Service manage the trees remains as it is covenanted in the Contracts for Sale relating to the land transfer.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline her Department's policy concerning re-wilding of roadside verges in the Ards and North Down Borough Council area through planting of wildflowers.

(AQW 17249/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department does not have a specific policy on planting wildflowers on roadside verges. However, there is a policy driver through The Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 (the WANE Act) which places a statutory duty on public bodies to conserve biodiversity.

DAERA recognises the biodiversity importance of roadside verges in providing a refuge for wildlife, and particularly the value of wild flowers in providing a food-source for pollinating insects.

My officials support the All Ireland Pollinator Plan (AIPP) to promote the conservation of pollinating insects, and as part of this, engage with council Local Biodiversity Officers to promote community based actions such as 'Don't Mow, Let it Grow' initiatives to improve habitat for pollinators. Road verge management is an important component, and Northern Ireland Environment Agency provides general guidance and specific comments to local authorities and Roads Service when requested.

While planting wild-flowers will provide an additional food-source for pollinating insects, it is important that any mowing is timed to allow plants opportunity to flower. Flower seeds should be of native species, and preferably locally sourced.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of (i) the Department for the Economy's proposals contained in its energy strategy consultation in relation to biofuels; (ii) the impacts of these proposals on food security in Northern Ireland and the reform of the agri-food sector; and (iii) whether the development of a large biofuel production sector in Northern Ireland is compatible with a sustained and large agri-food sector.

(AQW 17256/17-22)

Mr Poots: DAERA is aware of the Executive's Energy Strategy which is being led by the Department for the Economy (DfE). The consultation was published in March and DAERA will provide a response before the closing date at the end of June. I note that despite biofuels being discussed in the policy options consultation, in the context of home heating and transport fuels, DfE has not made any policy proposals around the role of biofuels. The only proposal DfE has made is for the oil industry to provide it with evidence on biofuels to inform a future policy decision. Through the consultation, DfE is seeking views on the role that biofuels and biomass could play on the pathway to net zero carbon energy emissions.

Energy from biomass does not necessarily require primary agricultural produce as a feedstock and there are significant volumes of agri-food by-product and waste that can be used for this purpose. I do not see these proposals impacting on Northern Ireland food security, which depends on a vast range of factors and not simply the volume of produce coming from Northern Ireland farms.

Increased energy from biomass can form part of the future output portfolio of the land based sector, helping not only to address Northern Ireland's GHG reduction ambitions but also broadening the opportunities for the land based and agri-food sectors. Agricultural production for non-food purposes is nothing new and, indeed, in a previous era, Northern Ireland's linen industry provided a market outlet for flax crops grown on Northern Ireland farms.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the deposit and return scheme for drinks containers and packaging.

(AQW 17311/17-22)

Mr Poots: I launched a public consultation on deposit and return scheme (DRS) for drinks containers on 24 March 2021 which will close on 4th June 2021.

The consultation seeks views on proposals to introduce a DRS for drinks containers in England, Northern Ireland and Wales whilst recognising that any DRS should form part of a coherent packaging producer responsibility system across the UK. It sets out details on how a DRS could be managed, financed and operated.

It proposes that materials for inclusion in the DRS are PET plastic bottles, steel and aluminium cans, and glass bottles. This includes a broad range of drinks, including water, soft drinks, juices and alcoholic drinks where they are sold in containers made of these materials. Implementation is planned for 2024.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what discussions he has had with the NI Fishermen's Federation in regard to apportioning additional quota between the devolved administrations.

(AQW 17336/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have met regularly with the representatives of the NI Fishermen's Federation (NIFF) since the launch of the DEFRA consultation on 9th October 2020 on apportionment of additional fishing quota between the UK Fisheries Administrations. This included facilitating a meeting in November 2020 between me, the NIFF representatives and UK Fisheries Minister Victoria Prentis MP at which the NIFF were able to express their concerns directly. We also met with Minister Prentis and NI Office Minister Walker to discuss this issue in March this year. Most recently I met with the NIFF earlier this month and once again the apportionment of additional quota was on our agenda.

Both the Fishing Industry's and my concerns have been strongly represented to DEFRA Ministers. Whilst the recent announcement by the DEFRA Secretary of State was not in line with our preferred method of apportionment, which would have generated more additional quota for Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland has nevertheless made significant gains in fishing quota compared to when the UK was in the EU.

I will continue to liaise with the NIFF and make the case on behalf of the Northern Ireland fishing industry for a fair allocation of additional quota for 2022 and beyond.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps his Department is taking to prevent littering by those using outdoor recreational spaces.

(AQW 17337/17-22)

Mr Poots: DAERA uses a combined approach of legislation, education & awareness, and enforcement to tackle litter including:

- The Clean Neighbourhoods & Environment Act (NI) 2011 enables Council fines of up to £80 or court fines of up to £2,500 for littering. DAERA is currently reviewing the fixed penalty notices available to Councils to penalise offenders.
- In 2013 DAERA introduced the 5p carrier bag levy. This has reduced the number of carrier bags dispensed by over 1 billion since its introduction, and generated millions of pounds for environmental work (including anti-litter projects).
- DAERA works closely with Councils & environmental NGOs to develop and support educational & promotional campaigns aimed at achieving behavioural change. The Environment Fund directly supports 'Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful' (KNIB) which runs a number of programmes, including: 'Eco-Schools'; 'Live Here, Love Here'; 'Clean Coast'; & 'Adopt-A-Spot' projects.
- Over £3m has been awarded to KNIB since 2007/8 with additional current funding of over £1m to further support its campaigns. These make environmental awareness & action an intrinsic part of the life and ethos of our schools & communities, and focus on practical, positive environmental behavioural change.
- DAERA supports the 'Big Spring Clean' – NI's largest community clean-up campaign - which involves 100,000+ volunteers every year.
- KNIB receives DAERA funding to produce the annual Marine Litter Report which contains counts of litter items, litter types and geographical breakdown of the litter items.
- DAERA's Marine Division produced NI's first Marine Litter Strategy in 2013. The Strategy is delivered through a coalition of partners.

In addition, DAERA is working with 'TourismNI' to promote the message "Be Outdoor Smart – Leave No Trace – Love The Place" which reinforces our objective of encouraging everyone to look after our environment – particularly during the current pandemic.

The Department has also issued a series of communications, delivered by the Waste & Resources Action Programme (WRAP), to support waste management and recycling behaviours and to combat fly-tipping and littering. A flyer was sent to every household in Northern Ireland with details of how to manage waste and recycling during the Covid-19 crisis. There were also radio adverts on local stations and a range of social media posts on various platforms highlighting the problems of fly-tipping, littering and illegal waste dumping.

We all have our part to play and the Department is committed to promoting and funding environmental education and action and building civic pride. New options for tackling litter will be considered in the Environment Strategy for Northern Ireland which is due to be consulted upon in late spring.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what action his Department is taking to increase usage of the public angling estate as a means to encourage people to go outdoors and be active.
(AQW 17338/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department recognises the benefits to the health and wellbeing for all those taking part in outdoor activities. The Public Angling Estate (PAE) has remained open from May 2020 to allow outdoor exercise to take place, which includes angling.

In 2020, the Department has seen an increase of 2,000 DAERA angling licence sales to approximately 28,000, up 7% from 2019. To encourage further angling participation, my Department has also not increased angling licences and permit fees for the 2021 season.

The Department has continued to stock game PAE waters throughout the pandemic, as well as carrying out maintenance and improvement works at over 90 PAE waters.

Once Covid 19 restrictions allow, the Department will reopen the Angling Outreach Events Programme to encourage angling participation from all who wish to try angling for the first time under the guidance of a trained coach. These programmes are aimed at encouraging underrepresented groups such as juveniles, females, disabled, minority groups and those from disadvantaged areas.

The Department has an annual programme to maintain and improve infrastructure at angling waters, including the provision of disabled angling stands and improved pathways. Many of the PAE lakes and rivers are popular locations with walkers and other recreational users and therefore the work carried out by my Department for permit holders, also benefits and encourages outdoor activities to be enjoyed by all.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what urgent steps his Department is taking to bring the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in Northern Ireland in line with the reduction of the rest of the UK.
(AQW 17339/17-22)

Mr Poots: Thank you for your question and the opportunity to outline the work currently being undertaken with urgency by my officials.

In light of the 2019 amendment to the UK Climate Change Act 2008, which introduced a UK Net Zero by 2050 target, I wrote to Lord Deben, the Chair of the UK Climate Change Committee (CCC), the Statutory Advisors to Government on climate change, to seek their expert advice on what would be Northern Ireland's fair and equitable contribution to UK Net Zero.

The CCC's headline advice was that Northern Ireland, as its fair and equitable contribution to UK Net Zero by 2050, should be achieving at least an 82% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from the 1990 baseline year. It is important to note this target of at least 82% emissions reductions does not show a lack of ambition for Northern Ireland.

The commitment in New Decade New Approach was to tackle climate change head on with a strategy to address the immediate and longer term impacts of climate disruption and to introduce legislation and targets for reducing carbon emissions in line with the Paris Climate Change Accord.

To drive forward action, my Department is developing policy options for future NI Climate Change legislation to set legally binding emissions reductions targets in Northern Ireland. Currently, I am engaged with my Executive colleagues seeking their agreement for my Northern Ireland Climate Change Bill Final Policy and agreement to formally engage the Office of Legislative Council to draft the Bill.

In June last year I announced that my Department would be leading on development of a Green Growth Strategy for Northern Ireland. The Strategy operates under the oversight of the Executive through an Inter-Ministerial Group (IMG), which I chair, and will require all Departments to work together collaboratively to deliver our objectives. The Strategy and associated Climate Action Plan will be our route map to climate action, green jobs and a clean environment. The Strategy will look out to 2050 and provide a pathway with sector-specific greenhouse gas emission targets. It will also set a pathway for a clean environment and green jobs. The Climate Action Plan will focus on the shorter term actions we must take across all sectors to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Northern Ireland.

An initial Green Growth Strategy Framework has been drafted, with input from DAERA and other departments through the Strategic Oversight Group. I am conscious that you will have had sight of the draft Green Growth Strategy Framework, as it was recently shared with the AERA Committee members for their consideration. I am now considering the Strategy Framework in light of feedback received from the Committee. Once agreed, I will seek the Executive's endorsement prior to publication.

Additionally, my Department is also leading on the development of a number of important areas of policy including a NI Peatlands Strategy, a NI Environment Strategy and ongoing programmes such as 'Forests for Our Future' which I launched in March 2020.

Finally, my officials and are I contributing to the UK Net Zero Strategy, due to be published later this year by the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, through engaging with colleagues in UK Net Zero Groups.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on progress made on a UK-EU veterinary agreement.

(AQW 17340/17-22)

Mr Poots: Under the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement, the Northern Ireland (NI) Protocol and domestic legislation, Northern Ireland must continue to align with the European Union's sanitary and phyto-sanitary (SPS) rules.

I am opposed to the detrimental impact of these additional rules on NI businesses and consumers, and the barriers they place on the intra-United Kingdom (UK) movement of animals, goods and products, from Great Britain to Northern Ireland.

Therefore, I will continue to engage with Ministerial colleagues to explore all available options that can minimise the impact of these new European Union requirements on intra-UK trade.

Discussions are ongoing between the UK Government and the EU Commission via the UK-EU Joint Committee, aiming to find viable solutions on a range of issues related to the Northern Ireland Protocol, including those stemming from the mandated SPS checks.

The establishment of a common SPS area, under the terms of a potential UK-EU veterinary agreement could assist in facilitating trade in live animals and agri-food products, which would be welcome; however, it would not address the entirety of the new rules associated with implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol.

Responsibility on any future alignment of the UK with the EU SPS rules, as well as the negotiation of any EU-UK veterinary agreement, rests solely with the UK Government.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he plans to introduce a ban on the environmentally harmful and health damaging practice of burning garden waste.

(AQW 17344/17-22)

Mr Poots: Although burning garden waste can cause unpleasant smells, fumes and nuisance smoke I have not seen evidence that this causes significant air pollution or material damage to either the environment or to health. As I previously advised in answer to question AQW 16824/17-22 local councils may investigate complaints about burning rubbish and I am content that this provides a sufficient control on the practice. This is fully consistent with the approach taken across all UK Administrations.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how much his Department has spent on producing material in Irish, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 17404/17-22)

Mr Poots: From the information which is currently available, the Department's expenditure on producing material in Irish between the financial years beginning on 01 April 2018 and ending on 31 March 2021 is as follows:

- 2018 – 2019: Nil
- 2019 – 2020: Nil
- 2020 – 2021: Nil

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many agricultural and farm workers are employed under the terms and conditions set by the Agricultural Wages Board, broken down by grade definition, for each of the last ten years.

(AQW 17410/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department does not hold data on agricultural and farm workers broken down by terms and conditions or by grade definition. However the Agricultural Census, which is conducted in June of each year, collects data on farm labour. This data has been collated over the period 1981 to 2019 and can be accessed through the following link: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/farm-labour-statistics-northern-ireland>

This shows the number of paid workers, broken down to full time and part time, who are assumed to fall under the terms and conditions as set by the Agricultural Wages Board. A breakdown by grade definition is not available. Please note that due to the restrictions in place at the time of the June Agricultural Census 2020, which prevented the normal survey methods, the Department moved to an entirely online method of collection for the first time. A shortened survey was therefore prepared and this data was therefore collected in 2020.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many agricultural and farm workers currently work on farms where less than 20 people are employed, in each of the last ten years.

(AQW 17411/17-22)

Mr Poots: The statistical review of Northern Ireland agriculture, accessible through: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/statistical-review-ni-agriculture-2007-onward> provides a breakdown of farm workers per size of farm, see table 4.12 of the Tables and Figures. Details on farm number by size, available from 1981, can be accessed through: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/farm-numbers-northern-ireland>.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many agricultural and farm workers work on farms in addition to non-farm employment.
(Aqw 17412/17-22)

Mr Poots: A breakdown of part time and casual/seasonal workers who may have other employment is not collected or held by the Department. The agricultural census farm labour statistics and the statistical review of NI agriculture both break down other workers (which excludes farmers and spouses) into full time, part time and casual/seasonal. While it may be possible to assume that some of these workers may have other employment, specific figures for this are not collected or held. It is also likely that a proportion would not have other employment due to factors such as being in education, or caring responsibilities or by choice.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many family farm members are also employees under the terms and conditions set by the Agricultural Wages Board on other farms.
(Aqw 17413/17-22)

Mr Poots: This data is not held by the Department. Historical farm labour figures, showing agricultural labour by family, male and female, full time as well as part time, is accessible through the following: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/historical-labour-data-1912-date>.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what inter-departmental discussions he has had in regard to the introduction of a walking strategy for Northern Ireland.
(Aqw 17424/17-22)

Mr Poots: DAERA has recently undertaken consultations on a Clean Air Strategy, Outdoor Recreation legislation and the Environment Strategy. Proposals to support further development of walking and cycling are included in each and other Departments are involved in the discussions about the outcomes and delivery of each.

The cross departmental and public body group SORG (Strategic Outdoor Recreation Group) has been working with partners to identify and develop the statistical and spatial metrics and baselines to support future strategic planning of outdoor recreation, including walking, such as the Environment Strategy, a future PfG, Green Growth, an updated Outdoor Recreation Action Plan, health strategies, Community Plans, Local Development Plans and funding programmes. The metrics will identify areas of greatest need and priorities for targeting future development of resources such as paths, information provision and targeted intervention programmes.

A review of the Outdoor Recreation Action Plan for Northern Ireland alongside the proposals above and the Strategy for Sport and Physical Activity currently being developed by DfC, will consider future additional action needed across departments.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to Aqw 13864/17-22, whether there is an update on the launch of a public consultation on a peatland strategy for Northern Ireland.
(Aqw 17426/17-22)

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 and will provide a framework for conserving our intact semi-natural peatlands and restoring degraded semi-natural peatlands.

Officials are finalising the document and it is my intention to initiate a public consultation exercise shortly.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what discussions he has had with his UK counterparts with regard to budget allocations for the Office of Environmental Protection in Northern Ireland.
(Aqw 17427/17-22)

Mr Poots: The commencement of the provisions relating to the extension of the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) to Northern Ireland is subject to the future approval of the Assembly but, in anticipation of that, my officials are engaged with Defra to consider detailed operational arrangements, including potential staffing requirements along with budget contributions and allocations.

Practical decisions about the operation of the OEP in Northern Ireland and what proportion of the OEP's budget would be allocated to work carried out here are still to be finalised, as is the size of the OEP's overall budget.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to Aqw 16887/17-22, (i) for his assessment of the legislative and scrutiny gap that exists within the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006

or Local Government Act (NI) 2014; (ii) whether he intends to address the gaps to allow for scrutiny or enforcement by his Department.

(AQW 17429/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- i) As stated in my previous response to AQW 16887/17-22, there are no statutory enforcement powers contained within the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 or Local Government Act (NI) 2014 to allow for scrutiny or enforcement by my Department. Further provisions for Councils are included in the Local Government Act (NI) 2014 with regards community planning in which it states that they must carry out their functions in a way that contributes to sustainable development and in doing so Councils must identify long-term objectives in relation to the district for contributing to the achievement of sustainable development in Northern Ireland.

Whilst there are no legislative provisions for scrutiny in either piece of legislation, with regards the statutory duty which has been in place on Public Authorities for many years now, I do not believe that there is a scrutiny gap for monitoring the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as there are already a number of mechanisms/processes in place which allow for reporting and monitoring of progress towards delivery by NI Departments and Councils.

My Department engaged with the Department for International Development (DfID), ONS and the other Devolved Administrations to undertake and publish the UK Voluntary National Review (VNR). The UK's VNR took stock of progress towards the SDGs and provided a mechanism for independent review. As part of the VNR input was sought from all NI Departments and Councils. It is expected that further UK VNRs may take place in the run up to 2030 for which updated positions from Departments and Councils will be required to be provided again.

Additionally with the recent alignment of the SDGs to the draft Programme for Government outcomes and indicators, which are subject to monitoring and reporting, it provides for a separate mechanism to monitor progress against the implementation of the SDGs in respect of the PfG outcomes and indicators to which they are aligned to and for which delivery responsibility cuts across the NI Executive.

- ii) Whilst I fully recognise the importance of Public Authorities contributing towards the delivery of SDGs, evidenced through their inclusion in the draft Programme for Government, it would not be appropriate for my Department to introduce scrutiny or enforcement measures due to the breadth of subject matter which the SDGs relate to and cut across from poverty to justice. Additionally many of the 17 SDG goals already have associated separate specific subject matter legislative provisions such as those SDGs which relate to nature conservation, equality, marine, education, waste etc. which are subject to their own legislative arrangements. You will be aware that in relation to the SDG on Climate Action, my Department is currently developing policy proposals to deliver on the Executive's NDNA commitment. This includes development of a Green Growth Strategy and Climate Action Plan and progress of future Northern Ireland Climate Change legislation which will set legally binding greenhouse gas emissions reductions targets in Northern Ireland which would be subject to monitoring and reporting.

I believe that an amendment to the Section 25 of the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006, to introduce monitoring and/or enforcement, would only risk duplicating effort and result in enforcement overlap across a large number of the SDGs.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many people have been prosecuted for littering, broken down by local council area, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 17450/17-22)

Mr Poots: The response to AQW 15101/17-22 (answered 9 March 2021) refers.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the actions being undertaken to assist with the reduction of carbon emissions within the agricultural sector.

(AQW 17481/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have prioritised the development of a cross-cutting Green Growth Strategy which my Department is leading on, on behalf of the Executive. This will be a multi-decade strategy to tackle climate change and will map out the actions we must take to meet sector-specific greenhouse gas emission targets, including across the agri-food industry, which will deliver a cleaner environment, more efficient use of our resources within a circular economy and green jobs. The Green Growth Strategy will be developed in phases and a consultation on the draft Strategy to be launched will take place in advance of COP26 in Glasgow later this year, with the final Strategy being launched by March 2022.

My department continues to support farmers to adopt low-carbon farming practices through knowledge transfer, farm support schemes and scientific research.

CAFRE deliver knowledge and technology transfer advice through initiatives including Business Development Groups, Farm Family Key Skills and the new Environmental Business Development Group Programme where currently 20 groups have been set up across NI focusing on sustainable farm systems and helping farmers identify carbon reduction measures and how to help protect the environment.

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.

Forest Service is leading on 'Forests for our Future' aiming to create 9,000 hectares of new woodland by 2030. Grant funding for creating new woodlands is provided via the Forest Expansion Scheme and a new stand-alone Small Woodland Grant Scheme to help farmers integrate woodland on their farms. Also, the Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) supports carbon friendly practices through a range of measures, including peatland restoration, establishing native woodland, agro-forestry and creation of new hedgerows. There are currently over 5,000 EFS agreements in place after four tranches, and a further two tranches are planned, subject to the necessary approvals.

DAERA supports ongoing scientific research aimed at reducing agricultural emissions and enhancing carbon storage in the landscape. This includes research 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.

My department also supports the Agri-Forestry Greenhouse Gas Implementation Partnership's (GHGIP) Efficient Farming Cuts Greenhouse Gases Implementation Plan aimed at tackling greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from agriculture. There is a strong emphasis on improved nutrient and livestock management within the plan.

My officials will continue to develop measures of support to help farmers play their part in reducing emissions and protect the environment. Work is ongoing to develop a future agri-environment scheme which will contribute to these aims. We 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.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the efforts being made to remove barbed wire fences from Northern Ireland's beaches.

(AQW 17485/17-22)

Mr Poots: DAERA is responsible for managing bathing water quality at 26 identified sites around the coast of Northern Ireland. DAERA works closely with the bathing water operators, who are the local councils, the National Trust and NIEA. Other partners in the Better Beaches Forum, which DAERA leads, are Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful and NI Water.

It is the bathing water operators who manage the beach area and NIEA performs this role at Helen's Bay and Crawfordsburn. Barbed wire is not used at any beaches managed by NIEA. If staff find discarded barbed wire, it is targeted for removal as soon as possible.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on his Department's efforts to remove the necessity of an EU pet passport for domestic pet travel between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

(AQW 17571/17-22)

Mr Poots: As a result of the Withdrawal Agreement and the Northern Ireland (NI) Protocol, the European Union (EU) Pet Travel Regulation (Regulation (EU) 576/2013), which details the documentary, health and compliance check requirements for the travel of pet dogs between or into EU Member States, continues to apply in NI, following the end of the transition phase. Therefore, there are now additional requirements for pet travel from Great Britain (GB) to NI, including the need for appropriate documentation, rabies vaccination and tapeworm treatment.

I am acutely aware of the impact of what I consider to be completely unnecessary new measures on those travelling within the United Kingdom (UK). I am particularly concerned about the significant implications for guide dog users, those travelling with pets to attend shows and exhibitions, on hobby breeders and the potential impact on tourism for those wishing to holiday in NI or return to NI from GB accompanied by their pets.

After engaging with my officials to find potential flexibilities, and considering pet owners have not had time to familiarise themselves with the new rules, I confirmed that DAERA will delay the introduction of any checks on pet travel from GB to NI until 1 July 2021. As a result, there will be no routine checks until then.

I have written to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, George Eustice MP, and to the European Commission, highlighting these issues, and particularly the entirely unjustified requirements for rabies vaccination and tapeworm treatment, given that both the UK and the Republic of Ireland (RoI) are considered free from both diseases.

Furthermore, I have requested that urgent consideration be given to the introduction of a 'Common Travel Area' for pets travelling between GB, NI and the RoI. A joint UK/NI/RoI working group has now been established to consider where flexibilities can be achieved, and I can advise that this group has met on a number of occasions and will continue to engage on these issues.

This matter has also now been escalated by the UK Government to the European Commission seeking urgent resolution to the matters. The Commission has responded and discussions are ongoing. In the interim, I will continue engagement with Ministerial colleagues to urgently seek derogations where possible from these unnecessary additional requirements.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what capacity is remaining in landfill sites in South Antrim.

(AQW 17580/17-22)

Mr Poots: I can advise that there are three permitted landfills in South Antrim; two are non-hazardous landfills and the third is an inert landfill. The estimated remaining capacity in each is:

- (i) Permit P0090/05A, Cottonmount Non-hazardous Landfill, Mallusk, has an estimated remaining capacity of 3,440,000 tonnes;
- (ii) Permit P0340/10A, Eastwood Envirowaste Facility Landfill Site, 18 Crosshill Road, Crumlin, BT29 4BQ has an estimated remaining capacity of 377,040 tonnes
- (iii) Permit P0260/07A, Newline Inert Landfill, Hannahstown Road, Belfast, has an estimated remaining capacity of 92,474 tonnes.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail which incinerators in Northern Ireland are operating under capacity.

(AQW 17581/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department currently regulates five incineration plants in Northern Ireland under the Pollution Prevention and Control (Industrial Emissions) Regulations (NI) 2013, and these are: PSNI Seapark Incinerator (P064/05A), Veolia Water Sewage Sludge Incinerator (P0081/05A), Full Circle Generation (P0446/14A), Tyrone Energy Limited (P0374/11A), and Evermore Renewable Energy (P0387/12A).

The five plants are all operating and there are no plants currently operating under capacity.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the complaint submitted to the Interim Environmental Governance Secretariat relating to Northern Ireland.

(AQW 17651/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Interim Environmental Governance Secretariat (IEGS) was established in January 2021 as a precursor to the establishment of the Office for Environmental Protection. Amongst other functions it is responsible for receiving and validating complaints in respect of alleged failures of public authorities to comply with environmental law in England and Northern Ireland.

One of the key characteristics of the IEGS is the establishment of robust information barriers. Details of individual complaints and associated information received by the IEGS are saved in a secure manner which is not accessible by individuals outside the IEGS, including Defra and DAERA Ministers. This is to protect the confidentiality of the information ahead of its consideration by the Office for Environmental Protection once vested as a statutory body, should the Assembly agree to extend its remit to Northern Ireland. As a result I am unable to provide the information requested.

The IEGS publishes general information on complaints received, but not details of individual complaints. However, individuals may approach the IEGS directly who can advise whether specific information on individual complaints can be released.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) pollution incidents on the Sixmilewater River in the 2021 calendar year to date; (ii) the category of severity assigned to each; (iii) whether sources of pollution have been identified; and (iii) what, if any, follow up actions have taken place.

(AQW 17656/17-22)

Mr Poots: There have been 22 reports of water pollution in the Sixmilewater catchment between 1 January and 31 March 2021. The table below provides the information requested for the 7 incidents where pollution was confirmed.

Pollutant Category	Pollution Severity	Polluter Identified	Follow Up Action
Sewage	Medium	Yes	Investigated - Ongoing Water Order 1999 Enforcement
Suspended Solids	Low	Yes	Investigated - Discharge Stopped - Pollution Prevention Advice Given
Oil	Low	No	Investigated - No Polluter Identified therefore no further action possible
Oil	Low	No	Investigated - No Polluter Identified therefore no further action possible
Suspended Solids	Low	No	Investigated - No Polluter Identified therefore no further action possible
Agriculture	Medium	Yes	Investigated - Nutrients Action Programme Enforcement

Pollutant Category	Pollution Severity	Polluter Identified	Follow Up Action
Agriculture	Low	Yes	Investigated – Nutrients Action Programme Enforcement

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to the recent diesel pollution incident at Millisle Beach, (i) to detail the work undertaken by his Department (ii) whether his Department will conduct an environmental impact assessment in relation to the damage caused; and (iii) what enforcement action his Department intends to undertake.

(AQW 17663/17-22)

Mr Poots: On Saturday 17 April 2021 at approximately 09:

- i 15, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) received a report via the Incident Hotline of diesel pollution on the beach at Millisle County Down. A Water Quality Inspector was deployed to the area to investigate. He identified an outfall from a culverted stream which was polluted by diesel flowing onto the beach. Absorbent booms were installed to contain the oil. Following a request from NIEA, the PSNI were able to contact a local key holder who was asked to return to their premises. The source of the leak was located and stopped. It has not yet been established how much fuel escaped from the premises. NIEA along with Marine & Fisheries Division (MFD) officers monitored the situation on the ground over the course of the weekend and are continuing to assess the impact of the incident at Millisle and along the coast. On Sunday 18 April 2021, a specialist oil spill contractor was appointed and a clean-up of the area commenced to prevent any more oil being released and to ensure any remaining trapped oil along the coastline is dealt with.
- ii. Officers from MFD are in the process of conducting a post-spill assessment of impact to evaluate the extent of any environmental damage.
- iii. The cause of the pollution is under active investigation. NIEA treat all aspects of a live and ongoing case as if 'sub judice' until the investigation is completed, therefore, no further information on potential enforcement actions can be given at this time.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs following the relaxation of bird flu restrictions, when pigeon racing will be allowed to resume.

(AQW 17696/17-22)

Mr Poots: Following a veterinary risk assessment I have taken the decision to allow low risk bird gatherings in Northern Ireland (NI), subject to certain conditions of a General Licence, from 21 April 2021. Gatherings of aviary birds, birds of prey and pigeons are now permitted. Pigeon racing is now also permitted provided that, due to a continuing higher level of risk there, the race does commence in mainland Europe.

Under the terms of the General Licence, there is a requirement to notify the Department three days in advance of any planned gathering. In addition, bird keepers wishing to take part in any gathering must ensure their birds are registered with DAERA. Details of how to register your birds can be found here:

Avian Influenza (AI) | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (daera-ni.gov.uk) (<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/avian-influenza-ai#toc-0>).

Full details of the conditions required in the General Licence can be found on the DAERA website at the following link:

General licence for bird gatherings | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (daera-ni.gov.uk)

Whilst this is positive step in our recovery from the avian influenza outbreaks in NI the risk from disease has not disappeared which is evidenced by further cases in Great Britain over recent weeks. Excellent biosecurity is the most effective measure of disease control and the enhanced biosecurity requirements that were brought in as part of the Avian Influenza Prevention Zone remain in place.

Department for Communities

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Communities what plans there are to support Glenavon FC and Portadown FC under the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer.

(AQW 16039/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): The Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is one of the commitments in the "New Decade, New Approach" agreement and as such this 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.

A range of primary and secondary research tools have been adopted to inform the evidence base. This work is nearing completion and has utilised a club survey along with discussions with key stakeholders including governing bodies of

football, Sport NI, councils and Disability Sport NI. The analysis of the work to date is informing the shape and scope of the programme going forward.

Following this work I will present my recommendations to my Executive colleagues on the future implementation of the Programme

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities, in relation to funding tribunal representation for the independent advice sector (i) how much funding has been allocated, and ringfenced, in the FY2021/22 Budget; (ii) to outline the reasons for this position; and (iii) what impact assessment her Department has conducted on the (a) number of appeals currently awaiting hearing; and (b) on those appellants who are vulnerable, in poverty or with mental health issues if funding is to be cut.

(AQW 16888/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Executive has now agreed 2021/22 budgets for departments. While I have yet to finalise the allocation of resources within my department, I have already publically stated that there will be no cut to the advice sector funding in the new financial year. This includes funding for appeals and Tribunal representation services.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for Communities when classes such as parent and baby groups will be able to resume.

(AQW 16980/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Rhythm and Rhyme classes, delivered by Libraries NI, ceased to operate in library buildings in March 2020 as a result of Covid-related restrictions. The classes are currently delivered online and are promoted through Libraries NI Facebook pages.

The resumption of in-library services, including Rhythm and Rhyme classes, will be dependent upon the review of ongoing restrictions which remains a matter for the Executive, taking account of the medical and scientific advice available at that time.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Communities what plans she has to ban the use of credit cards for the placing of bets in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 17026/17-22)

Ms Hargey: This issue is one of a number of proposals which I am considering following the consultation last year on the future regulation of gambling. I hope to be in a position to announce my way forward soon.

land based bookmakers here voluntarily introduced a ban on the use of credit cards to gamble within their premises.

Online gambling operators who wish to advertise their products here, are regulated by the Gambling Commission, and a ban on the use of credit cards to gamble online is a condition of their licence.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities (i) to detail the number of social housing units her Department, the Housing Executive and Housing Associations have procured on an Off the Shelf Purchase basis, broken down by location in each of the last five years; and (ii) given the high demand for Social Housing Units in Newry and Armagh, to detail the rationale behind a 25 unit cap being placed by NIHE's Place Shaping Unit.

(AQW 17083/17-22)

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 McNulty asked the Minister for Communities, in relation to the Sports Sustainability Fund, (i) to outline her rationale for not including a cap on individual payments, especially given the fact that other Executive Departments have introduced a cap on Covid Payment Schemes; and (b) whether her Department or Sport NI sought advice from her Department's Audit Unit or the NI Audit Office before deciding not to include a cap on individual payments.

(AQW 17084/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department secured funding to ensure that the sports sector was stabilised and sustained during the pandemic so that it would be in a position to help its members, players, volunteers and communities when restrictions permitted a return to sporting activities.

The Sports Sustainability Fund was co-designed with the sector, to meet the needs of the sector, incorporating a wide range of Governing Bodies and their affiliated clubs from grassroots to large amateur organisations right through to full time professional entities

On the basis of the information available at the time, it was determined that introducing a cap for funding would have created a significant challenge given the diverse nature of the eligible applicants and the variations in the levels of financial losses being reported by the governing bodies.

While neither my Department nor Sport NI sought advice from the Department's Internal Auditors or the Audit Office on this matter, the scheme design took into account a range of guidance including the NIAO Covid-19 Fraud Risk guidance (published August 2020).

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities how many sex offenders have been relocated to Foyle by the Housing Executive on an emergency, temporary or permanent basis in each of the last three years.

(AQW 17106/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has confirmed that it does not hold this information.

The Housing Executive does not retain details of a housing applicant's criminal record beyond its assessment process. The Housing Executive is mindful of the Data Protection Regulations 2018 and in compliance with this it is not in a position to record details of specific offending history on any of its systems.

However the Housing Executive has highlighted that staff responsible for the allocation of accommodation are aware of the need to carry out relevant checks, where applicable, as part of the Public Protection Arrangements (PPANI).

As part of PPANI the Housing Executive works with key stakeholders including the Police, Probation Board and Prison Service to manage any risks posed by certain sexual and violent offenders when they are released from prison into the community.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities to detail the planned number of public sector homes that will be provided in the 2021-22 financial year in (i) Northern Ireland; (ii) North Belfast; (iii) South Belfast; (iv) West Belfast; and (v) East Belfast.

(AQW 17121/17-22)

Ms Hargey:

- (i) I can advise that the current Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) has a gross figure of 2,215 proposed new social housing units to start in 2021/22. There are 4,291 new social housing units are currently under construction.
- (ii) Of the 2,215 units in the gross SHDP for 2021/22, a total of 324 units are programmed to start in the North Belfast Parliamentary Constituency. A total of 257 new social housing units are currently under construction in this Constituency.
- (iii) Of the 2,215 units in the gross SHDP for 2021/22, a total of 251 units are programmed to start in the South Belfast Parliamentary Constituency. A total of 71 new social housing units are currently under construction in this Constituency.
- (iv) Of the 2,215 units in the gross SHDP for 2021/22, a total of 83 units are programmed to start in the West Belfast Parliamentary Constituency. 1,130 new social housing units are currently under construction in this Constituency.
- (v) Of the 2,215 units in the gross SHDP for 2021/22, a total of 150 units are programmed to start in the East Belfast Parliamentary Constituency. A total of 117 new social housing units are currently under construction in this Constituency.

Please note that the Draft SHDP 2021/22 – 2023/24 has been submitted to my Department for approval. The published SHDP will be updated to reflect additional and re-profiled scheme proposals in due course, subject to Approval.

In general, programmed schemes can be lost or slip to future programme years for a variety of reasons e.g. relating to delays in acquiring sites and/or failure to secure Planning Approval. Additional schemes can also be added to the SHDP 'in-year' through the acquisition of Existing Satisfactory Purchases, properties for Rehabilitation, or 'Off-the-Shelf' properties.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of (i) greyhound racing stadiums in Northern Ireland; (ii) events permitted annually at each stadium; (iii) greyhounds that have died during events at each stadium, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 17122/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department for Communities has issued track betting licences to Drumbo and Brandywell to enable gambling to take place at each stadium. We do not regulate greyhound racing nor do we hold any information in connection with events or greyhound facilities.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities to outline the role of her Department in the regulation of greyhound racing.

(AQW 17123/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department for Communities has no role in the regulation of greyhound racing. The Department's only interface is with the regulation of gambling that may be associated with greyhound racing.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to outline plans for new social housing builds in Donaghadee.

(AQW 17153/17-22)

Ms Hargey: North Belfast Housing Association acquired four properties for social housing in 2020/21 on an 'Off-the-Shelf' basis at Meetinghouse Street, Donaghadee.

There are no new social housing units currently under construction in Donaghadee.

The Housing Executive is working closely with Housing Associations to bring forward new social housing proposals for Donaghadee, and has highlighted the need for new social housing in the SHDP Commissioning Prospectus, which is available on-line at

<https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Corporate/Commissioning-Prospectus-2021-23.aspx>.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to outline plans for new social housing builds in Millisle.
(AQW 17154/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Within Millisle there are 13 new social housing units currently under construction:

- North Belfast Housing acquired two properties for rehabilitation in 2020/21 (at 7 Abbey Road and 21 Copeland Avenue);
- Ark Housing are developing 11 new social homes at 18 Ballywalter Road (these properties are due to complete in August 2021).

Although no additional new social housing proposals are currently included in the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) 2020/21 – 2022/23, the Housing Executive is working closely with housing associations to bring forward new social housing proposals for Millisle, and has highlighted the need for new social housing in the SHDP Commissioning Prospectus, which is available on-line at <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Corporate/Commissioning-Prospectus-2021-23.aspx>.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to outline plans for new social housing builds in Bangor.
(AQW 17155/17-22)

Ms Hargey: North Belfast Housing Association acquired two properties for rehabilitation in Bangor in 2020/21, and intends to complete the acquisition of a further three properties in the near future.

There are no further social housing units currently under construction in Bangor.

Clanmil Housing Association is working to secure a start on-site for 26 new homes for active older people as part of their redevelopment of The Savoy (Broadway). Planning Approval has already been secured for these plans.

The Housing Executive is working closely with housing associations to bring forward new social housing proposals for Bangor, and has highlighted the need for new social housing in the SHDP Commissioning Prospectus, which is available on-line at <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Corporate/Commissioning-Prospectus-2021-23.aspx>.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities when the Housing Executive will replace cladding on high rise buildings.
(AQW 17187/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has cladding systems installed on four of its high rise blocks i.e. Cuchulainn, Eithné, Whincroft and Carnet Houses. Neither the Rain Screen system installed at Cuchulainn, Eithné and Whincroft nor the External Wall Insulation system installed at Carnet have Aluminium Containing Materials (ACM) similar to the system used at Grenfell. These systems were subjected to testing in accordance with BS 8414 (Fire performance of external cladding systems - Part 1: Test method for non-loadbearing external cladding systems applied to the masonry face of a building.) and all four comply with Building Regulations. For this reason, the Housing Executive has no current plans for replacing any of these cladding systems.

Following the Grenfell fire, the Housing Executive established an Independent Reference Group (IRG) to review all of its tower blocks in respect of their safety. The IRG's work commits the Housing Executive to review the cladding systems installed on the blocks against any new regulatory standards that may arise from the outcome of the Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety undertaken by Dame Judith Hackitt. In the interim they have appointed Ulster University / Fire-SERT as part of a wider commission to carry out a critical review of the cladding systems using the BS 9414 assessment process which was introduced after Grenfell to test the performance of completed cladding systems in situ; this should begin in May/June.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities how many people are in housing stress in the Strangford constituency, broken down by age, gender, and whether it is a family or single person.
(AQW 17188/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has provided the following tables detailing the number of applicants in housing stress in the Strangford constituency as at 31 December 2020, broken down by age, gender, and whether it is a family or single person. The Carryduff Common Landlord Area (CLA) crosses the Belfast South and Strangford Parliamentary Constituency Boundaries and has been included separately for completeness.

Waiting List as at 31/12/20 by Housing Stress & Gender

Parliamentary Constituency	Female	Male	Total
Belfast South/Strangford	59	42	101
Strangford	617	495	1112

Waiting List as at 31/12/20 by Housing Stress & Age

Parliamentary Constituency	18 - 25 Yrs (Inc. Under 18s*)	26 -29 Yrs	30 -39 Yrs	40 - 49 Yrs	50 - 59 Yrs	60 - 64 Yrs	65+ Yrs	Total
Belfast South/ Strangford	22	<10	31	18	10	<10	<10	101
Strangford	171	99	229	187	159	60	207	1112

Waiting List as at 31/12/20 by Housing Stress & Household Composition

Parliamentary Constituency	Elderly	Large Adult	Large Family	Single	Small Adult	Small Family	Total
Belfast South/ Strangford	10	<10	<10	40	<10	39	101
Strangford	205	23	86	510	61	227	1112

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities what plans there are to bring the process for reviewing Personal Independence Payments into line with the rest of the UK where regular reviews have been scrapped.

(AQW 17219/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The review process for Personal Independence Payment (PIP) has not been scrapped however two important changes have been introduced as detailed below:

- From August 2018 anyone who has a progressive condition and entitled to the maximum rate of PIP will be awarded it for an ongoing period, with a light touch review in 10 years; and
- From May 2019 anyone over State Pension Age, regardless of the rate of PIP they are entitled to, will be awarded it for an ongoing period, with a light touch review in 10 years.

These particular changes remove the need for unnecessary assessments for people with severe and/or progressive conditions and for those over State Pension Age. My Department announced these changes at the time they were introduced.

The most recent published statistical information shows that 151,530 people are in receipt of PIP and 38,220 of them (25%) have been awarded PIP for an ongoing period.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Communities what funding her Department has awarded to the Kids Together Project for children and young people with physical and learning challenges and needs.

(AQW 17225/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I can confirm that my Department has awarded Kids Together Belfast £57,488 for the 2021/22 financial year through the People and Place Strategy's Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the recommendations made by the Audit Office in their recently published report on the management and delivery of the Personal Independence Payment contract.

(AQW 17231/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I welcome the Audit Office report on the management and delivery of the Personal Independence Payment contract.

Whilst it concluded that the Department has generally managed the contract in line with good practice, the recommendations made may contribute to further improvements and my officials are currently carefully considering the recommendations.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Communities whether she will consider separating the figures for fraud and for error in social security when recording and reporting.

(AQW 17232/17-22)

Ms Hargey: To provide a statically valid estimate on the levels of fraud and error within social security benefits the Department monitors a random sampling of benefit cases. In cases where an error is detected the value of the error is recorded into one of three categories, customer fraud, customer error or official error.

The outcomes from this monitoring are used to inform the fraud and error figures which are reported in the Department's Annual Report & Accounts and these are broken down into the levels of error attributable to customer fraud, customer error or official error.

The Annual Report & Accounts for the year ending 31 March 2020 was laid in the Assembly on 4 November 2020.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the need to increase sporting facilities in rural West Tyrone.

(AQW 17297/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The provision of good quality, modern sports facilities is something that continues to require ongoing investment by central and local Government, sports Governing Bodies and clubs.

Sport NI is a statutory partner in the community planning process and engages regularly with the respective Councils and the other statutory bodies on identifying the needs of local communities. This includes the provision of sporting facilities.

The ongoing consultation on a new strategy for Sport and Physical Activity, highlights six key themes, which have been developed following an extensive co-design exercise, for the continued development of sport here. One of the key themes is the provision of inclusive and shared spaces and places and includes the goal that everyone has access to inclusive, shared, welcoming and high quality sport and physical activity infrastructure. When published, the Strategy will set the direction for the development of sport and physical activity for the next decade and will aim to address gaps in participation and provision.

The Department and Sport NI will continue to work with other Departments, Councils, Governing Bodies and clubs to ensure that quality sports facilities are available to meet the needs of local communities, including those in rural west Tyrone.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Communities for a geographical breakdown of her Department's spend on major heritage assets in the last 12 months.

(AQW 17360/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Please see details of my Department's expenditure on major heritage assets between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021, broken down by Council area.

The funding listed below includes £780,264 spent on capital works at State Care Monuments owned or under the guardianship of my Department, as well as £5.1 million which was distributed on behalf of my Department by the National Heritage Lottery Fund and which supported over 50 heritage organisation to stabilise their financial position and help support recovery from the impact of the pandemic. Some of the distribution is to organisations which operate over several counties; in the table below, head office locations are used to assign the entry to a council area.

Council Area	Heritage Asset	Amount
Antrim & Newtownabbey	War Years Remembered	£20,000
Ards & North Down	Ballycopeland Windmill	£259,802
	Greypoint Fort	£166,237
	Kirkistown Castle	£1,363
	Aquarium Exploris Ltd	£155,000
	Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust	£203,400
Armagh, Banbridge Craigavon	Dan Winter's Cottage	£13,400
	Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich Memorial Library & Archive	£8,700
Belfast	The Board of the Cathedral of St Anne, Belfast	£62,200
	Lagan Legacy	£14,500
	The Governors of the Belfast Library and Society for Promoting Knowledge	£166,200
	174 Trust	£90,800
	Conway Mill Preservation Trust	£58,800
	Titanic Belfast Ltd	£1,631,100
	East Belfast Mission	£27,000
	Crumlin Road Gaol	£126,900
	The Indian Community Centre (Belfast) Limited	£40,000
	Failte Feirste Thiar Ltd	£40,600
	Ulster Architectural Heritage Society	£49,000
	Kaleidoscope	£15,000
	Down and Connor Diocesan Trust St Peter's	£6,500
	Down and Connor Diocesan Trust, St Mary's Parish	£50,600

Council Area	Heritage Asset	Amount
	Down And Connor Diocesan Trust, St Patrick's	£18,000
	Irish FA Foundation Limited	£20,900
	Clifton House Centre Limited	£74,500
	Tour Guides NI	£37,200
	Belfast Buildings Trust	£40,500
	Sailortown Regeneration	£14,400
	Dunluce Castle	£59,535
Causeway Coast & Glens	Magheramore Rath	£65,000
	Causeway Coast & Glens Heritage Trust	£97,500
	Cushendun Building Preservation Trust	£8,700
	Ballylough Living History Trust	£12,400
	Antrim Estates Company	£44,500
	Ballygroll Prehistoric Landscape	£39,431
Derry and Strabane	The Bloody Sunday Trust	£15,200
	St Augustine's Church of Ireland	£7,700
	Creggan Country Park Enterprises	£72,900
	Creggan Education & Research Ltd	£58,200
	Devenish Island	£10,994
Fermanagh & Omagh	Drumclay Crannog	£4,952
	Creggan Education & Research Ltd	£58,200
	The Inniskillings Museum	£21,600
	Larchfield Estate	£205,500
Lisburn and Castlereagh	Historic Royal Palaces	£569,100
	Ulster New Zealand Trust	£35,400
	Associated Photojournalism for Art & Culture	£6,700
	Carrickfergus Castle	£127,247
Mid and East Antrim	Railway Preservation Society of Ireland	£167,300
	Carrickfergus Gasworks Preservation Society Limited	£3,900
	Gracehill Old School Trust	£28,000
	Heritage Engineering Ireland	£15,000
	Tullaghoge Fort	£26,523
Mid Ulster	Order of Mary Servite Trust	£145,200
	Lough Neagh Partnership Ltd	£10,900
	Upperlands Community Development Ltd	£4,200
	Friends of Killymoon Castle	£6,900
	Lissan House Trust	£16,200
	Dundrum Castle	£19,180
Newry, Mourne and Down	Saint Patrick Visitor Centre	£226,200
	Downpatrick and County Down Railway Society Limited	£33,100
	The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty	£324,500

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities for an update on discussions on a potential joint approach between the Department for Infrastructure, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and Ards and North Down Borough Council on a public realms scheme for Millisle village.

(AQW 17368/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department has no current plans for a public realm scheme in the village of Millisle. As a rural settlement it sits outside the Department's urban regeneration focus.

While discussions are taking place between officials from the Department for Communities, the Department for Infrastructure, and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs regarding the potential for a collaborative approach to supporting regeneration projects in smaller settlements, that work is at an early stage, and as yet no commitments have been made.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities to detail the (i) number; and (ii) location of new social housing units planned for the Strangford constituency over the next five years.

(AQW 17389/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) is a three year rolling programme of planned social housing schemes, therefore I am unable to provide you with schemes for the next 5 years.

At table 1 below I have attached details of all social houses planned under the current SHDP 2020/21–2022/23 within the Strangford Parliamentary constituency.

Please note that the Draft SHDP 2021/22 – 2023/24 has been submitted to my Department for approval. The published SHDP will be updated to reflect additional and re-profiled scheme proposals in due course, subject to approval.

Programmed schemes can be lost or slip to future programme years for a variety of reasons, for example, relating to delays in acquiring sites and/or failure to secure Planning Permission.

Additional schemes can also be added to the SHDP in-year through the purchase of Existing Satisfactory / Off-the-shelf properties.

Table 1 List of social housing units programmed to start as part of the Social Housing Development Programme 2020/21 – 2022/23, within the Strangford Parliamentary Constituency

Parliamentary Constituency	Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Strangford	Ark	56-60 East Street	Newtownards	16	2020/21	2021/22
Strangford	Ark	56-60 East Street	Newtownards	4	2020/21	2021/22
Strangford	Clanmil	Sloane Crescent (NIHE Transfer)	Killyleagh	4	2020/21	2021/22
Strangford	Clanmil	Sloane Crescent (NIHE Transfer)	Killyleagh	1	2020/21	2021/22
Strangford	North Belfast HA	11 Lismara Place	Newtownards	1	2020/21	2021/22
Strangford	North Belfast HA	21 Blenheim Drive	Newtownards	1	2020/21	2021/22
Strangford	North Belfast HA	7 Abbey Road	Millisle	1	2020/21	2021/22
Strangford	North Belfast HA	21 Copeland Avenue	Millisle	1	2020/21	2021/22
Strangford	North Belfast HA	17 Park Crescent	Millisle	1	2020/21	2021/22
Strangford	North Belfast HA	4 Abbot Garden Mews	Newtownards	1	2020/21	2021/22
Strangford	North Belfast HA	28 Abbot Gardens	Newtownards	1	2020/21	2021/22
Strangford	South Ulster	1A Lenamore Park	Newtownards	1	2020/21	2021/22
Strangford	South Ulster	1B Lenamore Park	Newtownards	1	2020/21	2021/22
Strangford	South Ulster	1C Lenamore Park	Newtownards	1	2020/21	2021/22

Parliamentary Constituency	Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Strangford	South Ulster	139 Upper Greenwell Street	Newtownards	1	2020/21	2021/22
Strangford	Choice	Court Street	Newtownards	27	2021/22	2022/23
Strangford	Habinteg	The Square	Ballynahinch	6	2021/22	2022/23
Strangford	Rural	Parsonage Close (T)	Kircubbin	1	2021/22	2022/23

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities how much her Department has spent on producing material in Irish, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 17407/17-22)

Ms Hargey:

Year	Cost £
2020-21	7,504
2019-20	16,274
2018-19	7,233

The attached table sets out the estimated costs of producing materials in Irish in each of the last three financial years.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Communities what inter-departmental discussions she has had in regard to the introduction of a walking strategy for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 17423/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department has been developing a new draft Strategy for Sport and Physical Activity and officials have engaged with a wide range of stakeholders including Departments, Councils, sports bodies, those involved in outdoor recreation and representatives from section 75 groups.

It is clear from this work that outdoor recreation, including walking, retains a significant level of importance for those who have contributed to that consultation.

In developing the Strategy officials have worked with other Departments, including the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Department of Health and Department of Education and officials from those Departments have sat on the Project Board and other working groups.

When the consultation exercise is completed I will bring the final draft Strategy to the Executive and seek their endorsement of the document which covers a very diverse range of issues that will require a cross Departmental collaborative approach to delivering the key themes.

This work is of particular importance given the interest there has been in outdoor recreation including walking and cycling during the covid restrictions and the benefits that these activities offer in terms of physical and mental wellbeing.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister for Communities whether any of her Department's publications or advertising campaigns since January 2020 use images that have been photoshopped to alter the body of the participants.

(AQW 17445/17-22)

Ms Hargey: No images that have been photoshopped to alter the body of the participants have been used in the Department for Communities publications or advertising campaigns since January 2020.

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Communities following the end of the contract with the Post Office Card Account service, whether she will liaise with banking institutions to urge greater assistance and mitigation for elderly people struggling to open a new bank account to facilitate payment of their benefits.

(AQW 17453/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department for Communities (DfC) is committed to supporting vulnerable customers, including the elderly, as the Post Office card account contract is coming to an end. A Vulnerable Customers Strategy is being developed and will include advice and support to customers as their Post Office card accounts close.

Officials will continue to liaise with representatives from the banks to discuss how they can support customers in these circumstances and to establish what best banking industry practices can be adopted when dealing with vulnerable customers.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities whether she intends to extend the legislation that permits district councils to meet remotely, as the existing temporary legislation currently in place is due to expire in May 2021.

(AQW 17477/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The actions needed to extend the remote meetings legislation are currently being progressed.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Communities how applications to the Sports Sustainability Funds were validated to ensure that they were specifically 'to help address the economic consequences of the COVID-19 health pandemic effecting the sports sector' as described in the fund guidance.

(AQW 17482/17-22)

Ms Hargey: 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.

As set out in the Fund Guidance Notes the difference between the current period's surplus/deficit and the average surplus/deficit from the previous years' evidenced the economic consequences of the COVID-19 health pandemic.

This information was assessed, vouched and verified against the figures provided on individual application forms to confirm financial net losses.

Following assessment against the criteria and based on evidence provided, Sport NI made grant awards to the respective governing body for distribution to the successful applicants. All applications were subject to the same assessment process.

Sport NI has commenced the monitoring and evaluation phase which will include post-award vouching and due diligence checks. This process will enable Sport NI to confirm that funding has been used for the purposes intended.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for Communities whether small street theatre events are allowed to go ahead on 30 April 2021 as outdoor visitor attractions.

(AQW 17524/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Street theatre is a cultural activity and as such would be considered under the regulations relating to outdoor gatherings. Those regulations currently allow that up to 10 people (including children of all ages) from a maximum of two households can meet outdoors.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities which Housing Associations will be building new social housing in North Down; and to list the locations of the new builds.

(AQW 17528/17-22)

Ms Hargey: At Table 1 below I have detailed the social housing units programmed to start as part of the Social Housing Development Programme 2020/21 – 2022/23, within the North Down Parliamentary Constituency. I have also included details of the provider and location.

The published SHDP will be updated to reflect additional and re-profiled scheme proposals in due course.

Table 1: List of social housing units programmed to start as part of the Social Housing Development Programme 2020/21 – 2022/23, within North Down

Parliamentary Constituency	Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
North Down	Clanmil	Savoy Blocks B&C	Bangor	26	2020/21	2022/23
North Down	North Belfast HA	3 Lisnabreen Terrace	Bangor	1	2020/21	2020/21
North Down	North Belfast HA	32 Lisnabreen Crescent	Bangor	1	2020/21	2020/21
North Down	North Belfast HA	5 Ballyhalbert Gardens	Bangor	1	2020/21	2020/21
North Down	Clanmil	Craigowen Gate Lodge, 208 Bangor Road	Craigavad	1	2021/22	2022/23

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities when swimming clubs will be able to recommence.

(AQW 17553/17-22)

Ms Hargey: An indicative date of 24 May has been set for the return of indoor group exercise and training (numbers informed by venue), which will include swimming clubs. This will be subject to review on 13 May.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the restrictions in place for community and voluntary organisations, regarding meeting indoors and outdoors, and the use of community centres/halls; and when these restrictions are expected to end.

(AQW 17554/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Up to date COVID 19 information and guidance for individuals and organisations is maintained by The Executive Office, Public Health Agency and the Department of Health and can be found on the NI Direct website.

Community and Voluntary sector organisations should continue to apply the most up to date rules and guidance set by the Executive in the coming weeks and months as and when restrictions are eased.

My Department supports NICVA to provide advice and guidance to the Voluntary and Community Sector during the pandemic, including via its website and through regular direct communications on key issues and developments.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities when she will make a decision on the future of the Knocknagoney shops and maisonettes.

(AQW 17568/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I can confirm that my Department is currently concluding the assessment of the business case. A decision will be reached shortly.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities to detail her programme of investment in, or schedule for demolition of, the tower blocks in East Belfast.

(AQW 17569/17-22)

Ms Hargey: There are six tower blocks owned by the Housing Executive located within the East Belfast constituency: Clarawood House, Kilbroney House, Willowbrook House, Woodstock House, Whincroft House and Carnet House.

Two of the blocks - Clarawood House and Kilbroney House - have been categorised as 'short term' blocks in the Housing Executive's Tower Blocks Action Plan and its proposal is to clear and demolish these blocks and provide new social housing on the sites (subject to housing need). The remaining four blocks have been categorised as 'long term' and the Housing Executive proposes to retain these blocks and carry out full improvement works.

The business case recommending the demolition of Clarawood House was approved by the Housing Executive's Board in March 2021 and has now been referred to my Department for its consideration and approval. If approved, it is anticipated that it could take around 24 -30 months from the date of approval to clear the block. Subject to clearance proceeding as planned the Housing Executive expect to commence the demolition of Clarawood House in late 2023.

The business case for Kilbroney House is being presented to the Housing Executive's Board at its meeting this month. Subject to its approval it will then be forwarded to the Department for Communities. Similar to Clarawood House, it is anticipated that it will take around 24 months from the date of approval to clear Kilbroney House. Therefore, the Housing Executive expect the demolition of Kibroney House to begin in late 2023/early 2024.

An indicative Refurbishment Programme has been developed for the improvement works to the 'long term' blocks. Willowbrook House, Woodstock House, Whincroft House and Carnet House are included in this programme. It is a seven and a half year programme and at present the Housing Executive is undertaking a procurement to appoint consultants to assist them in developing their improvement proposals. They currently anticipate that work to the first blocks will start in 2022/23, with Woodstock House scheduled for 2023/24, Willowbrook House for 2024/25, and Whincroft House and Carnet House in 2027/28. However, it should be noted that this is subject to a number of elements being in place i.e. approvals for the proposals and associated business cases for the blocks, contractors appointed to deliver the works, and the necessary funding being available.

In the interim the Housing Executive will continue to deliver response maintenance and cyclical maintenance in these four blocks as necessary.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Communities (i) how many people are on the housing waiting list; and (ii) what is the average waiting time for housing allocations in South Antrim.

(AQW 17577/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has advised that at the end of March 2021 there were 1,592 applicants on the waiting list in the South Antrim Parliamentary Constituency; and the median waiting time for housing allocations in South Antrim was 13 months at the point of allocation.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the need to increase sporting facilities in Newry and Armagh.

(AQW 17618/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The ongoing consultation on a new strategy for Sport and Physical Activity, highlights six key themes, which have been developed following an extensive co-deign exercise, for the continued development of sport here. One of the key themes is the provision of inclusive and shared spaces and places and includes the goal that everyone has access

to inclusive, shared, welcoming and high quality sport and physical activity infrastructure. When published, the Strategy will set the direction for the development of sport and physical activity for the next decade and will aim to address gaps in participation and provision.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the spend by each local councils on (i) public parks; (ii) community walkways; and (iii) any other outdoor recreation, over the last three years.
(AQW 17630/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department for Communities does not hold this information. The spend by each local council on public parks, community walkways and any other outdoor recreation is a matter for the councils.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister for Communities how much funding will be allocated for social housing in East Londonderry for this financial year.
(AQW 17646/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Funding for the Social Housing Development Programme has been set at £162 million for 2021/22. Funds are not allocated by Parliamentary Constituency. The budget will be used to build social homes that are scheduled on the current Development Programme.

The published SHDP will be updated to reflect additional and re-profiled scheme proposals in due course.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Communities what legislative work has been undertaken during her term in office to combat anti-social behaviour, particularly in relation to street drinking and related issues that stem from alcohol consumption on streets.
(AQW 17710/17-22)

Ms Hargey: There has been no legislative work undertaken by my Department during my term in office to combat anti-social behaviour, particularly in relation to street drinking and related issues that stem from alcohol consumption on streets.

My Department is a member of the multi-agency Anti-Social Behaviour Legislation Review Group, led by the Department of Justice. Its remit includes street drinking as an element of the work being taken forward.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 12790/17-22, to outline the reasons for her decision not to proceed with public realm schemes in settlements with a population of over 2500; and whether she will reimburse Councils for the expenditure they have made in progressing schemes.
(AQW 17782/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I have not made any decision in relation to public realm schemes in rural settlements. Whilst my Department's regeneration programmes are currently delivered in urban settlements, I have initiated discussions with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and the Department for Infrastructure on developing a more collaborative approach to rural regeneration and how the current regeneration focus on settlements with populations over 5,000 could be extended to smaller settlements.

No commitments can be made until that work completes and any proposals to extend the remit of my Department's regeneration activities, will be considered in the context of our regeneration priorities, policy focus and confirmed capital budget.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Communities, subject to appropriate risk assessments and social distancing guidance, whether outdoor street theatre events are permissible from 23 April 2021 as an outdoor visitor attraction.
(AQW 17807/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Street theatre is a cultural activity and as such would be considered under the regulations relating to outdoor gatherings. Those regulations currently allow that up to 10 people (including children of all ages) from a maximum of two households can meet outdoors.

It is a matter for the organisers of events and activities to ensure that their plans meet the terms of the regulations.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of meetings of the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer working group to date.
(AQW 17877/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Advisory Working Group for the Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer held their first meeting on 4 March 2020. The Working Group has subsequently met on four further occasions and will meet for a sixth time on 28 April 2021.

Department of Education

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education how much his Department has awarded to Irish language groups in each of the last three years, including a breakdown of same.

(AQW 17315/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The information sought is set out in the table below and includes information provided by the Education Authority (EA).

Payment awarded to	2018/19 £	2019/20 £	2020/21 £
Pathway Funding	221,842	189,340	246,060
An Gaeláras	73,000	73,000	73,000
Altram	150,000	150,000	150,000
Brightstart School Age Childcare grant scheme	84,456	85,743	85,743
Childcare Covid support funding – information available up to December 2020	-----	-----	196,723
EA - Youth Sector	308,836	448,015	235,862
Total	838,134	946,098	987,388

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education how much his Department has awarded to Irish language sector schools in each of the last three years, including a breakdown of same.

(AQW 17316/17-22)

Mr Weir: The funding awarded to Irish Medium Schools and Irish Medium Units in each of the last three years, is detailed in the table below:

Description of Funding	2018-19 £m	2019-20** £m	2020-21** £m
Resource Funding			
Funding Distributed to Schools via the Common Funding Formula	17.0	18.6	20.7*
Education Authority Block Grant	3.1	3.4	3.6
DE Funding Initiatives (earmarked funds) - excludes COVID-19 related funding in 2020-21	1.0	1.0	1.1
COVID-19 Related Funding	-	-	0.8
Total Resource Funding	21.1	23.0	26.2

Capital Funding			
Major Works	0.9	2.5	1.2
Minor Works	2.9	1.9	1.0
Total Capital Funding	3.8	4.4	2.2

Notes:

* 2020-21 includes Teachers' Pay Award Arrears, not distributed through the Common Funding Formula.

** The Education Authority's accounts for 2019-20 and 2020-21 are not yet final and therefore the figures noted above may be subject to change.

The Department is unable to disaggregate all funding allocated to Irish Medium Units, and therefore the table above only reflects the funding for Irish Medium Units from the Irish Medium Curricular and Admin support factors distributed through the Common Funding Formula.

Education Authority Block Grant funding includes, but is not limited to: Staff substitution costs, Special Educational Needs, Accommodation costs, Licence Payments, Insurance, Security Services and Legal costs.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Education to outline the plans his Department has to mark the Centenary of Northern Ireland
(AQW 17325/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department is currently developing an Education Programme to mark the Centenary of Northern Ireland during 2021 in a spirit of mutual respect, inclusiveness and reconciliation. Further details will be announced in the near future.

CCEA has been commissioned to develop teaching resources which support an enquiry based, multi-perspective teaching of history in a divided society focusing on the longer term events leading to the partition of Ireland. The resources are designed to be used in a Shared Education context as well as by individual schools. The resources will be launched during May 2021.

There are a range of other initiatives currently being progressed within the Department in connection with the Centenary however these are currently work in progress.

The UK Government has made a commitment in the New Decade, New Approach document to work with the Executive to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland in 2021; and to make available funding for related projects. I intend to participate in Executive discussions with the Secretary of State about the implementation of the UK Government's commitment to support and fund projects. The quantum and method of allocation of these funds have not yet been determined.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Education, given that so many of his departmental staff are working from home, often in rural locations with substandard connections, whether his Department will consider covering the costs incurred by his staff to install superfast broadband, or available alternatives, in their homes.
(AQW 17335/17-22)

Mr Weir: During the last year my Departmental officials have worked closely with colleagues in IT Assist to ensure that all my staff have access to laptops; creating a flexible workforce that can work from home.

In addition, the Department of Finance (DoF) has produced guidance for NICS staff on the expenses incurred by installation, additional usage and associated tariffs relating to home broadband services. My Department will fully consider all broadband expenses requests by staff when supported by the necessary information as outlined in the DoF protocols.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education (i) what provision is made within mainstream schools for young people with Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD) with a statement of special educational needs once they reach the age of 16; (ii) whether this provision varies from that offered to 16-year-olds in special schools; and (iii) for a rationale for the variance.
(AQW 17397/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) delivers a range of specialist provision, providing a continuum of support to reflect need, for pupils with special educational needs (SEN). For children and young people with Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD), this can include support in mainstream schools, specialist support classes within mainstream schools, and special schools.

The presence of more than one type of assessed need can influence the nature of provision made to support the child or young person. Different types of provision are needed by different children to meet their individually assessed need. Schools can request advisory support from the EA, as stated in statements of SEN, and support provided will be based on the presenting difficulties of the pupils, which include learning as well as other areas such as transition planning. Advisory support for statemented pupils can be sought by both mainstream and special school staff, provided that this is written into the pupil's statement of SEN.

Young people with MLD who attend a mainstream school or a specialist class within a mainstream school may progress from their mainstream setting, at the end of compulsory education, to training, Further Education or to work. Alternatively, they may continue to attend their mainstream setting where Post-16 provision is available. Where a setting does not have Post-16 provision, a young person can, at the end of compulsory education, progress to an alternative grant-aided school which offers Post-16 provision, through an Amendment Notice to the statement.

Where it is determined, through the annual review, that a young person who attends a mainstream school or a specialist class within a mainstream school will require more intensive support, the EA will issue an appropriately informed Amendment Notice to facilitate a change of placement to an alternative setting.

Likewise, young people who attend a special school with a predominately MLD profile, may progress, at the end of compulsory education, to training, Further Education or to work or, where the setting offers Post-16 provision, may continue to attend that setting. Where there is not Post-16 provision, young people can, at the end of compulsory education, progress to a grant-aided special school setting which offers Post-16 provision, through an Amendment Notice to the statement.

Where it is determined, through the annual review, that a young person who attends a special school with a predominately MLD profile requires more intensive support, the EA will issue an appropriately informed Amendment Notice to facilitate a change of placement to an alternative special school (Severe Learning Difficulty) setting.

Every young person aged 14+ with a statement of SEN will access the EA's Transition Service and will have a named Transition Co-ordinator whose role is to provide advice and support to parents and young people as preparations begin for adult life.

All statutory bodies, including Education, the Health and Social Care Trusts and Department for the Economy, work very closely together during the transition process to ensure that an appropriate pathway is identified for each person as they move beyond compulsory education, and that decisions in relation to progression are made in conjunction with the young person and their parents or carers and in accordance with their wishes.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education to outline the overall percentage of pupils in special schools taking part in the Loop-mediated Isothermal Amplification Test.
(AQW 17464/17-22)

Mr Weir: 21.23% of all pupils in special schools completed a LAMP test, week ending 16th April.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education to outline the overall percentage of staff in special schools taking part in the Loop-mediated Isothermal Amplification Test.
(AQW 17465/17-22)

Mr Weir: 53.3% of staff in special schools completed a LAMP test, week ending 16th April.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether the testing centre at Queens University, Belfast has the capacity to cope with weekly testing of all special school pupils and staff.
(AQW 17467/17-22)

Mr Weir: The current capacity of the laboratory at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) is to process 10,000 tests per week, based on the maximum number of staff and pupils in all special schools accessing tests each week.

QUB have indicated further expansion of capacity is possible if required.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education to outline the support provided to teachers to resettle and reintegrate pupils into the classroom environment after months of learning from home.
(AQW 17484/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has issued curriculum guidance circulars to provide advice and support to teachers across the system as they resettle and reintegrate pupils into the classroom environment. The EA is also delivering a range of Teacher Professional Learning courses, including the recent 'Sharing the Learning' Conferences. Notably, the Supporting Learning Project has provided a suite of resources designed to meet teachers' professional learning needs during the current time. On the ground advice, support and guidance is also available to schools from their cross-organisational Link Officers.

In addition, my Department has advised schools of its intention to relax a range of statutory requirements for example around pupil reports and statutory Key Stage Assessment. This will give teachers additional time and opportunity to focus on teaching and learning in the classroom.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether he is aware of any delays in the registration process for the Northern Ireland Substitute Teacher Register.
(AQW 17488/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Northern Ireland Substitute Teacher Register (NISTR) is administered by the Education Authority (EA). EA has been asked to comment and has responded as follows:

EA is not aware of any delays in the registration process for NISTR. The current turnaround times dictate that once an initial application is received it is processed within 24 hours. The teacher is then issued with, and required to complete, an Access NI application. When this is received their profile is updated within 48 hours.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education for an update on the review of the Common Funding Formula.
(AQW 17555/17-22)

Mr Weir: In March 2020, at the outset of lockdown, the Education Transformation Programme, including the Review of the Common Funding Scheme (RCFS) Project, was suspended to allow staffing resources to be redeployed to business critical activity linked to COVID management and response.

Following advice from the Education Transformation Programme Board, I agreed to close the Programme in March 2021. This was due to funding uncertainty, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and linkages with the forthcoming independent review of education. The RCFS Project continues to be suspended and is unlikely to recommence until the Department is closer to business as usual, post the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education to detail the criteria which has to be met in order for the requirement for pupils to wear masks in school to cease.
(AQW 17559/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education, the Department of Health, the Education Authority and the Public Health Agency have worked closely together throughout the pandemic to maintain the education of children, reduce the risk of outbreaks and respond when these occur.

The common aim has been to keep schools safe for children and staff, prioritise children's education and ensure that any impact on overall transmission is as low as possible. An important mitigating measure to achieve this is the requirement for face coverings to be worn in post-primary settings including, classrooms, corridors and communal spaces such as toilet areas unless a pupil has a reasonable excuse, for example, due to a medical condition. No child should be refused entry to school or treated differently in school if they are unable to wear a face covering. No medical certification for an exemption is required nor should it be sought by the school.

I fully understand the concerns that have been expressed by many people regarding pupils wearing face coverings in the classroom. However, the virus continues to impact many aspects of all of our lives, and we have to take the actions necessary to protect all of our pupils and staff.

Education is a small part of a much wider package of societal responses to the spread of COVID-19. My Department will continue to work closely with the Department of Health, and, whenever the wider health situation allows us to make further relaxations in schools, we will do so.

The Department's COVID-19 guidance, including that specifically relating to the wearing of face coverings in schools, continues to be informed by advice from the Chief Medical Officer, the Assistant Chief Scientific Advisor and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) which takes account of a broad range of scientific and medical evidence. This advice reflects the expert consideration of a range of complex and often interdependent epidemiological factors and takes account of experiences across the globe in responding to the pandemic.

The wearing of face coverings by pupils and staff is only one of a range of mitigating measures that are in place to reduce the risks of virus transmission in schools. All of these measures have been recommended by my Department following detailed engagement with the Department of Health, seeking to balance the benefits in reducing transmission of the virus with the potential disruption to children's education. No mitigating measure will be in place any longer than is necessary, however, any changes to my Department's guidance in areas such as the wearing of face coverings in schools will only take place after engagement with the Chief Medical Officer, deputy Chief Scientific Advisor and Public Health Agency. This is necessary in order to ensure that the actions of pupils and schools continue to be part of the co-ordinated wider societal response to the challenges raised by COVID-19.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education what steps his Department intends to take to ensure that teachers are trained to provide pupils with (i) accurate information on climate change; (ii) the impact of climate change on pupils' lives; and (iii) the steps needed to mitigate climate change.

(AQW 17591/17-22)

Mr Weir: The overall aim of the Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC) is to empower young people to achieve their potential and to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives, as individuals and as contributors to (amongst other matters) the environment. Therefore, education plays a critical role in mitigating climate change.

Pupils' understanding of climate change at primary level is facilitated through the area of learning within the NIC entitled 'The World Around Us'. At post-primary level, this understanding is further progressed and developed under the key area of learning 'Environment and Society', with the learning areas of 'Science and Technology' and 'Learning for Life and Work' also providing additional opportunities for teachers to discuss wider climate change issues with pupils.

Through these statutory areas of learning, teachers enable pupils to develop a deeper knowledge and understanding on this matter, by providing them with the opportunity to investigate environmental and climate change, explore how to exercise environmental stewardship, and gain an understanding of the importance of environmental change being sustainable. They also develop an understanding of the interdependence of society, the economy and the environment and respect for the needs of present and future generations.

No specialist Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) is provided for teachers on any of these areas of learning since teachers should already have the required skills to teach the NIC. However, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) does provide a wide range of curriculum learning resources on climate change and related topics for teachers to use (via its website).

In line with the Department of Education's (DE) Learning Leaders strategy, responsibility for ongoing TPL should increasingly be led by teachers' own reflections on the effectiveness of their own pedagogy and teaching practice. Where a teacher identifies a need to enhance their skills, DE aims to support them by ensuring high quality TPL opportunities and resources are available.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education what impact assessment has been made for school pupils who have been asked to wear face masks for most of the school day.

(AQW 17605/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department's guidance continues to be informed by advice from the Chief Medical Officer (CMO), the Assistant Chief Scientific Advisor and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) which is based on scientific and public

health advice. Although no impact assessment has been carried out, the advice from the CMO and Public Health Agency is that wearing face coverings in environments with reduced capacity for social distancing is an effective risk mitigation, both for the wearer and the surrounding pupils. SAGE evidence further suggests that there is a 7% - 45% reduction in transmission of the COVID-19 virus when wearing face masks. All pupils will be strongly encouraged to adopt this position, but no pupil should be refused entry to school, or treated differently in school if they are unable to wear a face covering. Guidance will continue to be monitored and will be amended to reflect any updates to public health guidance and will be used to form any future decisions on policies for the wearing of face coverings in post-primary schools.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to detail any proposed capital investments planned in schools in Newry and Armagh during (i) 2021/2022; and (ii) 2022/2023.

(AQW 17617/17-22)

Mr Weir: The total proposed capital investment planned in schools in Newry and Armagh during 2021/2022 and 2022/2023 is detailed below.

	2021/2022 £	2022/2023 £
Major Capital Projects	9,150,000	5,065,000
Minor Works Projects non-controlled	2,642,158.05	681,000
Minor Works Projects Controlled	2,571,153.67	12,000
Total	14,363,311.72	5,758,000

School Enhancement Programme

Six schools in Newry and Armagh have been announced to advance in design under the School Enhancement Programme Second Call (SEP2). During 2021/22 and 2022/23 design work will be progressed on these six projects at an estimated total investment of £24m. It is currently anticipated that work at St Mary's Primary School, Jerrettspass and St Patrick's Primary School, Crossmaglen, could start on site in 2022/23.

Minor Works

Delivery of minor works schemes is subject to the availability of capital funding.

Furthermore, there could also potentially be investment in unavoidable and emergency minor works Newry and Armagh Parliamentary Constituency in 2021/22 but, due to the very nature of these works, i.e. they are unplanned works that arise in-year, I cannot put a figure the level of investment.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education to outline the process for challenging school admissions decisions in light of the changes related to COVID-19.

(AQW 17622/17-22)

Mr Weir: Article 15 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 requires the Education Authority (EA) to make arrangements to enable a parent to appeal against an admission decision where a child has been refused a place at an over-subscribed school by the application of the school's published admissions criteria.

At the conclusion of the admissions processes, parents will receive notification of the outcome of their school applications via the EA's online portal and at this time the EA will inform parents of their right to appeal and the deadline for submitting an appeal form.

An Independent Appeal Tribunal will then determine whether the school in question applied its admissions criteria and, provided it did, whether the criteria were applied correctly. Where an appeal is successful the child will be placed at the school.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the current provision of school crossing patrol officers in West Tyrone; and (ii) whether there will be any additional patrol officers recruited.

(AQW 17631/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) currently employs 36 school crossing patrol officers in the West Tyrone area.

When a school crossing patrol post becomes vacant or a school requests a new crossing patrol, the EA will carry out an assessment to establish whether there is a need for such provision. The EA will only seek to fill the post if this is confirmed.

These assessments are based on clear, objective criteria which have been drawn up based on guidance provided by the Local Authority Road Safety Officers' Association. These criteria take account of the volume of traffic, the number of unaccompanied children crossing the road together combined with other weighting factors and enable the EA to make a decision on whether a particular location warrants a patrol.

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education (i) whether any work has been undertaken regarding primary school principals and teachers' opinions or experience on guidance relating to the implementation of remote learning; and (ii) in light of any findings, will he revise policy on remote learning.

(AQW 17636/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) whether any work has been undertaken regarding primary school principals and teachers' opinions or experience on guidance relating to the implementation of remote learning

My Department and other education support organisations have utilised a variety of surveys, conferences and meetings to gather feedback regarding primary principals and teachers' opinions and experiences relating to the implementation of remote learning.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) carried out a cross-phase survey of schools on the delivery of remote learning during the week of 25 January 2021. The survey showed that during the second lockdown, pre-schools, schools, and EOTAS centres were better prepared and more confident than in 2020. A summary of the quantitative data from the responses is available at ETI consultation on the delivery of remote learning | Education Training Inspectorate (etini.gov.uk) (<https://www.etini.gov.uk/news/eti-consultation-delivery-remote-learning>)

On 25 March 2021, ETI published phase-specific reports covering the period between September 2018 and December 2020. The reports contain analysis of ETI engagement with a significant number of education and training settings across Northern Ireland during the period since March 2020. The reports include lessons learned during the COVID-19 response phase (March to August 2020) and recovery phase (September to December 2020) and a range of key considerations going forward (ETI publish phase-specific reports) (<https://www.etini.gov.uk/news/eti-publish-phase-specific-reports>).

In addition, the Education Authority held a series of Sharing Learning conferences on 20th, 21st and 22nd April. These were attended by approximately 300 schools, including 200 primary and nursery schools.

This programme enabled conversations between school leaders on how they had adapted to remote learning, how they sustained learning and what they will retain as pupils return to school. NI schools were joined by a small number of schools from Scotland and listened to short presentations from Scottish school leaders on the challenges that they have faced. The outcomes of the conferences will be shared with all participants.

In addition, a series of short case studies "Just one thing" is also available to schools through the Supporting Learning website (Just One Thing) (<https://sites.google.com/c2ken.net/teacherprofessionallearning-ea/just-one-thing>), with 42 presentations from primary practitioners discussing aspects of their remote learning practice.

- (ii) in light of any findings, will he revise policy on remote learning.

My Department's guidance and advice on remote learning is regularly reviewed and updated to take account of emerging evidence and best practice.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education whether schools will be allowed to hold their annual sports day this year.

(AQW 17669/17-22)

Mr Weir: The recent decisions by the Executive mean that schools are able to host sports days for their pupils as part of the physical education curriculum. However, parents or other spectators are not permitted to attend. It is recommended that schools should mitigate any potential risks in line with public health guidance.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Education when singing lessons not linked to public examinations will be able to begin in schools.

(AQW 17709/17-22)

Mr Weir: Singing for those not sitting examinations is permitted, however, as stated in my letter of 1 April, this must be done in an outdoor setting. The Department's guidance continues to be informed by advice from the Chief Medical Officer, the Assistant Chief Scientific Advisor and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) which is based on scientific and public health advice. Guidance will continue to be monitored and will be amended to reflect any updates to public health guidance and will be used to form any future decisions on policies for singing indoors in schools for those not sitting examinations.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Education, given that the Secretary of State for Education announced that secondary school pupils will not have to wear face coverings under rule changes expected on 17 May 2021, whether his Department has plans to replicate this decision.

(AQW 17751/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department's COVID-19 guidance, including that specifically relating to the wearing of face coverings in schools, continues to be informed by advice from the Chief Medical Officer, the Assistant Chief Scientific Advisor and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) which takes account of a broad range of scientific and medical evidence.

This advice reflects the expert consideration of a range of complex and often interdependent epidemiological factors and takes account of experiences across the globe in responding to the pandemic.

The wearing of face coverings by pupils and staff is only one of a range of mitigating measures that are in place to reduce the risks of virus transmission in schools. All of these measures have been recommended by my Department following detailed engagement with the Department of Health, seeking to balance the benefits in reducing transmission of the virus with the potential disruption to children's education. No mitigating measure will be in place any longer than is necessary, however, any changes to my Department's guidance in areas such as the wearing of face coverings in schools will only take place after engagement with the Chief Medical Officer, deputy Chief Scientific Advisor and Public Health Agency. This is necessary in order to ensure that the actions of pupils and schools continue to be part of the co-ordinated wider societal response to the challenges raised by COVID-19.

I fully understand the concerns that have been expressed by many people regarding pupils wearing face coverings in the classroom. However, the virus continues to impact many aspects of all of our lives, and we have to take the actions necessary to protect all of our pupils and staff.

Education is a small part of a much wider package of societal responses to the spread of COVID-19. My Department will continue to work closely with the Department of Health, and, whenever the wider health situation allows us to make further relaxations in schools, we will do so.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education (i) how his Department ensures that children are receiving the standardised, statutory minimum entitlement of Relationship and Sexuality Education from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 4; and (ii) how his Department ensures that RSE is appropriately taught.

(AQW 17752/17-22)

Mr Weir: Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) is taught as part of the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding and Learning for Life and Work areas of learning. The curriculum provides for a standardised statutory minimum entitlement, which all children must legally receive. Boards of Governors of each school are responsible for ensuring that a comprehensive and age appropriate programme is taught and that the standardised minimum content is covered.

Inspections in schools are currently paused owing to the pandemic. However, at the point of inspection the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), through its inspection of child protection and safeguarding policies and practices, routinely assesses whether or not schools have an appropriate policy for the delivery of RSE within the curriculum. Inspectors also assess the outworking of the schools RSE Policy through discussion with focus groups of learners. The ETI Safeguarding Proforma includes a reference to the school's RSE policy with prompt questions as to whether the policy was consulted upon with parents and endorsed by the board of governors and if it includes a review of the taught pastoral / preventative education curriculum. The Department recommends that the ETI Safeguarding Proforma is completed annually as part of a school's self-evaluation process.

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) prepares student teachers to deliver all aspects of the Northern Ireland Curriculum in an appropriate manner and recognises that teaching on issues such as race, religion and sexuality will require particular care and sensitivity. Teachers are expected to build on the foundational skills learned during ITE and develop professionally throughout their careers.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Education to outline the workforce planning his Department is undertaking for the Irish Medium Sector.

(AQW 17800/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education is responsible for determining the number of students to be admitted each year to courses of Initial Teacher Education (ITE), based on a number of relevant factors, including the predicted future need for teachers across the NI education system. The Board of Governors for every school is responsible for assessing their workforce needs and determining the complement of teaching posts of the school.

I am aware of the concerns of the Irish-medium sector about the availability of suitably qualified teachers. This is something I have raised with Minister Dodds in the Department for the Economy, as ITE cuts across both our areas of responsibility. My officials will be engaging in work to consider the current provision, particularly for post-primary, with the ITE providers and sectoral representatives. This work will scope what longer term ITE provision is needed to ensure beginning teachers receive the best training to support them in delivering immersion education in the Irish-medium sector.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education to detail what, if any, oversight mechanisms exist between his Department and Boards of Governors to ensure that Relationship and Sexuality Education policy is implemented in their schools.

(AQW 17813/17-22)

Mr Weir: Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) is taught as part of the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding and Learning for Life and Work areas of learning. The curriculum provides for a standardised statutory minimum entitlement, which all children must legally receive. Boards of Governors of each school are responsible for ensuring that a comprehensive and age appropriate programme is taught and that the standardised minimum content is covered.

Inspections in schools are currently paused owing to the pandemic. However, at the point of inspection the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), through its inspection of child protection and safeguarding policies and practices, routinely assesses whether or not schools have an appropriate policy for the delivery of RSE within the curriculum. Inspectors also assess the outworking of the schools RSE Policy through discussion with focus groups of learners. The ETI Safeguarding Proforma includes a reference to the school's RSE policy with prompt questions as to whether the policy was consulted upon with parents and endorsed by the board of governors and if it includes a review of the taught pastoral / preventative education curriculum. The Department recommends that the ETI Safeguarding Proforma is completed annually as part of a school's self-evaluation process.

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) prepares student teachers to deliver all aspects of the Northern Ireland Curriculum in an appropriate manner and recognises that teaching on issues such as race, religion and sexuality will require particular care and sensitivity. Teachers are expected to build on the foundational skills learned during ITE and develop professionally throughout their careers.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education in light of the Secretary of State for Education's commitment to remove mandatory face masks in England at stage 3 of the easing of restrictions, what consideration he has given to this as part of the Executive's pathway towards recovery.

(AQW 17833/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department's COVID-19 guidance, including that specifically relating to the wearing of face coverings in schools, continues to be informed by advice from the Chief Medical Officer, the Assistant Chief Scientific Advisor and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) which takes account of a broad range of scientific and medical evidence. This advice reflects the expert consideration of a range of complex and often interdependent epidemiological factors and takes account of experiences across the globe in responding to the pandemic.

The wearing of face coverings by pupils and staff is only one of a range of mitigating measures that are in place to reduce the risks of virus transmission in schools. All of these measures have been recommended by my Department following detailed engagement with the Department of Health, seeking to balance the benefits in reducing transmission of the virus with the potential disruption to children's education. No mitigating measure will be in place any longer than is necessary, however, any changes to my Department's guidance in areas such as the wearing of face coverings in schools will only take place after engagement with the Chief Medical Officer, deputy Chief Scientific Advisor and Public Health Agency. This is necessary in order to ensure that the actions of pupils and schools continue to be part of the co-ordinated wider societal response to the challenges raised by COVID-19.

I fully understand the concerns that have been expressed by many people regarding pupils wearing face coverings in the classroom. However, the virus continues to impact many aspects of all of our lives, and we have to take the actions necessary to protect all of our pupils and staff.

Education is a small part of a much wider package of societal responses to the spread of COVID-19. My Department will continue to work closely with the Department of Health, and, whenever the wider health situation allows us to make further relaxations in schools, we will do so.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education (i) how many places were allocated to each pre-school setting in Ballycastle, in each of the last 5 years; and (ii) how this corresponds to the number of first choice applications received by these establishments in each year.

(AQW 17871/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority Pre-School Education Group (EA PEG) has responsibility for determining the number of funded places in non-statutory (community and voluntary) pre-school education providers on an annual basis and operates within strict parameters in doing so.

The number of places within statutory pre-school settings are not allocated annually. Legislation requires that, where there is any significant change proposed to a statutory setting such as an increase or reduction to provision in a Primary or Nursery school, a statutory development proposal must be published and approved. There have been no development proposals approved to change the level of statutory pre-school provision in the Ballycastle area in the last five years

The following table shows the number of funded pre-school education places and first preference applications in Ballycastle in each of the last 5 years:

Pre-school setting	Ballycastle IPS NU	Gaelscoil an Chaistil NU	St Patrick's & St Brigid's NU	Jack Horner
2017/18				
Admissions Number	26	26	52	-
Funded Places Allocated	-	-	-	12
1st Preference Applications	16	19	51	10

Pre-school setting	Ballycastle IPS NU	Gaelscoil an Chaistil NU	St Patrick's & St Brigid's NU	Jack Horner
2018/19				
Admissions Number	26	26	52	-
Funded Places Allocated	-	-	-	13
1st Preference Applications	25	15	42	9
2019/20				
Admissions Number	26	26	52	-
Funded Places Allocated	-	-	-	9
1st Preference Applications	27	14	54	9
2020/21				
Admissions Number	26	26	52	-
Funded Places Allocated	-	-	-	10
1st Preference Applications	25	17	45	9
2021/22*				
Admissions Number	26	26	52	-
Funded Places Allocated	-	-	-	11
1st Preference Applications	13	16	50	17

* The 2021-22 Pre-School admissions process is currently underway. The table reflects the position at 27 April 2021.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Education to detail the plans his Department has in relation to the development and promotion of Irish Medium Education in South Down, including the Irish Medium pre-school sector.

(AQW 17892/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department funds Comhairle Na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) to provide information, analysis and advice on Development Proposals (DPs) impacting on Irish-medium schools, to engage with the planning authorities (the Education Authority (EA) and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)) in identifying innovative, creative and shared solutions for sustainable provision and to engage with all other sectors with a view to adding to quality and viability of provision. CnaG is facilitated to fulfil this role through its representation at all levels of the area planning structures (Area Planning Steering Group (APSG), Working Group (APWG) and Local Groups (APLG)).

The EA publish an Annual Action Plan (AAP) that identifies actions to be undertaken within pre-school, primary, post-primary and special education, in conjunction with the CCMS and Sectoral Support Bodies. There are no specific Irish-medium key issues or actions in the Newry, Mourne & Down Local Government District (where South Down is located) in the most recent AAP (April 2019- March 2021).

Ms Brogan asked the Minister of Education to outline any plans he has to include statutory nursery schools in the Engage Funding for September 2021 to March 2022 with specific reference to Omagh North Nursery School.

(AQW 17908/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is clear that the disruption caused by the extended period of remote learning was felt by all pupils and their families. I recognise the impact of this on their wellbeing, and also the associated impact on pupils in terms of lost learning. There is therefore an ongoing need to help children and young people by supporting their learning and engagement during the next academic year.

I therefore intend that the Engage programme will continue for a second academic year, and I would wish to broaden it to include pre-school education and other early years settings, Special schools, and Education Other Than At School settings.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) how many development proposals for transformation his Department has received in the last five years; (ii) how many requests for school transformation he has received in the last year; and (iii) how many school transformations have been granted.

(AQW 17968/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has received eight Development Proposals (DPs) for transformation in the last five years (all of which have been published between March 2020 and April 2021);

My Department does not receive "requests" for transformation. Proposals are brought forward on which I take decisions after all relevant evidence has been accumulated and recommendations made to me by my officials. In the past year, four proposals for transformation have been published. Of these four, three are still within the statutory two-month objection period

within which representations may be made to my Department. The fourth proposal is currently being considered by officials and recommendations will be brought to me in due course; and

In the five-year period from the beginning of 2016, two proposals for transformation have been approved.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education (i) to advise of the additional funding allocated toward supporting the Bright Start School Age programme as a result of the Minister of Finance's statement on the 27 April 2021; and (ii) to outline the number of additional young people that are expected to benefit.

(AQW 18012/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has allocated £1.08M for the Bright Start School Age Childcare Grant Scheme in 2021/22. This Scheme helps to sustain school age childcare services in areas of disadvantage, on the schools estate and in rural areas.

The funding will support continuity of services for 59 groups and approximately 1230 children in 2021/22,

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the extent to which the Rural Needs Act was considered prior to the decision being made to close Ballyhackett Primary School; (ii) his assessment of how the closure of this school will impact the wider rural community around Castlerock; and (iii) what consideration was given to the current trend of more people moving to rural areas, post-COVID-19, in reaching his decision.

(AQW 18027/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) confirmed that the statutory requirements of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 were considered. CCMS acknowledged the potential impact on the local community and the possibility of longer travelling distance for some pupils. Alternative options for education provision were considered, but each of the options were rejected as they did not provide sustainable education.

I recognise the impact of a school closure on the wider rural community and appreciate there will be great disappointment at my decision. I wish to emphasise that aim of the Sustainable Schools Policy (SSP) is to ensure that pupils receive a high quality education in schools that are educationally and financially viable regardless of where they live. Concerns expressed must be balanced against the positive impact of the proposal which would increase opportunities for pupils living in a rural area to have access to a broad and balanced curriculum with transport assistance to alternative schools. My over-riding consideration is the educational well-being of the pupils.

In relation to people moving to rural areas post COVID-19, I can only say that enrolment at the school continued to fall despite the considerable efforts of the school management team and in 2020/21 there were only 31 pupils.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education whether it a (i) legal requirement; or (ii) departmental guidance to wear a face covering in the classroom.

(AQW 18101/17-22)

Mr Weir: The wearing of face coverings by pupils is Departmental guidance and is not a legal requirement. However, it is only one of a range of mitigating measures that are in place to reduce the risks of virus transmission in schools. All of these measures have been recommended by my Department following detailed engagement with the Department of Health, seeking to balance the benefits in reducing transmission of the virus with the potential disruption to children's education.

No mitigating measure will be in place any longer than is necessary, however, any changes to my Department's guidance in areas such as the wearing of face coverings in schools will only take place after engagement with the Chief Medical Officer, Deputy Chief Scientific Advisor and Public Health Agency. This is necessary in order to ensure that the actions of pupils and schools continue to be part of the co-ordinated wider societal response to the challenges raised by COVID-19.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education whether there is any obligation on parents to provide a reason for their child not wearing a face covering if they have already stated the child is exempt.

(AQW 18102/17-22)

Mr Weir: The common aim has been to keep schools safe for children and staff, prioritise children's education and ensure that any impact on overall transmission is as low as possible. An important mitigating measure to achieve this is the requirement for face coverings to be worn in post-primary settings including, classrooms, corridors and communal spaces such as toilet areas unless a pupil has a reasonable excuse, for example, due to a medical condition. No child should be refused entry to school or treated differently in school if they are unable to wear a face covering. No medical certification for an exemption is required nor should it be sought by the school.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education what risk assessment has been carried out for children wearing face coverings in school.

(AQW 18103/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department's guidance continues to be informed by advice from the Chief Medical Officer (CMO), the Assistant Chief Scientific Advisor and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) which is based on scientific and public health advice. Although no impact assessment has been carried out, the advice from the CMO and Public Health Agency is

that wearing face coverings in environments with reduced capacity for social distancing is an effective risk mitigation, both for the wearer and the surrounding pupils. SAGE evidence further suggests that there is a 7% - 45% reduction in transmission of the COVID-19 virus when wearing face masks. All pupils will be strongly encouraged to adopt this position, but no pupil should be refused entry to school, or treated differently in school if they are unable to wear a face covering. Guidance will continue to be monitored and will be amended to reflect any updates to public health guidance and will be used to form any future decisions on policies for the wearing of face coverings in post-primary schools.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education how much funding has been set aside by his Department and its arm's-length bodies to celebrate the Northern Ireland Centenary.

(AQW 18104/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department is currently developing an Education Programme to mark the Centenary of Northern Ireland during 2021 in a spirit of mutual respect, inclusiveness and reconciliation. Further details will be announced in the near future.

CCEA has been commissioned to develop teaching resources which support an enquiry based, multi-perspective teaching of history in a divided society focusing on the longer term events leading to the partition of Ireland. The resources are designed to be used in a Shared Education context as well as by individual schools. The resources will be launched during May 2021. Total funding of £50k has been provided (£30k in 2020-21 and £20k in 2021-22).

There are a range of other initiatives currently being progressed within the Department in connection with the Centenary, however these are currently work in progress.

The UK Government has made a commitment in the New Decade, New Approach document to work with the Executive to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland in 2021, and to make funding available for related projects. I intend to participate in Executive discussions with the Secretary of State about the implementation of the UK Government's commitment to support and fund projects. The quantum and method of allocation of these funds have not yet been determined.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education to outline when schools can resume music tuition.

(AQW 18169/17-22)

Mr Weir: I wrote to schools on 14 April to advise that, with immediate effect, pupils taking a practical music assessment for GCSE, AS-level and A-level qualifications that require singing or the playing of a woodwind or brass instrument will be permitted to take these lessons as normal in suitable venues ie where mitigations, such as social distancing and well-ventilated rooms, can take place.

The Education Authority (EA) met with the Public Health Agency (PHA) to review its guidance for its Music Service. A letter was issued to Principals dated 16 April 2021 to advise that woodwind and brass tuition could recommence, along with strings, percussion and keyboard, from 19 April 2021.

Music Service tutors who teach singing resumed face-to-face tuition in schools to support ONLY those pupils who are taking a practical music assessment for GCSE, AS-level and A-level qualifications. The policy to pause all other indoor singing remains in place. All Music Service tuition will continue to be delivered with appropriate mitigations in place, as detailed in the "Music Unlocked" guidance and risk assessments. The Department will keep this under review with PHA input.

Department of Finance

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance (i) to detail the number of staff employed at grades (a) EO1; (b) Staff Officer; (c) Deputy Principal; and (d) Principal Officer in Pensions Service in Waterside House; and (ii) how many staff at each grade were (a) promoted as a consequence of a general Civil Service promotion board; and (b) promoted as a consequence of a trawl notice to fill a specific post.

(AQW 16745/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The table below details the number of staff in the substantive analogous grades of EO1, Staff Officer, Deputy Principal and Principal in Pensions Service in Waterside House at month ending February 2021. Also included are the numbers at each of these grades who were promoted as a consequence of a general Civil Service promotion board and the number promoted as a consequence of a trawl notice.

Substantive Analogous Grade	Headcount	FTE
EO1	11	10.8
Staff Officer	8	7.3
Deputy Principal	9	8.7
Principal	3	3
Total	31	29.8

Source: HR Connect

The method of appointment is set out in the table below:

Substantive analogous Grade	Career Break Return	Internal Elective Transfer	External Recruitment	Method of appointment not held on record	Promotion List	Internal Trawl	Total
EO1		2		1	8		11
Staff Officer		1		1	2	4	8
Deputy Principal	1	1	2			5	9
Principal					1	2	3
Total	1	4	2	2	11	11	31

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 16839/17-22, when £1000 fines for Census 2021 non-compliance will be issued.

(AQW 17069/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Field staff are visiting properties and letters are being issued to addresses for which no census return has been made. Officials are undertaking this work to ensure that there is as complete a census as possible.

Any householder who refuses to take part in the census may face further action and officials will prepare information on this for the Public Prosecution Service. This process will take place over the summer months. Any final judgement on fines can only be taken by a court.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Finance how many businesses in South Down have been contacted by his Department requesting a repayment of money issued under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

(AQW 17352/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Land & Property Services (LPS) is not able to report on these cases on a constituency level and can only provide figures at a District Council level. LPS wrote to 36 businesses in the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council during the week commencing the 29 March 2021 regarding an overpayment or incorrect payment in respect of their Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) application and seeking recovery. Businesses can appeal this decision and provide evidence to support their eligibility for payment under the LRSS. LPS will give full consideration to any evidence supplied and will change the decision on eligibility where appropriate.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Finance, given that so many of his departmental staff are working from home, often in rural locations with substandard connections, whether his Department will consider covering the costs incurred by his staff to install superfast broadband, or available alternatives, in their homes.

(AQW 17421/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Civil Service has published, on the DoF Internet and all departmental intranets, "Working from Home Guidance" in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Details can be found using this link:

COVID-19 Working from home guidance v2 16.12.2020.pdf (finance-ni.gov.uk) ([https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dfp/COVID-19 Working from home guidance v2 16.12.2020.pdf](https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dfp/COVID-19%20Working%20from%20home%20guidance%20v2%2016.12.2020.pdf))

All staff within my Department, and across the Civil Service, have already been advised that reimbursement for the additional cost of increased broadband data charges, incurred solely from working from home, will be considered.

Staff have also been notified that where appropriate, having considered IT alternatives available, such as provision of a Data Sim for laptops or Wifi device for desktop computers and where these are found to be unsuitable, the Department may reimburse the additional cost of installing broadband at home and monthly tariffs on the basis that the charges incurred are solely related to working from home.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance where is the statutory authority for the appointments to and early work of the Fiscal Council and Fiscal Commission respectively; and how have the provisions of Chapter 2, Annex 2.5 of Managing Public Money NI been met.

(AQW 17498/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The appointments to, and early work of both the Fiscal Council and Fiscal Commission are being taken forward under the authority of the Budget Act, consistent with the general ambit of the Department of Finance, and in line with its statement of purpose as set down in the Northern Ireland Main Estimates, which is:

“To help the Executive secure the most appropriate and effective use of resources and services for the benefit of the community and deliver quality, cost effective and efficient public services and administration in the department’s areas of executive responsibility.”

While the Fiscal Council will become a permanent body, I indicated in my Written Ministerial Statement on 12 March 2021 that it was being established now on the basis of an initial draft of Terms of Reference, and that during the first preparatory stages of its work, the Chair and Fiscal Council members would engage with stakeholders to inform the finalising of these terms.

The initial Terms of Reference also made it clear that the intention afterwards is that legislation benefiting from this preparatory work will be brought forward to formally establish the Fiscal Council as a fully independent body in due course.

The Fiscal Commission, in comparison, will be in existence for a relatively short period of time, being expected to report in 9-12 months, and its role is purely advisory, informing the ongoing work of the Department. Therefore further legalisation is not required in this regard.

Going forward, the Fiscal Council and Commission will separately be identified in the detail of Department’s ambit at the next opportunity – the forthcoming Budget (No 2) Bill.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Finance whether he is planning to introduce Red Squirrels to the grounds of Stormont Estate; and how he will address the matter of the Grey Squirrel population in the Estate.
(AQW 17508/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Department Officials have partnered with the North Down Red Squirrel and Pine Marten Group and intend to commence work that will control the grey squirrel population and reintroduce the red squirrel to the Stormont Estate. The project is scheduled to commence in summer 2021.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether his Department has considered requiring all buildings over 11 metres in height to use non-combustible materials, as opposed to the current proposals of 18 metres.
(AQW 17519/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department consulted on proposals to introduce an effective ban on the use of combustible materials forming the external walls on certain higher risk ‘relevant buildings’ with a storey over 18m in height, so that only non-combustible materials can be used. The consultation did ask consultees for views on the threshold height for the ban, including, specifically, at a height of 11m.

Officials in the Department’s Building Standards Branch have analysed the consultation responses and a summary of responses is available on the Department’s website.

Consultation indicated a mixed response on the height threshold for application of the ban. The Department acknowledges that height thresholds on this matter could be viewed as arbitrary in nature and the comments from some consultees suggested 11m as an upper threshold limit for effective external firefighting techniques. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has commissioned research on this issue and it has also been subject to consultation in the review of the ban in England in 2020.

The Department is currently consulting with the local Building Regulations Advisory Committee (NIBRAC) and its Technical-subcommittee for Part E ‘Fire safety’ of the Building Regulations and will bring forward final proposals, for my consideration, in the near future.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance what work his Department is doing to ensure that all existing buildings over 11 metres in height are fire safe.
(AQW 17520/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department has policy and legislative responsibility for Building Regulations which apply only when a building is newly erected, altered, extended or provided with a service or fitting, or when there is a material change of use of a building.

My Department consulted on proposals to introduce an effective ban on the use of combustible materials forming the external walls on certain higher risk ‘relevant buildings’ with a storey over 18m in height, so that only non-combustible materials can be used. The consultation asked consultees for views on the threshold height for the ban, including at 11m. Officials have analysed the consultation responses and a summary is available on the Department’s website.

The Department is currently consulting with the local Building Regulations Advisory Committee (NIBRAC) and its Technical-subcommittee for Part E ‘Fire safety’ of the Building Regulations and will bring forward final proposals, for my consideration, in the near future.

Any effective ban implemented by my Department through building regulations along with planned future proposals to address other building fire safety matters, such as provision of Automatic Fire Suppressions Systems such as sprinklers, provision of fire safety information and more, would apply to existing buildings only in the circumstances outlined above.

The Executive has agreed that citizens here are afforded the same level of fire safety in all buildings, as in other devolved administrations. The Head of the Civil Service will chair a Cross-Departmental Group to allocate policy responsibility for a range of enhanced measures to improve fire safety in buildings.

It will be a matter for this group to decide the appropriate action and funding to remove unsafe cladding in existing buildings here.

The predominant Fire Safety legislation governing the ways in which employers and people in control of premises manage fire safety in the vast majority of existing non-domestic buildings is the Fire and Rescue Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and accompanying Fire Safety Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010. Responsibility for this legislation lies with the Department of Health and it is enforced by the Fire and Rescue Service.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the sufficiency of the BS 8414 test in providing a robust mechanism to ensure the fire safety of buildings.

(AQW 17521/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department consulted on the amendment of local Building Regulations in relation to Fire Safety and radon matters. In relation to buildings other than 'relevant buildings', it is proposed to include in the technical guidance to Part E 'Fire safety' of the Building Regulations, the alternative option to use large scale testing carried out to BS8414 and meeting BRE135 performance requirements, to demonstrate compliance with external fire spread requirements in building regulations.

This option is included in the Building Regulations technical guidance of England and Wales. Scotland recently removed reference to BS8414/BR135 as alternative guidance, as an interim measure until the outcome of deliberations by the Ministerial Working Group on Building and Fire Safety reports later this year. The south of Ireland does not reference the alternative approach of BS8414/BR135 as a route to compliance in its Technical Guidance Document B.

Officials have analysed the consultation responses and a summary is available on the Department's website. In relation to the introduction of BS8414/BR135 as an alternative route to compliance in the technical guidance for non-relevant buildings, the majority of responses (78%) were in support of the proposal with only 2 respondents (5%) not in support (17% expressed 'No view').

The Department is currently consulting with the local Building Regulations Advisory Committee (NIBRAC) and its Technical-subcommittee for Part E 'Fire safety' of the Building Regulations and will bring forward final proposals, for my consideration, in the near future. My Officials are also maintaining contact with counterparts in Britain and the south of Ireland so NIBRAC can monitor and consider any potential changes in approach to large scale testing to BS8414 there, resulting from Phase 2 of the Grenfell inquiry.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance what measures have been taken in Civil Service Estate buildings to increase ventilation.

(AQW 17544/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In May 2020, the Department of Finance Estate moved to a Covid-19 mitigation ventilation strategy, based on industry guidance. Measures taken were:

- Buildings with a mechanical ventilation system moved to 24/7 operation, with the ventilation system set to run continuously;
- Carbon dioxide set points were lowered; and
- Operable windows, including those with mechanical ventilation, were to be opened much more than might be usual, for periods of around 15 minutes at a time. Buildings with automatic openable windows were programmed, where possible, to open for 15 minutes per hour during building occupation.

The Covid-19 mitigation ventilation strategy in the NICS Office Estate is still in operation and is kept under review.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance how many risk assessments have been carried out across Departments on COVID-19 related workplace safety.

(AQW 17545/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In accordance with the NICS Recovery Plan Accommodation Guidance, COVID-19 property risk assessments are in place for the fourteen buildings where the Department of Finance has Premises responsibility. Additional assessments are undertaken when required within business areas and for staff working remotely. These are not recorded centrally.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance when the £178 million support to businesses fund announced on 15 March 2021 will open to applications.

(AQW 17560/17-22)

Mr Murphy: For two of the schemes announced on 15 March, payments will be made automatically to businesses that meet the scheme eligibility, based on the information held by Land & Property Services.

Automatic payments of £25,000 for the Medium Industrial Support Grant will be made to manufacturers with a Net Annual Value (NAV) between £15,001 and £51,000 who benefit from industrial derating. It is anticipated that payments will begin to issue from the end of April.

For the Business Support Grant Top-Up Scheme, automatic payments of £5,000 will be made to businesses that received the £10,000 Small Business Support Grant in 2020; and £10,000 to businesses that received the £25,000 Retail, Tourism, Hospitality and Leisure Grant, if they have not previously availed of the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme or Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme: Part B. It is anticipated that payments will begin to issue by the end of May 2021.

The Large NAV Business Grant Scheme is application based, providing up to £50,000 for businesses occupying a commercial premises with a NAV over £51,000 that were awarded the 12-month rates holiday for 2020-21, subject to some exclusions. The Scheme opened for applications at 12:00 on 21 April and will remain open until 23:59 on 5 May. It is expected that applications to this Scheme will be to be processed by the end of May.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance whether departmental staff can work past aged 60 while at the same time claiming full pension benefits without reduction under the Civil Service Pensions and the Classic Scheme arrangements.
(AQW 17561/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Under the 'classic' rules of the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (Northern Ireland), a member can work past 60 and claim full accrued pension benefits. To do so the member must secure the agreement of their employer to partially retire. Pension in payment is subject to abatement provisions.

Further information on abatement is available on Civil Service Pensions Website:

<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/landing-pages/civil-service-pensions-ni>

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister of Finance how many businesses have been paid Localised Restriction Support Scheme grants in error; and how his Department plans to recoup this money.
(AQW 17566/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The financial support under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) is linked to the restrictions placed on businesses by the Health Protection Regulations. These restrictions have changed several times since October 2020, making the LRSS increasingly complex to administer. Land & Property Services (LPS) has been regularly reviewing all approved applications to ensure the scheme is being administered in line with the associated regulations and to identify instances where incorrect payments have been made, including payments made outside of the scope of the regulations.

LPS wrote to 480 businesses during the week commencing the 29 March 2021 regarding an overpayment or incorrect payment in respect of their LRSS application. The amount involved in these cases is £4.26 million, which is less than 1.6% of all payments made under the scheme to date.

Businesses have the opportunity to appeal the Department's decision and provide further evidence to support their eligibility for the LRSS payments. LPS will give full consideration to any evidence supplied and will change the decision on eligibility where appropriate. This is expected to result in payments continuing to some of these businesses thereby reducing the overall amount of overpayments.

If a business which received a LRSS payment in error has been determined to be eligible for the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CBRSS), payment due under CBRSS will be off set against the LRSS payment. Similarly if a business is eligible for one of the new Covid-19 support grants announced on 15 March 2021, the LRSS payment, or part thereof, will be deducted from this before any new grant award is made.

To date £723,628 has been repaid from Businesses who had received the Grant.

The published information on the Scheme states that any payments made contrary to the Regulations will have to be repaid and this condition is stipulated and has to be agreed during the application process.

It is recognised that repaying monies paid in error may present significant financial challenge to some businesses. LPS will work with businesses to put in place arrangement for repayment over an agreed period of time.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Finance, in relation to his recent comments that to meet the costs of the victims payments he is considering top slicing all Departmental budgets, to outline the financial implications on the Department of Health in each of the next four years.
(AQW 17671/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive continue to believe that the British Government should be meeting the costs of the scheme, which could be £19 million this year rising to £70 million in subsequent years. This expectation is in line with the Statement of Funding policy, and, as a result of the British Government devising and legislating for a scheme which is outside what the parties agreed to at Stormont House.

The First, and deputy First Ministers and I have committed and given undertakings to the court to ensure that victims' payments are made. Therefore, if the British government refuse to honour their Statement of Funding policy the Executive will have to find the funding from its own Budget and options would include top-slicing departments.

I will be engaging further with the Treasury in the hope of resolving this issue. Should that not prove successful any decision to top slice departments would be for the Executive to consider.

Should a decision be made to reduced departmental budgets, the precise impact on departmental budgets for future years will depend on a number of factors including the cost of the scheme and the outcome of future budget exercises.

The table below however sets out illustrative reductions for each department over the lifetime of two scheme scenarios.

	Lifetime		£m
	Upper Scenario	Central Scenario	
DAERA	21.1		14.6
DfC	80.3		55.7
DfE	82.7		57.4
DE	231.9		160.9
DoF	17.1		11.9
DoH	626.4		434.7
DfI	42.9		29.8
DoJ	109.9		76.3
TEO	9.8		6.8
Estimated Cost	1,222.0		848.0

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance to outline the criteria for selection for financial support to groups under the Dormant Accounts Fund.
(AQW 17760/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Dormant Accounts Fund is focused on improving sustainability and resilience in the Voluntary Community and Social Enterprises (VSCE) sector and supporting capacity-building in the longer term.

The Dormant Accounts Fund will support proposals that meet the following outcomes:

- VSCE organisations will be more confident about their ability to adapt to future challenges
- VCSE organisations will be more financially resilient
- VCSE organisations will have increased skills and capacity
- Strategic planning in the VCSE sector will improve
- There will be more collaboration within and across sectors.

Organisations are encouraged to visit the National Lottery Community Fund's website <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/programmes/dormant-accounts-ni> in the first instance for more details.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance how many businesses in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area have been overpaid under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme; and to outline the reasons for the overpayments.
(AQW 17764/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Land & Property Services (LPS) wrote to 28 businesses in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area during the week commencing the 29 March 2021 regarding an overpayment or incorrect payment in respect of their Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) application and seeking recovery.

Land & Property Services was tasked with administering the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) at pace. Payments under LRSS are linked to the restrictions imposed by the Health Protection Regulations. These Regulations have changed many times making the Scheme complex to administer. The changes have resulted in 30 different payment amounts being payable to businesses for the period up to 14 April 2021. In the circumstances that the scheme was established and administered, it was accepted that there was a risk that payments may be made in error.

The review of payments has identified the following reasons for overpayment:

- Business Type not eligible
- Business Type eligible for a limited period during restrictions only, but paid for a longer period
- Business not occupying a commercial premises
- Business not open and trading when restrictions began
- Business ceased trading during period of restrictions

■ Accommodation business not Tourism NI approved

Businesses can appeal this decision and provide evidence to support their eligibility for payment under the LRSS. LPS will give full consideration to any evidence supplied and will change the decision on eligibility where appropriate.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister of Finance whether a Barnett consequential results from the announcement of the £5 billion Restart Grant scheme by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his Budget of 2 March 2021; and whether this money will be spent on equivalent local schemes to help businesses restart after Covid restrictions.

(AQW 17783/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The £5 billion Restart Grant scheme will cover England only therefore the Executive received a Barnett consequential for this fund. Funding received through the Barnett formula is unhypothecated. It is therefore for the Executive to allocate in line with local needs and priorities.

Instead of the Restart Grant, the Executive has a number of local support measures in place. The Department of Finance operates the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS), under which a business is eligible for a weekly payment for each property they occupy. Businesses with multiple properties are in receipt of substantial financial assistance under this Scheme. Support payments will be issued to successful applicants for the period that the Localised Restrictions are in force. If localised restrictions are subsequently extended, support payments will automatically continue, subject to budget availability. Successful applicants do not need to reapply and payments will stop when localised restrictions are ended.

The amounts paid per week in the North are between two and two-and-a-half times as much as the equivalent businesses in England receive. In addition to the LRSS, I also recently announced £178 million further support for businesses. Grant schemes have been developed that will provide a lifeline for many businesses who continue to confront the challenges of Covid-19. This package of support will help businesses and safeguard jobs through the period ahead as we emerge from the current restrictions. These grants are:-

- £50,000 grant for large businesses unable to access grant funding during the first lockdown;
- £25,000 payment to manufacturing businesses unable to access grant funding during the first lockdown; and
- Top-up payments of £5,000 and £10,000 for businesses which received grants during the first lockdown but are not eligible for one of the current Executive support schemes.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister of Finance whether the Retail, Tourism, Hospitality and Leisure Top-up Scheme, the Small Business Support Grant Top-Up Scheme and the Large NAV Business Grant schemes are the equivalent of the business restart grants in England and financed as a Barnett consequential of this scheme.

(AQW 17784/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The £178 million in new business support grants which I announced on 15 March draw on remaining unallocated Covid funding that had to be utilised by the end of the 2020-21 financial year. The funding was not a Barnett consequential of the budget set aside for the payment of Restart Grants in England in the current financial year.

The delivery of these grants by Land & Property Services within my Department reflects the need for the Executive to make maximum possible use of the resources available to it to mitigate against the economic impacts of the pandemic. The grants will provide much needed support to the economy and businesses here and were introduced in the absence of further bids for support being received from other Departments. They are not the equivalent of the English Restart Grants.

The Regulations to provide the legal authority for the Coronavirus Financial Assistance (Large Business) Scheme 2021, the Coronavirus Financial Assistance (Industrial Business) Scheme 2021 and the Coronavirus Financial Assistance (Business Support) Scheme 2021, which will support almost 20,000 businesses, came into operation on 31 March 2021 and processing of payments has now commenced.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the City Deal for Derry and Strabane.

(AQW 17793/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Derry City and Strabane District Council City Deal had a Heads of Terms document signed on 24 February 2021. The council is currently setting up governance arrangements and, in conjunction with Deal partners, developing business cases in order to progress to a Deal Document and Financial Agreement.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Finance for an update on policy in relation to Changing Places toilets.

(AQW 17803/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department is bringing forward a provision for CPTs in local Building Regulations. Officials have been working on this with the local Building Regulations Advisory Committee and its technical sub-committee. This work has considered fully recent developments in other administrations for the provision of Changing Places Toilets.

We will make it a requirement to put in Changing Places Facilities in new buildings of a certain type or size, or where relevant works are being undertaken to buildings. This work is well advanced and we plan to launch a consultation soon. This will help advance greater accessibility and ensure dignity and equality for all.

Building Regulations cannot require the installation of such facilities retrospectively, but I am prepared to consider the establishment of a fund to support and encourage people, particularly those doing retrofit work, to bring this type of facility into place.

On 27 April, I had the privilege of opening a new Changing Places Toilet Facility on the Stormont Estate. This new facility will offer people with complex and multiple disabilities more freedom when visiting Stormont Estate. The facility provides extra equipment and additional space, to enable people with complex caring needs and their carers to use the resource comfortably. This is a very welcome step in helping to make our outdoor green spaces more accessible to everyone.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 17047/17-22, how Land and Property Services calculated valuations for plots of land at Portavoe Reservoir.

(AQW 17818/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The valuations for the plots of land reflect the physical nature of the site itself and obligations transferring with ownership, and were assessed by comparison to open market sales of similar property types that were former NI Water properties.

Department of Health

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Health whether his Department is aware of any confirmed transmissions of COVID-19 through participation in organised sport since the beginning of the pandemic.

(AQW 14557/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): The Public Health Agency (PHA) has advised that from 10 July 2020 to date they have detected 14 outbreaks and 24 clusters associated with Sporting Teams and Clubs with between 2 and 21 cases associated per outbreak/cluster.

PHA has advised it is not always possible to definitely confirm if transmission has occurred between cases within organised sport.

Information on the number of outbreaks and clusters by setting, which is updated weekly, is now available on the Public Health Agency website and can be accessed using the following link:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/covid-19-clusteroutbreak-summary>

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health how his Department will secure extra dental places in South Belfast for low income families who cannot afford to pay for their dental treatment.

(AQW 14711/17-22)

Mr Swann: In order to minimise the risk of Coronavirus transmission within dental surgeries it has been necessary to introduce strict Infection Prevention and Control measures. Unfortunately, this has resulted in a very significant reduction in the number of patients that can be seen per day in dental practices.

Guidance issued to dental practices recommends that they should use their available capacity to see those patients with the most pressing dental needs. Prioritisation of patients on the basis of clinical need and provision of care to non-registered patients are also conditions of the Financial Support Scheme which is used by the vast majority of general dental practitioners. Furthermore, practitioners should offer dental care to all patient categories whether they are fee paying patients, patients who receive dental care free of charge or those who receive dental care at reduced cost. There should not be any difference in the accessibility of dental care for these different groups.

Dental care at a reduced cost is available to low-income families via the Low Income Scheme. Claim forms are available from dental practices and jobs and benefits offices across Northern Ireland.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health whether a care home provider would be in breach of its contract if it was unable to provide malpractice cover for a communicable disease, such as COVID-19.

(AQW 15418/17-22)

Mr Swann: I can confirm that the contract each provider enters into specifies minimum insurance arrangements including the minimum amount of medical malpractice insurance to cover the Service required.

Due to the variation of insurance products, a care home provider should, in the first instance, engage with their insurance company to consider the insurance requirements and seek confirmation of the cover available. If the response from the insurance company raises issues with the level of cover available the care home provider should revert to the HSCB for consideration of that detailed position and the requirements to meet the terms of the contract.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health whether he would consider launching a vaccination helpline.

(AQW 15443/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department is not considering a vaccination helpline at this time.

There are several pathways available to the public for their questions to be answered, including the dedicated booking telephone line 0300 200 7813 for those unable to book on-line, and numbers for changing a vaccination appointment in each HSC Trust, the details can be found at: <https://covid-19.hscni.net/get-vaccinated/>

The member will also be aware that there are contact numbers available to Carers for Care Co-ordinators for each of the 5 Health Trusts as well as Trust contacts for questions and complaints.

The Covid 19 Vaccination Programme within my Department can also be contacted by the public in relation to issues and enquiries.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health what action is being taken to gather data and monitor equality of uptake of COVID-19 vaccines among (i) areas of multiple deprivation; (ii) essential workers; and (iii) the protected grounds covered by the Section 75 statutory equality duty.

(AQW 16156/17-22)

Mr Swann: The gathering and monitoring of data on deployment and uptake are integral parts of the process of rolling out the vaccination programme.

The Northern Ireland Covid-19 Vaccination programme is based on the guidance and recommendations of JCVI on priority groups. Beyond health and social care workers and care home workers, JCVI have not recommended early access to vaccination based on occupation.

As an essential part of monitoring the rollout of the programme, my Department remains in close and regular contact with Health Trusts, GPs and Community Pharmacy. Through these channels and others areas of poor uptake or penetration by the programme are identified.

In particular, the deployment of the programme through community pharmacy will enhance both availability and uptake of vaccine in communities across Northern Ireland.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health how many care homes in each Health and Social Care Trust are currently not operating care partner arrangements.

(AQW 16305/17-22)

Mr Swann: Care homes are required on a daily basis to report a range of Covid-19 status updates to RQIA, which includes care partner arrangements.

As of Monday 12 April 2021, of the 471 care homes who reported their status, 169 homes were not currently operating care partner arrangements. A total number of 2525 care partners were reported.

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.

HSC Trusts and RQIA are actively working with care homes not delivering care partner access to help facilitate implementation.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health, in relation to the roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccination, whether those in Priority Group 6 are facing any delay in accessing their first vaccine as the second doses are made available for those aged 80 and over.

(AQW 16478/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member will be aware that the vaccination programme is running ahead of schedule. GP practices have received sufficient allocations of vaccine to allow them to roll out the GP programme at pace.

Based on the latest data available at date of writing, 112, 633 persons being 86% of the cohort of vulnerable persons have received their first dose of vaccine.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health what the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust is doing with the key pieces of evidence received from the Independent Neurology Inquiry; and what actions have been taken as a result of these key pieces of evidence.

(AQW 16544/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Belfast Trust has confirmed that they have complied with all requests for information from the Independent Neurology Inquiry and any concerns raised by the inquiry to the Belfast Trust have been acted upon appropriately.

The Belfast Trust is unable to share this information as it contains staff and patient identifiable information.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, in light of the recall of neurology patients, (i) whether he has put in interim supports on harm assessments; (ii) whether processes have been established to conduct these assessments; (iii) whether psychological support measures have been put in place to support patients; and (iv) whether he has looked into the issue

surrounding fertility treatment and provisions that may be implemented to support those women advised by Dr Watt not to have children.

(AQW 16545/17-22)

Mr Swann: The harm assessment process relates to the investigation of causation in the clinical negligence cases. All clinical negligence claims received in respect of the recall of neurology patients are progressing under the standard arrangements for health service litigation claims.

My Department initiated work, the progress of which was impacted by the Covid pandemic, to consider the possibility of streamlining the civil litigation process as an alternative to provide redress payments earlier than under normal civil litigation for clinical negligence. This work has restarted in recent weeks and I expect to receive an updated position in relation to these matters by June 2021.

Access to psychological support has been available to support patients who were affected by the Neurology Recall. This has been an additional service provided to support patients affected by the recall. The Belfast Trust continues to support patients who attend the neurology service and those patients who were included in the neurology recall process.

The methodology applied to the neurology patient recall provided prioritisation to women of childbearing age. All patients who were on Dr Watt's active caseload will have been reviewed by a Consultant Neurologist with any ongoing concerns being referred in the first instance to GPs. GPs have access to the appropriate services within the Belfast Trust, should this be required for appropriate referral and any individual patients who identify fertility as an ongoing concern should discuss this with their GP to determine an appropriate referral. My Department is currently considering the fertility issues raised relating to neurology recall patients with colleagues in the HSCB who commission these services. My Department is in the process of arranging stakeholder engagement to discuss the fertility issues and concerns raised in more detail.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 15790/17-22, whether binge eating disorder is a recognised and treated condition in child and adolescent mental health services.

(AQW 16830/17-22)

Mr Swann: Young people who present with Binge Eating Disorder and are assessed as requiring child and adolescent mental health services will receive treatment to meet their needs.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Health whether people working in COVID-19 testing centres are classed as health workers and therefore eligible to book an appointment for their vaccine.

(AQW 17054/17-22)

Mr Swann: As you may 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.

The vaccine was initially targeted at those considered most at risk or HSCWs working closely with those considered most at risk. JCVI did not recommend prioritisation by occupation. Since that initial phase the programme has moved on to other priority groups and the Programme has reached Priority Group 11.

Public facing Test Centre staff have now been approved for vaccination out of age cohort, and some 275 vaccination letters to staff wishing to avail if the vaccine have been issued. Some of this cohort may have already been vaccinated as part of a prior priority group.

The rate limiting factor for the Programme remains the availability of vaccine.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether he has plans to introduce a strategy to prevent and minimise gambling harm, similar to that in New Zealand where the Ministry of Health is responsible for developing and implementing an 'integrated problem gambling strategy focused on public health' as described in section 317 of the Gambling Act 2003 (New Zealand).

(AQW 17114/17-22)

Mr Swann: Individuals currently experiencing mental health issues associated with problem gambling or addiction can access support through existing services.

The new 10 year mental health strategy for Northern Ireland seeks to ensure community support services continue to match individuals to interventions that best suit their needs; and that services are adaptable to include an understanding of the underlying factors for the needs, such as gambling addiction.

In addition, my department is also working collaboratively with the Department of Communities on their work to bring forward proposals to reform gambling legislation in Northern Ireland, and any health related issues that arise as a result of this work.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health, in light of the reference to addressing gambling addiction in the draft 10-year Mental Health Strategy, whether he has discussed the need for a cross-departmental approach between his Department and the Department for Communities to developing a strategy to prevent and minimise gambling harm.

(AQW 17115/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department works collaboratively with the Department of Communities on many areas of mutual interest, including their work to bring forward proposals to reform gambling legislation in Northern Ireland, and any health related issues that arise as a result of this work.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Health what plans he has for the reintroduction of face-to-face visiting in care homes.

(AQW 17131/17-22)

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.

With specific reference to the Care Home sector, my Department has commissioned the Public Health Agency (PHA) to develop a new approach which supports the safe and proportionate return to normalised visiting in care homes, as restrictions in Northern Ireland are eased from April 2021. PHA has drawn together a working group including representatives from:

- HSCB, PHA, RQIA, Trusts, COPNI and PCC;
- Departmental policy Directorates;
- Representatives from various relatives Groupings; and
- Independent Healthcare Providers

The Group expects to submit its recommendations by the end of April.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Health how he plans to follow up with patients that did not attend vaccine centres for vaccination as a result of not be contacted due no access to internet or poor telephone signal.

(AQW 17137/17-22)

Mr Swann: The NI Vaccination Programme model for vaccine deployment has been designed to be pragmatic, agile and flexible, therefore it has involved collaborative working across the Health and Social Care system in conjunction with our wider stakeholders and partners to afford the widest possible communication to ensure the vaccine is offered to all those who are eligible.

A central vaccination management system (VMS) has been established to capture the details of the vaccination programme, and is accessible to those who are administering vaccinations. This central system identifies those who have not yet been vaccinated, and contact will be made with those persons e.g. letters issued from their GPs.

The rate limiting factor for the Programme remains the availability of the vaccine, however the Vaccination Programme is on target to vaccinate all eligible adults by Summer 2021, and at the time of writing some 1.2m vaccinations having been administered.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to introduce an NHS Services App for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 17157/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Health and Social Care organisations already offer similar services through a small number of Apps and Websites. There is no requirement at this time to combine this functionality in one monolithic application or App. The current arrangements enable my Department to respond to emerging requirements in an agile, timely manner.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update into the investigation into adult learning disability underspend in the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 17202/17-22)

Mr Swann: Departmental Officials have recently engaged with Western Health & Social Care to seek an update on progress made by the Trust, lessons learned, financial planning and engagement with carers. Options on any future investigation are also in development for my consideration and I expect to receive detail in the near future.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health what funding his Department has awarded to the Kids Together Project for children and young people with physical and learning challenges and needs.

(AQW 17224/17-22)

Mr Swann: Kids Together are not funded directly by my Department. However, Kids Together have availed of funding from the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, receiving £22,575.39 in both 2019/20 and in 2020/21.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health whether he has given consideration to affording those age groups who may be at risk from the AstraZeneca vaccine, predominantly women under the age of 50, an opportunity to request an alternative vaccine. (AQW 17301/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member will be aware that MHRA and JCVI have issued new advice on the safety of AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine. The JCVI recommends to offer alternatives to AstraZeneca to adults under 30 without underlying health conditions.

JCVI advises those who have received a first dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine should receive a second dose of the same vaccine.

JCVI have indicated it is preferable for pregnant women to be offered the Pfizer vaccine or Moderna (when available).

MHRA and JCVI have confirmed the safety of all vaccines currently in use in the UK balancing the small risk of adverse reaction against the level of protection offered. Therefore, anyone aged over 30 should accept whichever Covid 19 vaccine they are offered.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 10028/17-22, for an update on the commissioning of an external facilitator to review the Southern Health and Social Care Trust's Learning Disability Carer Forum. (AQW 17326/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust have appointed an independent chair of the Learning Disability Carer Forum and they chaired their first meeting of the Forum on 16 April 2021. Future meetings of the Forum are scheduled to take place every two months, as agreed with carers, and sub-group meetings on day care and short breaks aim to meet on a monthly basis.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Health what measures are being considered to facilitate home visits for residents of care homes that have been suspended as a result of the pandemic. (AQW 17353/17-22)

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.

My Department has commissioned the Public Health Agency (PHA) to develop a new approach which supports the safe and proportionate return to normalised visiting in care homes, including arrangements for visiting out, as restrictions in Northern Ireland are eased from April 2021. PHA has drawn together a working group including representatives from:

- HSCB, PHA, RQIA, Trusts, COPNI and PCC;
- Departmental policy Directorates;
- Representatives from various relatives Groupings; and
- Independent Healthcare Providers

The Group expects to submit its recommendations by the end of April.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the total spend for each Multi-Disciplinary Team, broken down for each GP Federation area. (AQW 17362/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Primary Care Multi-disciplinary Teams model was introduced in 2018, with full implementation in the Down and Derry GP Federations, and a partial introduction in West Belfast. Since that time, it has expanded to the Causeway, Newry & District and, more recently, North Down and Ards GP Federations as well as moving to the full model in West Belfast.

Spend for the 2018/19 and 2019/20 financial years across each of these areas is detailed below:

GP Federation area	2018/19	2019/20
Derry/Londonderry	£440,079	£4,471,473
Down	£716,567	£3,111,914
West Belfast	£294,500	£1,245,927
Causeway	0	£542,321
Newry & District	0	£530,993

This reflects the total expenditure incurred by both the HSC Trust and the GP Federation in each local MDT project.

Spend for the 2020/21 year is currently undergoing validation. However, the allocations to the GP Federation areas were as follows:

GP Federation area	Allocation
Derry/Londonderry	£5,744,505
Down	£3,575,323
West Belfast	£3,442,323
Causeway	£2,540,524
Newry & District	£2,091,061
North Down & Ards	£266,879

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the total staffing complement by profession and grade for each established Multi-Disciplinary Team.

(AQW 17363/17-22)

Mr Swann: The MDT model is complete or well developed in 5 of the 17 GP Federations in Northern Ireland – Down, Londonderry, West Belfast, Causeway and Newry & District Federations. Additionally, a small MDT footprint is currently being introduced jointly in the North Down and Ards areas.

The tables below detail the whole time equivalent staff in post (SiP) figures across the current MDT areas, at March 2021.

	Project Management	Project Management	Physio Manager	Physio	Social Work Manager	Social Worker	Social Work Assistant	Mental Health Manager	Mental Health Practitioner
	Band 8A	Band 8B	Band 8B	Band 8A	Band 8A	Band 7	Band 4	Band 8B	Band 7
Down	0.00	1.00	1.00	7.70	1.00	15.38	7.70	1.00	7.70
Londonderry	1.00	0.00	1.00	12.35	2.00	22.00	10.40	1.00	20.00
Causeway	0.50	0.00	1.00	7.70	1.00	8.00	4.00	1.00	11.00
Newry	1.00	0.00	1.00	5.70	1.00	8.40	4.30	1.00	8.60
West Belfast	0.00	1.00	1.00	9.10	1.00	5.00	2.00	1.00	8.80
Ards & North Down	0.00	0.00	0.00	4.80	0.00	2.00	1.00	0.00	1.00
Total	2.50	2.00	5.00	47.35	6.00	60.78	29.40	5.00	57.10

	District Nurses					
	Band 8A	Band 7	Band 6	Band 5	Band 4	Band 3
Down	0.00	1.00	0.80	6.20	1.00	2.00
Londonderry	1.00	0.00	2.00	11.24	1.00	12.00
Causeway	1.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	0.00
Newry	1.00	0.00	0.00	5.00	0.00	2.53
West Belfast	1.00	5.00	2.00	5.00	0.00	0.00
Ards & North Down	0.00	2.00	0.00	2.00	0.00	0.00
Total	4.00	2.00	4.80	29.44	3.00	16.53

	Health Visitors					
	Band 8A	Band 7	Band 6	Band 5	Band 4	Band 3
Down	1.00	0.00	4.97	0.00	0.00	1.25
Londonderry	1.00	1.00	8.14	0.30	0.00	2.40
Causeway	1.00	0.00	4.21	0.00	0.00	2.50
Newry	0.00	0.00	3.70	0.00	0.00	3.90
West Belfast	0.00	0.50	6.00	0.50	1.00	0.00

	Health Visitors					
	Band 8A	Band 7	Band 6	Band 5	Band 4	Band 3
Ards & North Down	0.00	0.00	0.84	0.00	0.00	0.00
Total	3.00	2.00	27.86	0.80	1.00	10.05

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how many departmental staff have been working solely on activities associated with the hyponatraemia inquiry in the 12 months.

(AQW 17378/17-22)

Mr Swann: During the response to the first wave of Covid-19 in March 2020, all but three staff members involved in hyponatraemia inquiry programme activities were redeployed; and of these, two were full time.

From October 2020, a total of 9 staff members have been working on activities associated with the hyponatraemia inquiry, although due mainly to Covid-19 response-related activities, only one of these has been on a full-time basis.

As we hopefully move into a new phase of recovery, it is the intention that more Departmental staff will be in a position to return to their substantive responsibilities, including implementation of the 96 recommendations in Mr Justice O'Hara's report, which is one of my top priorities.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health how many carers were registered in each Health and Social Care Trust at the end of March 2021.

(AQW 17390/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of carers registered in each Health and Social Care Trust is set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of carers registered in each Health and Social Care Trust, as at end of March 2021

HSC Trust	Number of carers registered
Belfast	1,983
Northern	2,006
South Eastern	2,913
Southern	988
Western	1,975

Source: Health and Social Care Trusts

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Health, given that so many of his departmental staff are working from home, often in rural locations with substandard connections, whether his Department will consider covering the costs incurred by his staff to install superfast broadband, or available alternatives, in their homes.

(AQW 17420/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Civil Service has published, on the DoF Internet and all departmental intranets, "Working from Home Guidance" in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Details can be found using this link:

COVID-19 Working from home guidance v2 16.12.2020.pdf (finance-ni.gov.uk) ([https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dfp/COVID-19 Working from home guidance v2 16.12.2020.pdf](https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dfp/COVID-19%20Working%20from%20home%20guidance%20v2%2016.12.2020.pdf))

All staff within my Department, and across the Civil Service, have already been advised that reimbursement for the additional cost of increased broadband data charges, incurred solely from working from home, will be considered. Staff have also been notified that where appropriate, having considered IT alternatives available, such as provision of a Data Sim for laptops or Wifi device for desktop computers and where these are found to be unsuitable, the Department may reimburse the additional cost of installing broadband at home and monthly tariffs on the basis that the charges incurred are solely related to working from home.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how he plans to address outpatient waiting lists.

(AQW 17530/17-22)

Mr Swann: It isn't right that any patient should wait longer than is clinically appropriate for assessment and I fully understand the distress and anxiety that long waiting times cause, particularly when patients are suffering pain and discomfort.

There is no doubt that the pandemic has had a devastating impact on our hospital services, particularly elective care. Waiting times have been unacceptable for some time and, regrettably, they have deteriorated further as our health service, quite rightly, focused on responding to the pandemic.

To address this issue, I recently announced that I intend to publish an elective care framework. The purpose of this framework is to set out both the immediate and longer term actions and funding requirements needed to tackle our waiting lists.

Bringing our waiting lists to an acceptable level is a long term collective effort, requiring sustained and substantial investment and additional staffing.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how many vaccinations have been administered in the 40-50 years age group.
(AQW 17542/17-22)

Mr Swann: The member will be aware that of close of play on the 26th April 2021 75,020 vaccines were given to those in the 40-49 age cohort with 74,918 of these being first doses.

The member will be aware that individuals within this age group may have had their vaccination recorded as part of another cohort such as carers, clinically vulnerable, extremely vulnerable, health and social care worker or care home worker.

Daily vaccination data can be found: <https://covid-19.hscni.net/ni-covid-19-vaccinations-dashboard/>

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health to detail the shortfall in staff in the Family Intervention Teams; and what action is being taken to recruit the required qualified staff.
(AQW 17570/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department invested around £4.6m recurrently in Family Intervention Teams in 20/21. The additional funding was used to recruit 10 Band 7 social workers and 10 Band 4 social work assistants in each Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT). It also funded recruitment resource in each Trust to assist with the process of recruiting social workers.

In addition, the Health and Social Care Board is working in partnership with all five HSCTs to create additional workforce capacity, starting with a review of staff vacancies across Children's Services Directorates.

Finally, my Department has led a social work workforce review, the purpose of which is to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of suitably qualified social workers available to meet the needs of the population in Northern Ireland in the next ten years. The review is nearing completion.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for an update on the Gender Identity Pathway Review Group; and to list the dates the review group has met and engaged with service user representatives.
(AQW 17573/17-22)

Mr Swann: The work of the Gender Identity Pathway Review Group was paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It has resumed its work and it is expected that the Review Group will, by September 2021, submit a report that will include options and recommendations for a new service model for consideration by my Department.

The Review Group has recently established a Service User Liaison Panel to assist the group in taking forward its work. The panel comprises 21 service users. The Service User Liaison Panel has met twice with a third meeting to be confirmed shortly.

The Review Group has met and engaged with service user representatives on the dates shown below:

- Listening Events – Belfast and Derry/Londonderry – late Nov 2020 and early Dec 2020.
- Zoom meetings – Service Users and Review Group – Tues 20 Oct 2020 (afternoon and evening)
- Service User Liaison Panel – 2 meetings on 18 March 2021 and 1 April 2021. A third meeting will be scheduled for the end of April/start of May 2021.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health whether he will work with the Minister of Justice on the implementation of safe-zones around health care clinics to ensure no-one is intimidated or deterred from accessing vital health services due to street protests, like those in recent weeks at John Mitchel Place and Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry.
(AQW 17587/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have previously stated that it is wrong for people using their legal right to protest to obstruct anyone who is accessing healthcare services for whatever reason, and that anyone doing so should desist to allow issues to be resolved democratically. Abortion is a cross-cutting and controversial matter, and I would be happy to work with both the Minister for Justice to implement whatever measures the Executive considers appropriate.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health what advice his Department is providing to Health and Social Care Trusts on maternity services in allowing mothers to have their partners join them when giving birth.
(AQW 17594/17-22)

Mr Swann: Partners are currently permitted to attend births as outlined in the most recent visiting guidance published by my Department for all care settings (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/Covid-19-visiting-guidance>), which took effect from 1st March 2021. This allows that for expectant mothers:

“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.”

I welcome the good news that, thanks in no small part to the efforts of the public and our Health and Social Care Workforce, we are now seeing infection numbers consistently declining, and the threat of health services being overwhelmed has receded. However, transmission rates, hospital pressures and deaths remain higher than we would wish to see and so some level of visiting restrictions must remain.

My officials keep the visiting guidelines under constant review. New guidance for visiting in hospices and hospitals - including Maternity and other services, shortly.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health for an update on action 14 of the Online Safety Strategy action plan to develop and disseminate a sample of online safety policies and procedures.

(AQW 17595/17-22)

Mr Swann: As reflected in the accompanying Action Plan to the Online Safety Strategy, action 14 is scheduled to be taken forward in year 2 of the Strategy, that is, 2022 – 2023.

The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland has commenced a recruitment process to appoint an Online Safety Coordinator to support the implementation of the Online Safety Strategy Action Plan.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Health how many consultant paediatric ophthalmologists are employed in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 17611/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information provided by Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts on the number of consultant paediatric ophthalmologists employed is detailed in the table below.

HSC Trust	Consultant Paediatric Ophthalmologists
Belfast	5 (4.7 WTE)
Northern	0
South Eastern	0
Southern	0
Western	0 *

* The Western HSC Trust is actively working towards a recruitment solution.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether departmental officials have had any discussion with counterparts in England in relation to the public ownership of major pharmaceutical private companies.

(AQW 17612/17-22)

Mr Swann: Departmental officials have not had any discussions with counterparts in England in relation to the public ownership of major pharmaceutical private companies.

The pharmaceutical sector is a high-technology and knowledge-intensive industry and while it is generally very heavily regulated, the regulation around the ownership of companies is set out in UK company law and is not the responsibility of my Department.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to detail the average cost to parents to obtain access to private autism diagnosis and services.

(AQW 17613/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am aware that the extensive waiting lists for autism services have resulted in some families seeking private assessment. However, I am unable to confirm the costs associated with private assessment as this constitutes private treatment and is a confidential transaction between the family and the clinical practice.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of (i) medical and dental students from Northern Ireland receiving reduced financial support in the form of grants, loans and bursaries in the final two years of a five or six year course; and (ii) how, with only reduced grants, loans and bursaries, these students are expected to cover living costs, especially with increased studying hours during these years of study.

(AQW 17626/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is no reduced financial support for medical and dental students in the final years of their course. NI-domiciled students undertaking their studies at a UK Medical or Dental school are provided with tuition fee support and may

also be eligible for grants towards their living and travel costs on entering the fifth year of a first degree course in medicine or dentistry. Support may also be available to Medical students undertaking a one year, intercalated degree as part of their undergraduate degree course.

Queen's University Belfast consistently receives a large number of applications for its medical and dental courses. The most recent figures show 1509 applications for 312 medical places in 2021, and 580 applications for 60 dental places in 2021. QUB Medical School also reports very low drop out from its medicine course, with an attrition rate of 4%.

Ulster University's new Graduate Entry Medical School welcomes its first intake of students in September 2021; the university has reported 477 applications for 70 places.

The evidence available demonstrates that medical and dental courses in Northern Ireland are extremely attractive, heavily oversubscribed courses which the vast majority of individuals see through to graduation under the current support arrangements.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the planned capital works for GP practices in West Tyrone.
(AQW 17628/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) has been working alongside GP practices in Omagh to identify works required to increase the capacity for the GP practices to facilitate the roll out of multi-disciplinary teams at the Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Centre.

The HSCB is also working with all of the GP federations, including the South West Federation to assess the need for investment in their premises. GP practices can apply to the HSCB for a capital grant to assist with premises developments.

Funding has been approved and works have commenced for an extension to the Dunamanagh practice to facilitate GP training and the roll out of Multi-disciplinary teams. The HSCB is also working with the Western Rural Healthcare practice to explore options for premises capacity improvements at their Newtown Stewart and/or Ederney sites to facilitate both increased capacity for the GP practice and the roll out of Multi-disciplinary teams.

The Western HSC Trust has recently carried out works to the Carrickmore Health Centre to provide additional space for the GP practice within the Health Centre, to meet the urgent and immediate needs of the practice. It is recognised that further works to the Health Centre are required to meet the growing requirements of the practice in delivering services to its patients.

The HSCB will work with the Western HSC Trust to develop an outline business case to consider development options for Carrickmore however my ability to take forward new capital projects such as this 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.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to outline the implications of the first NHS Cannabis Patient Data Registry for patients in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 17638/17-22)

Mr Swann: The NHS Cannabis Patient Data Registry was launched in England on 1 April 2021 and discussions are currently ongoing between the health departments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to consider how the scope of this registry can be extended to patients across the UK, in line with the recommendations set out in NHS England's 2019 report on the barriers to accessing cannabis-based products for medicinal use on NHS prescription. (Barriers to accessing cannabis-based products for medicinal use on NHS prescription (england.nhs.uk) (<https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/barriers-accessing-cannabis-based-products-nhs-prescription.pdf>)).

It is hoped that the establishment of a detailed and consistent set of data will add to the underlying evidence base for the use of medicinal cannabis by providing information on which to base the development of randomised clinical trials for new treatments, as happens in many other areas of clinical practice.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update of the Gender Identity Pathway Review Group, including the timescale for the completion of its work.
(AQW 17642/17-22)

Mr Swann: The work of the Gender Identity Pathway Review Group was paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It has resumed its work and it is expected that the Review Group will, by September 2021, submit a report that will include options and recommendations for a new service model for consideration by my Department.

In addition, the Review Group has recently established a Service User Liaison Panel to assist the group in taking forward its work. The panel comprises 21 service users. The Service User Liaison Panel has already met twice with a third meeting to be confirmed shortly.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health when the Occupational Therapy Workplace Review Report 2017-2027 will receive final sign-off; and when the necessary sustainable funding will be implemented to ensure that Health and Social Care services are equipped to deal with the complexity and volume of demand for occupational therapists.
(AQW 17680/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department has 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.

The Occupational Therapy Workforce Review has been completed and will form part of a paper to be tabled at TMG in the coming weeks. The paper is currently in the process of being finalised prior to circulation to TMG members for consideration.

The pressures of COVID-19 emergency response had been delaying the TMG paper being progressed until now.

Once TMG sign off the paper, the reviews therein, including the Occupational Therapy one will be submitted to me to seek agreement to publish the reviews on the departmental website.

An AHP Workforce Implementation Plan has been developed which will seek to implement the recommendations contained in the AHP Workforce Reviews.

The AHP undergraduate numbers for 2021/22 including the funding requirement are currently under consideration.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health how many carers are on each Health and Social Care Trust's Carers Register. (AQW 17739/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of carers registered in each Health and Social Care Trust is set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of carers registered in each Health and Social Care Trust, as at end of March 2021

HSC Trust	Number of carers registered
Belfast	1,983
Northern	2,006
South Eastern	2,913
Southern	988
Western	1,975

Source: Health and Social Care Trusts

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the legislation and accompanying regulations that set the minimum age limit for the purchase of electronic cigarettes in Northern Ireland; and (ii) the dates on which they came into force. (AQW 17785/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department included provisions in the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 to introduce powers to prohibit the sale of nicotine products, including electronic cigarettes, to under eighteens. This includes prohibiting adults from purchasing these products on behalf of children, known as proxy purchasing. The Act received Royal Assent on 12 May 2016.

Draft regulations were consulted on in 2017 but were unable to be progressed in the absence of an Executive and Assembly. Since the return of the Assembly in 2020, my Department has been dealing with a considerable number of issues relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has had significant staffing implications, both for my Department and for the NICS legal resource which is required for clearance of the draft regulations. It is my intention to progress these regulations at the earliest opportunity.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the reasons for using a community/voluntary organisation to administer the Carers Support Fund; (ii) why payments will not be made similarly to the COVID-19 Recognition Payment for Health and Social Care Trust workers; and (iii) where the money will come from to pay the associated administration costs of the scheme. (AQW 17787/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) The Support for Carers' Fund will be managed on the Department's behalf by an Intermediary Funding Body (Community Foundation NI) who has the expertise and resources to operate such a grant funding programme. Community Foundation NI has a proven track record as an Intermediary Funding Body operating within Northern Ireland.
- (ii) The Support for Carers' Fund has been established with the aim of providing funds to charitable organisations working with and for carers to deliver agreed outcomes. The Fund will not provide for cash sums to be paid to individuals, and therefore has no links to the recognition payment to health and social care staff.
- (iii) The administration costs are contained within the overall amount allocated to the Fund. In this case a fee of £302k will be paid to Community Foundation NI from the overall Fund value of £4.4m.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health when Health and Social Care staff will receive the £500 COVID-19 recognition payment.

(AQW 17795/17-22)

Mr Swann: An FAQ on the special recognition payment, which includes 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>

My Department is currently finalising the scheme and will make payment as soon as possible. As soon as any further information becomes available, it will be published on the FAQ.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health to outline the qualifying criteria for Health and Social Care staff to qualify for the COVID-19 special recognition payment.

(AQW 17798/17-22)

Mr Swann: An FAQ on the special recognition payment, which includes 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>

My Department is currently finalising the scheme and will make payment as soon as possible. As soon as any further information becomes available, it will be published on the FAQ.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Health when he plans to seek the Executive's agreement to introduce the Adoption and Children (Northern Ireland) Bill to the Assembly.

(AQW 17802/17-22)

Mr Swann: A draft Executive paper seeking agreement to introduce the Adoption and Children (Northern Ireland) Bill into the Assembly issued on 15 April 2021.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, in light of the findings in the Justice O Hara Report into the Public Inquiry into Deaths as a result of Hyponatremia, whether Professor Ian Young will be returning to his post as Chief Scientific Advisor.

(AQW 17880/17-22)

Mr Swann: Professor Young's position as the Chief Scientific Advisor in the Department of Health remains unchanged.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health when Health and Social Care staff COVID-19 recognition payments will be processed.

(AQW 17899/17-22)

Mr Swann: An FAQ on the special recognition payment, which includes 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>

My Department is currently finalising the scheme and will make payment as soon as possible. As soon as any further information becomes available, it will be published on the FAQ.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health, given millions of pounds has been spent reacting to wildfires and the given the large extent of the wildfire in the Mourne on Friday 23rd April, will he commit to the development of an all-island strategy to prevent wildfires.

(AQW 17944/17-22)

Mr Swann: In March 2021, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), an Executive Agency within the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) re-established a cross departmental group to provide strategic direction on the implementation of the Northern Ireland Wildfire Strategy. Officials from both my Department and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) are represented on this group.

NIFRS continue to engage fully at an operational level with key partners and respond jointly within agreed protocols to incidents along the border counties. NIFRS representatives attend cross border project meetings led by Coillte (Irish Forestry) in the South West (Enniskillen District) aimed at developing a wildfire management plan for the local wildland area which traverses the border.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health when the £500 payment will be made to Health and Social Care Staff.

(AQW 18037/17-22)

Mr Swann: An FAQ on the special recognition payment, which includes 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>

My officials are currently finalising the scheme to enable payment as soon as possible. As soon as any further information is available, it will be published on the FAQ.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of current COVID-19 related hospital admissions.
(AQO 1923/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is hugely encouraging that COVID-19 hospital admissions have now stabilised. In fact inpatients with the infection have fallen considerably from the peak at the start of the year. As of today, there are 52 patients in hospital with COVID-19, compared to a peak of 834 on 15 January.

This is testament to the adherence of the public to the measures that have been in place since Boxing Day and to the successful roll-out and uptake of COVID-19 vaccines.

It is important, however, that we do not become complacent. COVID-19 remains with us and remains unpredictable, with a high level of uncertainty regarding its short to medium trajectory. . In line with the SPI-M projections for England, the modelling projections published last week suggest that case numbers in Northern Ireland are likely to rise through this spring and summer as restrictions are eased, even as the vaccination programme roll out continues.

The extent to which hospital admissions may rise will depend on the magnitude of the increase in cases; although, we expect that any increase in hospital admissions will be proportionately less than during previous periods, as cases will affect mainly the younger age groups who are less likely to become severely ill.

It is essential that vaccination take up rates continue at high levels as it is rolled out to younger age groups. There also remain threats such as new variants which may be less responsive to vaccines, as well as the potential for the effectiveness of vaccination to wane over time.

My Department will continue to monitor the trajectory of the virus. Surge plans will also remain in place ready to be reactivated if required, including the re-opening of the ICU Nightingale facility at Belfast City Hospital and the 'step-down' Nightingale facility at Whiteabbey.

I sincerely hope that we do not face another wave of COVID-19 in the future, but it is right that we remain ready and prepared for all eventualities.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health what guidance his Department has provided to Executive Departments on COVID-19 workplace safety for staff and customers.
(AQO 1924/17-22)

Mr Swann: Fundamentally the pandemic is a public health matter which has repercussions in the workplace as well as in the community. Responding to it is a whole-of-society effort, with workplace health and safety being the policy responsibility of the Department for the Economy.

In addition to the general public health advice provided by my Department, the Department for the Economy has provide a range of guidance on workplace issues in the light of COVID-19 for a range of sectors and situations.

At the outset of the pandemic, the Executive established the NI Engagement Forum - a collaboration of business organisations, trade unions and key statutory bodies, to advise Government on how best to manage the challenge of COVID-19 as it applies to the Northern Ireland economy and labour market. Based on the advice of the forum, the Executive published a list of priority sectors and a practical guide to making workplaces safer. Both the guidance and the list of priority sectors can be found at: nibusbusinessinfo.co.uk

As the Member will be aware, the current advice is for people to work at home. In jobs where this is not practical, employers must complete a COVID-19 Risk Assessment and take necessary measures to ensure the safety and health of their workers. Failure to do so is a breach of Health and Safety law and should be reported to the proper authority.

The Health and Safety Executive is the lead body responsible for the promotion and enforcement of health and safety at work standards in Northern Ireland, though it shares this responsibility with the 11 local councils.

I appreciate the thought, time and expense that business owners have given to putting additional safety measures in place, including the wearing of face coverings in shops - but businesses must also continue to take necessary precautions as restrictions ease to remain COVID secure and protect employees and customers. Relevant Departments, organisations and local government will continue to provide advice and support.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Health to outline his strategy for reducing waiting lists for first-time appointments.
(AQO 1925/17-22)

Mr Swann: Waiting times in Northern Ireland were unacceptably long before the pandemic. However, there is no doubt that the pandemic has compounded the problem. The downturn in elective services, while deeply regrettable, reflects the unprecedented pressures of the Covid-19 pandemic.

It isn't right that any patient should 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.

I have recently announced my intention to shortly publish an elective care framework. The purpose of this framework is to set out both the immediate and longer term actions and funding requirements needed to tackle our waiting lists. The framework builds on the actions and initiatives that are already underway to maintain and transform elective services. These initiatives include for example:

- Use of technology such as telephone and virtual clinics to a much greater extent. During the pandemic outpatients appointments have, where possible, moved to telephone appointments, consultations and essential communications. Technology will play a significant role in the delivery of elective care going forward and Trusts will continue to use technology where possible and appropriate.
- New and innovative ways to see patients in appropriate settings for example the creation of Northern Ireland's first regional Day Procedure Centre at Lagan Valley Hospital in the South Eastern Trust.
- A new regional approach to orthopaedic services. This involves developing a networked regional system of dedicated hubs.
- 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. This includes fully maximising all available in-house Health and Social Care and Independent Sector.
- The establishment of 'green' sites or pathways ensuring that every effort is made to keep these services entirely separate from any exposure to Covid-19. The capacity to deliver these green pathways will be increased as more surge capacity is de-escalated and staff are able to return to their usual roles at the appropriate time.

The Trust rebuild plans reflect many of these regional initiatives, not least my action to ensure that all elective surgery is prioritised in line with greatest clinical need, and not dependent on a patient's postcode.

The Elective Care framework will also set out how we will systematically tackle our waiting lists and transform the service to enhance and protect elective capacity 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. It will require major sustained investment over the next ten years 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 Carroll asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the Executive's announcement on 15 April 2021 on the relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions.
(AQO 1926/17-22)

Mr Swann: As Health Minister, I am very conscious of the consequences of prolonged lockdown, not least for mental and physical well-being. I do not want us ever to have to go back there, and working together we can shape the weeks and months ahead.

With the improving disease situation there is scope for further easements. This position is supported by both the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Advisor.

I support the Executive's package of relaxations that were announced on 15 April. They will restore many of the familiar aspects of everyday life that have been missed dearly over recent times.

As previously announced, the Executive will be guided by the Pathway to Recovery document, which was produced by the cross departmental working group. Indeed it is now the case that proposals for relaxations are made via individual departments, who are best placed to do so, and are in regular consultation with various sectors and stakeholders.

Such proposals are then presented to the working group, before review by the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Officer. Therefore it is important to note that it is a cross departmental collaborative approach we are now using, and the process of relaxations is not solely in the remit of the Department of Health. Further, all decisions are a matter for the Executive as a whole.

In making our decisions we are guided by four overarching principles when making decisions; that they will be evidence-based, necessary, proportionate and sustainable. We have been mindful of steps taken elsewhere and our decisions have been taken on what is best for us here at this time.

There is an inevitable potential for a further spike in COVID-19 cases in coming months, as opportunities for mixing increase. We must be prepared for that.

Our ability to suppress the virus and withstand any potential surge depends on us adhering to public health guidance and getting the vaccine.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health for an update on a salary increase for nurses.
(AQO 1927/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is important to recognise that pay in relation to Agenda for Change does not concern only nurses, but also staff in a large and varied range of essential roles within HSC. I place no lesser value on the contribution of the catering staff, the

porters, the cleaners, the administrative staff than that of those delivering direct clinical care. Every member of our HSC is a vital cog in delivering service, and it does them a disservice to focus on pay for one staff group over another.

The pay round for 2021/22 for NHS and HSC staff has not yet been finalised. No offer of a 1% increase has been made. The 1% commonly referred to was included in the written evidence submitted to the NHS Pay Review Body (NHSPRB) by the Department of Health and Social Care in England, which stated that any award above 1% will require re-prioritisation of budgets in England. This is not an offer of a pay award, nor was any similar reference made in the evidence submitted by my Department.

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/June 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.

Our focus remains on rebuilding the services in a way that meets the needs of the patient and funding must be prioritised towards measures aimed at reducing waiting lists and increasing patient activity during the re-building of services.

I have decided to proceed with a special recognition payment of up to £500 for Northern Ireland's health and social care workers. This scheme already goes beyond that as introduced in Scotland, by including Agency workers. I am also very grateful to my Executive colleagues for the provision of additional funding, which enable individuals to benefit from the nett value of up to £500 after tax and National Insurance deductions have been made.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on the development and commissioning of services for the diagnosis, assessment and treatment of long COVID.

(AQO 1928/17-22)

Mr Swann: Since the publication by the National Institute for Care and Health Excellence (NICE) of a rapid guideline on the condition in December 2020, the Health and Social Care Board have been tasked with developing costed proposals for the assessment and treatment of people who continue to experience long-term health effects as a result of Covid-19 infection.

In developing the proposals, HSCB is engaging with the primary and secondary care sectors as well as other stakeholder groups. In addition, it is reviewing the different approaches being taken in England, Scotland and Wales to ensure that we have the right service offering to meet the needs of people in Northern Ireland.

Once a service model has been identified, work will be undertaken to rapidly develop the appropriate services.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Health for an update on the utilisation of spare capacity in the South West Acute Hospital.

(AQO 1929/17-22)

Mr Swann: The South West Acute Hospital (SWAH) has offered vacant sessions for priority cancer patients to colleagues from Belfast Trust on a weekly basis since November 2020 and this has proven very successful to date in establishing patient pathways for the benefit of the region.

The Western Trust has also embarked on a 'test of change' exercise to introduce new surgical pathways within the Trust. As a first step, a team of orthopaedic surgeons has delivered elective orthopaedic surgery lists in the South West Acute Hospital (SWAH) in Enniskillen. This saw the successful treatment of low complex foot and ankle surgery on patients who had been waiting for years. It is hoped that the success of this pilot can be extended into the future on a regional basis and for the further development of orthopaedic, and other, services at the SWAH site.

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Health for an update on the appointment of a permanent Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland.

(AQO 1931/17-22)

Mr Swann: Professor Siobhan O'Neill was appointed the interim Mental Health Champion in June 2020 and took up post in August. The competition to appoint a permanent Mental Health Champion was advertised on 4 March 2021 and closed on the 9 April. A number of applications were received and are currently being processed. I expect to have a permanent Champion in post by September 2021.

The appointment, whilst not a regular public appointment, is being carried out in the spirit of the CPANI code of practice and will be competitive. The process will closely follow that of the public appointment process and will be open and transparent.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to outline his approach to addressing health inequalities.

(AQO 1932/17-22)

Mr Swann: The latest 'Health Inequalities Annual Report' published by my Department on the 14th April 2021 highlighted that inequalities in health outcomes continues to be a key challenge.

The report showed that alcohol and drug related indicators continue to show some of the largest health inequalities monitored in NI, with rates in the most deprived areas five times that in the least deprived for drug related mortality and four times that for alcohol specific mortality.

Other large inequalities exist for teenage birth rates (rate in most deprived six times the rate in least deprived), smoking in pregnancy (rate in most deprived four and a half times rate in least deprived) and for healthy life expectancy (HLE) where females in the most deprived areas can expect to live in good health for 15.4 years fewer than females in the least deprived areas, and the HLE inequality gap for males stood at 13.5 years.

The pandemic has no doubt exacerbated existing inequalities and therefore my Department, with the PHA continues to deliver a range of actions to address the impact of COVID-19, and other health conditions and behaviours, on the most deprived communities and reduce health inequalities.

A full range of health improvement services were adjusted throughout the pandemic to enable people in the most deprived areas to improve their health and wellbeing, including for example:

- more than 100,000 people accessed a Stress Awareness Course online;
- almost £1M additional funding was invested through a small grants process to help people improve their emotional health and wellbeing;
- 600 vulnerable families were able to access additional Early Intervention Support Services;
- more than 1,000 homeless people received 'Getting Started' boxes; and
- sexual health, smoking cessation, physical activity, breastfeeding and nutrition, mental and emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention programmes were adapted to online to ensure delivery within the parameters of COVID-19 restrictions

The Public Health Agency has developed a short, medium and long-term plan for the recovery of health improvement services, the majority of which are focussed in the most deprived communities.

Inequalities in health arise because of inequalities in the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. These conditions influence the ability of individuals, families and communities to take control over their lives and choices, and whether they are enabled and supported to lead, long, healthy, active lives.

My Department leads on Making Life Better (MLB), which is the overarching strategic framework for public health through which the Executive committed to creating the conditions for individuals, families and communities to take greater control over their lives, and be enabled and supported to lead healthy lives.

Departments are working together on a range of issues, including mitigating the impacts of poverty and tackling the conditions that create health inequalities. In addition, at regional and local level the Public Health Agency commissions a range of programmes, including through the community and voluntary sector.

The importance of health and wellbeing in local communities has also been widely reflected in the Local Government community plans and provides an important opportunity to maximise potential for tackling health inequalities at the local level.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline (i) the conditions of the sale of Portavoe Reservoir; and (ii) whether these have each been fulfilled.

(AQW 17248/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure):

- (i) NI Water has advised the transfer deed in relation to Portavoe Reservoir to Portavo Estates Limited includes covenants by the Transferee which include:
- a A Forestry Agreement dated 22 September 1978;
 - b A Fisheries Agreement dated 18 December 2014; and
 - c The Reservoirs Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.
- (ii) As the Reservoirs Act (NI) is not yet fully commenced, the Transferee, at present, has no statutory obligations to fulfil. In relation to the Fisheries Agreement and Forestry Agreement the Minister of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has advised:

'The terms of the Fisheries Agreement, that formed a part of the sale of Portavoe Reservoir by Northern Ireland Water, included the condition that DAERA Inland Fisheries would retain the fishing rights to that water until December 2024. However, the majority new owner of Portavoe Reservoir has confirmed that he wishes the site to remain private and not open or accessible to the public. DAERA officials have sought legal advice regarding the conditions in the agreement and transfer documents. Until this has been clarified permit holders have been advised, via the NI Direct website, that the site will remain closed to the public for the foreseeable future.'

The woodland comprises an area of 18.96 hectares of mixed woodland surrounding Portavoe reservoir. DAERA Forest Service has managed the woodland at Portavoe under the terms of a management agreement with NI Water (formerly DOE) since 1978. The agreement under which Forest Service managed the trees is covenanted in the Contracts for Sale relating to the land transfer to the new landowners. Forest Service is liaising with the Departmental Solicitor's Office regarding any implications for its tree management responsibilities following change of ownership. In the meantime, Forest Service is engaging with a representative of Portavo Estates Ltd, including meeting onsite to discuss tree management issues. Arrangements have been agreed for any necessary tree management issues currently requiring attention.'

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will install a crash barrier along the Fathom Line, Newry.

(AQW 17251/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can assure you that road safety is of paramount importance to my Department with the highest priority given to achieving a reduction in the numbers of people injured on our roads. In doing so we seek to identify locations where collisions are occurring on a frequent basis where the causation factors can be addressed by suitable engineering measures.

I am advised that a review of the collision history indicates that the incidents that have been occurring on the Fathom Link are relatively infrequent and caused by variety of factors. As such, provision of a safety barrier along this 6km stretch of road at a cost of around £2m does not score as highly as other priority schemes in the Division at this time. However I have asked officials to keep this situation under review.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail her Department's actions concerning each recommendation in the 2019 Audit Office report Structural Maintenance of the Road Network.

(AQW 17274/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The 2019 Audit office report into Structural Maintenance of the Road Network made five recommendations. Key actions taken and/or in planning include the following:

- Close working with the Department of Finance to secure long-term funding options and, in particular, to highlight the need for multi-year budgets. This was also the focus of the Ministerial Advisory Panel on Infrastructure, which I established in August 2020, which also identified the issues around multi-annual budgeting and the need for this to be explored further.
- Continued engagement with key stakeholders regarding the condition of the road network and, in particular, to ensure that we take account of the views of local councils. Our plans include the co-design with councils and other stakeholders of a new communications strategy on the condition of the road network which will set out the high level data sets that will be reported annually to stakeholders. Officials had hoped to complete this work in 2021 but it has inevitably been delayed due to the need to prioritise our response to the COVID pandemic.
- Development of a new strategy for investment in the road network, including maintenance and investment in new schemes will be considered as part of the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP). This plan will be developed in the context of wider requirements for capital across and is planned to be issued for consultation in autumn 2021 and finalised in spring 2022.
- Some work on road condition surveys has had to be suspended due to the pandemic but the aim remains to publish new condition data for the road network by Autumn 2022.
- Finally, arrangements are now in place to agree an annual budget allocation for resurfacing and strengthening activity on the Trunk Road Network. The objective of this approach is to ensure that action is taken to maintain the condition of the Trunk Road Network, while also maximising the available budget for the resurfacing of non-trunk roads, including rural roads.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her Department's plans to improve cycling infrastructure across Foyle.

(AQW 17321/17-22)

Ms Mallon: It is my intention to continue to make progress on active travel and blue / green initiatives in 2021/22. Given the importance of active travel and the multiple health and environmental benefits it brings, I am fully supportive of investment in cycling schemes.

My Department is currently constructing a shared footway / cycleway in the Strathfoyle area and is continuing to work with Derry City and Strabane District Council on the delivery of the North West Greenways project, which includes schemes on the Buncrana Road and Culmore Road. The Strategic road improvement planned for the Buncrana Road also includes measures for cycle provision and plans are under development for a shared use cycleway on the A2 Limavady Road.

In June 2020 a separate cycling path of around 300m was installed beside the existing shared cycleway at the Council staff car park and public car parks at Queen's Quay along with measures to assist social distancing between the car park and the Peace Bridge.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) how her Department is meeting commitments in the All-Island Pollinator Plan 2021-25; (ii) whether she intends to instigate, during 2021, a programme of re-wilding with native wild flowers those verges and central reservations belonging to her Department.

(AQW 17343/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As partner and supporter of the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan (AIPP) my Department recognises that road verges are an important habitat for many species of insects and animals. Having devised the specific AIPP Action, to promote pollinator-friendly management of the strategic road network in NI, the department has a comprehensive environmental policy arrangement for managing 'soft estate' which promotes the sowing of road verges with wildflowers and provides advice on the effectiveness of these areas.

Relevant AIPP actions are incorporated within our requirements for the delivery of new major road projects. A practical example of this is the planting regime for the A6 Dungiven to Drumahoe Dualling scheme which includes the provision of wildflower seeding for approximately 200,000m² over a number of locations throughout the 25.5km project. The seed mixture will consist of 60% Irish Native Wildflowers and 40% Ornamental Grasses, and include important native plants for pollinators. This planting regime also includes mixed native hedgerow planting.

With respect to general maintenance activities the Department does not have a proposed programme to re-wild existing road-verges and central reserves. My Department manages vegetation across the road network in a number of ways, with the primary aim of maintaining road safety whilst also protecting wildlife and taking care to preserve their habitats. In this regard our current grass cutting policy attempts to achieve a balance between road safety, the control of noxious weeds and environmental protection. There are currently 4 sites in Belfast who are part of the 'Don't Mow, Let it Grow' campaign. These are:

- 1 A2 Tillysburn roundabout;
- 2 A55 Parkway and Hawthornden Way;
- 3 A55 Belvoir Road;
- 4 A55 Malone roundabout.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, following the announcement of another feasibility study in June 2020, for an update on the third phase of the Derry-Coleraine rail upgrade.

(AQW 17358/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Work on the feasibility study is ongoing with a number of topographical and pilot studies underway and the report is still on schedule to be completed by November 2021. A full business case will then be prepared and submitted to me in spring 2022. This will ensure that all future spend is fully informed by a robust business case and that there is high-level assurance on costs and on risk and benefit realisation.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the investment in active travel in the Newry and Armagh area for 2021-2022.

(AQW 17374/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As the Member is aware, it is my ambition to continue to make progress on active travel and blue / green initiatives in 2021/22, given the importance of active travel and the contribution it can make to improving physical and mental health and wellbeing and to tackling climate change. A programme of active travel and blue / green schemes for implementation across the North can be confirmed after I have decided my capital allocations from the available budget.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the measures her Department has in place to encourage a culture change to active travel.

(AQW 17375/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In 2019, my Department launched a cycling campaign to help address the perception that the roads are not a safe place to cycle. The aim of the campaign is to remind both those who drive and those who cycle of the behaviours required to keep everyone safe and to encourage more people to cycle for short journeys.

These messages, along with many others, are run across many platforms, including television, radio, outdoor advertising and on the Department's active travel and road safety social media channels on 'Share the Road to Zero'.

In 2020, my Department developed a new campaign with the core message "Great Things Happen When You Walk". The campaign aims to influence a modal shift towards walking for shorter journeys; and further normalise walking as a travel option.

The messages contained within the campaign depict the feel-good element of walking, and amongst others, highlight the ease of walking as part of the commute and the school-run.

The publication of the Travel to and from School by Pupils in Northern Ireland (2018/19) Report demonstrates that the 'school run' is far too often, the 'school drive'. I want to create safer conditions that allow children to use an active and sustainable method of travel where possible. To achieve that aim, my Department's work with schools includes the Cycling Proficiency Programme, the Practical Child Pedestrian Safety Training scheme and the Active School Travel Programme (ASTP). The

ASTP is jointly funded by my Department and the Public Health Agency and is delivered by Sustrans. We also provide a range of road safety teaching resources to support safe walking and cycling to schools. The Department is also rolling out 20mph zones at 100 schools. These zones will mean that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from school on a daily basis and will complement our efforts to encourage more children to walk, scoot, wheel and cycle to school.

In 2020/21, I rolled out the Road Safety Safe Travel Grant Scheme. The scheme focused on vulnerable road users by prioritising projects seeking to improve the safety of people walking or cycling.

Last year, I created a Walking and Cycling Champion, supported by a Walking and Cycling advisory group, within my Department to provide a focus on delivering active travel projects and ensure that we deliver our Programme for Government commitment to increase the number of journeys made by walking and cycling.

With the ongoing Covid pandemic, my Department has been working on introducing short term, pop-up cycle lanes and I want to continue to add to the cycle infrastructure created which not only aided key workers travelling to the hospitals but also provided a safe route for those wishing to use their bicycle as their mode of transport and for active travel and leisure.

On 10 June 2020 I announced £20 million of funding for blue/green infrastructure which has been used to provide capital funding for a number of active travel and Blue Green projects across the North.

I am also pleased to advise that I will be publishing the Belfast Cycling Network shortly. The purpose of this document is to give a clear picture of my ambition to develop coherent and connected cycling infrastructure in Belfast, not just for the next year, but for the next 10 years and more. We hope to develop similar plans for other urban areas as these will form the basis for developing meaningful connected cycling routes for everyday journeys in other towns and cities.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail her Department's actions for addressing pollution in Armagh city. (AQW 17376/17-22)

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 plans in place to phase out diesel-only buses and trains by 2040 and we are already taking action to improve the emissions output of our public transport fleet. Over the past 5 years the bus fleet in Armagh city has been modernised through the withdrawal of older vehicles and the use of cleaner Euro 5 and Euro 6 vehicles. In total, this has resulted in over 65% of the fleet moving to Euro 5 or better and, with the addition of new vehicles to our public transport fleet as funding allows, this percentage will increase.

My Department also continues to identify, plan and implement measures to promote and enable a shift onto more sustainable modes of transport and by doing so will help to reduce vehicular emissions associated with transport.

Officials are currently developing proposals for a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan that will set out the priorities for future development of the main road and rail network. In relation to Armagh city projects such as Armagh East Link and Armagh North and West Bypass will be considered within the Transport Plan. In addition, my Department has also had initial exploratory discussions with council officials regarding a number of schemes for possible inclusion in the Mid South West Growth Deal, one of these being the Armagh East Link scheme.

I have also committed to providing funding in partnership with Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council for a Feasibility Study to consider the reopening of the Portadown to Armagh Railway line. Council Officers are currently assessing tenders from consultants who will help develop the Feasibility Study. It is expected that it can be prepared in next few months.

These projects would reduce city centre traffic and would help facilitate complementary improvements to promote sustainable travel choices, connect people and communities and create a thriving and liveable city. The Draft Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan will be issued for public consultation in the latter part of 2021.

The future transport needs of Armagh City and the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon (ABC) Borough Council area will also be considered as part of the new Sub Regional Transport Plan (SRTP). The SRTP will consider a range of future options to meet local and regional objectives, both transport and planning related. These will likely include improved active travel and public transport provision, and potentially possible improvements to local roads. The SRTP will be integrated with the Local Development Plan (LDP) processes and will therefore be developed in collaboration with the ABC Local Policies Plan.

I am determined to use these Transport Plans to better connect our population and businesses in a sustainable way, and help power our Green Recovery.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given the increase in use and enjoyment of the Lagan Valley Regional Park, (i) whether closure of the Gilchrist Bridge at Edenderry to facilitate repairs to the bridge will be upscaled to include step-free access; and (ii) to outline the expected timescale for work on the bridge to be completed and re-opened. (AQW 17409/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Repairs to Gilchrist Bridge were undertaken as a matter of urgency to deal with safety issues. The work to repair the bridge has now been completed and the bridge is fully reopened. Improvements to the bridge (e.g. to provide step-free access) will be considered in more detail as work on improvements to the Lagan towpath is taken forward. I believe that it is important to undertake substantial improvement works in a properly planned way as I am keen to minimize inconvenience for the local community and to avoid an extended closure at a time when the use of the towpath is at its highest.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure what inter-departmental discussions she has had in regard to the introduction of a walking strategy for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 17425/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have had no inter-departmental discussions in regard to the introduction of a walking strategy for Northern Ireland. I believe that rather than develop more strategies, the focus must now be on action to help address climate change and support the draft Programme for Government aim to improve health and wellbeing, especially as we look towards a green recovery.

In 2020, I appointed a new Walking and Cycling Champion in the Department. The Department also developed a new campaign with the core message “Great Things Happen When You Walk” aiming to influence a modal shift towards walking for shorter journeys.

Given the importance of active travel and the contribution it can make to improving physical and mental health and wellbeing and to tackling climate change, I have made it my ambition to continue to make progress on active travel and a green recovery.

To date, I have allocated £3.7 million of capital funding toward six greenway projects through the blue / green infrastructure fund

A programme of active travel and blue / green schemes for implementation across the North can be confirmed after I have decided my capital allocations from the available budget.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how long has her Department carried a vacancy rate of just over 15% for industrial staff and 13% for non-industrial staff; (ii) where specifically are these vacancies in her Department; and (iii) what impact have these rates had on service provision.

(AQW 17454/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) For clarity, the figures you refer to in your question were provided to the Committee for Infrastructure on 18 March 2021 in response to a question relating only to road maintenance and not to the whole Department. I am advised that the current DfI vacancy rate at the end of March 2021 is 14%, which is made up by 2.9% for industrial posts and 11.1% for non-industrial posts.
- (ii) The vacancy position for each business area, at the end of March 2021, is as follows:
- Planning, Safety & Transport Group (excluding DVA) – 12 (164 staff in post);
 - DVA – 47 (744 staff in post);
 - Resources Governance & EU Group – 20 (284 staff in post); and
 - Roads & Rivers – 339 (1799 staff in post).
- (iii) You will be aware that the Covid-19 pandemic has slowed recruitment across all NICS departments and that the resource budget allocated to the Executive has been far from sufficient to meet our needs. There is no doubt that the Department could do more if all vacancies were both affordable and filled. That is not the case though and, like other ministers, I will need to make some very difficult decisions to live within budgets and there is no doubt that there will be impacts on service position. This is a particular challenge for my Department given the significant uplift in capital funding with minimal increase to the resource budget that pays most of our staff.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail any carbon-capturing measures in place in any green spaces owned by her Department.

(AQW 17455/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the important role that nature based solutions have in contributing to a reduction in carbon emissions, including through capturing and holding carbon. In addition to carbon capture, measures such as tree and hedgerow planting, grassland and soil management provide multiple benefits in terms of increasing biodiversity; landscape improvement; and health and well-being benefits.

The Department’s environmental procedures in respect of major road projects promote the incorporation of native species of trees where possible. As partner and supporter of the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan (AIPP), the Department incorporates measures to support habitat management including a planting of wildflowers, grassland seeding and mixed hedgerow planting. In addition, the Department’s current grass cutting policy, which attempts to achieve a balance between road safety, the control of noxious weeds and environmental protection, seeks to identify roadside areas which could be managed to benefit the environment. This includes a number of “Don’t Mow, Let it Grow” sites to encourage the growth of wildflowers in verges and enhance biodiversity. The Department is also represented on the Afforestation Forum, set up by Minister Poots, to explore opportunities to enhance tree planting on our estate.

As the second biggest landowner in Northern Ireland, NI Water has ambitious plans to deliver a large-scale planting programme of one million trees across 11,300 hectares of land over the next 10 years. Over the last decade, NI Water has planted over 150,000 trees in some of the 24 drinking water catchments in Counties Antrim and Armagh. In addition, Translink is currently developing a Carbon Strategy which will include the identification of land suitable for all types of planting including trees and hedgerows.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the estimated timeframe of publishing consultations to the strategies being developed by her Department.

(AQW 17457/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Department is currently developing a Business Plan for the year 2021-22. The Plan will be informed by the capital and resource funding available to the Department and will detail my priorities for this year. It will include associated timescales for any plans or strategies to be published for consultation.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure who is responsible for the overall procurement of the public sector fleet.

(AQW 17458/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There is no single individual or business area responsible for overall procurement of public sector fleet for the DfI family. Procurement of public sector fleet within my department including its Arms Lengths Bodies and North South Body is undertaken by dedicated procurement teams assisted, where necessary, by the Department of Finance (DoF) Construction and Procurement Delivery, a Centre of Procurement Expertise (CoPE).

The table below details the business areas responsible for procurement of fleet across my Department:

Business Area	Fleet procured by:
DfI (including DVA)	DfI Roads and Rivers' CoPE DoF's Construction and Procurement Delivery CoPE DVA Procurement Team
NI Water	Operational Procurement Team (CoPE)
Translink	Procurement Department (CoPE)
Waterways Ireland	Technical Services - Mechanical and Electrical Section

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the ability to socially distance people taking tests was considered for the controlled environment of test centres.

(AQW 17461/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Following the Executive's decision on 15 April to relax some Covid-19 restrictions, the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) will resume practical driving tests and theory tests on 23 April, with appropriate mitigations in place.

The theory test provider has completed a comprehensive risk assessment, which went through the taskforce process and health assessment with advice of Department of Health, to ensure the necessary Covid-19 controls are implemented at its test centres to enable services to resume. Theory test centres are, therefore, operating at reduced capacity in order to comply with social distancing requirements. However, the DVA has worked closely with the theory test provider to ensure that additional theory test appointments have been made available, through a combination of extended opening hours at the six existing theory test centres and the opening of an additional temporary centre in Ballymena.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many of her Department's staff are working in their normal workplaces compared to the full staffing level.

(AQW 17462/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In line with the Executive's message that people should work from home, unless the nature of their work means that it needs to be done in the workplace, I can confirm that DfI staff have been working from home wherever possible throughout the pandemic and continue to do so. As a Department that delivers frontline services which cannot by their nature be delivered from home, many of our staff have continued to provide essential public services on site or from their normal workplaces. These services include, for example, winter service gritting, flood prevention and safety-related maintenance, enforcement and vehicle testing. On occasions, staff working from home may need to visit the office, or another local office, or attend meetings on site.

While the location of staff is always monitored by line management, the information is not held centrally that would allow for the precise breakdown that is sought in the Member's question. However, I can assure him that the guidance on working from home is being followed closely by my Department.

Our buildings remain open, with appropriate mitigations in place, for those who need to access them for essential reasons.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether (i) companies other than ESB are legally allowed to develop and operate electric vehicle charge point infrastructure; (ii) companies, including ESB, are allowed to make a profit from such enterprise under current legislation; and (iii) she has given consideration to creating a profit incentive for companies in order to boost the provision and quality of electric vehicle charge points in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 17486/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Companies other than ESB are legally allowed to develop and operate electric vehicle charge point infrastructure and are allowed to make a profit from such enterprise under current legislation. However, 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. I have not given consideration to creating a profit incentive for companies in order to boost the provision and quality of electric vehicle charge points in Northern Ireland.

The Utility Regulator's decision in March 2020 to remove the Maximum Resale Price on the electricity cost of charge points allows commercial operators to charge above cost price of electricity supply. This should give clarity for operators wishing to provide commercial services and strengthen network provision in 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.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she plans to release the Project Assurance Review of the York Street Interchange Project to key partners.

(AQW 17514/17-22)

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 (Department of Finance) 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.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) to outline the guidance from the Department of Finance which informs her decision to not publish the Project Assurance Review; and (ii) for the rationale for not sharing the Project Assurance Review for York Street Interchange to Belfast City Council officers and elected members.

(AQW 17516/17-22)

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 (Department of Finance) 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.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the level of spending on cycling infrastructure in Belfast over the last ten years; and (ii) how much has been allocated to West Belfast in comparison to North Belfast, South Belfast and East Belfast.

(AQW 17525/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not collate the information sought in the format requested as spend on both walking and cycling is included in expenditure on active travel. It is also important to note that the attribution of spend to active travel is not a precise exercise as some projects have benefits for active travel even if not carried out specifically for that purpose.

The following table provides details of my Department's expenditure on active travel infrastructure over the ten years 2010/11 – 2019/20 within the Eastern Division (audited figures for 2020/21 are not yet available). This Division covers both the Belfast City Council and the Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council areas.

Financial year	Expenditure £000
2010/11	75
2011/12	606
2012/13	150
2013/14	216
2014/15	440
2015/16	905
2016/17	730
2017/18	1,690
2018/19	1,221
2019/20	821

In terms of infrastructure development in areas of Belfast, I am planning to publish the Belfast Cycling Network in coming weeks. This will set out my proposals for a coherent cycling network across Belfast.

In 2019, my Department completed a short but important link at the Broadway Roundabout which ultimately connects the Falls Road through Bog Meadows to Belfast city centre.

Work on the development of a number of walking and cycling schemes in west Belfast is getting underway working in partnership with other stakeholders. A business case for the Colin active travel network is being taken forward by Belfast City Council with support from my Department and other agencies. My Department is also providing funding towards Belfast City Council's Forth Meadow Greenway project, which aims to connect shared civic space in the west of the city.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there are plans to establish an additional active travel centre in Belfast.

(AQW 17526/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In line with my priorities to connect people and communities sustainably, a proposal for an Active Travel Centre (ATC) is currently being developed as part of the main works contract for the Belfast Transport Hub. It is planned that the ATC will be based on the site of the existing bus entrance on Glengall Street and will have facilities including bicycle repair, hire and information.

Belfast City Council is also working on proposals for an Active Travel Hub as part of the redevelopment of Cathedral Gardens, Belfast.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the percentage of her total budget that is allocated for cycling infrastructure in 2021-2022.

(AQW 17532/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Budget allocations within my Department have not yet been finalised for 2021/22. In addition, expenditure for cycling infrastructure is not identified separately but is included together with other active travel measures.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the cycling infrastructure target in kilometres for (i) 2019/2020; and (ii) 2021/22.

(AQW 17534/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There is no specific target set for walking or cycling infrastructure each year. Walking and cycling infrastructure constructed in 2019/20 totalled almost 8 kilometres. Officials are currently developing a list of walking and cycling schemes to be delivered in 2021/22.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there is any consideration being given to a footpath to connect Stewartstown GAA pitch to the village as part of her Department's active travel plans.

(AQW 17546/17-22)

Ms Mallon: To date my Department has not received any requests to provide a footpath to connect Stewartstown GAA club to the village. A preliminary assessment on the possibility of providing a footpath indicates that the proposal would require construction of approximately 870m of path along the C636 Mullaghmoyle Road.

The Mullaghmoyle Road is a narrow 'C' class road and to construct a new footway along this stretch of road would require the acquisition of land to accommodate a footway link.

My officials will undertake a more detailed assessment of the proposal and if it meets the criteria in terms of cost and benefit, it will be considered when developing future works programmes within the Mid Ulster Council Area.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many accidents have there been in at the Gilpinstown Road and Portadown Road junction, Lurgan, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 17547/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The PSNI is the authority responsible for gathering and holding information associated with road traffic collisions. In line with an established protocol, they periodically share with my Department data on collisions in which injuries have been sustained. This helps to inform my officials of locations where collisions are occurring and to consider if the introduction of additional engineering measures may help to reduce both the likelihood and severity of future collisions.

Given that PSNI is the data controller for information on collisions, it would be more appropriate for you to contact them directly regarding the number of collisions recorded at the Gilpinstown Road/Portadown Road junction in Lurgan.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether she is considering extending MOT Test Exemption Certificates (TECs) for those who cannot secure a test prior to their expiry date; (ii) to detail the number of MOT tests that will be required when the current TEC period ends; and (iii) whether the testing system has the capacity to meet this demand.

(AQW 17551/17-22)

Ms Mallon: On 11 February 2021, I announced that existing Temporary Exemption Certificates (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

old, 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 Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) is delivering vehicle testing at all 15 of its test centres. However, in line with PHA advice and guidance, it has introduced additional control measures at its test centres to mitigate against the risk of Covid-19 transmission. The DVA is, therefore, operating at a reduced vehicle testing capacity and will continue to issue TECs to all eligible vehicles until normal vehicle testing services resume.

While there is sufficient capacity for customers to book a vehicle test appointment, it may not always be possible to book a test at the preferred test centre, and customers may have to travel to an alternative centre to secure a test before their current test pass certificate expires. Additional vehicle test slots are available daily at most centres and further slots also become available due to cancellations.

The DVA encourages customers who urgently require an appointment 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 the DVA customer services team at customerservices@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk and they will seek to secure an urgent appointment prior to the expiry date, so the customer can continue to use the vehicle legally on the road.

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. The DVA is also offering vehicle test appointments on a Sunday and bank holidays, at most test centres. Following conversion of an adjoining building at the Newbuildings test centre, additional testing capacity is now available to meet demand in the north-west.

As restrictions ease, the DVA will continue to adapt its services to enable full resumption of vehicle testing, when it is safe to do so. This will require the reinstatement of the normal vehicle testing procedures to ensure there is adequate vehicle testing capacity to meet the demand.

I remain committed to minimising disruption and ensuring our plan for the restoration of services is in hand, and most importantly remain committed to protecting the lives of staff and customers during this pandemic.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the reasons for any differences that exist in Coronavirus Regulations between the requirements placed on taxi drivers and the requirements placed on those collecting bus and train fares.

(AQW 17558/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As regards the requirement to wear face coverings on public transport under The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, as amended, both taxi drivers and those providing a passenger transport service (i.e. those collecting bus and train fares) are required to wear a face covering unless there is a partition between the person, or employee or driver and members of the public, or they have a "reasonable excuse" for not wearing one, as defined under the Regulations (e.g. a health reason or disability which prevents them from wearing one).

When it comes to enforcement of the requirement to wear a face covering, the Regulations grant powers to a constable, a person designated by the Department of Health, and operators of a passenger transport service and their employees and agents which would include those collecting bus and train fares but not taxis. However, while taxis are not granted enforcement powers under the Regulations, these powers exist under the current regulatory arrangements for taxi drivers whereby taxi drivers have the power to refuse to carry a passenger.

In practical terms, this means that there is no difference in the requirement on both bus and rail employees (collecting fares), and taxi drivers, as regards the wearing of face coverings under the relevant Coronavirus Regulations.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the number of reported street light outages in East Belfast in each of the last two years; and (ii) the average time from a fault being reported to repair being completed.

(AQW 17567/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is unable to provide this information by constituency. However, I can confirm that in Eastern Division, which includes the East Belfast constituency, there were 7,295 reported street light outages in 2019/2020 and 7,889 reported street light outages in 2020/2021.

My Department is now providing a full street lighting maintenance service with outages generally being attended to within our response target of 5 working days.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will begin to apply the criteria surrounding rural street lighting on a case by case basis, taking into consideration the specific characteristics of an area.

(AQW 17582/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As I advised in my response to your previous question on this issue (AQW 15352 refers), there are currently no plans to review the Department's current street lighting policy for the provision of street lighting in rural areas, which has also been the policy of previous Ministers. The rationale behind my decision was explained in my previous response.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 16971/17-22, what metrics her Department's Roads Divisions use to ensure that funds are distributed equitably across local council areas.

(AQW 17583/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In my reply to your previous question (AQW 16971/17-22), I advised that 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 broadly use these indicators when apportioning across council areas to ensure, as far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds.

The table below sets out examples of the two main structural maintenance activities and the associated range of indicators and metrics currently used across the DfI Roads Divisions to distribute funding to local Council areas:

Category	Indicator	Metrics	Source
Resurfacing	Traffic	Where traffic counts are not available, population density is used as a proxy	N.I. Census
		Length of H, M & L traffic roads	Road Maintenance Client System*
	Condition	Number of carriageway surface defects	Road Maintenance Client System
		Percentage length of road at or below an intervention / investigatory level	Road Condition Surveys e.g. SCANNER/SCRIM and deflectograph
		Number of Public Liability claims	DfI Claims Unit / Road Maintenance Client System
	Carriageway Length	Length of All roads	Road Maintenance Client System
		Length of A&B class roads	
	Carriageway Area	Area of All roads	Road Maintenance Client System
		Area of Urban Roads	
		Area of A&B class roads	
Surface Dressing	Condition	Number of carriageway surface defects	Road Maintenance Client System
	Carriageway Length	Rural road length	Road Maintenance Client System
	Carriageway Area	Area of bitmac rural roads	Road Maintenance Client System
	3 year Average spend	3 year Average spend on surface dressing	DfI Accounting System

*The Road Maintenance Client System is the Department's asset management system used to manage the maintenance of the public road network throughout the whole of Northern Ireland.

The exact combination of indicators and metrics used within each Division will be tailored to reflect individual needs and circumstances in the Division at that time with decisions and budgets influenced by specific allocations for functions such as Trunk Road resurfacing schemes and structural stability, including coastal defence repairs. Given the need to consider these functions separately, no Section Office or local Council area will receive a fixed percentage of the available allocation each year.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has researched the potential costs and benefits of extending the Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Scheme to (i) children aged 16 to 18; and (ii) young people aged 18 to 22.

(AQW 17584/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise that our children and young people use public transport to access education, training, employment and to maintain social connections. Children aged 5-16 enjoy half fare travel on public transport services in Northern Ireland under the Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Scheme. Other discounted tickets are available for our young people. The Translink y-link card is a smart card for all 16-23 years olds using Translink services within Northern Ireland. This card offers 1/3 off Translink bus and rail travel in Northern Ireland and up to 50% off the Enterprise tickets for up to 8 years. Also available is the 24+ Student Railcard is available for those in full time education over the age of 24 to receive up to 1/3 off rail fares.

No recent research has been undertaken here on the potential costs or benefits of extending concessionary travel to those aged 16-18 or 18-22, however my officials are examining the social value and impact of the Scheme on all those who receive a travel concession.

I have been very clear that, in its present format the Concessionary Fares Scheme is underfunded. I very much recognise the multiple benefits delivered by the Concessionary Fares Scheme and would like to do more in this area and I continue to engage with Minister Murphy on the long term funding of the Scheme.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider increasing Waterways Ireland's remit to include the Albert Basin project in Newry.
(AQW 17588/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Waterways Ireland is a North South Implementation body co-sponsored by my Department and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

The Albert Basin is not within the remit of my Department or Waterways Ireland. I understand that the Basin is in the ownership of the people of Newry and that Newry, Mourne and Down District Council is currently planning its redevelopment.

To extend Waterways Ireland's remit to include the Albert Basin, the people of Newry would have to agree to relinquish ownership. Furthermore, increasing Waterways Ireland's remit is not a decision I could make unilaterally. Initially it would have to be a joint decision by the Sponsor Ministers through the North South Ministerial Council.

The relevant legislation – The North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 and The British Irish Agreement Act 1999 would then have to be amended to include the Albert Basin in the nominated inland navigations for which Waterways Ireland is responsible.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will consider options for reopening the canal from Newry to Portadown.
(AQW 17589/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Newry Canal does not fall within the remit of my Department.

My Department is a co-sponsor of Waterways Ireland, the North South Implementation Body responsible for specific, navigable inland waterways. However, the Newry Canal is not included. The canal is currently in the ownership of the Local Councils.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department can assess the road safety of the Camlough Road, Newry along the front of Derrybeg housing estate.
(AQW 17590/17-22)

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 all across the North. I can confirm that an assessment of this area was carried out in February 2020 and I am advised that it concluded that this section of road is well served with defined footways, streetlights, right turn pockets and a pedestrian crossing. In light of these findings it is not proposed to provide any additional safety measures at this time however I have asked officials to keep the situation under review.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on proposed flood defences for Campsie, Omagh.
(AQW 17627/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department regularly inspects and maintains as necessary the designated flood defences in the Campsie area of Omagh Town. These flood defences have protected parts of Omagh, including the Campsie area, on numerous occasions in the past, most recently on the 8th and 9th February 2020 after a period of intense heavy rainfall.

In the short term My Department is carrying out a local flood study for the 'Dry Arch' of Campsie Bridge, Lower Market Street, Omagh. The purpose of this local study is to determine if a viable flood alleviation scheme could be taken forward to prevent flooding to a small number of basements on Lower Market Street. It is anticipated that this local study will be completed in early summer.

In order to further improve the level of flood protection in the Campsie area a number of flood studies have been carried out to assess the level of risk to properties and determine if a viable flood alleviation scheme could be taken forward. Unfortunately none of the proposals to date, including a joint project with the Strule Shared Education Campus, were found to be feasible or economically viable.

However, I can confirm that my Department is to re-visit the most recent flood study for Omagh Town, which was completed in 2016, in the 2021/22 financial year. The new study will take into account Climate Change and determine if other viable options, such as upstream flood storage and natural flood risk management solutions can be identified to reduce flooding.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update in relation to the proposals around introducing a rewilding scheme in conjunction with the new cycleway currently under construction along the C568 Maydown Road.
(AQW 17634/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The new cycleway under construction at Maydown Road extends for a distance of around 2km and involves improving the existing narrow footway and provision of a new shared cycleway at those sections where no facility currently

exists. This will provide a high quality link between the residential area at Strathfoyle and the business units at Maydown while also being part of a wider strategy to provide a greenway path from Strathfoyle to the city.

I can confirm that the separation strip between the cycleway and carriageway will be sown with wild flowers and that consideration is being given to planting trees in an area close to the Haw Road / Temple Road junction. These measures will both improve the environment and help to screen some industrial units without compromising visibility at the junction.

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Infrastructure, with regard to Moira village, what criteria has to be met for a bypass to be considered as a viable solution to alleviate traffic congestion.

(AQW 17637/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Moira is situated within Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council area, and as such its future transport needs will be considered as part of the new Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP), which is being developed by my Department. The BMTP will take account of the growth ambitions of the relevant Councils, including improvements needed to the transport infrastructure.

There is no rigid set of criteria which determine whether or not a bypass project is carried forward. Every settlement is different, and options for alleviating traffic problems will depend on a wide number of factors. The BMTP will therefore consider a range of future options to meet local and regional objectives; and these will include improved public transport provision and improvements to local roads, such as the A3 through Moira. The possibility of a Moira Bypass will therefore be considered in that Plan.

The BMTP will be integrated with the formal Local Development Plan processes being undertaken by Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council and will be released for public consultation at the appropriate stage.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will recommend a review of the entirety of the A24 from Newtownbreda to Carryduff, taking account of the significant projected growth in population along the route.

(AQW 17640/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is currently bringing forward a suite of new Transport Plans, including the new Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP), which will take account of the growth ambitions of the local Councils within the Belfast Metropolitan Area's catchment (BMA).

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. Amongst other measures, this will consider the need for improvements to key routes such as the A24, which is a significant commuter route for residents of County Down to access Belfast, and which will be assessed along that section of its route within the BMA.

The BMTP will be integrated with the formal Local Development Plan processes, and as such the timescales for the completion of the Draft Plan and its release for public consultation are still under review.

I am determined to use these Transport Plans to better connect our population and businesses in a sustainable way, and help power our Green Recovery.

As a statutory consultee to the planning authorities, my Department is consulted on all planning applications along the A24. For larger developments, applicants submit a Transport Assessment which considers the transport impact of their development and the proposed mitigation measures. I understand that the proposed residential development on the Mealongh Road requires developer led improvement works to be carried out at the Saintfield Road / Mealongh Road / Manse Road and Saintfield Road / Knockbracken Road junctions and am advised that the detailed design for the former junction scheme is nearing completion and this will allow improvement works to commence at this junction in the near future.

I can also confirm that there have been a number of additional measures introduced by my Department on the A24 in recent years. These include carriageway widening at Myrtledene Road and Glenhugh Park to provide right turn lanes and a puffin crossing; resurfacing between Manse Road and Brackenvale and the provision of a (SPECS) speed camera system by the NI Road Safety Partnership.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure why is she not taking action against British Telecom after damaging footpaths across North Down.

(AQW 17667/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As I have explained previously, 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. While it is acknowledged that the use of a bitmac track through flags has a visual impact, it does comply with the relevant standards and therefore enforcement action would not be appropriate.

Given the extensive scale of the current programme of works being undertaken by BT, the Department does not have sufficient resources to upgrade / resurface all of 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 once the maintenance / warranty period has expired.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has received concerns from the 26 county authorities over their utilization of online theory testing.

(AQW 17672/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My officials in the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) have advised that they have received no concerns from the Road Safety Authority in the South over their utilisation of online theory testing.

As advised in my answer to AQW 16191/17-22, this matter has been fully explored by the DVA and the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency and discounted because of the issues with security and accessibility.

Following the lifting of Executive restrictions, theory testing has now resumed on 23 April 2021 and additional capacity is being provided to help address demand. Resources are also now being focused on the replacement theory test service which is due to go live in the autumn. As previously advised, work is continuing to enable a move to online tests when the technology has developed sufficiently to satisfactorily address the security issues.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the Driver and Vehicle Agency intend to bring in additional examiners to help address the testing backlog.

(AQW 17673/17-22)

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.

Additionally, 10 new dual role examiners have been identified for driving examiner training, and the first tranche of these examiners should be available to conduct Category B (private car) driving tests from mid-May. The DVA is also currently progressing an external recruitment competition for 10 new full-time driving examiners, which was publicly advertised on 26 April 2021. These actions will significantly increase capacity to help address demand for driver testing.

I remain committed to minimising disruption and ensuring the DVA's plan for the restoration of services is in hand, and most importantly to protecting the lives of staff and customers during this pandemic.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how she intends to progress the Ulster Canal Greenway scheme to areas such as Benburn.

(AQW 17675/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Ulster Canal Greenway successfully secured €4.9m of funding through the INTERREG VA Territorial Co-operation Programme to construct 22km of cross-border greenway between Smithborough and Middletown. I am informed that the INTERREG VA programme is fully committed, so there is no funding available through the programme to extend the project beyond its current approvals.

The Ulster Canal Greenway from Middletown to Moy (via Benburb) is identified as a secondary greenway route in 'Exercise – Explore – Enjoy: a Strategic Plan for Greenways, published by my Department in 2016.

In 2017, my Department provided Mid Ulster District Council with a small grant to develop a feasibility study along the proposed greenway route that would, where feasible, follow the alignment of the old Ulster Canal.

My Walking and Cycling Champion wrote to Councils last year seeking an update on their greenway proposals. Mid Ulster District Council indicated that the Ulster Canal Greenway (Caledon to Moy) would not be ready for construction until 2025.

I am keen to work with Councils and with all stakeholders in order to provide better infrastructure and deliver on projects that have the potential to improve the lives of people and connect communities. I would encourage Councils to continue the momentum for delivery of greenways and advance their projects through meaningful local consultation and engagement with landowners.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on work to assess the proposal for a pedestrian path from St Ita's Primary School to Cairnshill Park and Ride.

(AQW 17707/17-22)

Ms Mallon: It is recognised that many parents and carers dropping off pupils at St Ita's Primary School regularly park in the Park & Ride site. In order to better facilitate this arrangement my officials have earmarked a section of the car park for this purpose and this allows children to walk to school without having to cross any roads. While there are no plans at this time to provide a pedestrian path from St Ita's Primary School to Cairnshill Park & Ride, I have asked officials to keep this under review.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the proposal for a link road from Belvoir to Cairnshill, as mentioned in the Belfast Area Metropolitan Plan, remains live or has been abandoned.

(AQW 17708/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The proposed link road between Cairnshill, at the Park and Ride site, and Belvoir Road on the A55 Outer Ring, remains live. It is included in the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan as a future scheme and although development of it has not advanced, there are currently no plans to abandon it.

My Department is currently bringing forward a suite of new Transport Plans, including the new Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP), which will take account of the growth ambitions of the local Councils within the Belfast Metropolitan Area's catchment (BMA).

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 possible improvements to local roads. Amongst other measures the new BMTP will include the routes identified in the soon to be published Belfast Cycling Network.

The BMTP will be integrated with the formal Local Development Plan processes, and as such the timescales for the completion of the Draft Plan and its release for public consultation are still under review.

I am determined to use these Transport Plans to better connect our population and businesses in a sustainable way, and help power our Green Recovery.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure why the Ulsterbus branding has been removed from the new Goldline vehicles in operation for Ulsterbus.

(AQW 17731/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Goldline service has been marketed separately to Ulsterbus from the late 1990's and has a separate logo that is used across many communications platforms including timetables, advertising, website and livery.

The "Translink Goldline" logo has been used from around 2004 and is in place on the new Goldline vehicles recently introduced into the fleet in the Coleraine area. This change followed a major review of services in 2004 when a new fleet of Goldline Double Decker accessible vehicles were introduced across the North with a significant step up in frequency also put in place.

The use of 'Translink (sub-brand name, e.g. Goldline)' logos on buses and coaches highlights the integration of all Translink services and seeks to enhance Translink's visibility across Northern Ireland whilst efficiently and effectively promoting the integration of all services and making services more relevant and understood.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the current cost attached to the York Street Interchange scheme.

(AQW 17737/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The York Street Interchange project is a Strategic Road Improvement scheme that will provide a fully grade separated interchange to replace the existing at-grade signal controlled junction of the A12 Westlink, M2 and M3. As a multi-million pound scheme it is a hugely significant project for the economic and societal well-being not just for Belfast, but for the region.

The expenditure to date for the York Street Interchange scheme is approximately £21m. It is important to note that the project, currently in development, is an extremely complex civil engineering project in a constrained and congested urban environment with extensive underground and overhead structures in an area of poor ground conditions. The costs associated with the development of the York Street Interchange scheme are in line with expectations for a major infrastructure project of this magnitude and complexity.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will (i) implement a trial for one hour free on-street car parking in Newry city centre; and (ii) engage with Newry Business Improvement District and local business groups urgently on this issue.

(AQW 17758/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Current Electric Vehicle (EV) Infrastructure

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the current electric vehicle (EV) infrastructure is adequate; and for her assessment of whether Northern Ireland has the potential to lag in EV adoption compared to other European regions, due to the availability of charging facilities.

(AQW 17775/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The most recent Department for Transport (DfT) data available indicates that there were 4,186 electric vehicles registered at 30 September 2020 in Northern Ireland. The EV public charge point network is owned by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and is operated on a commercial basis. 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 recently confirmed that it plans to replace approx. 60 charge points i.e. 30 charge posts and a further 5 Rapid charge points to upgrade and improve the reliability of the existing public network. I recently met with ESB to discuss what is required in order to ensure the current network is reliable and remains fit for purpose. 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. It is anticipated, however, that where possible the majority of EV charging should be carried out at home with the use of a home charge point.

I fully recognise the importance of having modern, reliable public electric vehicle charging infrastructure in providing confidence for users of ultra-low emission vehicles (ULEVs) and in respect of the connectivity improvements this would bring. My Department is, therefore, taking a number of actions in respect of the charge point infrastructure, including:

- introducing changes to the planning system, through permitted development rights, to make it easier to expand the charging infrastructure for electric vehicles which came into operation on 21 December 2020;
- contributing circa. £450,000 of match funding towards the EU INTERREG VA Funded FASTER electric vehicle network project to install a total of 73 EV Rapid charging points across the island of Ireland and the West of Scotland by 31 March 2023; and
- engaging with the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV) and the Energy Saving Trust (EST), who administer the On-street Residential Charge Point Scheme (ORCS), to provide charge points for residents without off-street parking, and to ensure the scheme can be accessed by councils in the North.

My Department has also been leading a Transport Working Group, set up to inform the transport elements of the Department for the Economy's Energy Strategy currently under development and consultation. A number of key areas have been identified for consideration including the electrification of transport and the charging infrastructure required to support the uptake of electric vehicles. As part of this work, my Department has commissioned research to consider future demand for charge points in Northern Ireland.

Following the British Government's announcement that it is bringing forward its plans to ban sales of new diesel and petrol vehicles in the UK to 2030, I have also written to British Ministers to seek clarity on what funding will be provided to support the North in delivering greener, cleaner transport.

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 Dickson asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the level of electric vehicle adoption in Northern Ireland, in comparison to other parts of Europe.

(AQW 17776/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There is no readily available comparable data for Northern Ireland and other parts of Europe in terms of the level of electric vehicle adoption. The latest statistics from DVLA/DfT show that the number of ultra-low emission vehicles (ULEVs) registered for the first time in Northern Ireland has increased each year to 2020.

The most recent Department for Transport (DfT) data indicates that there are 4,186 electric vehicles currently registered at 30 September 2021 in Northern Ireland. In the first nine months of 2020, 1052 Ultra Low Emission Vehicles (ULEVs) were registered in NI, an 82% increase for the whole of the previous year. This demonstrates a significant increase in uptake and is an encouraging sign as we make the transition to 2030 when the ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel vehicles will be introduced.

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 Lunn asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there is a timescale for commencement of repairs to the Gilchrist Bridge at Edenderry.

(AQW 17796/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Work to repair Gilchrist Bridge as a matter of urgency was initiated in the week commencing Monday 19th April 2021. This work has been completed and the bridge is fully reopened.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure what consideration is being given to the provision of rail halts at both Belfast International and City of Derry Airports to further boost NIR passenger numbers and tourist infrastructure.

(AQW 17806/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am ambitious for our rail network, and am keen to do all that I can to explore how we can progress rail improvements within the limited budgetary envelope that we have available to us.

The All Island Strategic Rail Review, which Minister Ryan and I recently announced, will allow us to consider our network across this island to view how we can improve it for everyone. Whilst it reflects the commitment under the New Decade, New Approach agreement of the Irish and British Governments to examine the feasibility of a high/higher speed rail link between Derry, Belfast, Dublin and Cork, Minister Ryan and I have a shared ambition for rail and commitment to tackling the climate emergency, and we are keen that we use this opportunity to consider how we can improve our rail network across the island of Ireland.

To achieve this, the All Island Rail Review will examine the potential for rail connections across the island including how our existing connections could be improved and where new rail links would be best placed. It will also review how we can connect our rail network to our international gateways through our ports and airports. This work will include consideration of rail halts to the Belfast International and City of Derry airports. I want to ensure that any proposals for changes to the rail network include operational and financial viability and have a very clear focus on the part that rail can play in growing our all-

island economy, while improving the ability of people to connect with and access opportunities, and addressing longstanding regional imbalances.

I have also commissioned a feasibility study to examine the possibility of introducing additional stops on the Coleraine to Derry line. Whilst the exact location of the halts has yet to be determined, the sites being considered are at Strathfoyle; Eglinton/City of Derry Airport and Ballykelly.

My Department is also 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, including links to key gateways such as our ports and airports. 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.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her plans for the deployment of Traffic Attendants and reduction in the use of Coronavirus Job Retention Furlough in line with the easing of COVID-19 restrictions and the associated increase in vehicle movements.

(AQW 17816/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In response to increasing traffic levels, some more Traffic Attendants (TAs) will be brought back from furlough by the service provider, NSL, in the coming weeks. This is in line with my decision to scale back parking enforcement with TAs deployed on a priority basis to locations where they can contribute most to road safety and traffic progression. My Department is currently considering when parking enforcement will be returned to pre-lockdown levels.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail NI Waters funding requirements for the first year of PC21; and whether her Department will be able to meet those requirements.

(AQW 17817/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Utility Regulator's Final Determination is intended to be published on the 13 May 2021, and this will outline the level of funding NI Water requires for the first year of PC21. I will be best placed to confirm my Department's ability to meet the funding requirement once we have an agreed final determination.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 17025/17-22, (i) to detail the date when the sale price for land at Portavoe Reservoir was established; and (ii) whether no nominal sale price was discussed with the local council in any pre-sale discussions.

(AQW 17825/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has advised:

- (i) the date the sale price for land at Portavoe Reservoir was established was 21 March 2019; and
- (ii) it is not aware of a nominal sale price being discussed with the local council.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what actions she intends to take after a firm received preferential treatment by her Department in 2015 during the procurement process for road works.

(AQW 17830/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Department is currently considering the Court's judgment with its legal advisors, after which I will be considering the next steps with my Permanent Secretary.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 17460/17-22 and in light of the potential for future lockdown restrictions, whether her Department has started working on a process to facilitate remote driving theory tests.

(AQW 17836/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Driving theory tests are currently delivered here via a network of six theory test centres; Ballymena, Belfast, Derry, Newry, Omagh and Portadown. An additional temporary test centre, which will be located in Ballymena, will also be opened soon to help address the increased demand caused by lockdown restrictions. 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.

Resources are now fully focused on the replacement theory test service which is due to go live in the autumn. However, work is continuing to enable a move to online tests when the technology has developed sufficiently to satisfactorily address the security issues.

Ms Brogan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what engagement has been made between residents of Glencam Road, Omagh and Translink to establish a bus service to and from Omagh Town and essential services.
(AQW 17911/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have been advised that a local Councillor has contacted Translink to arrange a meeting with the Glencam Road Residents to discuss a bus service to the local area.

Translink is in the process of arranging this meeting and will work towards finding solutions to serve the residents of Glencam Road.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the status of resurfacing contracts in each local council area.
(AQO 1938/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Northern Ireland is covered by twelve term contracts for asphalt resurfacing work, generally one for each Council district, with two in Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area.

Four of these contracts have now expired and need to be renewed; in Newry Mourne and Down, Mid Ulster, Derry and Strabane, and Omagh. The remaining eight contracts are operational and are currently being used to deliver resurfacing projects.

A procurement competition has been run to replace the expired contracts and letters providing notice of a decision to award four contracts were sent to tenderers in early March 2021, in accordance with the Public Contracts Regulations 2015. Writs of Summons were subsequently issued on behalf of three of the unsuccessful tenderers, thereby preventing the Department from awarding any of the four contracts at this time. Officials are in contact with Departmental legal advisors to progress options for addressing this obstacle.

Every effort will be made to resolve this matter expeditiously, in a manner that will permit a significant programme of resurfacing works in the affected areas over the remainder of this new financial year. You will appreciate that as this is a live procurement competition, subject to legal challenge, I am unable to provide further comment on this aspect.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) to detail the plans her Department has to develop greenway infrastructure in South Down; and (ii) what funding opportunities exist for the delivery of community greenway projects.
(AQW 17958/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In November 2016, my Department published 'Exercise – Explore – Enjoy: a Strategic Plan for Greenways'. This strategy identified the key role of Councils in the delivery of a greenway network and provided a framework to assist them to develop their own local schemes as part of that greenway network for the entire region.

In 2016/17, my Department provided Newry, Mourne and Down District Council with funding for a number of feasibility studies for greenway routes from Comber to Downpatrick; Downpatrick to Newcastle; and Downpatrick to Ardglass. Funding was also provided for a detailed design for the route from Comber to Downpatrick and onwards to Newcastle (2018/19). The member may wish to request an update directly with the Council on these schemes.

In terms of funding, my Walking and Cycling Champion wrote to all Councils last year, seeking an update on their greenway proposals to encourage them to continue the momentum for delivery of greenways and to advance their projects through meaningful local consultation and engagement with landowners. Last year I announced funding of £3.7 million for greenway schemes right across the North and I have invited Councils to submit business cases to secure further capital funding for any schemes that they wish to start building this financial year.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) what plans her Department has to address the ongoing waste water capacity issues in Drumaness; and (ii) how much is being spent in South Down in 2021/2022 to upgrade existing waste water facilities.
(AQW 17959/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) NI Water has advised me that an upgrade for the Drumaness WwTW forms part of its PC21 Business Plan submission. Within the PC21 Wastewater Treatment Programme, Drumaness WwTW represents an investment of approximately £3 million. Assuming funding is made available to NI Water to progress the project as planned, and there are no land acquisition requirements, an upgrade of Drumaness WwTW is currently scheduled for completion in year 4 of PC21 i.e. 2024/2025.

In terms of investment in wastewater facilities for South Down, NI Water advises me that there are 3 projects, with an expected investment of approximately £2.7m in 2021/22 in this region. These are:

- (ii) (1) Dundrum Drainage Area Plan (£1.4m), (2) Drumaness WwTW (£50k for consultancy when the project starts at the end of this year) and (3) Warrenpoint WwTW Phase 2 (£1.3m). A portion of NI Water's 2021/22 base maintenance programme is also expected to benefit the South Down area.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 17405/17-22, how many requests has her Department received for the translation of documents into (i) Irish; and (ii) Ulster Scots in each of the last three years.
(AQW 18047/17-22)

Ms Mallon: During the years 2018, 2019 and 2020 my Department received no Ulster Scots translation requests. The table below outlines the number of Irish translation requests during the three year period.

2018	2019	2020
4	4	0

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure why parking attendants cannot be deployed to enforce parking restrictions in Helen's Bay (i) before 9am; (ii) after 5pm; and (iii) on Sundays.
(AQW 18065/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In the North Down enforcement area, the normal working hours of Traffic Attendants is Monday to Saturday, 8:00 am – 6.30pm. Actual enforcement hours are less than this due to the time needed for vehicle checks and travel to and from sites. Enforcement outside of these times is possible but as it comes with an additional charge to the Department, it is used only when absolutely necessary.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her engagement with the Irish Government on all-island transport.
(AQO 1946/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In recent months, I have had a number of very productive discussions with the Irish Transport Minister, Minister Ryan T.D. and the Taoiseach on delivering on our shared commitments.

I very much welcome the Taoiseach's October 2020 announcement that €500m 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 transport infrastructure initiatives including the A5, the Ulster Canal, cross-border greenways and Narrow Water Bridge.

Minister Ryan and I have formally announced an All Island Strategic Rail Review. This Review will allow us to consider the rail network across this island and how we can improve it. Whilst it reflects the commitment under 'New Decade, New Approach' to examine the feasibility of a high/higher speed rail link between Belfast, Dublin and Cork, Minister Ryan and I are keen that we use this opportunity to consider how we can improve our rail network across the whole island. I am committed to continuing to work with the Irish Government to ensure delivery for our citizens across our island.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has any plans to revise the criteria applied to applications for street lighting in rural areas.
(AQO 1945/17-22)

Ms Mallon: To ensure objectivity and consistency my Department uses two main criteria when considering the provision of street lighting in rural areas:

- The density of housing within a community, including public buildings with significant night time use and
- Road safety, where street lighting would contribute to a reduction in the number of night-time collisions.

These criteria serve to balance the demand for more rural lighting against the unwelcome effects of increased urbanisation of the countryside, the environmental impact of night sky light pollution on people, wildlife and flora and the financial costs of providing and maintaining additional public lighting installations.

Given that the current policy provides a good balance between safety, environmental and financial needs, there are no current plans to change this policy which also reflects the policy adopted by previous Ministers.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what action she is taking to improve the condition of our rural roads network.
(AQO 1944/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There has been historical under-investment in our road network for a significant number of years and as a result many rural roads are in need of repairs. In response, I allocated £10m of my 2020-21 Capital budget specifically towards rural roads. This funding allowed targeting of many short lengths of roads that were in particularly poor condition and it is currently estimated that over 650 locations on the rural road network will have benefitted from this funding.

Looking to 2021-22, as part of the Budget information gathering exercises, I highlighted a requirement of £120m for Capital Structural Maintenance. I am currently considering the allocation of my capital budget for 2021-22 but would confirm that I am committed to setting up a further rural roads fund.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on Mid and East Antrim Borough Council's Local Development Plan 2030 Draft Plan Strategy.

(AQO 1943/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Mid and East Antrim Borough Council submitted their draft Plan Strategy to the Department on 29th March 2021. The Department must cause an Independent Examination to be heard by the Planning Appeals Commission (in accordance with Section 10(4) the Planning Act 2011), unless it intends to make a direction under section 11(2) or 15(1) of the Act to direct the council to withdraw or modify a development plan document.

Whilst not set out in legislation, my Department's Development Plan Practice Note (DPPN) 10 'Submitting Development Plan Documents for Independent Examination' indicates that it will take approximately 8 weeks to consider whether to cause the Independent Examination (IE). My officials are currently considering the MEABC draft Plan Strategy submission.

I welcome the progress that Mid and East Antrim Borough Council is making in developing its framework for planning decisions to be taken for the next 15 years within the local Council area.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on rail connectivity.

(AQO 1940/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am ambitious for our rail network, and am keen to do all that I can to explore how we can progress rail improvements within the limited budgetary envelope that I have available to me. For too long, there has not been enough ambition for the opportunities for rail right across our island. As Minister I want to change that, so that we can better connect our communities, open up opportunities for our island economy and rise to the challenge of tackling the climate emergency. That is why earlier this month I, along with my counterpart Eamon Ryan, announced the All Island Strategic Rail Review which will consider how the rail network on the island of Ireland can improve sustainable connectivity between major cities, enhance regional accessibility, and support balanced regional development.

I have also publicly stated my commitment to Phase 3 of the Coleraine to Derry line improvements, and allocated funding to take forward a feasibility study into increased frequency of rail services. I am keen to get our rail back on track so that we can help our communities to grow and prosper and tackle regional imbalance particularly in the North West. The recently completed Multi Modal Transport Hub in Derry will also provide a step change in public transport services in Derry and the wider North West.

Translink also recently took delivery of the first three of the 21 new rail carriages which will allow us to increase capacity, operating more six carriage trains on busy routes at key times of the day. This will help address the demand for train travel as more people make it their first choice for travel to work, study, shopping, health and leisure activities.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline how the Driver and Vehicle Agency plans to address the significant backlog of applicants seeking driving tests.

(AQO 1941/17-22)

Ms Mallon: On 15 April, the Executive agreed that driving tests can resume from 23 April, with appropriate mitigations in place. I announced in January that bookings for driving tests will open in three phases based on the expiry dates of theory test pass certificates, to give priority to those who have been waiting for the longest time. The booking service opened for Phase 1 customers today, whose theory test pass certificates will expire by 31 October 2021. The booking system for Phase 2 customers, whose theory test pass certificates will expire between 1 November 2021 and 31 March 2022, will open on 4 May 2021.

The DVA plans to open the booking service for all other customers in mid-May and they will issue further communications through nirect and social media channels, and write to all Approved Driving Instructors to confirm the process and the exact date.

The DVA has, and continues, to work hard to increase its capacity by recruiting additional examiners and will be offering evening appointments as we move into the brighter nights. They will continue to offer driving tests on a Saturday and driving tests for Heavy Goods Vehicles on Sundays where it is suitable to do so without compromising the integrity of the test. Overtime will also be used to rota off-shift dual role driving examiners to provide further capacity. Additional slots are therefore being made available for May, June and July to accommodate more learners.

The Department, the DVA and I remain committed to minimising disruption and ensuring our plan for the restoration of services is in hand, and most importantly remain committed to protecting the lives of staff and customers during this pandemic.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to extend the Belfast Storm Water Tunnel from Upper Lisburn Road to Musgrave Park to facilitate progress on the drainage schemes for Sicily Park and Marguerite Park.

(AQO 1942/17-22)

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. Proposed measures in the plan include more significant investment on hard-engineered infrastructure such as large drainage pipes, alongside greener drainage solutions such as river floodplain restoration works.

The hard-engineered infrastructure proposals in the plan include a significant sewerage improvement programme to alleviate flooding in the Upper Lisburn Road area. I am advised by NI Water that construction work on Phase 1 of this programme commenced this month and involves the construction of 1.3km of new sewer to increase the capacity of the existing network. This will reduce the risk of out-of-sewer flooding and environmental pollution within the Marguerite Park area. The scheme will take over two years to complete at a cost of £8million.

The out-of-sewer flooding in the Sicily Park area will be addressed by Phase 2 of this programme which involves the extension of the Belfast Stormwater Tunnel from Glenmachan Street to Musgrave Park. NI Water has included this scheme in its PC21 Business Plan submission to the Utility Regulator for the next six years. If funded, it is anticipated that construction of this work will take place during the PC21 period, subject to all statutory approvals being in place. In the meantime, NI Water will continue to monitor the sewerage network within this area, particularly during periods of heavy rainfall and undertake any required routine maintenance.

Department of Justice

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Justice to detail the alternative options for firearm certificate renewals in the instance of an applicant with no access to computers or the internet.

(AQW 17270/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): The term 'renewal' is not used for firearm applications. Under the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2004 automatic renewals are not permitted. All applications for continued possession of firearms will be subject to a further grant process. Applications are made to the Chief Constable for the grant of a firearm certificate under Article 4 of the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2004.

The administration of the application scheme is a matter for the PSNI Firearms and Explosives Branch who has advised that there are a number of firearm dealerships, shooting clubs and organisations with facilities to enable applicants to submit an online application. PSNI FEB can provide more detail on the alternative arrangements available if needed.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the reform of minimum sentencing in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 17296/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department's review of sentencing policy in Northern Ireland has resulted in 54 recommendations, based upon the responses received to the consultation, which I have agreed.

My officials briefed the Justice Committee on the proposed way forward on Thursday 15 April. The report on the way forward setting out my decisions was published on 21 April 2021 and can be seen at <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/sentencing-review-policy-way-forward>.

Preparatory work for new legislation to implement a large number of the decisions will now be progressed, with a view to introduction of a dedicated Sentencing Bill early in the next mandate.

The sentencing review did not consider reform of minimum sentencing in Northern Ireland. Sentences determined by the courts rely on the judge having discretion to consider all of the facts presented during a trial – imposing minimum sentencing requirements would potentially fetter such discretion.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Justice to detail the funding provided by her Department to voluntary and charitable groups in South Down, in each of the last three years, for each of the publicly available funding streams.

(AQW 17305/17-22)

Mrs Long: The funding provided by my Department to voluntary and charitable groups in South Down from publicly available streams, and from Departmental grant funding, in each of the last three financial years, is outlined in the tables below:

Groups who operate in South Down:

Organisation	Funding Stream	2018-19 £	2019-20 £	2020-21 £
1st Rathfriland Boys Brigade	Assets Recovery Community Scheme	0	6,862	5,722
Life Change Changes Lives - Downpatrick	Assets Recovery Community Scheme	17,800	63,560	63,560

Organisation	Funding Stream	2018-19 £	2019-20 £	2020-21 £
SPACE (Supporting People and Community Enterprise) - Newry	Assets Recovery Community Scheme	0	20,000	0
The Cabbage Patchers - Warrenpoint	Assets Recovery Community Scheme	0	2,700	0
Sport and Thought Programme - Newry	Departmental Resource Grant Funding	3,360	0	0
Mourne Mountain Rescue Team	Departmental Resource Grant Funding	14,000	18,500	12,400
Mourne Mountain Rescue Team	Departmental Capital Grant Funding	0	23,260	0

Groups who have a based in South Down but provide services across Northern Ireland:

Organisation	Funding Stream	2018-19 £	2019-20 £	2020-21 £
Search and Rescue Dogs Association	Departmental Resource Grant Funding	7,000	18,500	9,050
Search and Rescue Dogs Association	Departmental Capital Grant Funding	0	26,500	0
Community Service Rescue	Departmental Resource Grant Funding	16,000	0	21,000
Community Service Rescue	Departmental Capital Grant Funding	0	32,000	0

My Department also provides funding to a number of Voluntary Organisations who provide Northern Ireland wide services, including the South Down Constituency. Records are not kept in a manner that would make it possible to break funding provided into individual constituencies.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice how much her Department has spent on producing material in Irish, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 17312/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department in July 2020 spent £7.56 on translating the departmental logo into Irish and Ulster Scots for use on official documents and publications. The cost cannot be split.

There was no further expenditure on producing materials in Irish, in each of the last three financial years from 2018-19 to 2020-21.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Justice whether her Department holds data on the number of liquor licences the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service has transferred from pub to off-sale licences, in each of the last 10 years.

(AQW 17356/17-22)

Mrs Long: Pub Liquor Licence s

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Justice (i) whether her Department holds data on the current number of operational public houses that have been granted a pub liquor licence by the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service; and (ii) the number for each of the last ten years.

(AQW 17357/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department holds data on the number of pub liquor licences in force in each of the last 10 years and this is set out in the table below.

2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
1426	1252	1273	1326	1309	1298	1210	1216	1222	1224

However, the Department cannot say whether or not these premises are currently operational.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Justice how many court cases have been held without juries in each of the last 5 years.
(AQW 17380/17-22)

Mrs Long: The number of Non-Jury Crown Court cases disposed in each of the last five years is given in the table below.

	Non-Jury Cases
2016	12
2017	9
2018	18
2019	14
2020	9

The figures relate to those cases for which a non-jury certificate has been issued under the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007.

The data for 2020 are provisional.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Justice to outline what action has been taken to resolve the 2019/20 pay dispute for workers at the probation Board for Northern Ireland
(AQW 17381/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Probation Board submitted a pay remit for operational staff to the Department in November 2020. Normally the pay remit process is straightforward and concluded in a shorter timeframe. However, PBNI's decision to seek an award above that allowed for in the public sector pay policy has meant that the evidence required to justify such an award needs to be more substantive to satisfy the requirements of the policy.

Our approach has been to work constructively with PBNI to help them identify and develop that evidence. This has been a long, but necessary, process.

The Department have now given approval for the pay remit to go formally to DoF for their consideration.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Justice (i) to detail the number of so-called punishment attacks that have taken place per constituency, in each of the last five years; and (ii) what actions her Department and the PSNI are taking to address this issue.
(AQW 17386/17-22)

Mrs Long: Information on offences reported to the police and associated statistics, including those on the number of paramilitary attacks 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 wish to note that the PSNI publish security statistics, including detail on paramilitary attacks at the following link:
<https://www.psni.police.uk/inside-psni/Statistics/security-situation-statistics/>.

Dealing with paramilitary attacks in our communities is a societal issue that requires a sustained response from across all government departments. It is vital that the Executive continues to take a collaborative approach to support individuals at risk and addressing the underlying issues that can make our communities vulnerable to paramilitary influence and harm.

My Department co-ordinates the cross Executive Action Plan to Tackle Paramilitary Activity, Criminality, and Organised Crime. There are a number of initiatives under the Action Plan which are aimed at supporting vulnerable people and communities, including support for young people and multi-agency initiatives. Details can be found in the latest update report:

<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/executive-action-plan-delivery-updates-tackling-paramilitary-activity>

In addition to the Executive Action Plan, my Department provides funding of £1.8m to Victim Support Northern Ireland to provide a range of support services to all victims and witnesses of crime, including the victims of these attacks. These services include the provision of emotional support, advocacy, information and advice to victims; assistance with claiming Criminal Injuries Compensation; and ongoing help and support to witnesses.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the current waiting times for cases to be heard at the Magistrates' Court and Courts; and (ii) how many cases are currently with the Public Prosecution Service.
(AQW 17398/17-22)

Mrs Long: The most recent published figures available refer to Criminal Cases dealt with in the Magistrates' Courts in Northern Ireland for the year 1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020. Of these cases, the median time taken from receiving a PPS decision to first appearance at court was 40 days. This includes cases dealt with at both Adult and Youth Magistrates' Courts.

In relation to part (ii) of the question, the Department does not hold the information requested. The recording of information on numbers of cases currently being dealt with by the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) is a matter for the PPS.

You may, therefore, wish to direct this part of your question to the PPS.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Justice, given that so many of her departmental staff are working from home, often in rural locations with substandard connections, whether her Department will consider covering the costs incurred by his staff to install superfast broadband, or available alternatives, in their homes.

(AQW 17422/17-22)

Mrs Long: Guidance has been made available to all staff within my Department on "Working from Home" in response to the pandemic.

The guidance explains that reimbursement for any additional cost of increased broadband data charges, incurred solely as a result of working from home, will be considered. Furthermore, where appropriate, having considered IT alternatives available, such as provision of a Data Sim for laptops or Wifi device for desktop computers, and where these are found to be unsuitable, the Department may reimburse the additional cost of installing broadband at home and monthly tariffs on the basis that the charges incurred are solely related to working from home.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice for an update on funding for Phase 2 of the Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality, and Organised Crime Programme for the financial year 2021/22.

(AQW 17431/17-22)

Mrs Long: As advised in AQW/14913/17-22, the Programme has been allocated £8m from the Executive and £5m allocation from UKG for 2021/22. It has also received a £10m allocation from New Decade New Approach (NDNA) funding which the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) has indicated 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.

The Programme Board made its financial allocations to projects on 1 March 2021 and I wrote to the Executive and the Justice Committee on 2 March advising of those allocations. All projects have now received Letters of Offer from the Programme Team and should be in a position to continue or commence delivery, subject to any relevant processes, such as business case development or procurement. Departments in receipt of funding from the Programme are responsible for delivery of those projects and reporting on achievement of outcomes.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Justice to confirm the number of offences relating to child abuse that have occurred over each of the past two years in Northern Ireland, Belfast and East Belfast.

(AQW 17509/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department does not hold the information requested. The recording of information on offences related to child abuse which have been reported to the police 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 Easton asked the Minister of Justice for an update on bringing forward legislation to introduce Helen's Law to Northern Ireland.

(AQW 17601/17-22)

Mrs Long: A focussed review of the position in Northern Ireland is nearing completion. I will consider my next steps upon receipt of my officials' report and recommendations following the completion of their engagement with key stakeholders.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister of Justice how many of the 253 recommendations from the Gillen Review Report into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland have been fully implemented.

(AQW 17686/17-22)

Mrs Long: Good progress has been made towards implementation of the 253 recommendations from the Gillen Review Report. As with other sectors across Northern Ireland and beyond, Covid-19 has had an impact upon the pace of delivery, however, it remains a key priority for me and my Department.

While more work needs to be done, almost 75% of recommendations are either fully implemented or in train (14% fully completed and 60% actively in train and at various stages of development).

We are starting to see the impact of these reforms with the establishment of temporary Remote Evidence Centres in Belfast and Craigavon, the launch of a Sexual Offences Legal Advice pilot for adult complainants on 1 April and other positive developments in relation to Case Progression Officers, Achieving Best Evidence, disclosure and training.

The transformational change stemming from the review cannot be implemented without the support of justice partners and other Executive departments meaning that a collaborative approach is needed. I am working hard to strengthen and progress this collaborative approach and have recently met with both the Education and Health Ministers. A system wide change is required, so the biggest challenge is ensuring that things are staged properly and that change is embedded permanently, both in processes, but also in culture.

I remain fully committed to achieving the transformational and cultural change envisaged by Sir John in his report.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister of Justice when applications for the Troubles-related Incident Victims Payment scheme will open.

(AQW 17688/17-22)

Mrs Long: Mr Justice McAlinden, President of the Victims' Payments Board, has announced his intention to open the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme for applications from 30 June 2021.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Justice how many of the recommendations from the Gillen Review Report into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland have been fully implemented.

(AQW 17780/17-22)

Mrs Long: Good progress has been made towards implementation of the 253 recommendations from the Gillen Review Report. As with other sectors across Northern Ireland and beyond, Covid-19 has had an impact upon the pace of delivery, however, it remains a key priority for me and my Department.

While more work needs to be done, almost 75% of recommendations are either fully implemented or in train (14% fully completed and 60% actively in train and at various stages of development).

We are starting to see the impact of these reforms with the establishment of temporary Remote Evidence Centres in Belfast and Craigavon, the launch of a Sexual Offences Legal Advice pilot for adult complainants on 1 April and other positive developments in relation to Case Progression Officers, Achieving Best Evidence, disclosure and training.

The transformational change stemming from the review cannot be implemented without the support of justice partners and other Executive departments meaning that a collaborative approach is needed. I am working hard to strengthen and progress this collaborative approach and have recently met with both the Education and Health Ministers. A system wide change is required, so the biggest challenge is ensuring that things are staged properly and that change is embedded permanently, both in processes, but also in culture.

I remain fully committed to achieving the transformational and cultural change envisaged by Sir John in his report.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Justice what procedures are in place to deal with graffiti that names an individual and suggests they may be targeted by violence or a murder attempt.

(AQW 17823/17-22)

Mrs Long: Graffiti removal is the responsibility of the landowner. Public bodies such as Councils, the Housing Executive and Government Departments tend to have well developed procedures in place to ensure the swift removal of such material, whatever its nature. Private landowners are expected to arrange for the removal of graffiti but can often avail of support from local Councils to secure the removal of material that is racist, offensive, intimidating, paramilitary or threatening in nature. On occasion, Policing and Community Safety Partnerships provide funding to Councils towards the costs of removing this particular type of graffiti.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Justice whether she has received any correspondence regarding current detention arrangements at Larne House short term holding facility where females and males are detained in the same facility

(AQO 1957/17-22)

Mrs Long: I have not received any correspondence regarding current detention arrangements at Larne House.

Larne House is an Immigration Removal Centre owned by the Home Office's Border Agency and managed by its escorting services contract provider.

I can advise Immigration is an excepted matter under Schedule 2 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and therefore wholly out with the remit of the NI Assembly and the Department of Justice.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Justice what research her Department has carried out to understand the mental health issues experienced by women within the criminal justice system.

(AQO 1954/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department has not commissioned any research specifically in relation to mental health issues experienced by women within the criminal justice system.

We have however, during the last year, conducted extensive engagement of the women in the Northern Ireland Prison Service's care in support of the development of a range of strategies, including the health-led Mental Health Strategy and the Department's Strategy to Support Women and Girls in Contact with the Justice System. Professor Siobhan O'Neill also met personally with a number of women in our care in her capacity as Interim Mental Health Champion to ensure that their voices were heard and to inform her input to the Mental Health Strategy.

We are very grateful to these individuals, many of whom have lived experience of mental health issues, for sharing their views in order to improve outcomes for others.

The member will be aware that many of those who come into contact with the justice system have a range of unmet or unidentified health needs, many of which are co-existing. This is not a problem which justice alone can fix and a truly integrated, cross-departmental approach is required to systemically address a range of issues which have an impact on mental health - including substance misuse, homelessness, educational underachievement, employability and child poverty.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Justice to outline what measures her Department is taking to address anti-community activity in the Foyle constituency.
(AQO 1955/17-22)

Mrs Long: We all know the impact anti-community activity has on a community, on individuals, and indeed the longer term life-consequences it can have for those who engage in it.

Within my own Department, the Youth Justice Agency has funded a number of programmes in the Foyle area, including work with young people engaged in anti-community behaviour in the Galliagh area.

Youth Justice Agency, in partnership with PSNI, also deliver a Schools Programme, and facilitate the Children Diversion Forum (CDF) in the Foyle constituency. This is an interagency forum to identify and put in place early interventions for those young people who may be at risk of coming into the criminal justice system for anti-community behaviour.

The Derry and Strabane Policing and Community Safety Partnership (PCSP) jointly funded by my Department and the Northern Ireland Policing Board through their annual Action Plan deliver services and initiatives addressing anti community behaviour across the constituency, including ASB hotspot patrols by Community Safety wardens; regular Community Safety Forum meetings across the constituency; as well as funding for local initiatives to tackle ASB, improve youth engagement and raise awareness of drug and alcohol issues.

Through the cross-Executive Tackling Paramilitarism, Crime and Organised Crime Programme, there are a number of early intervention and diversionary programmes which address this issue across the Foyle constituency. These include funding for youth workers to deliver the START project; delivery of WRAP, an educational achievement project, in the Galliagh area; a DfC community pilot project, also in the Galliagh area to work with "at risk" young people and their families; in the Creggan and Brandywell areas the Programme supports an arts and culture project delivered by the Gasyard, a health and well-being project delivered by the Old Library Trust and an employability project delivered by Extern. The Programme also supports agile solutions to prevent young people from getting involved in public order or other vulnerable situations.

There are also a number of non-locality based projects associated with the Programme which are delivering in the Foyle area, including the women's programme and the Aspire programme.

To supplement these interventions, place-based working will be developed further over the coming months and conversations have started with community partners in the Creggan area to identify and work to address shared priorities there, some of which will have a positive impact on anti-community activity.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Justice to confirm the number of domestic abuse offences that have occurred over each of the past two years in Northern Ireland, Belfast and East Belfast.
(AQO 1956/17-22)

Mrs Long: Figures sourced from the Police Service of Northern Ireland indicate that there were 31,848 domestic abuse incidents recorded by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) in Northern Ireland in 2020, a slight increase from the figure of 31,714 recorded in 2019. The number of domestic abuse crimes recorded by PSNI in 2020 was 19,000, up slightly from 18,049 in 2019.

In Belfast City council area, there were 8,283 domestic abuse incidents recorded in 2020, a slight decrease from the figure of 8,468 recorded in 2019. The number of domestic abuse crimes recorded by PSNI in Belfast in 2020 was 4,892, up slightly from 4,666 in 2019.

In the Belfast East constituency, the number of domestic abuse crimes recorded by PSNI in 2019/20 was 874, down slightly from 910 in 2018/19. Figures for the number domestic abuse incidents recorded are not available at this geographical level.

Note:

- 1 Not all domestic abuse incidents will result in the recording of a crime, as what has occurred in the incident may not be of the level of severity that would result in a crime being recorded.
- 2 Figures for Northern Ireland and for Belfast City area are sourced from the PSNI bulletin on Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland – Update to 31 December 2020.
- 3 Figures for the Belfast East constituency are sourced from NINIS part of the NISRA website.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Justice to provide an update on her legislative programme.
(AQO 1958/17-22)

Mrs Long: The ambitious legislative plans that I set out for the remainder of the mandate, upon taking up my position as Minister of Justice in January 2020, are progressing well.

The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill received Royal Assent on 1 March and Departmental officials are now progressing measures to facilitate the implementation of the new powers contained in the Act.

I also have three Bills at Committee Stage in the Assembly: the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill; the Protection from Stalking Bill; and the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill.

The final Bill in my legislative programme is the Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, which will legislate for a number of discrete policy areas that do not come within scope of the other Bills that I have just mentioned.

Drafting of the Justice Bill is now complete and, subject to securing the necessary Executive approvals, my introduction of this Bill to the Assembly in May remains on target.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Justice whether any additional measures are being considered to enable the resettlement into society of women coming out of a custodial setting.

(AQO 1959/17-22)

Mrs Long: I have outlined in the framework for a justice-wide strategy supporting women and girls in contact with the justice system, which has recently been consulted on (closed 12 March), that I think more can be done to take account of the unique needs and situation of women and girls in contact with justice and to grow a culture of openness, partnership, and continuous improvement. The new strategy will seek to enhance measures to support women throughout their contact with the justice system, under three themes, 'Prevention and Diversion', 'In the Community', and 'In Custody and Reintegration'. With the latter including resettlement following custody.

As consultation responses are currently being analysed it is too early to say what specific or additional measures will support women's resettlement. However, I would highlight, as indicated in the framework and supported by responses considered thus far, that the strategy should seek to respond to the range of challenges women face when leaving custody. I anticipate going forward key aspects of this resettlement work will include, but not be limited to, ensuring a smooth transition and through-care to services, and helping them build a strong foundation, develop pro-social relationships, and access appropriate accommodation.

This is not all within the gift of Justice, however the Department of Education, the Department of Health, and the Department for Communities sit on the strategy working group. I will of course also continue to work at a cross-executive level to ensure the needs of women (and men) leaving custody are appropriately considered and represented.

In terms of partners we will also want to consider the recommendations that will emerge from the current inspection that Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland are conducting of 'how the criminal justice system treats females in conflict with the law'. It is my understanding that, in part, this will focus on female's resettlement and transitions from custody.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the Modernisation Delivery Plan for civil and family justice.

(AQO 1960/17-22)

Mrs Long: Good progress is being made on modernisation. I recently shared a draft Delivery Plan detailing my priorities for the remainder of the mandate with the Justice Committee and I hope to publish the Plan in coming weeks.

The Delivery Plan reflects my desire to focus initially on actions which will generate more immediate benefits for citizens and which will help deliver on my two key priorities of making the system more accessible and making the system fairer, more proportionate and more responsive.

A number of workstreams have been developed in fulfilment of those priorities including enhancing information and advice services, modernising structures, enhancing digital delivery and better supporting vulnerable citizens and I am pleased to say that we are already making some headway through the introduction of protections for victims of domestic abuse in the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act, a consultation on county court jurisdiction, the introduction of the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill, a Digital Strategy for Courts and a pilot to test a streamlined approach to the appointment of expert witnesses to address potential causes of delay.

I intend to continue to build on that progress in coming months with, among other steps, a joint DoJ/DOH action plan to encourage the early resolution of private family law disputes, launch of a probate online portal, launch of mediation and online dispute resolution pilots and consultations on the introduction of pro bono cost orders, the extension of Registered Intermediary support to civil proceedings and the introduction of a requirement for court approval for awards of damages for minors.

I intend these initial actions to be the first steps in a programme of continuous improvement and that the Delivery Plan will evolve further as we learn from consultations and concept testing initiatives.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Justice to outline the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on her Department's capital spend in the next five years.

(AQO 1961/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department of Justice has been allocated a Capital Departmental Expenditure Limit (CDEL) budget for the 2021-22 financial year of £96.4m, subject to Assembly debate and vote. This is a one year budget allocation, and is sufficient to meet existing commitments and progress priority projects.

It is difficult to have certainty on the extent of the impact of COVID-19 over the next five years. This will be kept under review.

NI Courts and Tribunals Service will continue to regularly review its operations across its estate, including any Nightingale venues, in conjunction with the Office of the Lord Chief Justice and other justice partners in light of the latest public health advice. On the basis of the latest public health information, it will act appropriately.

PSNI have planned capital expenditure in 2021-22 of £0.6m for estates work connected with physical measures, to help maintain social distancing when dealing with the public on PSNI premises.

Progress against the main capital projects within the Department will be kept under review during 2021-22 via the in-year monitoring process.

During the previous financial year 2020-21, the COVID-19 pandemic did have an impact on capital expenditure by slowing down capital expenditure on a number of projects within areas such as Prisons and Policing.

Department for the Economy

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy how much her Department has spent on producing material in Irish, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 17313/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): My Department made a single payment of £13.52 for Careers Posters to Global Connects in August 2019 for Irish translation services.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether the three reports from external academic experts that were commissioned as part of the strategic energy review have been received by her Department; (ii) when they were received; and (iii) whether her Department has published all three reports; and, if not, why not.

(AQW 17437/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As part of developing the evidence base for the Energy Strategy, four research projects were commissioned and procured. These were awarded to energy consultants Afry and Cornwall Insight, not external academics.

Of these four research reports, one has been finalised. A 'Review of the Strategic Energy Framework' was received by my Department on 23 November 2020 and has been used to inform the development of the Options Consultation. This research will be published in due course as part of our ongoing research publication programme.

Final reports of the remaining three research projects have not yet been received.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister for the Economy whether any of her Department's publications or advertising campaigns since January 2020 use images that have been photoshopped to alter the body of the participants.

(AQW 17447/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: No

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will bring forward legislation to ban the practice of fire and rehire in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 17614/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As Minister with responsibility for employment, I remain active in protecting those immediately affected by the pandemic.

In this regard, I have already introduced legislation to:

- ensure that statutory entitlements connected with redundancy or the termination of employment are based on normal pay, rather than furlough pay;
- allow workers who were unable to take holiday leave as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak to carry over their annual leave into the next two leave years; and
- extend protections against detriment to all workers in relation to any action they may take to protect themselves or others where they reasonably believe there is serious and imminent danger. Currently this health and safety protection is afforded only to employees.

I am also pleased to have been able to make progress towards the introduction of Parental Bereavement Leave and Pay in NI, an important new employment right for those parents in work who suffer the loss of a child. This will be the only piece of employment related primary legislation I will have time to introduce during this mandate.

Nonetheless, I would caution any employer considering giving notice and offering a new contract with revised terms - effectively 'firing and rehiring' the employee. There are still statutory processes to follow. The employer must follow a statutory minimum dismissal procedure. They may have to follow a collective redundancy consultation process if a group of employees is involved.

I would encourage all employers considering changing terms and conditions of employment for staff to consult their staff or their representatives to explain the reasons for their plan and to listen to alternative ideas.

Any employees who believe they have been unfairly dismissed from the original contract may be able to complain to an Industrial Tribunal providing they have at least one year's continuous service with their employer. Employees may also be able to claim redundancy if they have at least two years' service.

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.

Further information may be found at

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/changes-employment-conditions>

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the High Street Voucher Scheme and Holiday at Home Scheme, including any plans on how the schemes will be administered.

(AQW 17616/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The High Street Stimulus and the Holiday at Home Schemes are key components of the Department's Economic Recovery Action Plan to boost demand in our struggling towns, city centres and tourism sector.

The schemes will be launched at a time when it is safe and appropriate to stimulate demand and encourage the public to shop on the high street and use local tourism providers.

The High Street Stimulus Scheme will provide eligible members of the public with a pre-paid card which can be used at 'bricks and mortar' businesses including local retail and hospitality sector outlets.

The Holiday at Home Voucher Scheme will allow NI households to claim back 50% off a stay of two nights or more in NI certified accommodation, up to the value of £100. Vouchers will also be issued, offering 50% off visits to attractions or tourism experience providers, up to the value of £20. Vouchers will be allocated on a first come first served basis and each household can apply for one of each type of voucher. Households can then claim their voucher money back by uploading their receipt and voucher details online.

Media campaigns for both schemes will be launched in due course to encourage members of the public to register for pre-paid cards and vouchers online.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the total number of applications to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (i) received; (ii) approved; (iii) rejected; and (iv) still being, or awaiting to be, processed.

(AQW 17683/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Information in relation to the number of businesses that have applied to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme and received payment can be accessed online via the following webpages:

Part A: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part>

Part B: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part-b>

The information details the number of applications to date based by status (submitted/processed/rejected/paid) and provides a breakdown about the operation of the scheme by District Council area and Parliamentary Constituency. The data is updated on a weekly basis.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme appeals (i) submitted; and (ii) that have been successful.

(AQW 17685/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (Part A & B) has received a total of 8,415 applications. From this 251 have progressed to appeal as at 26 April 2021 – a breakdown is provided in the table below.

Invest NI considers each appeal on its individual merit and endeavours to resolve each in a timely manner. Most appeals relate to eligibility as per the Scheme Guidance, insufficient evidence supplied with original application, late applications, and grant amount awarded.

Scheme	Appeals Received	Appeals Rejected	Appeals Accepted	Appeals Ongoing
CRBSS Part A	79	39	34	6
CRBSS Part B	172	53	80	39

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for the Economy whether the Large Tourism and Hospitality Business Support Scheme will remain available beyond the 30 April 2021 for businesses where, due to no outdoor or reduced capacity, it is not viable to open.

(AQW 17705/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I presented a paper to Executive colleagues on 22 April outlining my recommendation to extend LTHBSS payments in line with current restrictions. The Executive agreed to the extension of the scheme and businesses that are eligible and remain closed will receive payment until this date.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for the Economy what steps his Department is taking to address respiratory issues arising from occupational exposures in the agricultural industry.

(AQW 17748/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The issue of Farmers Occupational Health is being addressed via the ongoing work of the Farm Safety Partnership.

The Farm Safety Partnership is made up of 7 members including The Ulster Farmers Union (UFU), the Northern Irish Agricultural Producers Association (NIAPA), The Young Farmers Clubs of Ulster (YFCU), The National Farmers Union (NFU) Mutual and the Farm Safety Foundation along with The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI).

Within the Partnerships latest action plan (Action Plan 4) the Partnership has highlighted the need to address farmers Occupational Health and has an objective to highlight key areas of occupational health (including mental health) and provide information on risks and how to manage them.

In the first phase the partnership agreed to prioritise Mental Health which should complete later this year with future targeting of other key issues including respiratory health and occupational cancers on completion of this phase.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will put in place financial support for businesses who were eligible for the £10,000 small business grant but have not been eligible for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme or Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme grants, or the top-up grants recently announced by the Minister of Finance, as they are not the ratepayer for their operational premises.

(AQW 17757/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department of Finance's Small Business Support Grant Top-Up Scheme provides a further payment of £5,000 for eligible businesses that received the £10,000 Small Business Grant in 2020 and who have not been paid under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme or the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme Part B. Land & Property Services holds all the relevant information on those businesses who qualified for the £10,000 grant under the Small Business Support Scheme.

My Department has no plans to introduce any new schemes at this time. Rather, my focus is on the full and un-interrupted re-opening of the NI economy. I have listened to many business representatives and employers in recent months, and this has confirmed my belief that the best way to support all of our local businesses is to enable all of our people to commence working and trading as soon as possible, in line with the Executive's roadmap 'Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions', and the associated health regulations.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether (i) Invest NI links approval of capital grant, interest free loans and employment support to the number of jobs to be created; and (ii) if not, what criteria are used.

(AQW 17763/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: All financial support offered by Invest NI is aligned to an agreed set of targets and milestones in a Letter of Offer between Invest NI and the company. Grant payments are only released when the agreed targets/milestones have been met.

In the case of job creation projects, financial support is only released when the jobs have been created. For example, if a company contracts to create 100 jobs, the grant will be structured to be paid out as the company hits regular milestones, such as 25, 50, 75 and 100 jobs. When claiming the grant, the company is required to provide evidence of the existence of the new jobs, such as official payroll details showing salary payments.

Invest NI's capital schemes are mainly used to assist businesses to invest in property, new technology (including energy and resource efficiency technology), machinery and/or equipment which supports job capacity and future growth. Again, a grant is only paid against evidenced and vouched expenditure for defined items in line with the Letter of Offer.

Finally, with regards to the provision of loans to commercial entities, there are only very limited circumstances where Invest NI can provide interest free loans. In Invest NI's Access to Finance Funds is the principal means of providing loan support, and loans are managed and provided on commercial terms. Companies are then held to the terms and conditions clearly outlined in the original loan agreement, including repayment schedule and interest rates payable.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy for a timeline for expanding apprenticeships to all ages, as outlined in the Economic Recovery Action Plan.

(AQW 17777/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am committed to making apprenticeship opportunities at levels 2 and 3 available to more people and sectors by amending the current age-related criteria.

My Department continues to develop this proposal, including engaging with stakeholders across a range of sectors on implementation. I intend to bring forward proposals to make sure this commitment is delivered this year as age should not be a barrier to lifelong learning.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 16923/17-22, for her assessment of (i) the need for energy governance reform; and (ii) whether the complexity identified could undermine the delivery of a zero carbon and sustainable energy future.

(AQW 17778/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In the Energy Strategy Policy Options Consultation which I launched last month, governance is one of six delivery priorities identified to progress energy decarbonisation.

The vision of the Energy Strategy is to achieve 'net zero carbon and affordable energy' by 2050. Building on the clear leadership and effective structures established to develop the Energy Strategy, a strong foundation exists to ensure the delivery of our decarbonised energy future is joined-up across different departments, levels of government and sectors.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy what financial support is available for post-graduate students for the second year of their studies, when their course covers two years, or is extended to a second year.

(AQW 17819/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Currently, Northern Ireland students commencing Postgraduate Certificate, Postgraduate Diploma, or Taught Research Masters courses in the UK are eligible to apply for a non-means tested tuition fee loan of up to £5,500 for their course.

The loan is available for courses of up to three years' duration, and students are free to apportion it as they wish. Any shortfall between the fees charged and loan available must be met by the student.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of circumstances where students enrolled with further education colleges are unable to avail of in-class teaching, whereas students in the same cohort in schools' sixth form colleges are now attending classes in person.

(AQW 17820/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Further Education (FE) colleges have had a different operating model to that of the school sector since the outset of the pandemic. The colleges are required to comply with the phases set out in the Executive's 'Pathway out of Restrictions' which was published on 2 March 2021. Whilst it is my preference that all learners return to face-to-face learning as quickly as possible, it is for the Executive to agree when the colleges can progress through the phases of the Pathway.

Colleges have extensive expertise in delivering quality online learning, more so than many schools do at this time, and are well placed to provide quality online delivery and relevant support through their virtual learning environments. Further, learners are often attracted to the FE college environment because they have not benefited from, nor enjoyed, the school environment. It should be noted that, while some of the subjects and the quality of the provision provided by the colleges is the same as that in schools, the delivery of those courses has never been restricted to that of schools and this has been to the benefit of FE college learners.

The current arrangements are that colleges must deliver distance learning to the maximum extent possible, with essential face-to-face learning taking place only when it is a necessary and unavoidable part of the course. However, much progress has been made in recent weeks with the return to on-site provision for specific groups of learners, to facilitate them to complete practical work and assessments that will enable them to finish their courses and achieve their qualifications. This is being done in a phased way in line with public health advice.

At the Executive meeting on 15 April 2021, it was agreed that those learners who are training in 'close contact' subject areas such as hair and beauty and health and social care could return to on-site training at FE premises from Friday 23 April 2021. Subsequently, the Executive agreed that a move to phase two of the Pathway out of Restrictions, which will enable a partial return to practical face-to-face learning for increased numbers of FE learners, apprentices and Training for Success (TfS) participants, can commence once lateral flow testing (LFT) arrangements are in place in the colleges. It is anticipated that this will be operational in all FE colleges from 10 May. This is a very positive step for learners who will receive the practical learning they require to progress.

Furthermore, I have agreed that school pupils studying at colleges under the Entitlement Framework could return to on-site learning from the week commencing 19 April 2021. This specifically relates to school pupils who are undertaking practical courses including Occupational Studies or other courses with a practical element where assessments or activities to enable the award of a Centre Determined Grade need to be carried out.

I understand that there are concerns over the different operating models in schools and FE colleges for the same cohorts of learners, but no learners will be disadvantaged as a result.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of (i) the mental health and welfare support provided by further education colleges to students vulnerable as a result of the pandemic and related social isolation; and (ii) whether additional funding is needed by colleges to provide this service in a way that meets demand.
(AQW 17821/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Supporting learner welfare and mental health in post-16 learning is, at all times, a key priority for my Department. Further Education (FE) colleges are acutely aware of the impact of the pandemic and social isolation on the mental health and welfare of their learners, and have a range of learner support services available including resilience training, a free counselling service, Health and Well-being Action Plans, and ensuring safeguarding of all learners by providing them with access to the 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 was stepped up in response to Covid-19 to ensure support is available for learners in this period of challenge. Learner Support teams continue to work with curriculum teams to engage with all learners, including those who may not be fully participating.

I met with the Executive's Mental Health Champion Professor Siobhan O'Neill and shared with her details of what the FE sector is doing to support the welfare and mental health of learners. Officials have had subsequent further meetings with Professor O'Neill to further explore how to better support learners in FE, and ensure that mental health support continues to be a priority while remaining responsive to changing and increasing needs of learners.

In addition, Further Education Division is also undertaking a comprehensive review of Student Support in FE, including associated costs. This full review of the collective package of FE Student Support will, amongst other things, seek to identify trends and areas of increased need for mental health and welfare support for students, and make appropriate recommendations for improvement, to help address the impacts of the pandemic and beyond.

My Department will continue to keep FE student support arrangements under review and adapt these as required in response to evolving needs.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy, further to AQW 17593/17-22, to detail the outcome of meetings between her, or her officials, and their counterparts in the Irish government that included discussion on the future participation of Northern Ireland students in Erasmus.
(AQW 17822/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The meetings between Irish Government officials and my officials have provided an opportunity to keep informed of the detail of the Irish Government proposals, so that my officials and I can consider any potential implications from a Northern Ireland perspective. Irish Government officials have committed to providing ongoing updates on this matter and engagement is ongoing.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for the Economy what guidance is being provided to further education colleges to enable students to return to face-to-face teaching.
(AQW 17850/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In June 2020 my Department established an Advisory and Oversight Group (AOG) to work collaboratively with the FE sector to prepare for the safe resumption of on-site educational delivery. The Group developed a guidance document for the sector which has been provided to the colleges and Non Statutory Contractors (NSCs) to advise them on the necessary steps that must be taken to ensure health and safety. The document includes clear direction on the need for individual FE colleges and NSCs to undertake suitable and sufficient risk assessments and to put measures in place to ensure compliance with the latest Public Health Agency (PHA) guidance. It provides a planning framework to support the completion of risk assessments and the development of policies and procedures required to mitigate risks.

This guidance is the "Framework for Safe Resumption of On-Site Educational Provision and Related Activity" document (the Framework) and can be found at Framework for the safe resumption of on-site educational provision and related activity (<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/framework-safe-resumption-site-educational-provision-and-related-activity>).

Most recently my officials engaged with the colleges to identify those groups of learners most at risk of not completing their respective courses this year and to take steps to address this. This applied in particular to learners studying in 'close contact' subject areas, such as hair and beauty, sports studies and service elements of hospitality, who were unable to receive any face-to-face on-site education whilst the wider sector was under occupational operating restrictions.

My officials collaborated with the colleges to produce specific guidance outlining the process that could be implemented in FE colleges and NSCs to mitigate against the risk of infection/transmission of COVID-19 in these training environments, with the aim of allowing learners to return, in order to gain the required training. At the Executive meeting on 15 April it was agreed that those learners training in close contact subjects could return to on-site training at FE premises from Friday 23 April 2021 (to coincide with the lifting of restrictions in the close contact sectors), subject to strict adherence to specific conditions set out in the new guidance document, the Framework document, and site specific risk assessments.

My department is working with the Department of Health to roll out Lateral Flow Device Testing (LFDT) into the FE colleges, which will enable a move to phase two of the 'Pathway out of Restrictions' and a further partial return to practical face-to-face learning for increased numbers of FE learners, apprentices and Training for Success (TfS) participants.

In addition to the work of the AOG, FE Division engages with the College Principals/Chief Executives on a regular and ongoing basis, and officials work in collaboration with the relevant specialist teams within the sector to prepare for the return to on-site face-to-face learning. My officials will continue to engage with the colleges as we progress through the remaining phases of the 'Pathway out of Restrictions' to ensure the best outcomes for learners in a safe environment.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail Invest NI spend on business support and job creation, broken down by constituency, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 17860/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI assistance patterns are demand-led by businesses seeking the agency's support to improve their competitiveness and gain a larger share of international markets. In the case of established businesses, reinvestment patterns will usually be determined by the existing location of the business.

Where a business chooses to locate will be driven by a number of factors including availability of a skilled workforce, infrastructure, size of land required and the location of similar businesses.

The relatively small size of Northern Ireland means that a project assisted in a particular location has the potential to create benefits across a much wider area. Indeed, evidence from the most recent census indicates that many investments draw their workforce from areas beyond constituency and council area boundaries.

The table below shows the amount of assistance that Invest NI has offered towards business support and job creation projects over the past 5 years. This includes support to help businesses grow; ranging 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.

Invest NI Assistance Offered (£m) by Constituency (2015-16 to 2019-20)

PCA	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	Total
Belfast East	4.81	9.84	8.03	19.27	7.77	49.73
Belfast North	4.53	3.83	4.41	4.13	8.10	24.99
Belfast South	11.78	20.92	26.88	25.24	26.31	111.13
Belfast West	1.03	2.71	5.81	2.24	4.87	16.66
East Antrim	1.81	3.06	1.00	2.05	2.61	10.55
East Londonderry	1.39	2.07	2.95	2.53	3.99	12.94
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	4.97	4.14	7.85	3.39	5.04	25.38
Foyle	6.60	4.31	3.05	20.00	3.96	37.92
Lagan Valley	11.86	4.91	6.50	9.17	4.72	37.17
Mid Ulster	8.53	8.12	5.67	5.97	8.69	36.99
Newry & Armagh	4.07	4.71	3.10	9.28	4.83	25.99
North Antrim	4.44	9.68	3.13	2.97	2.07	22.29
North Down	1.14	1.35	1.81	2.02	1.29	7.60
South Antrim	2.74	25.98	6.03	5.09	1.89	41.74
South Down	2.91	2.96	2.98	4.07	3.84	16.76
Strangford	1.77	2.91	2.58	1.79	3.60	12.66
Upper Bann	6.34	7.59	7.22	4.88	11.51	37.55
West Tyrone	5.82	9.44	2.80	2.47	2.45	22.97
Not Determined	0.68	0.18	0.12	0.03	1.59	2.60
Total	87.21	128.71	101.94	126.61	109.13	553.61

Note: In addition to support offered directly to businesses, in the last five years an additional £52.6m was offered to External Delivery Organisations or universities, towards projects or initiatives that will benefit businesses across the whole of Northern Ireland.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy to confirm whether the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme: Part A and Part B will be (i) extended to entitle payments for the period 15 - 30 April 2021; and (ii) issued to eligible applicants for the entire period that the restrictions apply.

(AQW 17903/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I recently announced that further payments under the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme Part A and Part B will continue to be issued to those businesses who remain eligible, up until 23rd May 2021. Eligibility will be dependent on decisions taken by the Executive on the future easing of restrictions.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will seek to improve the delivery of skills training by building linkages between regional colleges and community organisations specialising in providing training for the long term unemployed, by ensuring that these community organisations have representation on the boards of the regional colleges.

(AQW 17905/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The six further education (FE) colleges have and will continue to develop networks and partnerships with local community and voluntary groups to promote and deliver skills. However, the Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 (the FE Order) governs the membership of the Governing Bodies of the six FE colleges in Northern Ireland.

Two thirds of the membership of Governing Bodies are appointed through public recruitment competitions, regulated by the Code of Practice for Ministerial Public Appointments in Northern Ireland. These members are drawn from those who are engaged or employed in business, industry or any profession, which includes the community and voluntary sector. In addition, individual college governing bodies may co-opt two members with the expertise and experience in differing aspects of activity relevant to the work of the college and which are considered not to be adequately covered by other members. All other members are appointed ex-officio.

My Department aims to undertake a significant recruitment competition for new governing body members later this year and I would encourage all those with an interest in the delivery of skills training in Northern Ireland to consider applying for these opportunities.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether extended trading hours has been considered to assist with the recovery of retail and reduce the potential for crowding.

(AQW 17928/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is not for my Department to answer. This is for the Department for Communities.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) when she last met with NUS-USI; and (ii) whether she will agree to meet the organisation in the near future.

(AQW 17929/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: On 14 October 2020, I had a very productive meeting with representatives from NUS-USI, at which we discussed ways in which my Department could support students during the Covid 19 pandemic, as well as ensure that students' voices are represented in discussions which concern them.

I remain open to meeting with NUS-USI and other representatives of students, diary permitting. Students and their views are very important to me and my officials have been in regular contact with NUS-USI to discuss a broad range of further- and higher-education related matters, which is in addition to the significant volume of correspondence which I regularly receive on their behalf.

Journal of Proceedings

Minutes of Proceedings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 12 April 2021

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Assembly Business

2.1 Motion: Suspension of Standing Order 20(1)

Proposed:

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 12 April 2021.

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr John O'Dowd

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr Robbie Butler

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Clare Bailey

The Question being put, the motion was **carried** with cross-community support.

3. Speaker's Business

The Speaker announced the death of HRH Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh.

Members paid tribute to HRH Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh.

4. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 1.40pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

12 April 2021

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 9 April 2021 to 12 April 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
 - The Commission for Victims and Survivors Annual Report & Accounts 2019/20 (The Commission for Victims and Survivors)
 - Translink Retention and Disposal Schedule (Public Record Office of Northern Ireland)
 - Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland Retention and Disposal Schedule (Public Record Office of Northern Ireland)
5. Assembly Reports
 - Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Thirty-third Report of Session 2020 – 2021 (NIA 93/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)
6. Statutory Rules
 - SR 2021/96 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) (Department of Health)
 - SR 2021/97 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment) Regulations 2021 (Department of Health)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 12 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 Monday 12 April 2021:

Steve Aiken	Gerry Kelly
Andy Allen	Liz Kimmins
Martina Anderson	Naomi Long
Caoimhe Archibald	Gordon Lyons
Rosemary Barton	Seán 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
Pat Catney	Maolíosa McHugh
Alan Chambers	Sinead McLaughlin
Stewart Dickson	Justin McNulty
Linda Dillon	Gary Middleton
Diane Dodds	Andrew Muir
Jemma Dolan	Karen Mullan
Gordon Dunne	Conor Murphy
Mark Durkan	Mike Nesbitt
Alex Easton	Robin Newton
Sinead Ennis	Carál Ní Chuilín
Arlene Foster	Michelle O'Neill
Órlaithí Flynn	Edwin Poots
Colm Gildernew	George Robinson
Paul Givan	Emma Rogan
Deirdre Hargey	Pat Sheehan
Harry Harvey	Emma Sheerin
David Hilditch	Christopher Stalford
Cara Hunter	John Stewart
William Irwin	Mervyn Storey
Declan Kearney	Robin Swann
Dolores Kelly	Peter Weir

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 13 April 2021

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker, in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Assembly Business

2.1 Motion: Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Mervyn Storey replace Mr Gordon Dunne as a member of the Committee for the Economy.

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr Gary Middleton

Mrs Pam Cameron

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

2.2 Motion: Suspension of Standing Order 20(1)

Proposed:

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 13 April 2021.

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr John O'Dowd

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr Robbie Butler

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Clare Bailey

The Question being put, the motion was **carried** with cross-community support

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement: Health and Social Care Trust Rebuild Plans

The Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, made a statement regarding the Health and Social Care Trust Rebuild Plans, following which he replied to questions.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

3.2 Motion: The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period in Schedule 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Proposed:

That the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period in Schedule 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

Minister for the Economy

Motion: The draft Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Change of Expiry Date in section 32(1)) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Proposed:

That the draft Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Change of Expiry Date in section 32(1)) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 be approved.

Minister for the Economy

A single debate ensued on both motions.

The Question being put, the motion on the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period in Schedule 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 was **carried**.

The Question being put, the motion on the draft Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Change of Expiry Date in section 32(1)) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 was **carried**.

3.3 First Stage: The Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 20/17-22)

The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Mr Edwin Poots, introduced a Bill to amend the Horse Racing (Northern Ireland) Order 1990 to allow for payments to be made from the Horse Racing Fund to horse racecourse operators; and for connected purposes.

The Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 20/17-22) passed First Stage and was ordered to be printed.

4. Question Time

4.1 Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Mr Edwin Poots.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

4.2 Communities

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey.

4.3 Economy

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for the Economy, Mrs Diane Dodds.

5. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 2.40pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

13 April 2021

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 13 April 2021

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 20/17-22)
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
The Sports Council for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department for Communities)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
For information only
Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2021/91 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
Correction Slip for Land and Property Services Trust Statement – Rate Levy Accruals Account 2019-20 (Department of Finance)
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 13 April 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					
Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 20/17-22)	13/04/21							

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 13 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 Tuesday 13 April 2021:

Steve Aiken	Gerry Kelly
Andy Allen	Liz Kimmins
Martina Anderson	Naomi Long
Caoimhe Archibald	Gordon Lyons
Rosemary Barton	Seán Lynch
Roy Beggs	Chris Lyttle
John Blair	Nichola Mallon
Cathal Boylan	Declan McAleer
Paula Bradley	Fra McCann
Sinéad Bradley	Daniel McCrossan
Paula Bradshaw	Patsy McGlone
Nicola Brogan	Colin McGrath
Thomas Buchanan	Philip McGuigan
Joanne Bunting	Maoliosa McHugh
Pat Catney	Sinead McLaughlin
Alan Chambers	Justin McNulty
Stewart Dickson	Gary Middleton
Linda Dillon	Andrew Muir
Diane Dodds	Karen Mullan
Jemma Dolan	Conor Murphy
Gordon Dunne	Mike Nesbitt
Mark Durkan	Robin Newton
Alex Easton	Carál Ní Chuilín
Sinéad Ennis	Michelle O'Neill
Arlene Foster	Edwin Poots
Órlaithí Flynn	George Robinson
Colm Gildernew	Emma Rogan
Paul Givan	Pat Sheehan
Deirdre Hargey	Emma Sheerin
Harry Harvey	Christopher Stalford
David Hilditch	John Stewart
Cara Hunter	Mervyn Storey
William Irwin	Robin Swann
Declan Kearney	Peter Weir
Dolores Kelly	

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 19 April 2021

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

Procedures and Conventions.

The Speaker made some remarks about the standards of debate that he expects in the Chamber, highlighting correspondence he issued to all Members detailing 10 principles which provide details on what courtesy, good temper, moderation and respect mean in practice.

3. Matter of the Day

3.1 NI Senior Women's Football Team Qualification for European Championships

Mr Mike Nesbitt, under Standing Order 24, made a statement on the NI Senior Women's Football Team Qualification for European Championships. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

4. Committee Business

4.1 Motion: Extension of Committee Stage: Damages (Return on Investment) Bill (NIA Bill 16/17-22)

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 28 October 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill (NIA 16/17-22).

Chairperson, Committee for Justice

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

4.2 Motion: Extension of Committee Stage: The Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 15/17-22)

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 19 November 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Severe Fetal Impairment Abortion (Amendment) Bill (NIA 15/17-22).

Chairperson, Committee for Health

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

4.3 Motion: Extension of Committee Stage: The Health and Social Care Bill (NIA Bill 18/17-22)**Proposed:**

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 1 October 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Health and Social Care Bill (NIA 18/17-22).

Chairperson, Committee for Health

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

5. Private Members' Business

5.1 Motion: Brexit and Card Fees**Proposed:**

That this Assembly regrets the decision of Visa and Mastercard to increase, drastically, their fees for EU card transactions; notes that these increases are only possible because of Brexit and the subsequent loss of EU consumer protections; condemns this cynical exploitation of working people and small and medium-sized enterprises by big banks and card companies during a global pandemic; further notes that this extortionate increase will disproportionately impact border communities, who have already borne the brunt of Brexit; and urges the British government to reverse these increases through legislation to regulate interchange fees on EU transactions.

Dr Caoimhe Archibald

Mr John O'Dowd

Ms Jemma Dolan

Ms Liz Kimmins

Amendment**Proposed:**

Leave out all after the second 'Brexit;' and insert:

'recognises that the United Kingdom's ability to regulate charges on cross-border transactions is limited; calls on the UK Government to reinstate the previous cap on interchange fees within its regulatory authority; and further calls on the UK Government to engage with the European Union to reach an agreement on interchange fee caps on UK-EU and EU-UK card transactions as part of wider efforts to ease the trading frictions caused by Brexit.'

Mr Stewart Dickson

Mr Andrew Muir

Debate ensued.

The debate stood suspended for Question Time.

The Speaker took the Chair.

6. Question Time

6.1 The Executive Office

Questions were put to, and answered by, the First Minister, the Rt Hon Arlene Foster. The junior Minister, Mr Gordon Lyons, also answered a number of questions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

6.2 Education

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

7. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

7.1 Motion: Brexit and Card Fees (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the amendment was **made**.

The Question being put, the motion as amended was **carried**.

8. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 3.49pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

19 April 2021

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 14 April 2021 to 19 April 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

Royal Ulster Constabulary George Cross Foundation Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2020
(Royal Ulster Constabulary George Cross Foundation)

Retention and Disposal Schedule for the Victims and Survivors Service (Public Records Office of Northern Ireland)

Retention and Disposal Schedule for the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (Public Records Office of Northern Ireland)

5. Assembly Reports

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2021/99 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021
(Department of Health)

SR 2021/101 The Mental Health (1986 Order) (Amendment No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

SR 2021/102 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel, Operator Liability and Information to Passengers) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

SR 2021/103 The Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 (Protection from Detriment in Health and Safety Cases) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for the Economy)

For information only

SR 2021/98 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Suspension) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

8. Consultation Documents

The Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No.31) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2021
(Department of Education)

9. Departmental Publications

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 19 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 Monday 19 April 2021:

Steve Aiken	Gerry Kelly
Andy Allen	Liz Kimmins
Martina Anderson	Naomi Long
Caoimhe Archibald	Gordon Lyons
Rosemary Barton	Seán Lynch
Roy Beggs	Chris Lyttle
John Blair	Nichola Mallon
Cathal Boylan	Declan McAleer
Paula Bradley	Fra McCann
Sinéad Bradley	Daniel McCrossan
Paula Bradshaw	Patsy McGlone
Nicola Brogan	Colin McGrath
Thomas Buchanan	Philip McGuigan
Pat Catney	Maolíosa McHugh
Alan Chambers	Sinead McLaughlin
Stewart Dickson	Justin McNulty
Linda Dillon	Gary Middleton
Diane Dodds	Andrew Muir
Jemma Dolan	Karen Mullan
Gordon Dunne	Conor Murphy
Mark Durkan	Mike Nesbitt
Alex Easton	Robin Newton
Sinéad Ennis	Carál Ní Chuilín
Arlene Foster	Michelle O'Neill
Órlaithí Flynn	Edwin Poots
Colm Gildernew	George Robinson
Paul Givan	Emma Rogan
Deirdre Hargey	Pat Sheehan
Harry Harvey	Emma Sheerin
David Hilditch	Christopher Stalford
Cara Hunter	John Stewart
William Irwin	Mervyn Storey
Declan Kearney	Robin Swann
Dolores Kelly	Peter Weir

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 20 April 2021

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker, in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Executive Committee Business

2.1 Statement: 2020-21 Further Funding Allocation

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, made a statement regarding 2020-21 Further Funding Allocation, following which he replied to questions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

2.2 Statement: Publication of Neurology Recall Cohort 2 Outcomes Report

The Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, made a statement regarding the Publication of Neurology Recall Cohort 2 Outcomes Report, following which he replied to questions.

The Speaker took the Chair.

3. Private Members' Business

3.1 Motion: Conversion Therapy

Proposed:

That this Assembly rejects the harmful practice widely referred to as conversion therapy; notes that the UK Government National LGBT Survey in 2018 reported that 2% of respondents had undergone conversion therapy with a further 5% having been offered it; acknowledges the damage this practice causes to the mental health of those who are subjected to it; further acknowledges that this practice has been widely rejected by medical professionals; declares that it is fundamentally wrong to view our LGBTQ community as requiring a fix or cure; and calls on the Minister for Communities to commit to bringing forward legislation before the end of the current Assembly mandate to ban conversion therapy in all its forms.

Mr Doug Beattie

Mr John Stewart

Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'professionals;' and insert:

"recognises that legitimate religious activities such as preaching, prayer and pastoral support do not constitute conversion therapy, cannot be defined as such and must be protected; and calls on the Minister for Communities to consult widely on the way ahead, including relevant legislative options, to ban the practice of conversion therapy."

Mrs Pam Cameron

Mr Robin Newton

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 1.02pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, in the Chair.

4. Question Time

4.1 Finance

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy.

5. Private Members' Business (Cont'd)

5.1 Motion: Conversion Therapy (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the amendment was **negatived** (Division 1).

The Question being put, the motion was **carried** (Division 2).

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

5.2 Motion: Putting Cancer Services at the Centre of the Covid-19 Recovery

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the serious and negative impact of Covid-19 on cancer diagnosis, treatment and surgery across Northern Ireland; notes with deep concern that during the pandemic, tests, treatments and clinical trials have been disrupted or cancelled, with many patients not accessing help for possible cancer symptoms; highlights in this context the need to place the restoration of patient-centred and high-quality cancer services at the heart of the recovery from COVID-19; endorses the statement by 47 cancer charities, under One Cancer Voice, which seeks to plot a course out of the pandemic towards world-leading cancer services; stresses the need to direct resources to clear the cancer backlog as quickly as possible, drive faster and earlier diagnosis and encourage people with signs and symptoms of cancer to seek help; and calls on the Minister of Health to publish urgently an ambitious and fully-funded roadmap for restoring and enhancing local cancer services.

Mrs Pam Cameron

Mr Jonathan Buckley

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

6. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

Mr Declan McAleer spoke to his topic regarding the Progress of the A5 Dual Carriageway.

The Assembly adjourned at 6.10pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

20 April 2021

Northern Ireland Assembly

20 April 2021

Division 1

Motion: Conversion Therapy – Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'professionals;' and insert:

“recognises that legitimate religious activities such as preaching, prayer and pastoral support do not constitute conversion therapy, cannot be defined as such and must be protected; and calls on the Minister for Communities to consult widely on the way ahead, including relevant legislative options, to ban the practice of conversion therapy.”

Mrs Pam Cameron

Mr Robin Newton

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 28

Noes: 59

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr M Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Givan, Mr Newton.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Butler, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Chambers, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Ennis, Ms Sugden.

The amendment was **negatived**.

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

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

Mr K Buchanan voted for Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mrs Foster, Mr Lyons, Mr Middleton and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis [Teller, Noes], 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 O'Toole voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin and Mr McNulty.

Northern Ireland Assembly

20 April 2021

Division 2

Motion: Conversion Therapy

Proposed:

That this Assembly rejects the harmful practice widely referred to as conversion therapy; notes that the UK Government National LGBT Survey in 2018 reported that 2% of respondents had undergone conversion therapy with a further 5% having been offered it; acknowledges the damage this practice causes to the mental health of those who are subjected to it; further acknowledges that this practice has been widely rejected by medical professionals; declares that it is fundamentally wrong to view our LGBTQ community as requiring a fix or cure; and calls on the Minister for Communities to commit to bringing forward legislation before the end of the current Assembly mandate to ban conversion therapy in all its forms.

Mr Doug Beattie

Mr John Stewart

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 59

Noes: 24

AYES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Butler, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Chambers, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Sheerin, Miss Woods.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr M Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Clarke, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Newton, Mr Wells.

The amendment was **carried**.

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

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

Mr K Buchanan voted for Mr Dunne, Mr Lyons and Mr Middleton.

Mr Butler voted for Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis [Teller, Noes], 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 O'Toole voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin and Mr McNulty.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 20 April 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
Legislative Consent Memorandum: Private International Law (Implementation of Agreements) Bill (Department of Justice)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
For information only
Explanatory Memorandum SR 2021/95 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 11) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
Memorandum on the Fourth Report from the Public Accounts Committee Mandate 2017-2022 (Department of Finance)
Follow-up Review of No Excuse Domestic Violence and Abuse Inspection (Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland)
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 20 April 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	28/10/21					
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	01/10/21					
Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 20/17-22)	13/04/21							

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	19/11/21					
Climate Change Bill (NIA Bill 19/17-22)	22/03/21							

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 20 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 Tuesday 20 April 2021:

Steve Aiken	Naomi Long
Andy Allen	Gordon Lyons
Martina Anderson	Seán Lynch
Caoimhe Archibald	Chris Lyttle
Rosemary Barton	Nichola Mallon
John Blair	Declan McAleer
Cathal Boylan	Fra McCann
Sinéad Bradley	Daniel McCrossan
Paula Bradshaw	Patsy McGlone
Nicola Brogan	Colin McGrath
Pat Catney	Philip McGuigan
Alan Chambers	Maolíosa McHugh
Stewart Dickson	Sinead McLaughlin
Linda Dillon	Justin McNulty
Diane Dodds	Gary Middleton
Jemma Dolan	Andrew Muir
Gordon Dunne	Karen Mullan
Mark Durkan	Conor Murphy
Sinéad Ennis	Mike Nesbitt
Arlene Foster	Carál Ní Chuilín
Órlaithí Flynn	Michelle O'Neill
Colm Gildernew	Emma Rogan
Deirdre Hargey	Pat Sheehan
Cara Hunter	Emma Sheerin
Declan Kearney	John Stewart
Dolores Kelly	Robin Swann
Gerry Kelly	Peter Weir
Liz Kimmins	

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 26 April 2021

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

Order in the Chamber

The Speaker made some remarks about the recent conduct of Mr Wells in the Chamber which he considered had fallen short of the required standards of courtesy, good temper, moderation and respect. The Speaker advised that while no further action would be taken on this occasion, he hoped the Member would reflect on how he interacts with others in the future.

3. Public Petition

3.1 Additional Parking and Traffic Calming around St. Conor's Primary School, Omagh

Mr Daniel McCrossan was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition on Additional Parking and Traffic Calming around St. Conor's Primary School, Omagh.

4. Executive Committee Business

4.1 Statement: British-Irish Council Ministerial Meeting on Misuse of Substances

The Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, made a statement regarding the recent British-Irish Council Ministerial Meeting on Misuse of Substances, following which he replied to questions.

The sitting was suspended at 12.33pm.

The sitting resumed at 12.46pm, the Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.

4.2 Statement: Response to Wildfire in the Mourne

The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Mr Edwin Poots, made a statement regarding the Response to Wildfire in the Mourne, following which he replied to questions.

4.3 Second Stage: Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 20/17-22)

The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Mr Edwin Poots, moved the Second Stage of the Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 20/17-22).

Debate ensued.

The debate stood suspended for Question Time.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

5. Question Time

5.1 Health

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann.

5.2 Infrastructure

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

6. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

6.1 Second Stage: Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 20/17-22) (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 20/17-22) passed Second Stage.

The Speaker took the Chair.

7. Private Members' Business

7.1 Motion: Academic Selection and the Transfer Test

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes the recent publication of Ulster University's Transforming Education Research Paper on Academic Selection and the Transfer Test; further notes that this is yet another report which outlines the psychological harm that academic selection causes to children; acknowledges the finding within the report that there is little evidence that social mobility is increased by academic selection; agrees with the conclusion articulated in the report that the current arrangements for school transfer at age 11 are damaging the life-chances of a large proportion of the school population; and calls on the Minister of Education to act in the interests of children and the wider education system by ending the use of academic selection as a means of determining post-primary transfer.

*Mr Pat Sheehan
Ms Nicola Brogan
Mr John O'Dowd*

Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'school population;' and insert:

"further notes that the right to use academic selection is currently enshrined in law; and calls on the Minister of Education to give notice that he will repeal this legal provision by 2023 and replace it with a system that has the widest support and prioritises educational excellence for all without academic selection."

*Mr Daniel McCrossan
Mr Justin McNulty
Mr Matthew O'Toole*

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the amendment was **made** (Division 1).

The Question being put, the motion as amended was **carried** (Division 2).

8. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 6.00pm.

Mr Alex Maskey
The Speaker

26 April 2021

Northern Ireland Assembly

26 April 2021

Division 1

Motion: Academic Selection and the Transfer Test – Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'school population;' and insert:

"further notes that the right to use academic selection is currently enshrined in law; and calls on the Minister of Education to give notice that he will repeal this legal provision by 2023 and replace it with a system that has the widest support and prioritises educational excellence for all without academic selection."

Mr Daniel McCrossan

Mr Justin McNulty

Mr Matthew O'Toole

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 48

Noes: 37

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Brogan, Mr Carroll.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr M Bradley, Mr Stalford.

The amendment was **made**.

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

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

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford [Teller, Noes] and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan [Teller, Ayes], 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 O'Toole voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin and Mr McNulty.

Ms Bailey voted for Ms Sugden.

Northern Ireland Assembly

26 April 2021

Division 2

Motion: Academic Selection and the Transfer Test (As Amended)

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes the recent publication of Ulster University's Transforming Education Research Paper on Academic Selection and the Transfer Test; further notes that this is yet another report which outlines the psychological harm that academic selection causes to children; acknowledges the finding within the report that there is little evidence that social mobility is increased by academic selection; agrees with the conclusion articulated in the report that the current arrangements for school transfer at age 11 are damaging the life-chances of a large proportion of the school population; further notes that the right to use academic selection is currently enshrined in law; and calls on the Minister of Education to give notice that he will repeal this legal provision by 2023 and replace it with a system that has the widest support and prioritises educational excellence for all without academic selection.

*Mr Pat Sheehan
Ms Nicola Brogan
Mr John O'Dowd*

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 48

Noes: 37

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Brogan, Mr Sheehan.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Ms Sugden, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr M Bradley, Mrs Cameron.

The motion as amended was **carried**.

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

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

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan [Teller, Ayes], 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 [Teller, Ayes] and Ms Sheerin.

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

Ms Bailey voted for Ms Sugden.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 21 April 2021 to 26 April 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

Director of Legal Aid Casework Annual Report for 2015-16 (Legal Services Agency)

Director of Legal Aid Casework Annual Report for 2016-17 (Legal Services Agency)

Director of Legal Aid Casework Annual Report for 2017-18 (Legal Services Agency)

Director of Legal Aid Casework Annual Report for 2018-19 (Legal Services Agency)

Director of Legal Aid Casework Annual Report for 2019-20 (Legal Services Agency)

Arts Council of Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts for year ended 31 March 2020 (Department for Communities)

Annual Report on Decision Making and Financial Accuracy 2019 (Department for Communities)

5. Assembly Reports

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Thirty-fourth Report of Session 2020 – 2021 (NIA 94/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2021/105 The Social Security (Coronavirus) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)

SR 2021/106 The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Suspension of Liability for Wrongful Trading) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for the Economy)

SR 2021/108 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

SR 2021/109 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

SR 2021/110 The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Finance)

SR 2021/111 The Rates (Small Business Hereditament Relief) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Finance)

Draft SR - The Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for the Economy)

For information only

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2021/93 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2021/97 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2021/99 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2021/102 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel, Operator Liability and Information to Passengers) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2021/108 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Health)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

8. Consultation Documents

9. Departmental Publications

Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (Amendment) Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Finance)

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 26 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 Monday 26 April 2021:

Steve Aiken	Gerry Kelly
Andy Allen	Liz Kimmins
Martina Anderson	Naomi Long
Caoimhe Archibald	Gordon Lyons
Rosemary Barton	Seán Lynch
Doug Beattie	Chris Lyttle
Roy Beggs	Nichola Mallon
John Blair	Declan McAleer
Cathal Boylan	Fra McCann
Paula Bradley	Daniel McCrossan
Sinéad Bradley	Patsy McGlone
Paula Bradshaw	Colin McGrath
Nicola Brogan	Philip McGuigan
Thomas Buchanan	Maoliosa McHugh
Pat Catney	Michelle McIlveen
Alan Chambers	Sinead McLaughlin
Stewart Dickson	Justin McNulty
Linda Dillon	Gary Middleton
Diane Dodds	Andrew Muir
Jemma Dolan	Karen Mullan
Gordon Dunne	Conor Murphy
Mark Durkan	Mike Nesbitt
Alex Easton	Robin Newton
Sinéad Ennis	Carál Ní Chuilín
Arlene Foster	Michelle O'Neill
Órlaithí Flynn	Edwin Poots
Colm Gildernew	George Robinson
Paul Givan	Emma Rogan
Deirdre Hargey	Pat Sheehan
Harry Harvey	Emma Sheerin
Cara Hunter	Christopher Stalford
William Irwin	John Stewart
Declan Kearney	Robin Swann
Dolores Kelly	Peter Weir

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 27 April 2021

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Executive Committee Business

2.1 Statement: 2021 – 22 Final Budget

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, made a statement regarding the 2021 – 22 Final Budget, following which he replied to questions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

3. Private Members' Business

3.1 Motion: The Inclusion of End of Life Outcomes in the Programme for Government

Proposed:

That this Assembly believes everyone impacted by death, dying and bereavement should receive the care and support they need; expresses its concern that demographic trends in Northern Ireland predict a significant increase in chronic illness and palliative care demand in the years ahead; notes that Scotland and Wales have current palliative care strategies and that the Republic of Ireland's Programme for Government contains seven clear commitments on end of life care; further notes the New Decade, New Approach agreement commitment to invest in palliative care service improvement has yet to materialise; recognises that the care and support available to people as they die has an enormous impact on their quality of life and that each death leaves a number of people bereaved; and calls on the Executive to ensure that the draft Programme for Government Outcomes Framework includes indicators around death, dying and bereavement and the importance of a good end of life experience for people in Northern Ireland.

Ms Joanne Bunting

Mr Colm Gildernew

Ms Sinéad Bradley

Mr Robbie Butler

Ms Paula Bradshaw

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

The Speaker took the Chair.

3.2 Motion: International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's Working Definition of Antisemitism

Proposed:

That this Assembly condemns antisemitism in all forms; notes with deep concern the findings of the Community Security Trust's (CST) antisemitic incident report for 2020 which recorded 1,668 antisemitic incidents across the United Kingdom; stresses the need to tackle the scourge of antisemitism in every aspect of our society; and endorses the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism, including its examples, which states that antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews and rhetorical and physical manifestations toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and, or, their property, Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.

Mr Alex Easton

Mr David Hilditch

Mr Paul Frew

Mr William Humphrey

Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'society;' and insert:

"unambiguously condemns the most recent vandalism in Belfast City Cemetery of graves belonging to our Jewish Community; recognises that antisemitism is a form of racism that is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews, that rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property and toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities; agrees that antisemitism is unacceptable and is totally, unequivocally and loudly rejected by this Assembly; and commits to combating antisemitism, as part of our commitment to prevent hate crime and racism."

Mr Pat Sheehan

Ms Emma Sheerin

Ms Liz Kimmins

Ms Linda Dillon

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 1.02pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, in the Chair.

4. Question Time

4.1 Justice

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Justice, Mrs Naomi Long.

The Speaker took the Chair.

5. Private Members' Business (Cont'd)

5.1 Motion: Putting Cancer Services at the Centre of the Covid-19 Recovery (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the amendment was **negatived**.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

6. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

Mr Colin McGrath spoke to his topic regarding the Resumption, Retention and Development of Health Services at the Downe Hospital, Downpatrick.

The Assembly adjourned at 4.35pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

27 April 2021

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 27 April 2021

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
5. Assembly Reports

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Thirty-fifth Report of Session 2020 – 2021 (NIA 96/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)
6. Statutory Rules

SR 2021/112 The Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 (Coronavirus, Calculation of a Week's Pay) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for the Economy)

For information only

(C.1) SR 2021/107 The Addressing Bullying in Schools (2016 Act) (Commencement) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department of Education)
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 27 April 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	28/10/21					
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	01/10/21					
Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 20/17-22)	13/04/21	26/04/21	09/06/21					

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	09/11/21					
Climate Change Bill (NIA Bill 19/17-22)	22/03/21							

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 27 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 Tuesday 27 April 2021:

Steve Aiken	Liz Kimmins
Andy Allen	Naomi Long
Martina Anderson	Gordon Lyons
Caoimhe Archibald	Seán Lynch
Rosemary Barton	Chris Lyttle
Roy Beggs	Nichola Mallon
John Blair	Declan McAleer
Cathal Boylan	Fra McCann
Paula Bradley	Daniel McCrossan
Sinéad Bradley	Patsy McGlone
Paula Bradshaw	Colin McGrath
Nicola Brogan	Philip McGuigan
Thomas Buchanan	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	Edwin Poots
Órlaithí Flynn	George Robinson
Colm Gildernew	Emma Rogan
Paul Givan	Pat Sheehan
Deirdre Hargey	Emma Sheerin
Harry Harvey	Christopher Stalford
Cara Hunter	John Stewart
William Irwin	Mervyn Storey
Declan Kearney	Robin Swann
Dolores Kelly	Peter Weir
Gerry Kelly	